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Lord Bacon, Part II: His Character and Writings

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The Baconian Philosophy—its chief peculiarity—its end, 'Fruit'—Bacon contrasted with Seneca—superiority of the Baconian, to the ancient Philosophy, even to that of Socrates—still more, to that of Epicurus—Fruitlessness of ancient philosophy—Why!—his disdain of the merely useful—its dispute, even before Bacon's time—its false use, and false estimate, of the Scites, cæls, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, alphabetical writing—medicine—difference of Bacon in these respects.

The chief peculiarity of Bacon's philosophy seems to us to have been this—that it aimed at things altogether different from those which his predecessors had proposed to themselves. This was his own opinion. 'Finis scientiarum,' says he, 'a nonine adhibit bene positus est.' And again, 'Omnia gravissimus error in devotione uti ultima doctrinarum sine consistit.' 'Nec ipsa meta,' says he elsewhere, 'adhibe uti, quod seam, mortuim posita est et definx.' The more carefully his works are examined, the more clearly, we think, it will appear, that this is the real clue to his whole system; and that he used means different from those used by other philosophers, because he wished to arrive at an end altogether different from theirs.

What then was the end which Bacon proposed to himself? It was, to use his own emphatic expression, 'Fruit.' It was the multiplying of human enjoyments and the mitigating of human sufferings. It was 'the relief of man's estate.' It was 'commodis humanis inventor.' It was 'efficaciter operari ad sublerrrionis vitae humanae incommoda.' It was 'dotee virttim humanam novi inventis et copiis.' It was 'genius humanum novi operibus et potestibus continuo dote.' This was the object of all his speculations in every department of science,—in natural philosophy, in legislation, in politics, in morals.

Two words form the key of the Baconian doctrine—utility and progress. The ancient philosophy disdained to be useful, and was content to be stationary. It dealt largely in theories of moral perfection, which were so sublime that they never could be more than theories; in attempts to solve insoluble enigmas; in exhortations to the attainment of unattainable frames of mind. It could not descend to the humble office of ministering to the comfort of human beings. All the schools regarded that office as degrading; some censured it as immoral. Once indeed Posidonius, a distinguished writer of the age of Cicero and Cæsar, so far forgot himself as to enumerate among the humbler blessings which mankind owed to philosophy, the discovery of the principle of the arch, and the introduction of the use of metals. This eulogy was considered as an af-
front, and was taken up with proper spirit. Seneca vehemently disclaims these insulting compliments. Philosophy, according to him, has nothing to do with teaching men to rear arched roofs over their heads. The true philosopher does not care whether he has an arched roof or any roof. Philosophy has nothing to do with teaching men the uses of metals. She teaches us to be independent of all material substances, of all mechanical contrivances. The Wise Man rises above the vanities of the senses. Instead of attempting to add to the physical comforts of his species, he regrets that his lot was not cast in that golden age when the human race had no protection against the cold but the skins of wild beasts—no screen from the sun but a cavern. To impede such a man any share in the invention or improvement of a plough, or a mill, is an insult.

In my own time, she says Seneca, there have been inventions of this sort—transparent windows, tubes for diffusing warmth equally through all parts of a building, short-hand, which has been carried to such perfection that a writer can keep pace with the most rapid speaker. But the inventing of such things is dreariness for the lowest slaves; philosophy lies deeper. It is not her office to teach men how to use their hands. The object of her lessons is to form the soul.

Non est, hiequam, instrumentorum ad usum necessarios opus: If the sun were left out, this last sentence would be no bad description of the Baconian philosophy; and would, indeed, very much resemble several expressions in the Novum Organum. We shall next be told, explains Seneca, 'that the first shoemaker was a philosopher.' For our part, if we are forced to make our choice between the first shoemaker and the author of the three books On Anger, we pronounce for the shoemaker. It may be worse to be angry than to be wet. But shoes have kept millions from being wet; and we doubt whether Seneca ever kept any body from being angry.

