



UNIVERSITÄTS-
BIBLIOTHEK
PADERBORN

Universitätsbibliothek Paderborn

The Works Of The Right Honourable Joseph Addison, Esq.

In Four Volumes

Addison, Joseph

London, 1721

N° 225. Saturday, November 17.

[urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-53621](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-53621)

N^o 225. *Saturday, November 17.*

Nullum numen abest si sit prudentia-----

Juv.

I Have often thought if the minds of men were laid open, we should see but little difference between that of the wise man and that of the fool. There are infinite *Reveries*, numberless extravagances, and a perpetual train of vanities which pass through both. The great difference is, that the first knows how to pick and cull his thoughts for conversation, by suppressing some, and communicating others; whereas the other lets them all indifferently fly out in words. This sort of discretion, however, has no place in private conversation between intimate friends. On such occasions the wisest men very often talk like the weakest; for indeed the talking with a friend is nothing else but *thinking aloud*.

Tully has therefore very justly exposed a precept delivered by some ancient writers, that a man should live with his enemy in such a manner as might leave him room to become his friend; and with his friend in such a manner, that if he became his enemy, it should not be in his power to hurt him. The first part of this rule, which regards our behaviour towards an enemy, is indeed very reasonable, as well as very prudential; but the latter part of it, which regards our behaviour towards a friend, favours more of cunning than of discretion, and would cut a man off from the greatest pleasures of life, which are the freedoms of conversation with a bosom friend. Besides that, when a friend is turned into an enemy, and (as the son of *Sirach* calls him) a bewrayer of secrets, the world is just enough to accuse the perfidiousness of the friend, rather than the indiscretion of the person who confided in him.

Discretion does not only show it self in words, but in all the circumstances of action; and is like an under-agent of providence, to guide and direct us in the ordinary concerns of life.

There are many more shining qualities in the mind of man, but there is none so useful as Discretion; it is this indeed which gives a value to all the rest, which sets them at work in their proper times and places, and
turns

turns them to the advantage of the person who is possessed of them. Without it learning is pedantry, and wit impertinence; Virtue it self looks like weakness; the best parts only qualify a man to be more sprightly in errors, and active to his own prejudice.

Nor does Discretion only make a man the master of his own parts, but of other mens. The discreet man finds out the talents of those he converses with, and knows how to apply them to proper uses. Accordingly if we look into particular communities and divisions of men, we may observe that it is the discreet man, not the witty, nor the learned, nor the brave, who guides the conversation, and gives measures to the society. A man with great talents, but void of discretion, is like *Polyphemus* in the fable, strong and blind, endued with an irresistible force, which for want of sight is of no use to him.

Though a man has all other perfections, and wants Discretion, he will be of no great consequence in the world: but if he has this single talent in perfection, and but a common share of others, he may do what he pleases in his station of life.

At the same time that I think Discretion the most useful talent a man can be master of, I look upon Cunning to be the accomplishment of little, mean, ungenerous minds. Discretion points out the noblest ends to us, and pursues the most proper and laudable methods of attaining them: Cunning has only private selfish aims, and sticks at nothing which may make them succeed. Discretion has large and extended views, and, like a well-formed eye, commands a whole horizon: Cunning is a kind of short-sightedness, that discovers the minutest objects which are near at hand, but is not able to discern things at a distance. Discretion the more it is discovered, gives a greater authority to the person who possesses it: Cunning, when it is once detected, loses its force, and makes a man incapable of bringing about even those events which he might have done, had he passed only for a plain man. Discretion is the perfection of reason, and a guide to us in all the duties of life: Cunning is a kind of instinct, that only looks out after our immediate interest and welfare. Discretion is only found in men of strong sense and good understandings: Cunning is often to be met with in brutes themselves, and in persons who are but the fewest removes from them. In short, Cunning is only the mimic of Discretion, and may pass upon weak men in the same manner as vivacity is often mistaken for wit, and gravity for wisdom.

The cast of mind which is natural to a discreet man, makes him look forward into futurity, and consider what will be his condition millions of

of ages hence, as well as what it is at present. He knows that the misery or happiness which are reserved for him in another world, lose nothing of their reality by being placed at so great a distance from him. The objects do not appear little to him because they are remote. He considers that those pleasures and pains which lie hid in eternity, approach nearer to him every moment, and will be present with him in their full weight and measure, as much as those pains and pleasures which he feels at this very instant. For this reason he is careful to secure to himself that which is the proper happiness of his nature, and the ultimate design of his being. He carries his thoughts to the end of every action, and considers the most distant as well as the most immediate effects of it. He supercedes every little prospect of gain and advantage which offers it self here, if he does not find it consistent with his views of an Hereafter. In a word, his hopes are full of immortality, his schemes are large and glorious, and his conduct suitable to one who knows his true interest, and how to pursue it by proper methods.

I have, in this essay upon Discretion, considered it both as an accomplishment and as a virtue, and have therefore described it in its full extent; not only as it is conversant about worldly affairs, but as it regards our whole existence; not only as it is the guide of a mortal creature, but as it is in general the director of a reasonable being. It is in this light that Discretion is represented by the wise man, who sometimes mentions it under the name of Discretion, and sometimes under that of Wisdom. It is indeed (as described in the latter part of this paper) the greatest wisdom, but at the same time in the power of every one to attain. Its advantages are infinite, but its acquisition easy; or, to speak of her in the words of the apocryphal writer whom I quoted in my last *Saturday's* paper, *Wisdom is glorious, and never fadeth away, yet she is easily seen of them that love her, and found of such as seek her. She preventeth them that desire her, in making her self first known unto them. He that seeketh her early, shall have no great travels: for he shall find her sitting at his doors. To think therefore upon her is perfection of wisdom, and whose watcheth for her shall quickly be without care. For she goeth about seeking such as are worthy of her, sheweth her self favourably unto them in the ways, and meeteth them in every thought.*

