

Truth: From Mystery to Inquiry

In the 17th century, the influence of the Ptolemaic universe's cosmic map began to wane in favor of higher forms of understanding through studying the natural world. A shift in thinking led people from thinking of nature as constructed to keep God and mankind separated toward understanding God and themselves *through* nature. Francis Bacon was one of the earliest proponents of a scientific inquiry of nature to reveal better understanding of the world that we inhabit and what we can do to improve our lives outside of simple ritual and prayer. In Bacon's "The Advancement of Learning," we find some of the earliest attempts to solidly suggest pragmatic methods of scientific inquiry that when applied can lead to discovery of Truth as evidenced by the Creator.

Lawrence Babb's essay "The Physiology and Psychology of the Renaissance" provides an analysis of the information that was available to citizens living during the Renaissance and explains some of the rationalities behind the antiquated logic that had been accumulated over the course of western civilization. Until contesting these notions with applications of real scientific practice, it is hard to find Truth in many of these beliefs outside of the incontrovertible word of the Bible. As Babb states, the Renaissance "derived its information concerning temporal man chiefly from writers of ancient times and from medieval writers indebted to classical thought. . .it occurred only to the very exceptional man to make scientific observations of human nature for himself" (749). By having all trust secured away in the dead remnants of the past, this practice left people at large unable to think for themselves or make progress in terms of scientific discovery or original artistic developments, leading to a condition known as "Elizabethan melancholy" (750).

The widely held belief in the humors is perhaps one of the most intellectually limiting facets of pre-Modern scientific thought, especially considering this highly abstract notion was posited by Aristotle and Hippocrates over a millennia prior to Renaissance thinkers espousing these ideas earnestly. If one were to believe in the accuracy of the concept of the humors in physiology today, that person would most likely not be able to function well in society, especially in intellectual discourse, much less remain aware of their own health status or be able to ward off diseases or infections. Without opening and physically examining the human body, how is one to truly discern the features of an ailment, connect the symptoms of different individuals, or develop progressive treatments?

While it is comfortable to have an established set of ideals and norms when it comes to standardizing education, it is shocking to know that hardly anybody had given a harsh criticism of this practice until around this time. It must have been very different, so much so that people today who have benefited from Bacon's advancement of the scientific process would never understand, though many of these changes in the intellectual life of the population have altered hierarchical structures of government and authority in all settings. The Renaissance's developments of humanist theory were certainly the fulcrum of these changes which lead to the Enlightenment, or Age of Reason, and so on. By placing the subjective within the individual or microcosm rather than the collective or macrocosm, people are then able to regain a connection to their intuition that leads them to natural inspiration that is not divinely inspired by a religious ceremony and grand narratives espoused by governments and religious authorities. An analogy of the caged bird singing seems relevant to apply to this time period, seeing as the majority of the intellectuals writing at the time are creative but only in the scope of appropriating all of life's experiences to biblical narratives with ample egregious errors in the field of logic.

These simplistic conceptual frameworks were probably a major influence in the literature that emerged from this time period and those prior, mainly in the area of character and plot development. In this medieval mindset, people were labeled as “sanguine, choleric, melancholic, and phlegmatic” which corresponded to levels of associated humors within the body. This idea readily lent itself to practices like physiognomy which stereotyped individuals by certain irreversible qualities which were considered innate and highly reflective of a person’s internal nature as well. A writer that believed this notion, like everybody else living at the time, would most likely develop their characters based on these static archetypal figures and have them relate on the basis of these innate characteristics rather than creating dynamic characters that would be able to think for themselves and invent original narratives. It’s as if this limiting world view would make nearly everything in life seem as if a true allegory, which is indubitably how many contemporaries would have reflected upon their lives along with the religious doctrine to support these (now preposterous) claims.

The primary focus of a contemporary individual would be concerned with moral qualities rather than physical aspects of health or external natural beauty unless completely surrendered to God’s power. Babb supports this claim with the reminder that “moralists of the Renaissance subscribe to a fundamental principle of classical ethics: conduct motivated by reason is virtuous conduct; conduct motivated by unregulated passion is vicious conduct” with the impetus being: “reason is the faculty which distinguishes man from beast” although intellectual rigor was certainly not a prominent feature of medieval minds (761). To disconnect the mind from the body in such a way as to alienate one from their intuition or emotions is prohibitive in the worst way: as later theorists have discovered serious negative consequences of repression and the disconnection of mental activity from emotional content. Rather than inquiring the source or

purpose of these emotions, a person would repress these passions and somehow try to use their incapacitated mind to create a (usually erroneous) logical explanation for how it related to this person's moral life. It was widely believed that the mental faculty was uniquely provided to mankind from God, directly, and that it was to be solely used for understanding life in terms of religious narrative rather than the physical world.

