

Interpretation

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- Designer* Sarah Teutschel
- Inquiries* ***Interpretation, A Journal of Political Philosophy***
Department of Political Science
Baylor University
1 Bear Place, 97276
Waco, TX 76798
- email* interpretation@baylor.edu

David C. Innes, *Francis Bacon*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2019, 142 pp., \$14.99 (paperback).

ERIN A. DOLGOY
RHODES COLLEGE
dolgoye@rhodes.edu

David C. Innes's *Francis Bacon*, despite its title, is as much a critique of modern life and a call for a reaffirmation of Christian beliefs and values as it is an analysis of Francis Bacon's thought. The explicit purpose of Innes's text is to promote a godly science that will return humanity to "the kingdom of God" (103). The text begins with a question: "Why should a thoughtful, modern reader care about Francis Bacon?" (xxi). Bacon's arguments and ideas, Innes suggests, have been instrumental in the creation of the contemporary, technologically driven world. We study Bacon, Innes explains, to learn about "what makes the modern world and us as a modern people modern" (xxi). We study Bacon, in other words, to learn about ourselves. Innes depicts Bacon as a false prophet of hope, whose trust in human reason and human ingenuity displaced trust in the divine. Those of us who have inherited the world that Bacon helped to create, Innes argues, are unwitting proponents of science and progress whose spiritual lives have been enervated. The human experience can be improved, Innes asserts throughout the text, by a return to Christ.

Readers who may believe that they do not care about science are passionately reminded by Innes that "science touches everything, shapes everything, tells everything what it is and what it may aspire to become.... [It] has become the whole of life" (xxi). Science is so pervasive that, for many of us, it is invisible. In the modern world, Innes contends, science—or more specifically, scientism—has become a religion. Scientism, as Innes defines it, is "the exclusivity of natural science as a way of knowing" (xxii). It is based on the belief "that to know something as true one must have facts, data, measurement and

quantifiable observations, and these analyzed scientifically” (xxii). Proof of scientific knowledge is evidenced by mechanical arts or technological innovations: “Technology, technological thinking, and technological culture are inseparable from each other and give us both the spirit of innovation and the religion of human autonomy, forward-looking hope, and backward-looking suspicion and disdain” (xxiii). The dominant ideology of the modern world which has replaced faith and Christian belief, Innes argues, is scientism.

Francis Bacon is part of the Great Thinkers series published by P&R, or Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, which “is dedicated to publishing excellent books that promote biblical understanding and godly living as summarized in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms.” The press’s explicit “mission is to serve Christ and his church by producing clear, engaging, fresh, and insightful applications of Reformed theology to life.”¹ The Great Thinkers series is mandated, as explained by Nathan D. Shannon, series editor and professor of systematic theology at Torch Trinity Graduate University in Seoul, South Korea, to “engage our cultural and social contexts as ambassadors and witnesses for Christ” (xi). Each contribution to the series is expected to be “*academically informed*” and “*accessible*” and to “maintai[n] a high standard of *biblical and theological faithfulness*” (xi–xii).

True to the mandate of the press “to help lay readers grow in Christian thought and service,”² Innes’s argument is premised on Christian doctrine and affirms a Christian perspective. Throughout the text, Innes explains what that means to him and what he believes it should mean for all of us: human beings are created “in the image of God” (102); there is “purposeful design” (104) by “an intelligent and benevolent Creator” (110); and we must “take the Bible at its word” (109). The intended audience of Innes’s *Francis Bacon* is clear from the outset (although these categories need not be mutually exclusive): individuals who seek Christian thought or Christian interpretation; individuals who are interested in Francis Bacon’s project and writings; and individuals who are concerned about the modern human experience, made possible by the advancement of learning and evidenced in technological developments.

The text begins by looking backwards at “the precarious condition of daily life that almost everyone suffered for most of human history” (3). Historically, the human experience, according to Innes’s Christian apocalyptic

¹ “About P&R Publishing,” <https://www.prpbooks.com/about-us> (accessed July 19, 2020).

