

Essays

F.Bacon

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Francis Bacon is mainly known for his call for arms for a new science. A science based on unprejudiced observation and with the power to control nature and thus be the driving force to enhance the well-fare of men. This is an idea of science and its purpose that politicians have taken to heart. However the essays under review do not address themselves to these issues. Bacon was a courtier, but not a very successful one, and it is mainly the worldly wisdom of such a career that directs his attentions. He has been compared with both Montaigne and Machiavelli, approximate contemporaries, but to his own detriment. While Montaigne dwells lovingly on his subjects, Bacon hurries on to the next topic. And while Machiavelli pursues a subject relentlessly, Bacon soon tires. Thus few if any of the essays stick in your mind, even while there are some elegant formulations which would not be amiss in a play by Shakespeare, and if so gain permanency. Perhaps this is the reason Bacon has sometimes been proposed as the real author of Shakespears plays. If so one is grateful the latter did not write essays.

There is in toto almost sixty essays listed under typical headings such as 'Of Truth', 'Of Death', 'Of Health' or 'Of Travel', 'Of Suspicion', 'Of Negotiating'. Thus some quite portentous, others almost flippant. Most of them are mercifully short, as remarked above. So are there any cherries to be picked?

Great people, he points out, have a need to borrow other peoples opinion of themselves in order to find happiness, because if left to their own, there is little to give occasion to. True or false? Not particularly poignant. He continues by pointing out that they are the first to find their own griefs, though they be the last to find their own faults. This is closer to the mark, but seems as appropriate to the great majority which is not great, as to great people themselves, unless we suspect that great people are particularly immune to find their own faults (the reason for their greatness?). Great man are apparently to be pitied than envied. It is a miserable state of mind to desire few things but to fear many. And this is, exactly the predicament of kings. Fame is like a river, he tells the reader. It it brings up lights and swollen things while drowns things weighty and solid. This brings up a comparison between praise and mere flattery, and how the latter can corrupt the minds of men.

Bacon believes in God and Goodness, and without the latter man is no better than a kind of vermin. A similar idea comes up in his reflections on friendship. Where there is no love, crowds provide no company, and faces just a gallery of pictures. When it comes to friendships one of its benefits is the giving of counsel, because your own counsel is not much more worth than that of a flatterer. In fact there is no flatterer that compares to a man himself. Suspicion he compares to bats, they only fly at twilight. To know little is to suspect more, thus the remedy is to know more and not let suspicions smolder. He scorns atheism. Just as a little learning is worse than none at all, a little philosophy may incline a man to atheism, but those who probe deeper are returned back to faith. In fact

he doubts that any man can sincerely believe in atheism, that it is more of a confession of the lips than the heart. And once again, not to believe in God is to reduce yourself to the level of a beast.

Bacon is in favor of the distribution of wealth, because he compares money with muck, not good unless being spread. He has a thing against usury, as was normal at the time, claiming it is against nature to have money beget money. However, he acknowledges the need to for it to be both borrowing and lending so you cannot dispose of interest for that would surely strangle the flow. He gives many arguments against usury, as well as some in favor of, although the sets do not seem to be entirely disjoint. One argument against it, is the prediction that it would concentrate money, rather than having it spread.

When it comes to cunning and such things Bacon the courtier shows his face. He refers to a man, who always wrote the important things in a letter as a PostScript. I am well aware of that stratagem, having hit upon it myself. In the same vein he warns against being too blunt, when making a request or asking for a favor, on the other hand one should never be too circumspect, the latter is only wearisome. As to ambitious men, he says that as long as they find the way for promotion unobstructed they are rather busy than being dangerous. But if checked they become secretly discontent and tend to look upon everything with an evil eye. He also notes that things we can overlook in a prince we should be wary of in his servant, because after all the interests of a prince tend to coincide with that of his realm and hence that of the public, but this is not true of the servant, whose position is more like that of a parasite. And I am reminded of the Swedish 16th century King Gustavus I, who thought of his country as his private realm, and hence took very good care of it. When it comes to state-fare and war, Bacon has the temerity to compare the latter, as long it does not concern a civil war, to exercise, as crucial to maintain the health of a realm, as physical exercise is to the health of the body. From which we get evidence, if further evidence would be necessary, that the cult of health and exercise is not of recent vintage. As to the former he has many advices, in principle differing little as to what is current today. If you change your diet do it only gradually, as with any kind of change of habit. Sudden and radical changes supposedly bad for your health. When it comes to training it is a good thing to make sure that the practice is harder than the use, as in the case of Demosthenes, who naturally comes to ones mind, speaking with pebbles in his mouth trying to outdo the roaring of the sea breaking on the shore.

Writing on study he takes it very seriously. Experts may judge particulars, but when it comes to the general management of affairs, you look for learned men. This is somewhat remarkable, knowing how formal and unworldly learning traditionally was. To study, according to Bacon, is to let natural abilities grow naturally. Crafty men condemn studies, simple men admire them, while wise men simply use them. He gives specific advice as how to read. Read not to contradict and confute, he admonishes, nor to believe and take for granted. Furthermore one should not read merely to find subject for talk and find inspiration for discourse, but to weigh and consider. Books are different, he reminds the reader. Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested. In other words, some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but not curiously, and only a few to be read in whole, with due diligence and attention. He continues by claiming that reading makes a full man, conference a ready one, and writing

an exact man, concluding that if a man writes but little, he needs a good memory, if he confers little he needs to be endowed with a ready wit, and the if he reads little he has need for a lot of cunning in order to seem to know what he does not. Mathematics makes the mind of a man subtle, and if his mind wanders let him study mathematics, for in a demonstration, if his wit strays ever so little, he must begin from the beginning again.

Most of the essays are rather short, but there are some in which he let himself indulge, almost as if in a reverie. One on gardens, the other on houses, giving extended and detailed descriptions of how they should be arranged and constructed,

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