It is very reluctantly that Seneca can be brought to confess that any philosopher had ever paid the smallest attention to any thing that could possibly promote with the greatest of people would consider as the well being of mankind. He labors to clear Democritus from the disgraceful imputation of having made the first arch, and Anacharsis from the charge of having contrived the potter's wheel. He is forced to own that such a thing might happen; and it may also happen, he tells us, that a philosopher may be swift of foot. But it is not in his character of philosopher that he either wins a race, or invents a machine. To be sure, The business of a philosopher was to declaim in praise of poverty with mechanical contrivances. The Wise Man lives according to virtue with the same pen which had just before written the nones of that Socrates cannot, for a moment, be compared. It pervades the dialogues of Plato. It may be distinctly traced in many parts of the works of Aristotle. Bacon has dropped hints from which it may be inferred, that in his opinion the prevalence of this feeling was in a great measure to be attributed to the influence of Socrates.

Our great countryman evidently did not consider the revolution which Socrates effected in philosophy as a happy event; and he constantly maintained that the earlier Greek speculators, Democritus in particular, were on the whole, superior to their more celebrated successors.

Assuredly, if the tree which Socrates planted, and Plato watered, is to be judged by its flowers and leaves, it is the noblest of trees. But if we take the homely test of Bacon,—if we judge of the tree by its fruits,—our opinion of it may perhaps be less favorable. When we sum up all the useful truths which we owe to that philosophy, to what do they amount? We find, indeed, abundant proofs that some of those who cultivated it were men of the first order of intellect. We find among their writings incomparable specimens both of dialectical and rhetorical art. We have no doubt that the ancient controversies were of use in so far as they served to exercise the faculties of the disputants; for there is no controversy so idle that it may not be of use in this way. But, when we look for something more—for something which adds to the comforts and alleviates the calamities of the human race,—we are forced to own ourselves disappointed. We are forced to say with Bacon, that this celebrated philosophy ended in nothing but disputation; that it was neither a vineyard nor an olive ground, but an intricate wood of briars and thistles, from which those who lost themselves in it, brought back many scrubs and no food.†

We readily acknowledge that some of the teachers of this unfruitful wisdom were among the greatest men that the world had ever seen. If we admit the justice of Bacon's censure, we admit it with regret, similar to that which Dante felt when he learned the fate of those illustrious heathens who were doomed to the first circle of Hell.

Gran duo mi prise au cœur quando loventei, Pecché gente il molto valore Comodó ch'era quel limbo era spepeli;* But, in truth, the very admiration which we feel for the eminent philosophers of antiquity, forces us to adopt the opinion, that their powers were systematically misdirected. For how else could it be that such powers should effect so little for mankind? A pedestrian may show as much muscular vigor on a treadmill as on a highway road. But on the road his vigor will assuredly carry him forward; and on the treadmill he will not advance an inch. The ancient philosophy was a treadmill, not a path. It was made up of revolving questions,—of controversies which were always beginning again. It was a contrivance for having much exertion.

* Novum Organum, Lib. 1. Aph. 73.
* Great sorrow seceded my heart, when I heard it, for I knew that persons of great worth were suspended in that limbo.
and no progress. We must acknowledge that more than once, while contemplating the doctrines of the Academy and the Portico, even as they appear in the transparent splendor of Cicero's incomparable diction, we have been tempted to mutter with the surly certainty in Periplus—"Cur quis non praebeat hic est?"

What is the highest good,—whether peace be found in the pursuit of pleasure? We must acknowledge that Bacon, not on that of Epicurus, that those noble lines ought to be inscribed:

* O bonissima tana tenera extulerunt lumen
  Quir prinpis patulis, illustris commoda vita.*

At length the time arrived when the barren philosophy which had, during so many ages, employed the faculties of the ablest men, was destined to fail. It had worn many shames. It had mingled itself with many creeds. It had survived revolutions in which empires, religions, languages, races, had perished. Driven from its ancient haunts, it had taken sanctuary in the church which it had persecuted; and had, like the daring friends of the poet, placed its seat

"next the seat of God,
  And with its darkness dared affront his light."

Words, and more words, and nothing but words, had been all the fruit of all the toil, of all the most renowned sages of sixty generations. But the days of this sterile exuberance were numbered.

