

Interpretation

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Robert K. Faulkner, *Francis Bacon and the Project of Progress* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993), ix + 308 pp. \$67.50 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

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Francis Bacon is remembered today chiefly as one of the founders of modern science, for which he conceived a new mode of inquiry (rigorous experiment rather than naive experience), a new type of knowledge (dynamical laws rather than substantial forms), and a new ultimate goal (mastery of nature rather than pure *theoria*). In this excellent study Robert Faulkner sets out to examine not Bacon's science but his "project for progressive civilization," that is, his comprehensive plan for transforming the human world, a plan in which Bacon's scientific writings play "only the most conspicuous part." What emerges is a portrait of Bacon as a profound student of Machiavelli who introduced key innovations, primarily with a view to "private security, limited government, economic growth, and progress in conquering nature." According to Faulkner, our modern world and its project of perpetual progress bear the distinctive stamp of Bacon's "much modified Machiavellianism." In reading Bacon, Faulkner seeks a confrontation with "the principles of progress in their original clarity and vigor," in part with a view to "prudent discrimination and philosophic rethinking." In an age of "postmodern disillusionment with modernity," Faulkner suggests that the thoughtful citizen ought to be prepared to "defend the benefits of progress" or at least to reconsider them while being aware of the defects and advantages (pp. 3-8).

Faulkner finds the Baconian project most fully elaborated in the *Essays or Counsels, Civil and Moral*, Bacon's "practical work *par excellence*" (p. 273), containing his "comprehensive pictures of progressive morals, politics, and theology" (p. 20). While the 58 essays offer a "tantalizing mixture of obscurity and lucidity" (p. 27), Faulkner claims to have discovered the teaching concealed beneath their disorderly surface. In the *Essays*, writes Faulkner, Bacon "manages to turn traditional opinions into enlightened opinions and to do this while disguising the transformation" (p. 28). The work as a whole, like each essay, "moves from undermining to establishing." The sequence of essays begins with "corrosion of the most authoritative received pieties," advances to "production of a new-model, progressive nation-state," and culminates in "intimations of a new-model progressive civilization" (p. 29). Bacon's revolution is "more insinuated than imposed" (p. 28), and Faulkner's careful interpretations of the indi-

vidual essays shed much light on the dark and devious Baconian “art of enlightenment.”

After surveying the literary divisions of the *Essays* that correspond to “different stages in the work of overturning a world” (pp. 30, 41), Faulkner turns to examine specific passages that clarify Bacon’s relation to Machiavelli. According to Faulkner, Bacon’s four explicit references to Machiavelli in the *Essays* reveal both his fundamental harmony with Machiavelli’s teaching and his decisive corrections of Machiavelli’s application of that teaching (p. 59). That is, Bacon’s quarrel with Machiavelli proves to be only “over means, although vast means extending to whole civilizations” (p. 61).

Faulkner shows that Bacon, no less than Machiavelli, admires “the imperial glory that attends the head of a conquering sect.” Like Machiavelli, he is also profoundly impressed by the worldly success of the Christian religion, which he traces to “Christ’s promise of satisfaction, a promise of immortality.” But Bacon aims to surpass Machiavelli’s imitation of Christ by supplying “an analogous vision of future satisfaction” (viz., the project of progress), relying less on fear than Machiavelli and more on hope. He recommends the adoption of a “humane cause that retains an aura of Christian charity.” Yet Baconian charity is still only a means to personal glory, and the humanity he envisages is rooted in “malignity” and in the desire for “private domination on the grandest scale.” Bacon’s “politic and artificial nourishing and entertaining of hopes” is thus merely a continuation of Machiavellian policy by other means (pp. 61–65).

Bacon also dissents from Machiavelli’s favorable judgment as to the utility of wars and conspiracies. Instead, writes Faulkner, he seeks to transform human divisions of class and sect into a mutually useful division of labor and advancement. Faced with partisan disputes, princes should strive to appear neutral and impartial. Under the Baconian regime, seditions and troubles will give way to a new civil order, founded on general institutions of a progressive economy. Bacon commends the efficacy of custom in promoting a climate of discipline favorable to “business,” the indispensable engine of progress (pp. 70–73). Much as Machiavelli admires imperial republics for redirecting factional enmity against a common foe, Bacon would unite both princes and peoples in a perpetual war on poverty, conducted on a global scale, all presumably under the aegis of Baconian science (pp. 66–70). Indeed, the advancement of science and the conquest of nature are the chief tenets of Bacon’s new sect, which will satisfy the longings of the few for glory and of the many for peace, security, long life, and a rising standard of living (pp. 73–79).

