

# Bacon as a moralist

[Sociology](#), [Ethics](#)



Bacon is certainly a moralist and he appears in that role in his essays. His essays abound in moral percepts. He lays down valuable guidelines for human conduct. He urges human beings to follow the right path in every field of life political, social, domestic, etc. The essay, *Of Truth*, is frankly didactic. The object of the writer is to instill into the minds of the readers a love of truth. A man's mind, says he, should "turn upon the poles of truth." All the reasoning of human beings, says Bacon, should base upon truth... "Clear and round dealing is the honour of man's nature."

For these winding and crooked courses are the goings of the serpent, which goeth basely upon the belly, and not upon the feet. He goes on to Montaigne who said that, in telling a lie, a man was brave towards God but a coward towards his fellow-men. Concluding the essay, Bacon says that falsehood is wicked and such wickedness will duly receive its punishment on the doomsday. Indeed, much of the essay is a moral sermon. In the essay, *Of Suitors*, Bacon says that a man should refuse to undertake a suit rather than undertake it by giving a false hope to the petitioner.

After having undertaken a suit, a man should keep telling the petitioner exactly how much he has made progress in the case. Furthermore, he should ask for a reward for only that much of the service that he has actually rendered. A man who has undertaken a suit should not take under advantage of any information, which is available to him through a petitioner. If he finds it difficult to promote a suit, he should allow the petitioner to approach somebody else for help. Those who undertake suits and employ all kinds of crooked methods in having them granted or rejected are the worst offenders in society.

Bacon shows the same high respect for moral principles in some of his other essays. For example, “ A man that hath no virtue in himself ever envieth virtue in others” (Of Envy). “ The desire of power in excess caused the angels to fall; the desire of knowledge in excess caused man to fall; but in charity there is no excess; neither can angel or man come in danger by it” (Of Goodness and Goodness of Nature). The author of such principles was a man who theoretically at least cherished a profound love and respect for justice: “ The principal duty of a judge is to suppress force and fraud” (Of Judicature).

However, Bacon is not a moral idealist. He does preach morality but not ideal morality. The kind of morality he preaches has a tinge of worldliness. We might even say that his guiding principle is appropriateness, while morality is a secondary consideration. We cannot even claim that he was certain of the existence of moral principles of absolute validity. His essays seem to be the work of an opportunist. In the essay, Of Truth, he certainly admires truth but then he also points out that falsehood is like alloy in gold and silver, which makes metal better, even though it lowers the value of metal.

By pointing out this, he dilutes all that he has said in this essay in praise of truth. It is obvious that Bacon is concerned only with worldly success, and that he intends with his morality to help people achieve worldly success. In other words, Bacon shows his concern for an individual's success in life rather than a concern for absolute morals or for any absolute ethical standards. In short, Bacon's principles are sensible. Bacon appears to be looking down from a height and determining what course of conduct pays

best. He condemns cunning, not as a hateful thing but as a thing that is unwise.

Occasionally he even lays down the rules for immoral conduct without a word of open disapproval. For this reason, critics regard Bacon's morality as a cynical wisdom. The essays, which deal with domestic relations, by their tone and substance, also confirm this impression. His view of friendship is purely and fundamentally utilitarian. Friendship gives comfort to heart; light to understanding and help in affairs of life. Thus, Bacon gives it a high value. Bacon throws no hint that a man may get a noble position by a deed of pure selflessness.

In the essay, *Of Marriages and Single Life*, Bacon says that wife and children are hostages to fortune. According to Bacon, they are discipline of Humanity. However, he hardly seems to be aware of any wider influence. He emphasizes the utility of wife by saying that for a young man a wife is a mistress, for a middle-aged man she is a companion, and for an old man she serves as a nurse. His view of love is also devoid of any passion or intense emotion. He looks upon love as "the child of folly" and urges his readers to serve it wholly from the serious affairs and actions of life.

Bacon is certainly a moralist in his essays, but his morality is subservient to what is known as expediency. Bacon does not preach any ideal morality or advocate any moral idealism. Bacon in his essays appears to be an opportunist. The morality which he preaches has a strong mixture in it of worldliness. It is in fact possible to say that his guiding principle is expediency, while morality is only a secondary consideration. Sometimes we

even get the impression that Bacon does not sufficiently recognise the existence of any moral principles of absolute value.