Many causes predisposed the public mind to a change. The study of a great variety of ancient writers, though it did not give a right direction to philosophical research, did much towards destroying that blind reverence for authority which had prevailed when Aristotle ruled alone. The rise of the Fiorentino sect of Platonists—a sect to which belonged some of the finest minds of the fifteenth century—was not an unimportant event. The mere substitution of the academic for the peripatetic philosophy would indeed have done little good. But any thing was better than the old habit of unreasoning servility. It was something to have a choice of tyrants. "A spark of freedom," as Gibbon has justly remarked, "was produced by this collision of adverse servitudes."

Other causes might be mentioned. But it is chiefly to the great reformation of religion that we owe the great reformation of philosophy. The alliance between the schools and the Vatican had for ages been so close, that those who threw off the dominion of the Vatican would not continue to recognize the authority of the schools. Most of the great reformers treated the peripatetic philosophy with contempt; and spoke of Aristotle as if Aristotle had been answerable for all the dogmas of Thomas Aquinas. *Nullo eadem philosophiae professione esse in pretio,* was a reproach which the defenders of the old school chafed under. The puritans and many of the Protestant leaders considered as a compliment. Scarcely any text was more frequently cited by them than that in which St. Paul cautions the Colossians not to let any man spoil them by philosophy. Luther, almost at the outset of his career, went so far as to declare that no man could be at once a proficient in the school of Bacon and in that of Christ. Calvin, by which, if any one means to know what was the language of the Reformers from Geneva, we must rather understand the language of the church which was their common mother. In the words of one of the Scotch universities, the Aristotelian system was discredited for that of Ramus. Thus, before the birth of the pure and undiluted Bacon, the empire of the scholastic philosophy had been shaken to its foundations. There was in the intellectual world anarchy resembling that which in the political world often follows the overthrow of an old and deeply rooted government. Antiquity, prescription, the sound of great names, had ceased to awe mankind. The dynasty which had reigned for ages was at an end; and the vacant throne was left to be struggled for by pretenders.

* Seneca, Nat. Quæst. pro. Lib. 3.
† All the means of human subsistence were now attained.'
The first effect of this great revolution was, as Bacon most justly observed, to give for a time an undue importance to the mere graces of style. The new breed of scholars, the Aschamis and Buchanamis, nourished with the finest compositions of the Augustan age, regarded with loathing the dry, crabbed, and barbarous dictum of respondents and opponents. They were far from less studious about the matter of their works than about the manner. They succeeded in reforming Latinity; but they never even aspired to effect a reform in philosophy.

At this time Bacon appeared. It is altogether incorrect to say, as has often been said, that he was the first man to rise up against the Aristotelian philosophy when in the height of its power. The authority of that philosophy had, as we have shown, received a fatal blow long before he was born. Several speculators, among whom Ramus was the best known, had recently attempted to form new sects. Bacon's own expressions about the state of public opinion in the time of Luther are clear and strong: 'Accedebat,' says he, 'odium et contemptus, illia ipsius temporibus ortus et erga scholastico.' And again, 'Scholasticorum doctris despectui prorsus ubique, quibusdam damnatorum aedificato, quamvis ut barbara, nemo portavit, ut comune verbo, et usum commoditatis.' The part which Bacon played in this great change was the part, not of Lobespiere, but of Bonaparte. When he came forward, the ancient order of things had long been subverted. Some bigots still cherished with devoted loyalty the remembrance of the fallen monarchy, and exerted themselves to effect a restoration. But the majority had no such feeling. Freed, yet not knowing how to use their freedom, they pursued no determinate course, and had found no leader capable of conducting them.

That leader at length arose. The philosophy which he taught was essentially new. It differed from that of the celebrated ancient teachers, not merely in method but in object. Its object was the good of mankind, in the sense in which the mass of mankind has always had parts of his science.

The difference between the philosophy of Bacon and that of his predecessors, cannot, we think, be better illustrated than by comparing his views on some important subjects with those of Plato. We select Plato, because we conceive that he did more than any other person towards giving to the minds of speculative men the beneficial effect produced by mathematical study. The learning which Plato did love was the learning of nature, and from that time, according to Plutarch, the science of mechanics was considered as unworthy of the attention of a philosopher.

Archimedes in a later ageimitated and surpassed Archytas. But even Archimedes was not free from the prevailing notion that geometry was degraded by being employed to produce anything useful. It was with difficulty that he was induced to stoop from speculation to practice. He was half ashamed of those inventions which were the wonder of hostile nations; and always spoke of them slightly as mere amusements—as trifles in which a mathematician might be suffered to relax his mind after intense application to the higher parts of his science.