² *Ibid.*

frame, was bleak, brief, uncertain, and cruel.³ Innes provides data to support his arguments, citing Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror*, Tim Blanning's *The Pursuit of Glory*, Deirdre McCloskey's *Bourgeois Equality*, and Steven Pinker's *Enlightenment Now*. Plague, famine, and war, brought by "the fourth horseman of the Apocalypse" (3), imbued the human experience with desperation and vulnerability with respect to other human beings and to nature. As an explanation for human suffering, Innes affirms that while God's "goodness" and "mercy is upon and throughout his creation" (10), human suffering, in "traditional Christian teaching," is caused by "the fallen character, not only of man, but of the whole creation" (12). The problem of theodicy, Innes reminds us, is spiritual; "The remedy must, therefore, be ultimately spiritual, and it is provided in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ" (12). In contrast to doctrinal Christianity, Bacon explains human suffering as the result of human ignorance and inaction: human beings, according to Bacon, "do not rightly understand either their store or their strength."⁴ We overestimate our abilities and underestimate our potential to improve our condition. Alleviation from suffering, as promised by Bacon's Instauration—the name of his project—is philosophical rather than spiritual; if human beings can learn to *think* better and construct more elaborate mechanical helps, our misery and suffering will be ameliorated. Unlike many scholars, including Howard White, Jerry Weinberger, and Robert Faulkner, who focus on the ways that Bacon's emphasis on reason and secularity have freed human beings from suffering, Innes focuses on our lost spirituality.

Innes's discussion of Bacon's project is academically rigorous and accessible, engaging with two common themes in Bacon scholarship. First, Innes challenges arguments that affirm or attest to Bacon's Christian beliefs. While "Bacon is remembered as a pious man" (34), at least by some scholars—including Thomas Fowler, Benjamin Farrington, Perez Zagorin, and Stephen McKnight—he is, according to Innes, certainly not a Christian. Any instance wherein Bacon may appear to promote Christian doctrine is undertaken not in service to Christ, but as a strategic means to his own ends. Second, Innes challenges arguments that promote or aggrandize Bacon's humanitarianism, benevolence, or love of learning. Bacon, in Innes's estimation, was motivated by his "soaring personal ambition" (25), not by a meaningful sense of care for human beings. In practice, Bacon "allowed himself to be distracted from

³ Innes echoes Thomas Hobbes's understanding of the unpleasantness of human existence. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1994), 76.

⁴ Francis Bacon, *The Great Instauration*, in *The Complete Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 4:13.

his highest goals and most lasting glories by lesser and incompatible accomplishments and pleasure” (25). As an example, Innes mentions Bacon’s sexual proclivities and suggests that had Bacon truly “wanted the safest path to high office, then—like Elizabeth, his queen—he should have prudently committed himself to chastity” (24). Innes, therefore, charges Bacon with two counts of disingenuity: he is neither a Christian nor a philosopher. His intentions are neither to further Christianity nor to pursue truth; rather, he is primarily concerned with his reputation, legacy, and “his own posthumous glory” (xxiv).

The dubiously pious Bacon, Innes explains, exploits the Christian sentiments of his contemporaries to further his personal ambition. Innes argues that in Bacon’s time, “people’s hope was in Christ, his resurrection, and his eschatological kingdom” (xxiii). Innes likens Bacon to a cuckoo bird, which leaves its eggs in the nests of other birds to be raised by unwitting surrogates. Bacon’s intention, Innes claims—following work by Robert Faulkner, Timothy Paterson, Jerry Weinberger, and Howard White—was to occupy and displace Christianity. His plan was “to adapt Christianity as a vehicle for his new scientific civilization” (xxiii). To this end, Bacon “substitutes the hope of technological science for the Christian hope” (xxiii). Science replaces Christianity as the primary means of understanding the world; since Bacon’s (heretical) modifications to accepted Christian doctrine and practice are both subtle and denied by their architect, his changes go unnoticed (or at least can be contested). Bacon’s science, in practice, challenges the fundamental tenets of Christian faith. Speculative knowledge and enjoyment of God’s glory are replaced by productive or technological works. As Innes laments, “divine or metaphysical things,” since they fall outside Bacon’s method of knowing, come to be “unreliable as sources of hope” (49).

