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## Bacon's Essays and the Evolution of Humanitarian Thought: A Critical Exploration

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### Abstract

MICHEL EYQUEM DE MONTAIGNE (28 February 1533 - 13 September 1592), the French statesman and the author who began the genre of essay ('essai' in French) in the world literature, fervently declared: "I am the one subject of my essays." Charles Lamb (10 February 1775 - 27 December 1834), the Prince of English essayists heartily and affluently followed this Montaignian tradition in his romantic essays. But Lord Francis Bacon (Jan. 22, 1561 - April 9, 1626), the glory of his age and nation, the adorer and ornament of learning, and, above all, the Father of English essays, did not follow Montaigne, as the subjects of his essays, unlike the essays of Charles Lamb, are in his own words, "Counsels, Civil and Moral" (Bacon, 1597). His are not the essays that are full with Lambian personal touches, self-revelations, and subjective appeals but they are richly informative, impersonal in nature, profiteering and pragmatic in their objective and didactic in their form written in the tersest of language instead of Lambian poetic tenderness and sensuality. Bacon's essays, in other words, are meant to 'guide' his readers and followers practically in their effort to achieve the worldly success or to occupy higher positions in their life and career, and not to reveal any personal details about the author's own life. Apparently the two paradigms, 'the essays of Francis Bacon' and the notion of 'humanitarianism,' seem very paradoxical. One important reason for this is the ruthless approach that Bacon owned to advice his followers through his writings; the other, equally important, reason for this is Bacon's pithy and stern prose style. But an intimate study of his essays also shows the essential humanitarian approach of Bacon in his "Counsels..." — how Bacon has been fervently humanitarian in guiding and virtually helping his readers in every respect of their lives, so that they can achieve the pinnacle positions in their own careers. The present study, therefore, proposes to justify this essential truth that Bacon's essays are not merely "good advice for Satan's Kingdom," as William Blake has very caustically remarked on Bacon's "Essays," but they are equally imbued with the ideas concerning practical utility and modernity aiming at a global humanitarian end.

**Keywords:** Lord Francis Bacon's Essays, Evolution, Humanitarianism, Exploration

### Introduction

To save lives and do so with noble purpose, humanitarianism would do well to subscribe to the axiom Francis Bacon gave voice to nearly three hundred years ago: *Scientia est potestas* — knowledge is power" (Hoffman and Weiss 2008) [7].

This is how Peter J. Hoffman and Thomas G. Weiss concluded their seminal essay, "Humanitarianism and Practitioners: Social Science Matters" (2008) by paying their homage to Lord Francis Bacon (January 22, 1561 - April 9, 1626), the Father of English essays and his unique precept on 'knowledge' and 'power.' Apparently the two ideas that constitute the very title of the present paper, 'the essays of Francis Bacon' and the notion of 'humanitarianism' seem very paradoxical. One important reason for this is the utilitarian approach that Bacon owned to advice his followers through his writings; the other equally important reason for this is Bacon's pithy and stern prose style. But an intimate study of his essays and the other scientific writings also shows the essential humanitarian content in the writings of Bacon, especially in his *Essays* which he considers as "Counsels, Civil and Moral" (Bacon, 1597) — how Bacon has been fervently humanitarian in guiding and virtually helping his readers in every respect of their lives, so that they can achieve all material success in their lives and reach to the pinnacle positions of their respective careers. The present study, therefore, proposes to justify this essential truth that Bacon's essays are not merely "good advice for Satan's Kingdom," as William Blake has very caustically remarked

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on Bacon's *Essays* centuries ago, but they are equally imbued with the ideas concerning practical utility and modernity aiming at a global humanitarian end.

Michel Eyquem De Montaigne (28 February 1533 - 13 September 1592), the French statesman and the author who began the genre of essay ('essai' in French) in the world literature, fervently declared: "I am the one subject of my essays." Charles Lamb (10 February 1775 - 27 December 1834), the Prince of English essayists heartily and affluently followed this Montaignian tradition in his romantic essays. But Lord Francis Bacon, the glory of his age and nation, the adorer and ornament of learning, and, above all, the Father of English essays, did not follow Montaigne, for the subjects of his essays, unlike the essays of Charles Lamb, are in his own words, "Counsels, Civil and Moral" (Bacon, 1597). His are not the essays that are full with Lambian personal touches, self-revelations, and subjective appeals but they are richly informative, impersonal in nature, profiteering and pragmatic in their objective and didactic in their form written in the tersest of language instead of Lambian poetic tenderness and sensuality. Bacon's essays, in other words, are meant to 'guide' his readers and followers practically in their effort to achieve the worldly success or to occupy higher positions in their life and career, and not to reveal any personal details about the author's own life. Bacon, being himself a worldly-wise person and a true follower of the Machiavellian principles, led his own life very staunchly to accomplish the worldly success. Given below is an exhaustive list of the high positions achieved by Francis Bacon himself in his own life which also indicates the most shining prosperity of his own (political) career particularly under the rule of King James I:

In 1603, Francis Bacon was given Knighthood,  
In 1604, he was made King's Counsel,  
In 1607, he was made Solicitor General,  
In 1613, he was made Attorney General,  
In 1617, he was made Lord Keeper,  
In 1618, he was made Lord Chancellor,  
Again in 1618, he was made Baron of Verulam,

And in 1621, he was created the Viscount St. Albans (Brian Vickers, 1979).

So, what he himself achieved in his own life and career by following a stern path of pragmatic or worldly approach to life, he simply wanted to convey the same message to his readers and followers through his writings, particularly through his essays. This is no exaggeration, therefore, if someone says that Bacon's essays are a treasure house of practical wisdom with true humanitarian objective.

Indeed, Bacon is a true humanitarian, and his views on men and their affairs are shaped by humanitarian outlook prevailing in his own age as well as today. The wisdom enshrined in his essays has very least concern with abstract theories and ideals. Rather, it has a practical bearing on the stern realities of life — on the terra firma of life. In his essays, Bacon advocates pragmatism and prudential approaches to life concerning least about the myth of moral considerations. He is a man of practical wisdom who considers "all knowledge" as his "province." And to achieve that practical wisdom or the worldly success he does not hesitate to sacrifice his morality in terms of material prosperity. Alexander Pope thus could not resist himself but calling Bacon in his *Essay on Man* (1733) as "The wisest, the brightest and meanest of mankind."

## Humanitarianism and Humanitarian

But what do we understand by the terms 'humanitarianism' and 'humanitarian'?

Lexically the term 'humanitarianism' refers to 'humanitarian principles;' it also denotes to a) "the doctrine that man's duty is to strive to promote the welfare of mankind," and b) "the doctrine that man can achieve perfection through his own resources" (Concise Oxford Dictionary 2011). And the term 'humanitarian' is an adjective meaning "concerned with or seeking to promote human welfare," or a noun that refers to "a person who seeks to promote human welfare" (Concise Oxford Dictionary 2011). Now the question arises: can we correlate Bacon's writings especially his essays with the concept of humanitarianism? Or, can we call Bacon a humanitarian at all? I must acknowledge here, that if we consider the traditional critical views on Bacon and his essays — the caustic remarks of different critics and scholars of different ages together, the answer to both of these two questions is 'no.' William Blake's sharp charge against Bacon's *Essays* as "Good advice for Satan's Kingdom," Alexander Pope's hostile remark on him: "The wisest, the brightest and meanest of mankind," Hugh Walker's cynical comment on Bacon, "on the whole Bacon gives the impression of singular aloofness from moral consideration" (Hugh Walker 1915) are some of these critical and hostile remarks on Bacon and his essays which have become almost clichés to the readers of Bacon. But, on the contrary, if we put all the acerbic remarks of the critics and scholars of Bacon aside for a while for the sake of "a noble purpose" (Hoffman and Weiss 2008) <sup>[7]</sup> we can help ourselves to find out the essential philanthropist latent in Bacon and can also designate his writings as testimonies of the doctrines that "strive to promote the welfare of mankind."

## Humanitarianism in Bacon

Bacon, being a true Renaissance man and the noble reformer of learning and scientific knowledge stands upright as a colossal figure among all the intellectual thinkers of his own age and that of the others. A man like him, whose chief objective in life was to bring the essential reformation in the fields of learning and science like that of Socrates in the ancient Greece, cared a fig to all the filthy charges done against his moral values. These ethical charges often appear meaningless and mere inconsequential comparing to the vast panorama of his writings and the immeasurable store of practical values that they have. Truly speaking, the weight of the divergent messages concerning the affairs of every sphere of human life which Bacon very meticulously conveys in his essays and other writings proves to be too heavy and potential to be stirred by any of the caustic charges done against his moral values. Bacon proposed himself to bring a phenomenal change in the social, political, philosophical and, above all, the intellectual levels of the contemporary English society, and that of the whole world at large. His objective was also to aid his fellowmen in turning their countenance from the traditional concepts of science and knowledge towards something newer and advanced. R.F. Jones in his article "The Bacon of the Seventeenth Century" (1971) has made a clear observation on it:

Bacon impressed upon his age the need of advancement and held out to it the hope of scientific progress. He did more than anyone else to break the fetters that bound his age to

servile submission to the authority of the ancients, and he inspired his followers to face the future rather than the past ... (R. F. Jones 1971).