The opinion of Bacon on this subject was diametrically opposed to that of the ancient philosophers. He valued geometry chiefly, if not solely, on account of those uses which it which Plato appeared so base. And it is remarkable that the longer he lived the stronger this feeling became. When, in 1605, he wrote the two books on the 'Advancement of Learning,' he dwelt on the advantages which mankind derived from mixed mathematics; but he at the same time admitted, that the beneficial effect produced by mathematical study on the intellect, though a collateral advantage, was 'neither less worthy than that which philosoph)' had, as we have shown, received a total blow.

But it is evident that his views underwent a change. When, nearly twenty years later, he published the De Augentis, which is the treatise on the 'Advancement of Learning;' greatly expanded and carefully corrected, he made important alterations in the part which related to mathematics. He condemned with severity the high pretensions of the mathematicians—'detectas et fistum mathematicorum.' Assuming the well-being of the human race to be the end and principal and intended end of all speculation, he pronounced that mathematical science could claim no higher rank than that of an appendage, or an auxiliary to other sciences. Mathematical science, he says, is the handmaid of natural philosophy—she ought to demean herself as such—and it is probable that he cannot conceive by what ill chance it has happened that she presumes to claim precedence over her mistress. He predicts—a prediction which would have made Plato shudder—that as more and more discoveries are made in physics, there will be more and more branches of mixed mathematics. Of that collateral advantage, the value of which, twenty years before, he rated so highly, he says not one word. This omission cannot have been the effect of mere inadvertence. It was a principle of which he was informed before. From that treatise he deliberately expunged whatever was favorable to the study of pure mathematics, and inserted several keen reflexions.

* Besides—a hatred and contempt of the schoolmen had then arisen.

† 'The learning of the schoolmen began to be despised, as vulgar and barbarous.'

‡ 'Redargutie Philospharium.'—1 aim to new-model Philosophy; so that it may have no empty abstractions, and may improve the condition of mankind.'

§ Plato's Republic, Book 7.

* Usus et commodis hominum consul-sium.
tions on the ardent votaries of that study. This fact, in our opinion, admits of only one explanation. Bacon's love of pursuits which those of his age held to be the condition of mankind, and his jealousy of all pursuits merely curious, had grown upon him, and had, it may be, become immoderate. He was afraid of using any expression which might have the effect of inducing any man of talents to employ in speculations, useful only to the mind of the spectator, a single hour which might be employed in extending the empire of man over matter.* If Bacon erred here, we must acknowledge that we greatly prefer his error to the opposite error of Plato. We have no patience with a philosophy which, like those Roman matrons who swallowed abortives in order to preserve their shapes, takes pains to be barren for fear of being homely.

Let us pass to astronomy. This was one of the sciences which Plato exalted his disciples to learn, but for reasons far removed from common habits of thinking. 'Shall we set down astronomy,' says Socrates, 'among the subjects of study?' 'I think so,' answers his young friend Glaucon: 'to know something about the seasons, about the months and the years, is of use for military purposes, as well as for agriculture and navigation.' 'It amuses me,' says Socrates, 'to see how afraid you are lest the common herd of people should accuse you of recommending useless studies.' No then proceeds in that pure and methodic spirit, which he gives us in his 'Astronomical Instructions,' would use if Jupiter spoke Greek, to explain, that the use of astronomy is not to add to the vulgar comfort of life, but to assist in raising the mind to the contemplation of things which are to be perceived by the pure intellect alone. The knowledge of the actual motions of the heavenly bodies he considers as of little value. The appearances which make the sky beautiful at night are, he tells us, like the figures which a geométrician draws on the sand, mere examples, merely to serve the mind. We must get beyond them; we must neglect them; we must attain to an astronomy which is as independent of the actual stars as geometrical truth is independent of the lines of an ill-drawn diagram. This is, we imagine, very nearly, if not exactly, the astronomy which Bacon compared to the ox of Prometheus—a sleek, well-shaped hide, stuffed with rubbish, goodly to look at, but containing nothing to eat. He complained that astronomy had, to its great injury, been separated from natural philosophy, of which it was one of the noblest provinces, and annexed to the domain of practical letters. The world stood in need, he said, of a very different astronomy—of a living astronomy; of an astronomy which should set forth the nature, the motion, and the influences of the heavenly bodies, as they really are. The greatest and most useful of all inventions—

* Compare the passage relating to mathematics in the second book of the Advancement of Learning with the De augmentis, Lib. 3, Cap. 3.