In the second part of his book, Faulkner investigates Bacon’s “individualism,” i.e., his “discovery of a needy self that must make its own provision to the point of making its own world” (p. 87). Bacon replaces classical ethics with the doctrine of the “self-made man” (p. 91). The ground of action is not the distinction between good and bad but the self’s recoiling from death and its concomitant wish to “endure” or “continue” (pp. 92, 273). Nature is not a guide

to conduct but an implacable adversary, to be subdued by custom and art. For Bacon, in contrast to Hobbes, the important passion is not fear of death but anger at our mortality, which spurs the ambitious to secure an enduring name for themselves and thus “have their revenge of nature” (p. 101). According to Faulkner, Bacon does not wish to soothe this anger but to arouse it, render it more effective, and procure for it a more lasting satisfaction.

Faulkner indicates the problematic character of the Baconian self-made man (p. 104). For Bacon, there is no soul whose dignity can be measured by external standards, only a self that employs the “arts of ostentation” to achieve a “great place” for itself (p. 109). But, apart from its overpowering drive to endure, the Baconian self is “hollow,” empty of content, nothing but a “constructed image that can win a state of security” (pp. 103, 274). Does the ambitious man then truly achieve a victory over nature, or does nature, as an impersonal force acting within him, merely goad him on in his struggle against death? If the self is a construct, who is the constructor? This is the difficulty implicit in modern thought as a whole: human autonomy proves elusive when man, in his campaign to conquer nature, lays siege to human nature itself.

The third part of Faulkner’s book addresses Bacon’s politics, and especially his doctrine of “the state.” Faulkner argues for Bacon’s thought as an important source of the modern nation-state, “given over to economic and industrial growth and presided over by a republican but effective government” (p. 145). More fundamentally, writes Faulkner, Bacon follows Machiavelli in understanding “state” primarily as an “instrument of the self” (pp. 154–55), i.e., an acquisitive “state of mind,” and hence “separable from government.” Bacon’s new state, “unconcerned with either salvation or virtue” (p. 147), is instead merely an “engine for channeling human energy,” so as to satisfy “both the glory-seeking few and the security-seeking majority” (p. 154). Faulkner offers a persuasive reading of Bacon’s *History of the Reign of King Henry VII* as a model of enlightened despotism, in which the force and fraud of Machiavellian statecraft are moderated by the addition of laws, economic policies, and civil institutions that eventually supplant the despot altogether. In Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, Faulkner finds not only a “seminal vision of progressive society” packaged to appeal to the people, but also a more ominous teaching: that the achievement of progress through control of nature requires the management of peoples by control of human nature (p. 229–30). In order to “mobilize the young and daring” to embrace his project, Bacon in the *New Atlantis* deliberately exaggerates the goods and conceals the evils that technological progress will bring (p. 244). In fact, however, Bacon foresaw and accepted the ugly truth of modern science which C. S. Lewis expounds in *The Abolition of Man*: that man’s dominion over nature will always mean in practice the dominion of some men over other men (p. 254).

In his last chapter Faulkner turns to the question of the foundation of Bacon’s project. Did Bacon found his new science primarily for the sake of theory

or of practice? Faulkner appears to answer unequivocally: Bacon “abandons altogether” philosophy as the ancients meant it, i.e., “as a quest for the most comprehensive truth” (pp. 267–68). Bacon himself was not moved by the love of wisdom but by the aspiration to “immortality or continuance,” an aspiration best satisfied by the lasting fame accorded to founders and discoverers. Bacon’s great project, comprising both the new progressive civilization and the new experimental science, was chiefly intended to keep Bacon’s own name alive (p. 96). According to Faulkner, Bacon was describing himself when he spoke of the “gigantine state of mind” of those rare men who wish to “give form to the world, according to their own humors” (pp. 64–65). Further, Faulkner traces Bacon’s paramount desire for glory to a “spirited revulsion from death” and “a passion for revenge” fueled by “anger at his natural state” (pp. 273, 99–103). Like Machiavelli, Bacon was a “wise malignant,” i.e., a benefactor whose humanity is rooted in malice, and whose great deeds are no more than a means to put a permanent and personal stamp on the world (pp. 63–64). In short, Bacon was merely the angriest of the angry men described in the *Essays*—or at any rate the one best able to satisfy his anger.

Nonetheless, while insisting that Bacon’s highest aim is productive rather than contemplative, Faulkner adds that Bacon sought “real knowledge of what nature is,” and that his “art of interpreting nature” is still a “modified form of knowing” (pp. 268–69). The practical end of Baconian science (production of useful effects) may dictate its cognitive form (laws of action and forces), but Bacon still “presumed” that these laws would capture “the decisive truth” about nature. Faulkner criticizes Bacon for this assumption, and, citing Werner Heisenberg, he argues that modern science as a whole has sacrificed genuine and comprehensive knowledge of nature in its pursuit of “a crusade of conquest into the material world.” Distorted by its practical aim, Baconian science produces at best a “narrow illumination” of nature, at worst a systematically misleading “construction of utilitarian meanings” (pp. 271, 280 nn. 31, 33).