In the essay, *Of Truth*, for instance, Bacon points out that falsehood is like alloy in gold and silver which makes the metal work the better even though it lowers the value of the metal. By pointing out this, Bacon seems to recognise the need of employing falsehood in certain situations in the course of human life. In the essay, *Of Great Place*, he seems to justify the use of crooked methods for attaining high offices: “ All rising to great place is by a winding stair. ” In the same essay, he even justifies a man’s joining a faction or a clique if by doing so he can improve his prospects:

“ and if there be factions, it is good to side a man’s self whilst he is in the rising and to balance himself when he is placed. ” In the essay, *Of Revenge*, Bacon takes up a position of compromise between wreaking vengeance upon an enemy and forgiving him. In other words, his position is here ambiguous. He admires the man who forgives his enemy but at the same time he partly justifies the action of a man who does some wrong for the sake of profit or pleasure. As for a man’s doing some wrong merely out of ill-nature, Bacon simply accepts the position by comparing such a man to a thorn which pricks because it can do nothing else.

And for Bacon goes on to justify the revenge for those wrong which cannot be remedied by resorting to any legal process. In the concluding lines, however, he is categorical and says that revengeful persons live the miserable lives of witches. The whole argument in this short essay has in it a considerable element of cynical wisdom. In the essay, *Of Riches*, Bacon makes a cynical remark when he says that men who despise riches should

not be trusted because only those persons despise riches who have failed in their efforts to become rich.

Certainly there are cases of people who have a noble contempt for riches and who despise riches because of their essential holiness of thought and nobility of feeling, but Bacon does not recognize such people. In the essay, of Ambition, Bacon makes quite a few suggestions that are essentially Machiavellian. For instance, he points out that ambitious men are useful to a king in so far as they help to pull down any man who has reached the top in the political life of the country, “ as Tiberius used Macro hi the pulling down of Sejanus.”

He then goes on to suggest that a king should see to it that the persons whom he is encouraging are preferably of mean birth because in that case they will be less dangerous. A king should also see to it that his favourites are rather harsh of nature than gracious and popular. It may be a weakness for a king to have favourites, but favourites are the best remedy against ambitious individuals who are likely to become powerful in the State.

One of the ways of keeping favourites under control is to balance them by others as proud as they but then “ there must be some middle counsellors to keep things steady for without that ballast the ship will roll too much. ” The political essays of Bacon show indeed, a lot Machiavellianism. In the essay, of Seditions And Troubles, which contains much sound advice. Bacon advises a king “ not to be without some great person, one or rather more, of military valour, for the repressing of seditions in their beginnings.”

But such military persons, says Bacon, should be “assured and well reputed of, rather than factious and popular” But the most Machiavellian piece of advice in this essay is that a king should feed the people with hopes, because these hopes will serve as a deterrent to sedition: “Certainly, the politic and artificial nourishing and entertaining of hopes, and carrying men from hopes to hopes, is one of the best antidotes against the poison of discontentments.” This advice, indeed, reminds us of the temptation that Satan held out to Eve when he urged her to taste the forbidden fruit.

Bacon is here urging a king to resort to hypocrisy and falsehood in order to keep his subjects under control. Bacon considers it a sign of a wise government if “it can hold men’s hearts by hopes, when it cannot by satisfaction.” In the essay, *Of the True Greatness of Kingdoms*, Bacon again offers advice which is suitable not for the kingdom of heaven but for Satan’s kingdom. Bacon here appears almost as a war-monger. Again and again in the course of this essay, he emphasises the need of keeping a nation in a state of military preparedness. He would like a nation to “profess arms as their principal honour, study, and occupation.”

In this context he says: “It is enough to point at it; that no nation which doth not directly profess arms, may look to have greatness fall into their mouths.” In the pursuit of military greatness. Bacon would even urge a government to entrust its manufactures and industries to naturalised citizens and to “the vulgar natives” (that is the commonest people among the native population). War, according to Bacon, keeps a nation healthy: “..... a foreign war is like the heat of exercise, and serveth to keep the body in health.”

He is opposed to peace because peace in his opinion, breeds effeminacy and corruption: “..... for in a slothful peace, both courages will effeminate, and manners corrupt. ” Bacon’s cynicism or disregard of the ethical values of life appears in several other essays also. In the essay, Of Simulation and Dissimulation, he approves of secrecy and of dissimulation which is often necessary to preserve secrecy. He justifies simulation or the pretence to be what one is not. And the conclusion mat Bacon reaches in this essay is: “ The best position and temperature is: to have openness in fame and opinion; secrecy in habit; dissimulation in seasonable use; and a power to feign, if there be no remedy. ” It is not an elevated or elevating ideal.

A reading of this essay shows that, although Bacon’s morality is higher than that of average human beings, it is not of the highest order. He is no upholder of the maxim which demands justice though the heavens should fall. Bacon is particular that pursuing the right and just course should not prove too costly in worldly terms. The essay, Of Suitors, is yet another example of Bacon’s Machiavellianism. Here he tells us that, if a patron wants to favour an undeserving person in a legal case, he should bring about a compromise between the two parties but refrain from pronouncing the judgment in favour of the deserving person.