† Plato's Republic, Book 7.

Bacon's views, as may easily be supposed, were widely different. The powers of the memory, he observes, without the help of writing, can do little towards the advancement of the mind. He acknowledges that the memory may be disciplined to such a point as to be able to perform very extraordinary feats. But on such feats he sets little value. The habits of his mind, he tells us, are such that he is not disposed to rate highly any accomplishment, however rare, which is of no practical use to mankind. To those religious achievements of the memory, he ranks them with the exhibitions of ropo-dancers and tumblers. 'The two performances,' he says, 'are of much the same sort. The one is an abuse of the powers of the body; the other is an abuse of the powers of the mind. Both may perhaps excite our wonder; but neither is entitled to our respect.'

To Plato, the science of medicine appeared one of very disputable advantage. He did not indeed object to quick cures for acute disorders, or for injuries produced by accidents. But the art which resists the slow sap of a chronic disease—which repairs frames outraged by lust, swollen by gluttony, or inflamed by wine—which encourages vigour, and mitigates the natural punishment of the sensualist, prolongs existence when the intellect has ceased to retain its entire energy—had no share of his esteem. A life prolonged by medical skill he pronounced to be a long death. The exercise of the art of medicine ought, he said, to be tolerated as far as that art may serve to cure the occasional indisposition of men whose constitutions are good. As to those who have bad constitutions, let them die;—and the sooner the better. Such men are unfit for war, for magistracy, for the management of their domestic affairs. That however is comparatively of little consequence. But they are incapable of study and speculation. If they engage in any serious mental exercise, they are troubled with giddiness and fulness of the head; all which they lay to the account of philosophy. The best thing that can happen to such wretches is to have done with life at once. He quotes mystical authority in support of this doctrine; and reminds his disciples that the practice of the sons of Asclepius, as described by Homer, extended only to the cure of external injuries.

Far different was the philosophy of Bacon. Of all the sciences, that which he seems to have regarded with the greatest interest was the science which, in Plato's opinion, would not be tolerated in a well regulated community. To make men perfect was no part of Bacon's plan. His humble aim was to make imperfect men comfortable. The beneficence of his philosophy resembled the beneficence of the common Father, whose sun rises on the evil and the good—whose rain descends for the just and the unjust. In Plato's opinion man was made for philosophy; in Bacon's opinion philosophy was made for man; it was a means to an end—and that end was to increase the pleasures, and to mitigate the pains of millions who are not and cannot be philosophers. That a valetudinarian who took great pleasure in being wheeled along his terrace, who relished his boiled chicken and his weak wine and water, and who enjoyed a hearty laugh over the Queen of Na­

* Plato's Phædo, Quinacri, XIV. 1.

† De Augmentis, Lib. 5, Cap. 5.

† Plato's Republic, Book 5.