Francis Bacon's "The Advancement to Learning" is an interesting treatise that endeavors to change the hearts and minds of the king and his people, through heavy application of *laudando praecipere* to soften the blow and allow room for authority in his message. In the first section of the essay, Bacon basically sets up the foundation that his scientific inquiry comes from: certainly a religious view that is directly in accord with Anglican religious principles. He is simply inquiring into nature to discover more knowledge that can be found, but he reminds the king that God is unknowable by man's reason so that this new scientific method will not interfere with the Church or turn people against its authority (122-123). Bacon references many of the most philosophical and open-minded thinkers from antiquity, which have credible authority in medieval culture, and uses some of their best arguments to uproot some of the firm foundation that misunderstandings and lack of intellectual pursuit have established (124-126). He reminds the king that leaders like Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar and others were both very strong and highly competent because they treasured the acquisition of knowledge and cared for their educational needs (126-128). Bacon heralds the vast benefits of fertile philosophical discourse and progressive leadership methods, effectively criticizing the king by asserting that these qualities are best and are not to be found in this kingdom, hoping to influence the king's interests and suggest that it will increase production and profitability while also increasing satisfaction of subjects allowed to pursue their own advancement of learning (128-131).

Bacon then applies a curious logic to his argument in order to further influence the king toward actually allowing and promoting learning and scientific inquiry. He mentions that intellectuals often ignore minor social niceties and have a hard time making people like them universally, not because they are corrupt or deceitful intentionally, but because their passion for learning and basically a head in the clouds creates an aloof genius in most scholars (135-136). By analogy, this logical argument is akin to Bacon giving up a pawn in chess against the king in order to create an opportunity to gain a more valuable piece of his opponent. He is coming forward with some real and perceived differences between intellectuals and common persons or otherwise stubborn individuals because there would obviously be contention with changing the status quo from a constricting authoritarian society toward a more tolerant and progressive society.

It would perhaps be easier to suggest this type of argument for a secular inquiry into nature rather than adopt other religious doctrines, namely from Catholicism. Bacon next astutely cites Martin Luther's protestant proclamation for using reason to discern God's law from the Bible rather than simply adhering to tenants handed down from religious authorities, directly foundational to the Protestant Anglican Church (138-139).

“But as both heaven and earth do conspire and contribute to the use and benefit of man, so the end ought to be, from both philosophies to separate and reject vain speculations and whatsoever is empty and void, and to preserve and augment whatsoever is solid and fruitful; that knowledge may not be as a courtesan, for pleasure and vanity only, or as a bond-woman, to acquire and gain to her master's use; but as a spouse, for generation, fruit, and comfort.” (148)

This favoring the search for Truth by application of human reason is the explicit effect Bacon hopes to derive from this correspondence with the king, and his logical flow has perfectly softened the king's defenses against completely open secular inquiry and deviation from absolute doctrines as well as make a sharp argument for promoting his agenda via successful historical models with established credibility in relation to the king's personal concerns. It's really amazing how effective his rhetorical skills are at establishing ethos immediately, appealing to the emotions properly to assuage present fears, along with a completely sober and rational argument for his position in favor of intellectual pursuit in order to advance civilization profitably.

Bacon then gives a detailed historical account of the leaders and thinkers he mentioned earlier, thoroughly describing the benefits that these men received from thinking freely and applying philosophy to their positions. By allowing access to information and spreading information, a society will flourish and become more cohesive and profitable together, with all authority reserved for God and the leader. This rhetorical strategy places the choice in the king's hands, whether he should continue leading a herd of ignorant sheep or promote the advancement of learning and be the leader of a highly productive and satisfied country. Bacon places essentially all of the weight of these ancient rulers' power on the strength of the community that they had governed, being free to inquire the natural world around them and the infinite mystery within – prompting the king to certainly select the better of the two choices in the matter, following Bacon's advice and the lived history of previous successful leaders.

The second section of Bacon's essay goes into much detail about what principles might be important to a society that is open, free and values education. Much of it is theoretical in nature, having very few historical accounts to reference aside from ancient Greece and Rome, though he proposes methods for establishing authority of newly acquired information and the

communication of findings communally among the inquiring minds. The majority of this section would later be the groundwork laid for other future avenues of scientific inquiry. My own personal interest within Bacon's essay was the highly effective rhetoric that he applied in order to influence the king directly. Though Bacon was certainly an influential figure in politics at the time, it was apparent that he did not feel his passion was fulfilled without this very strong argument being made, and all academics and intellectuals should praise him for this effort in unleashing humanity from slavish dogma and ignorance.

Works Cited

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