And to fulfill this “noble purpose,” if Bacon must become the victim of being immoral, he does not bother at all. The dissatisfaction that Bacon felt over the state and system of learning in his own time was of great importance, because it instigated him to feel the need of an essential reformation in the field of learning and knowledge. He was surprised to discover that the people of his time overestimated their store of knowledge. He pointed out the evil of their strong belief that all truth had been discovered, and whatever was true had been inherited from the past. He marked this as a bare illusion in the eyes of his men. He simply wanted to shatter this illusion from their eyes, so that they might get rid of the murky shadows of hopelessness and despair caused by the mere ignorance of their strength and potentiality. Bacon was thus, self-appointed for an humanitarian objective to make the people of his time aware of their own strength and ability to reject the ‘old’ and ‘the worn out’ concepts and to create the ‘new’ - the hitherto ‘unknown and untried’ about which none other than Lord Tennyson could have sung as he did, though in a different context, in his famous elegy *In Memoriam* (1850):

Ring out the old, ring in the new,  
Ring happy bells, across the snow:  
... Ring out the false, ring the true (Lord Tennyson 1850).  
To defile the old concepts and to usher in and establish the new as the *minimum desideratum* (the minimum expectation) for a new world — a New Atlantis, Bacon proposed to his men to follow an empirical attitude to life — a logical-experimental attitude that would help them to achieve the zenith of human civilization through advancement of learning. This was the grand objective of his life and career that Bacon made very clear when he published his majestic works like *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), *The Novum Organum* (The New Organ) (1627), or *The New Atlantis* (1627), so was the same when he published his *Essays* in three respective editions in 1597, 1612 and 1625. This is what we may call the innate humanitarianism in Bacon — his reformatory and inventive attitude for the betterment of human race at large.

### Bacon's Pragmatic Approach to Life

A thoroughbred Machiavellian utilitarian, Bacon himself followed the utilitarian and pragmatic approach to his own life — a glimpse of which has already been given at the outset of this paper, and he wanted his readers to follow the same prudential philosophy in their own lives too. Therefore, almost all his essays are replete with this practical philosophy of life. So, when in his *Of Travaile* (1625), Bacon waxes eloquent: “Travaile [travel] in the younger sort, is a part of education; in the elder, a part of experience” (Bacon 1625), he focuses on the practical utility of travel at different stages of the life of a man. In the same essay he gives his readers and followers almost an interminable list of the names of things and places (at least 40) to observe by the traveler in his travel to a new country: ‘Courts of Princess’, ‘Churches’, ‘Armaries’ (armories), ‘Antiquities’, ‘Treasures’, ‘Cabinets’, ‘Ambassadors’, ‘Feasts and Funerals’ (Bacon 1625) etc. — the list is really endless.

In *Of Truth* (1625) he has definitely vindicated the value of truth. But simultaneously he does not forget to advise his men that truth becomes more attractive and captivating while it is blended with “some degree of falsehood” (Bacon 1625). This synthesis of falsehood with the truth enhances the charm of the statements as “alloy in a coin of gold and silver” (Ibid). Thus, he also prescribes: “A mixture of lie doth ever add Pleasure” (Ibid).

In his *Of Studies*, Bacon turns further more pragmatic and utilitarian in his approach to life. It is one important reason why he revised this essay thrice and published in all the three publications of his *Essays* in 1597, 1612 and 1625. Bacon's utilitarian advices are very much clear in his three-fold profiteering expediencies in the lines like:

Studies serve for delight, for ornament and for ability.

or, in the lines like:

Reading maketh [makes] a full man, conference a ready man; and writing an exact man.

or, scarcely can we ever forget his most profiteering counsels like:

Some books [books] are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested (Bacon 1597).

### His observant attitude condenses furthermore when he speaks of the practical utility of studies

Crafty men Condemn Studies; Simple Men Admire them;  
And Wise Men Use them: for they teach not their own Use;  
But that is a Wisdom without them, and above them, won by Observation (Ibid).