Not his tales, should be treated as a counter-remedy because he could not read the Timon without a headache, was a notion which the humane spirit of the English school of wisdom altogether rejected. Bacon would not have thought it beneath the dignity of a philosopher to contrive an improved garden chair for such a valetu-
The boast of the ancient philosophers was, that their doctrine formed the minds of men to a high degree of virtue and virtue. They indeed did nothing good which the most celebrated of those teachers even pretended to effect; and undoubtedly if they had effected this, they would have deserved the greatest praise. But the truth is, that in those very matters in which alone they professed to do any good to mankind, in those very matters for the sake of which they neglected all the vulgar interests of mankind, they did nothing, or worse than nothing. They promised what was impracticable; they despised what was practicable; they filled the world with long words and long beards; and they left it as wicked and as ignorant as they found it. An acre in Middlesex is better than a principality in Utopia. The smallest actual good is better than the most magnificent promise of impossibilities. The wisest man of the Stoics would, no doubt, be a grander object than a steam-engine. But there are steam-engines; and the wise man of the Stoics is yet to be born. A philosophy which should enable a man to feel perfectly happy while in agonies of pain, may be better than a philosophy which assuages pain. But we know that there are remedies which will assuage pain; and we know that the ancient sages liked the toothache just as little as their neighbors. A philosophy which should extinguish enmity, would be better than a philosophy which should devise laws for the security of property. But it is possible to make laws which shall, to a very great extent, secure property. And we do understand how many motives which the ancient philosophy furnished could extinguish enmity. We know indeed that the philosophers were no better than other men. From the testimony of friends as well as of foes—from the confessions of Epictetus and Seneca, as well as from the sneers of Lucian and the fierce invectives of Juvenal, it is plain that the men who taught the Stoics were a set of vipers, and the vices of their neighbors, with the additional vice of hypocrisy. Some people may think the object of the Baconian philosophy a low object, but they cannot deny that, high or low, it has been attained. They cannot deny that every year makes an addition to what Bacon called 'fruit.' They cannot deny that mankind have made, and are making, great and constant progress in the road which he pointed out to them. Was there any such progressive movement among the ancient philosophers? After they had been declaiming eight hundred years, had they made the world better than when they began? Our belief is, that among the philosophers themselves, instead of a progressive improvement, there was a progressive degeneracy. An object which the Ancients 'had and should have rejected with scorn, added the last disgrace to the long list of the Stoic and Platonist schools. Those unsuccessful attempts to articulate which are so delightful and interesting in a child, shock and disgust us in an aged panty; and in the same way, these wild mythological fictions which charm us when lisped by Greek poetry in its infancy, are a most nauseating dulness and loathing when humbled by Greek philosophy in its old age. We know that guns, cutlery, spectacles, clocks, are better in our time than they were in the time of our fathers; and were better in the time of our fathers than they were in the time of our grandfathers. We might, therefore, be inclined to think that when a philosophy which boasted that its object was the elevation and purification of the mind, and which for this object neglected the cordial office of ministering to the comforts of the body, had flourished in the highest honor for many hundreds of years, a vast moral amelioration must have taken place. Was it so? Look at the schools of this wise age—four centuries before the Christian era, and four centuries after that era. Compare the men whom those schools formed at those two periods. Compare Plato and Libanius. Compare Pericles and Julian. This philosophy confessed, may boasted, that for every end but one it was useless. Had it attained that one end?
Suppose that Justinian, when he closed the schools of Athens, had called on the last few sages who still haunted the portico, and lingered round the ancient plane trees, to show their title to public veneration:—suppose that he had said, 'A thousand years have elapsed since, in this famous city, Socrates posed Protagoras and Hippias; during those thousand years a large proportion of the ablest men of every generation has been employed in constant efforts to bring to perfection the philosophy which you teach; that philosophy has been munificently patronised by the powerful; its professors have been held in the highest esteem by the public; it has drawn to itself almost all the sap and vigor of the human intellect—and what has it effected? What profitable truth has it taught us which we should not equally have known without it? What has it enabled us to do which we should not have been equally able to do without it? Such questions, we suspect, would have puzzled Simplicius and Isidore. Ask a follower of Bacon what the new philosophy, as it was called in the time of Charles the Second, has effected for mankind, and his answer is ready—'It has lengthened life; it has mitigated pain; it has extinguished diseases; it has increased the fertility of the soil; it has given new securities to the mariner; it has furnished new arms to the warrior; it has spanned great rivers and estuaries with bridges of form unknown to our fathers; it has guided the thunderbolt innocuously from heaven to earth; it has lighted up the night with the splendor of the day; it has extended the range of the human vision; it has multiplied the power of the human muscles; it has accelerated motion; it has annihilated distance; it has facilitated intercourse, correspondence, all friendly offices, all despatch of business; it has enabled man to descend to the depths of the sea, to soar into the air, to penetrate securely into the noxious recesses of the earth, to traverse the land on cars which whirl along without horses, and the ocean in ships which sail against the wind. These are but a part of its fruits, and of its first fruits. For it is a philosophy which never rests, which has never attained it, which is never perfect. Its law is progress. A point which yesterday was invisible is its goal to-day, and will be its starting-post to-morrow.'

[Part 3d, and last, in our next number.]