

## 8. Bacon's Advancement of Learning

**F**RANCIS BACON (1561-1626) was a contemporary of Shakespeare and shared the same historical and philosophical interests as the playwright. He wrote a book on Henry VII, the one king from Henry IV to Henry VIII omitted from the Shakespeare canon. His rejection of Aristotelian philosophy in favour of a more inductive method is identical to Shakespeare's. His 'great instauration' was no different from that of the man who 'shook a lance, as brandish't at the eyes of ignorance' – a grand design to rejuvenate the intellectual life of England and indeed the world. Even Bacon's and Shakespeare's visions of a better future are one and the same. It is hardly surprising that Bacon has sometimes been suggested as the true author of Shakespeare.

Bacon outlined his project in a number of works, some of which were written in Latin, the language of classical learning and Renaissance Humanism. *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), however, was the first important philosophical work to be published in English. He believed that the intellectual life of England and indeed all of Europe was stagnating but that it could be advanced if people of learning opened their eyes to the world around them.

The *Advancement* is divided into two parts: the first is a defence of learning against its detractors; the second is an assessment of the current deficiencies and suggestions for change. Bacon begins by defending learning against theologians like Solomon, who argued that 'much reading is weariness of the flesh' (Eccl. 12:12), and Paul, who advised that 'we be not spoiled through vain philosophy' (Col. 2:8). Bacon refers to the 'ignorance and error' of these opinions and argues that there is no vexation or anxiety of mind which results from knowledge otherwise than merely by accident; "for all knowledge and wonder (which is the seed of knowledge) is an impression of pleasure in itself". And as for the conceit that too much knowledge should incline a man to Atheism, "a little or superficial knowledge of Philosophy may incline the mind of man to Atheism, but a further proceeding therein doth bring the mind back again to Religion".

Bacon sets no limits to the pursuit of knowledge. He stresses: "Let no man upon a weak conceit of sobriety or an ill-applied moderation think or maintain, that a man can search too far, or be too well studied in the book of God's word, or in the book of God's works; divinity or philosophy: but rather let men endeavour an endless progress or proficience in both; only let men beware that they apply both to charity, and not to swelling; to use, and not to ostentation".

Having defended learning, he next addresses the requirements for its progress. We need, first of all, to remove what he called the 'distempers' of learning: 'fantastical learning', or pseudo-science lacking any substantial foundation; 'contentious learning', which was basically Aristotelian philosophy; and 'delicate learning', which was a preoccupation with style rather than matter. Knowledge should be built on facts and observations, not pure deductive reasoning or mere fantasy. A better world was within man's grasp – if he takes the Baconian road.

As C.D. Broad suggests in his essay on *The Philosophy of Francis Bacon*, for learning to progress, we must devise a new method which will be to the mind as rulers and compasses are to the hand. The mere rationalists are like spiders who spin wonderful but flimsy webs out of their own bodies; the mere empiricists are like ants who collect raw materials without selection and store them up without modification. True and fruitful science must pursue a middle way between rationalism and empiricism, and be like the bee who gathers materials from every flower and then works them up by her own activities into honey. This marriage between rationalism and empiricism, and this discovery of a new method, are the tasks which Bacon set before himself.

B.H.G. Wormald rightly asserts (*Francis Bacon: History, Politics, and Science*, Cambridge, 1993), that Bacon had actually two programmes, not one. The first was concerned with the world of nature. The second, derived from the Greek injunction to 'know thyself', dealt with human beings in their social and political aspects and hence with history, moral philosophy and politics. So, although Bacon is often seen as 'the father of the modern scientific method', this is to pigeon-hole a man who was not a scientist at all but an artist who had the artist's dream of the futile. As Macaulay puts it, "the knowledge in which Bacon excelled was the knowledge of the mutual relations of all departments of knowledge". In saying that knowledge is power, he was asserting that the truth shall set us free, free to 'subdue and overcome the necessities and miseries of humanity'. The whole *leitmotiv* of Bacon's life was indeed dedicated to relieving 'the immeasurable helplessness of the human race'.

Here Bacon encapsulates the whole idea of progress, which is why Abraham Cowley of the Royal Society compared him to Moses, and his vision of man enthroned over nature to the promised land. Rousseau considered him, along with Descartes, one of the 'preceptors of the human race'. And John Dewey in *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1950), called him 'the real founder of modern thought'.