Or, as he further points out:

Read not to Contradict, and Confute; nor to Beleeve [believe] and take for granted; nor to Find Talk and Discourse; But to Weigh and Consider (Ibid).

The readers' true end of studying anything, therefore, is to first evaluate the practical values or the truth of the matter studied and only then to take or ‘consider’ it as granted. This experimental method of pursuing the practicability of things, which is also the very basis of Bacon's ‘inductive method’ — a new logical argumentative and scientific experimental method of ascending to a concrete and undeniable truth, may appear to a modern reader or researcher nothing new, because he uses this method knowingly or unknowingly as a part of his quest for the truth or facts of the things. But this was completely a new method in Bacon's own era that we have been successfully following even today. Therefore, Bacon's experimental argumentative approach for finding the real truth remains ever humanistic and modern.

Similarly, his adherence to the tenets of utilitarianism has been very much vivified in his another splendid essay, *Of Friendship* (1612, enlarged in 1625). In this essay, Bacon has treated the term ‘friendship’ not merely as a term of relationship. Rather he has dwelt on the utility and advancement of the relationship called ‘friendship.’ No doubt, he counts friendship as a priceless thing “without which the world is but a wilderness” (Bacon 1612). But the sublime or elevated aspect of friendship — the mutual attachment, the reciprocal love that vitalizes this bond has not been nurtured by him in this essay. Moreover, he centralizes his view chiefly on the advantages of friendship - the ways how people can enjoy the benefit and advantages

of maintaining such human relationship. Of course, Bacon has a true concern here to make his fellowmen aware about the falsehood of friendship. In *Of Followers and Friends* (1597, enlarged in 1625) – an essay with almost a similar theme, Bacon turns rather cynical to comment: “there is little true friendship in the world, and least of all between equals, which was not to be magnified” (Bacon 1597). Here Bacon, perhaps, throws a direct challenge to Cicero’s view that friendship is possible only between equals who can judge and feel alike. Bacon’s intention here is not to defile the ancient definition of friendship, but to exhibit the basis of a concrete mutual bond between two friends. The prosperity of the inferior blindly depends on that of the superior. Bacon, thus, thinks that in such case of mutually linked interests, true friendship can exist.

### Bacon on Human Relationships

Human relationship with its different forms finds a special place of importance in Bacon’s essays. Here too his observant eyes discover some newer ideas and definition about different relationships tempered with prudential values and profiteering expediency, a glimpse of which has already been mentioned in the above section of this paper. In Bacon, the traditional concept of common relationships like parents and children, husband and wife etc. have often been formed in terms of pragmatism and practical utility of the respective relationship without losing the minimum fidelity. Every essay of Bacon is like a mirror reflecting both the pros and cons of human relationships to the readers to guide them in taking the right judgments in their own life, and also in enjoying the pleasure of advantages of these relationships by making people equally aware about their disadvantages. Thus, he has made a very conscious balance between the pros and cons or the advantage-disadvantage dichotomy of human relationships in the lines like:

“The joys of parents are secret; and so are their griefs and fears” (*Of Parents and Children* 1612 & 1625);

“Children sweeten labour; but they make misfortunes more bitter. They increase the care of life; but they mitigate the remembrance of death” (Ibid).

Talking about the advantages and utility of being childless, Bacon’s concerns are very interesting and remarkable in this context:

“And surely a man shall see the noblest works and foundations have proceeded from childless men” (Ibid);

“Certainly the best works, and of greatest merit for the public, have proceeded from the unmarried or childless men” (*Of Marriage and Single Life* 1612 & 1625).

“HE that hath [has] a wife and children hath given hostages to fortune; for they are impediments to great enterprises, either of virtue or of misfortune” (Ibid).

Though often very controversial among critics and scholars, these remarks, too, have practical utility and if pragmatically considered, are profitable ones for achieving some greater goals – for establishing an Ideal State.

### His Concerns to the Parents

Though being himself childless in his personal life, Bacon, as a true humanitarian guide, has his serious concerns about the causes why children turn libertine, and how the parents can help their children to get rid of this crisis – an issue that has much relevance in the modern times too:

The illiberality of parents in allowance towards their children is a harmful error; makes them [children] base;

acquaints them with shifts [tricks]; makes them sorts with mean company; and makes them surfeit [to indulge in luxury and excess] more when they come to plenty (*Of Parents and Children* 1612 and 1625).