While Innes certainly concedes “the enormous success” and “overwhelming benefits” (77) of modern science as inspired by Bacon’s project, he emphasizes the tradeoffs: the discontent that accompanies advancement and optimism; the fear that our technology will destroy us; the uncertainty about whether scientists will, indeed, behave benevolently; and a litany of technologies that are evidence “of science’s evil applications” (79). Bacon’s project, Innes contends, is dangerous in two respects. First, scientism—or hope-as-a-method—limits the subjects that are determined legitimate sources of knowledge. Since faith and religion are not scientifically verifiable, according to Bacon’s plan as Innes explains it, Christianity is regarded as an illegitimate source of knowledge. Science is a method, not a guide to moral conduct: “reason as Bacon represents it to us is incapable of discerning

moral ends, proper uses, or any directing principle” (86). Second, technology—or hope-as-a-goal—cannot be the end of human striving. Technology “instrumentalized the world” (80), including other human beings. Comforts afforded by technology, Innes believes, do not outweigh the spiritual and emotional well-being afforded by faith. There is no endpoint or conclusion to technological innovation; rather, technology provides an ever-changing benchmark of success and comfort. The biblical moral boundaries of human domination are undermined as the world is instrumentalized; heaven and divine salvation are replaced by material human creations and earthly comforts. As a result, Innes maintains, Bacon “leaves us without any knowable moral guidance” (80): science (with its emphasis on reason) not only undermines the legitimacy of the religious understanding of the world, but it fails to provide a guide for action beyond method; and Bacon’s reformed (or cuckooed) religion cannot either, since the Bible is no longer understood as a guide or authority for the “humble believer” (88). Bacon’s project, Innes concludes, has been falsely advertised.

The Instauration—commonly understood as a project to dominate nature—is, according to Innes, irredeemable. Much like Bacon before him, Innes attempts to set the project anew, looking to amplify the best parts from the past and present, “raised upon the proper foundation.”⁵ The godly science, outlined by Innes, is based on three Christian disciplines: “*Know your Bible*” (114); “*Root yourself in the Church*” (114); and “*Center yourself in love*” of God (115). These disciplines uphold the three pillars of godly science: first, “replace scientism with philosophical humility” (105), which makes clear that science is not the exclusive means for understanding; second, “replace technology with teleology” (106), which allows for purposive accounts of nature and human beings as part of an intentionally designed creation; and third, “replace homocentricity with theocentricity” (108), which reaffirms God as the creator of nature and displaces humans from the center of nature.

Bacon certainly advocates for technology and homocentricity. He clearly believes that our lives will be improved with more refined mechanical helps, and he enervates organized religion and the centrality of the church in favor of human action and human control. But it is less clear that Bacon ought to be held responsible for scientism.⁶ Bacon’s project is often subject to criticisms of

⁵ Bacon, *The Great Instauration*, 4:8.

⁶ For a thoughtful discussion on this perspective, see Kimberly Hurd Hale, *Francis Bacon’s New Atlantis in the Foundation of Modern Political Thought* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013).

scientism;⁷ he is indeed at times an effusive advocate for his project for learning. Scientism, of course, is understood by Innes as pejorative: he defines scientism as “the exclusivity of natural science as a way of knowing” (xxii). In *Novum Organon*, Bacon specifically warns against totalizing schools of thought, which is one of his primary criticisms of the Aristotelian Schoolmen, the Church Fathers, and his own Instauration. Scientism is not necessarily a danger unique to Bacon’s project; rather, it is a consequence of human intellect and cognition, as Bacon explains in his well-known account of the Idols of the Mind. Bacon also appeals to our emotions through his use of fiction and myth, in his novella *New Atlantis*, from which Innes draws much of his analysis; in his collection of ancient fables, *Wisdom of the Ancients*; and in his dialogue *Advertisement Touching a Holy War*. Bacon did believe that our lives would be less bleak, brief, uncertain, and cruel if we attempted to improve our condition, rather than simply accept it as divinely willed.