And, further, if a patron wants to appoint a less deserving candidate to a post, he may do so though he should desist from passing any adverse remarks against the character of the more deserving applicant. In saying this, Bacon seems to be effacing the distinction between right and wrong. It is obvious that Bacon is concerned only with what is known as worldly



success, and that his morality is attuned and adjusted to help people to gain worldly advancement.

Bacon condemns cunning not as a thing that is hateful and vile, but as a thing that might lead to unpleasant consequences. In other words. Bacon's maxims are prudential. Occasionally he even lays down the rules for immoral conduct (as in the essay, *Of Suitors*) without a word of open disapproval. It is for this reason that Bacon's morality has been described as a cynical kind of wisdom, and it is for this reason that Blake criticized Bacon for offering advice which is suited to the kingdom of Satan.

Bacon confirms such impressions by the tone and substance of even those essays which deal with domestic relations and with special ties between man and man. In the essay, *Of Friendship*, Bacon puts a high premium upon friendship but his view of friendship is wholly and exclusively utilitarian. He values friendship chiefly for the gains to be derived from it—comfort to the heart, light to the understanding, aid in the affairs of life. He fails to recognise the fact that there can be such a noble thing as unselfish friendship.

As regards domestic relations, a wife and children are regarded by him as “hostages to fortune” (*Of Marriage And Single Life*). He does recognise a wife and children as having a refining effect, as a kind- of “discipline of humanity”, but he does not seem to be aware of their exercising any wider influence. He looks upon a wife as being “useful” at all stage of life rather than as a person attached to her husband by deep and unbreakable emotional ties. In the essay, *Of Love*, he takes a singularly one-sided and cynical view of one of the greatest and sublimest passions of mankind.

He looks upon love as “ the child folly”, and he urges men not to allow this passion to affect the serious affairs and actions of life. Bacon’s view of love is certainly most disappointing. His tone in the essay, *Of Parents And Children*, shows the same blindness to the depth of parental emotions. Here too he talks in terms of worldly success. But there is another side to the picture, and that is actually the more important side. Essentially Bacon is a moralist even though his moralism is diluted and flawed by Machiavellianism. Everywhere in his essays he shows a high reverence for moral principles.

In almost every essay, he emphasises the need of honesty, integrity, fair dealings, truthfulness, charity, justice, and so on. In the essay, *Of Truth*, he says that truth is “ the sovereign good of human nature”, and that “ clear and round dealing is the honour of man’s nature. ” Winding and crooked courses may, he says here, be compared to “ the goings to the serpent which goeth basely upon the belly, and not upon the feet. ” He wants that a man’s mind should “ move in charity, rest in providence, and turn upon the poles of truth.”

In the essay, *Of Goodness And Goodness of Nature*, he appears as almost a preacher delivering a sermon on the need of goodness and charity, he says, there can be no excess, “ neither can angel nor man come in danger by it. ” In the concluding paragraph of this essay, he points out the need of kindness and courtesy to strangers, compassion towards the affliction of others, a spirit of forgiveness towards those who have committed any offences, and a desire to work for the salvation of others. In the essay, *Of Riches*, he describes riches as an obstruction to virtue and says that riches are of ‘ no use if they be not distributed among others.

He points out that most of the means of becoming rich are foul, and he condemns these foul means. In the essay, *Of Ambition*, he considers it a mark of honour to occupy “the vantage ground to do good.” In the essay, *Of Great Place*, he points out the principal vices of authority—delays, corruption, roughness, and facility, and would like persons in high positions to avoid these vices. He also makes the following memorable statements in this essay: “In place there is licence to do good and evil, whereof the latter is a curse; for in evil the best condition is not to will, the second not to can.”

“Merit and good works is the end of man’s motion, and conscience of the same is the accomplishment of man’s rest.” Such remarks can only proceed from a man who is basically an upholder of the fundamental principles of morality. In the essay, *Of Revenge*, he admires the person who forgives his enemy and foregoes revenge. He is against doing an injury to a friend in relation for an injury which one has received from a friend. Thus we come to the conclusion that there is a dualism in Bacon.

He represents a combination of moralism and Machiavellianism with the former predominant over the other in many essays and with the latter predominant over the former in some of the essays, especially the political essays, Bacon’s general attitude is one of compromise with morality; it is an attitude that ranks expediency above morality. Moral principles, Bacon seems to argue, should be observed but they may be infringed if infringement becomes necessary for the advancement of one’s position in life, for ensuring one’s principles may also be infringed by kings, rulers, and governments for the strengthening of their position and authority.