Powerful as this critique may be, it loses some of its force if, as Faulkner argues, Bacon was not fundamentally interested in the truth about nature. For if his sole concern was with “the empire of man over things,” Bacon could answer this critique by simply renouncing his claim to “real knowledge of nature,” or, better still, by denying that such knowledge is available to man, notwithstanding the pretensions of all previous philosophers.

But perhaps Bacon’s assumption that his method would yield genuine knowledge is not as arbitrary as Faulkner makes it appear. Faulkner notes that in a few prominent places Bacon asserts emphatically the superiority of theory to practice and praises contemplation for the serene tranquility it affords (p. 268). But he dismisses such “traditional-sounding celebrations of contemplation” as “effusive little professions of an old faith” or “reassurances for the gullible.” However that may be, in several works Bacon offers a more sustained critique of the very distinction between action and contemplation. In *The New*

Organon, for example, Bacon writes that “human knowledge and human power meet in one” (*N.O.* I 3), that “these two directions, the one active, the other contemplative, are one and the same” (*N.O.* II 4), and that “truth and utility are here the very same thing” (*N.O.* I 124). As Richard Kennington has emphasized,¹ the unity of knowledge and power in Bacon’s science reflects above all his determination to discover general laws of nature, which are not only “in operation most useful” but also “in knowledge most true” (*N.O.* II 4). Whether modern science, under Bacon’s guidance, has truly overcome the distinction between theory and practice, or merely blurred it, is of course an open question.

In any event, Bacon’s amalgamation of knowledge and power leaves the ultimate goal of his science somewhat obscure. Whether utility is simply paramount in Bacon’s thought is finally a very difficult question indeed. It is by no means clear, for example, that a devotion to mastery dictates Bacon’s assertion that “in nature nothing truly exists besides individual bodies performing pure individual acts according to law” (*N.O.* II 2). On the other hand, such a mechanistic conception of nature would certainly seem to facilitate, if not to invite, the project of mastery. To solve this problem would require a fuller investigation of Bacon’s more theoretical writings than was evidently possible within the scope of Faulkner’s political study of Bacon. Very tentatively, one might say that Faulkner has emphasized the Machiavellian in Bacon at the expense of the Epicurean, or, in other words, that Bacon was in truth a student of both Machiavelli and Lucretius who corrected the teaching of each in the light of what he learned from the other.

Neither is it clear how to assess Faulkner’s conclusion that Bacon’s deepest impulse was the ambition to “continue” by keeping his name alive after death. Faulkner assembles many passages lending powerful support to this view; but he also concedes that Bacon does not always tell the truth, least of all about his own motives. In the *Essays*, especially, it would not be altogether surprising if Bacon wrote so as to appeal to men hungry for fame, without thereby disclosing that he simply shared their appetites. In a passage of apparent candor (*Essays* 1, “Of Truth”), Bacon remarks that by and large men cannot tolerate the truth and instead content themselves with “vain opinions, flattering hopes, false valuations, imaginations as one would, and the like.” To enlighten them, says Bacon, would be to leave their minds “poor shrunken things, full of melancholy and indisposition, and displeasing to themselves.” Is it likely that the author of these words would content himself with the flattering hope of posthumous fame, a good whose enjoyment, one suspects, is entirely confined to anticipation?

But if Faulkner’s portrait of Bacon as an aspiring prince of infinite ambitions looks incomplete, he is surely right to question whether Bacon’s passion for knowledge can be simply equated with the Socratic eros for wisdom or the Epicurean taste for tranquil pleasures. Bacon himself, unable or at least unwilling to appeal to a natural human desire to know, seems hard put to account for his own determination to seek enlightenment rather than surrender to “the natu-

ral but corrupt love of the lie itself" (*Essays* 1, "Of Truth"). In the same essay Bacon writes that "the inquiry of truth, which is the lovemaking or wooing it, the knowledge of truth, which is the presence of it, and the belief of truth, which is the enjoying of it, is the sovereign good of human nature." We could, following Faulkner, dismiss this "traditional" statement as merely "a diversion," wholly at odds with Bacon's reductionist science of human nature (pp. 94–95; cf. p. 272). Or else we could take it to indicate that Bacon himself found the pursuit of wisdom to be a self-sufficient good of a kind that his own science was powerless to explain.

One can hardly blame Faulkner for not resolving these difficult questions concerning the foundations of Bacon's project. His book as a whole is a fine companion to the study of Bacon's demanding texts, and whoever wishes to investigate Bacon's role in the origins of modernity will find here an invaluable guide. Faulkner has authoritatively mapped the Baconian territory, lighting the way for further explorations.

NOTE

1. Richard H. Kennington, "Bacon's Critique of Ancient Philosophy in *New Organon* I," in *Nature and Scientific Method*, Daniel O. Dahlstrom, ed. (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991).