As his chapter “Daedalus; or the Mechanic”⁸ from *Wisdom of the Ancients* shows, Bacon does not ignore some of the dangers of his Instauration. Geniuses, he notes, need not be *good* people; in fact, those individuals who are most exceptional are most likely to be vain, petty, selfish, and dangerous, since they are willing to push the bounds of what has previously been considered possible. Innes is correct that “benevolence is no more likely in scientists than in nonscientists and has no intrinsic connection with the scientific endeavor” (79). Bacon’s civil and moral project, I believe, attempts to mitigate these potential dangers; if those who study nature feel a responsibility to protect their polities and neighbors, they are less likely to behave in nefarious ways. Innes references Bacon’s discussion in the first Aphorism of *Novum Organon*, wherein Bacon casts human beings as “the servant[s] and interpreter[s] of Nature.”⁹ In the third Aphorism, he says, “Nature to be commanded must be obeyed.”¹⁰ Command, as Innes understands it, is an insufficient ground for moral limits. Whether or not Bacon *did enough* to prevent or alleviate the potential harms or injustices that scientists could commit in pursuit of knowledge and mastery of nature is a debated topic; clearly, he was aware of at least some potential harms, yet believed that the human attempt to command nature was worth the risks.

⁷ For a recent example, see David Whitney, *Maladies of Modernity: Scientism and the Deformation of Political Order* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s, 2019).

⁸ Bacon, *Complete Works*, 6:734–36.

⁹ Bacon, *Complete Works*, 4:47.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

One wonders if Innes at times gives Bacon too much credit and the rest of us too little. Innes depicts Bacon as a prophetic planner who understood in their entirety the ramifications of his project. As an *idea monarch*, Bacon “recast[s] and govern[s] whole civilizations by an empire of the mind” (1). Although he did hold public office, Bacon neither ruled nor had any direct control over science policy. He sets a path, but cannot control what is done with his arguments. If Bacon is culpable, should Jesus, too, be held responsible for what has been done in his name? Bacon is one of the architects of modern human learning, but he cannot be held solely responsible for what has been done with his ideas since his death in 1626. Innes casts all of us moderns as unwitting followers of Bacon’s project, who have traded faith and a meaningful human experience for creature comforts.

Science does not provide a moral standard for determining any particular course of action; modern science is a method of understanding, rather than a guide for human action. Bacon argues that human knowledge can be less subjective and more accurate if human beings rely on experiments rather than solely on their sentiments and senses. These experiments are then tested by other scientists to confirm their replicability. In order to combat the dangers of scientism, a scientist needs to understand the limits and appropriate application of the method. Science is adaptable, changing, and subject to scrutiny.

Innes’s account of politics is firmly grounded in theocentricity. For the religious, belief in itself is the measure of truth—that is, all truths are expected to affirm doctrine, or the word of the Bible. Science, on the other hand, is a method by which to study nature. Modern science certainly does not deny or prevent personal beliefs about the world: religious practitioners of science are welcome in Bacon’s plan. Bacon’s method should be applicable regardless of one’s private faith or beliefs—an adherent of any religion is able to employ Bacon’s method of learning. Modern science is practiced by adherents of many faiths, many of whom argue that there is no inherent or fundamental tension between science and their faith.¹¹ The godly science, on the other hand, is exclusive. Does the godly science allow for scientists who are not themselves Christians? Or is one’s Christian faith a requisite for the study of nature? The goal of godly science is to affirm one’s faith and prove the glory of god.

¹¹ “Religion and Science in the United States,” Pew Research Center, November 5, 2009, <https://www.pewforum.org/2009/11/05/scientists-and-belief/>.

Much like the maligned Francis Bacon who believed that he could improve the human condition, David C. Innes believes that the human experience will improve if the Christian foundations of learning are reestablished. Innes's project, much like Bacon's own, proposes a renewal; whereas Bacon attempted to raise human beings to their proper place in the world through science and learning, Innes is attempting to raise human beings to their proper place in the modern world through Christ. Whether or not one agrees with Innes's Christian account of the world, his analysis of Francis Bacon's project, or his understanding of modernity, *Francis Bacon* is certainly an important addition to the academic literature on Francis Bacon and a book that helps one to think more clearly about Christianity, scientism, modernity, and the different perspectives on human suffering and flourishing.