Equally interesting and humanitarian is Bacon’s advice to the parents, though with an alarming tone, about the proper nourishment of their children and selection of the proper course of study and profession for them:

Let parents choose betimes the vocations and courses they mean their children should take for them they are most flexible, and let them not too much apply themselves to the disposition of their children, as thinking they will take best to that which they have most mind to (Ibid).

Practicability of this view is realized no better than by the modern sincere parents who are very much conscious about which way to direct the course of life and career of their children what Bacon realized centuries ago.

### Empiricism and Rational Utility

Bacon’s essays are imbued with the same empirical spirit that animates his philosophical works like *Novum Organum*. He consistently privileges experience, observation, and pragmatic reasoning over abstract speculation. This is especially evident in essays like *Of Studies*, where he famously writes, “*Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man.*” The value of intellectual pursuits is not posited as inherently noble but as instrumental—tools to improve practical life.

This utilitarian approach to knowledge is deeply modern. In an age dominated by applied sciences, data-driven decision-making, and skill-based education, Bacon’s insistence on the functional value of study, governance, and personal ethics resonates powerfully. He does not write for the cloistered academic but for the “man of affairs”—a figure not unlike the modern professional, entrepreneur, or policymaker.

### Conclusion

In 1895, Edward Arber in his notable critical treatise on Bacon, “A Harmony of the Essays etc. of Francis Bacon,” had a very strong charge against Bacon’s *Essays* that they “formed no essential part [of his work, and] they entered not into his conception of the proficiency and advancement of knowledge” (Edward Arber 1895). Quoting R. S. Crane from his “The Relation of Bacon’s Essays to his Program for the Advancement of Learning” (1971) we can defile this charge of Edward Arber as “demonstrably mistaken one.” Of course, Bacon’s greatest scientific works like *The Advancement of Learning*, *Novum Organum*, *New Atlantis*, or *Instauratio Magna* etc. are splendid and have stirring impact upon the intellectual world then and now, but the vast range of his encyclopedic knowledge, his familiarity to diverse range of subjects pertaining to human life and state affairs, and his rational but compact treatment of these subjects in a very unique stylized language within the very short span of an essay can hardly be found anywhere else in his writings other than his *Essays*. His grand works are, no doubt, grand and the mammoth explorations of Bacon’s intellectual and scientific hypotheses, but his *Essays* are also equally majestic and not merely “by-works of his life” (R. S. Crane 1971), because they take up as their minimum concern all humanitarian aspects – starting from human nature, goodness, religion and truth through love, beauty, friendship, marriage, parents and children to wisdom,



empire, honour, fortune and death. It is for this reason, perhaps, Bacon, while dedicating the final edition of his *Essays* in 1625 to the Duke of Buckingham, his “very good Lord” (Lochithea 2009), very frankly confessed that his purpose in the *Essays* was to reach man’s day-to-day life affairs, so that “they [the essays] come home to men’s business and bosoms” (E. A. Abbot 1876).

It is an invariable truth that we knowingly or unknowingly use today many of the ideological precepts, scientific methods, and pragmatic principles given by Bacon in his writings, especially in his essays to fulfill our own goals. Sometimes, they become parts and parcels of our modern life about which I have already mentioned in this paper. Charles Whitney has a very strong emphasis on this point when he very significantly asserts on the practical utility of Bacon’s philosophy and principles today:

Certainly in United States we have enjoyed the fruits of modernity more than elsewhere; our freedom, new beginnings, and pursuits of happiness through learning, labor, and technology have often been implicitly Baconian (Whitney 1993).

Thus, we find that the pragmatic-utilitarian attitude that Bacon himself owned and propagated to his followers, his experimental-inductive method for the scientific pursuits for knowledge and truth, and his profiteering expediency always have a deep impact on man’s life and career since his own time. But, strangely enough, very often we forget to pay our minimum gratitude to him. Rather we feel proud in spreading spicy remarks and caustic critiques about this great master of knowledge, the ‘ornament’ and ‘adorners’ of learning. The principles propagated by Bacon are generally considered as, to quote Bacon himself, “the words for princes” (Bacon 1597). We can hardly deny this. But if we are true utilitarian and clever enough, we can apply these precepts as and when applicable in our own context to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Bacon, therefore, has always been humanitarian and our great BENEFACTOR if we want to use his principles and guidance in our own life and business.

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