

## THE TRUTH, THE WHOLE TRUTH AND NOTHING BUT ... DISSIMULATION

### A SURVEY OF FRANCIS BACON'S ESSAYS

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Ever since Aristotle classified people as *social animals*, numerous scholars have offered their advice to their fellow humans on a variety of matters relevant to their times. Naturally, the emphasis has shifted with the change of epochs and preoccupations, but the main purpose has remained the same: to instruct readers in the accepted dos and don'ts of the age. Thus while the courtesy books of the Middle Ages and the 'How to' books of the 21<sup>st</sup> century may dictate entirely different conventions (the former proffering counsel to courtiers and the latter giving recommendations to business people), they certainly share the more or less explicit aim of fostering successful social integration.

Success in the Renaissance period gravitated to the royal court, a celebrated example being Elisabeth I whose sovereignty attracted countless aspirants to power. Francis Bacon (1561-1626) partook of similar aspirations. His father had been Lord Keeper of the Seal of England, which facilitated the son's accession to high circles of government and diplomacy. He pursued a career in law, but failed to win the queen's ear, and managed to advance only under James I, when he became Baron, Viscount and Lord Chancellor. However, his progress was interrupted dramatically following accusations of bribery, which cost him his honour, fortune and place at court.

As a man who lived both within and without the hub of power, Bacon too felt inclined to give his personal reflections upon men, manners and morals. These were gathered in 1625 in a collection of fifty-eight short *Essays or Counsels Civil and Morals*, written in a simple aphoristic style, in contrast to the ornate and superficial style of his predecessors. As the essays had been originally intended for the private use

of his friends, they approach the reader in a familiar manner, abounding in references to everyday life and resembling an intimate conversation. Their main topic is public life, namely how to succeed in the struggle for power.

This paper aims to collect the pieces of witty advice scattered in the essays in order to construct a coherent profile of the social winner in Bacon's time. This endeavour will include an analysis of the key virtues of truth, honour and wisdom, and especially their juxtaposition to dissimulation, whereby the truth is often distorted and wisdom sometimes feigned in order to achieve honour in the eyes of the world.

Niccolo Machiavelli and Baldassare Castiglione had already postulated the Renaissance cult of virtues as *The Prince* (1513) and *The Courtier* (1528) respectively provided the fundamental grammars of government and court life. The reputation for virtue was so important to the image of Machiavelli's ruler that if he was not really a virtuous man, he had at least to give the appearance of being one by putting on the proper mask. Indeed one of the main missions of an individual at the time was to obtain social status and safeguard it within the community, which was often accomplished by cultivating the appearance of honour. The real self was thus concealed in favour of a projected self that was merely the result of façade restoration. Therefore power was a greater good than virtue.

Francis Bacon was familiar with the work of his forerunners; moreover, he himself was engaged in a struggle for advancement. Hence, like Shakespeare, he regards life as a stage, where men play their roles for the sake of reputation, trying to influence others to their own profit. However, in *Of Honour and Reputation*, he sees honour as the rightful recognition

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of a man's virtue and gives precedence to those who "darken their virtue (...) so as they be undervalued in opinion." [1:445] By contrast, he dissents from trumpeters who boast of their value in public. The envy of the latter is best defeated by moderation and self-effacement of the former, who are thus able to disconcert opposition.

Secrecy is another powerful quality and effective course of action Bacon presents in *Of Vain Glory* for, as the French proverb goes, "Beaucoup de bruit, peu de fruit" [1:444]. [1] By contrast, his essay *Of Discourse* states that "speech of a man's self ought to be seldom, and well chosen" since "discretion of speech is more than eloquence." [1:407] Effectiveness is therefore directly proportional to discretion; the more a man speaks of himself and his virtues, the less people will think of him.

Unfortunately, many social actors in Bacon's time could not perform these roles of secret men because they lacked substance. To compensate, they would affect wisdom, which also brought them reputation, but did not spare them the writer's satire in *Of Seeming Wise*. He satirizes these impostors, referring to them as 'formalists', 'empty persons' [1:390] who have no solid matter beneath the pretence of wisdom. Bacon was determined to unmask them for bragging about real virtues was one thing, but claiming something that did not actually exist was quite another. "Nothing doth more hurt in a state than that cunning men pass for wise," [1:386] he said in *Of Cunning* as he proclaimed war against this social disease.

Cunning is perceived as "a sinister and crooked wisdom" [1:383] and is the distinguishing feature of petty men, the so-called "haberdashers of small wares," [1:384] who are incapable of real business and success. Jesuits are one favourite example. One of their rules for modesty required that one should lower the gaze and not look directly at one's interlocutor, which however did not prevent them from observing others closely. This craft is supplemented with instances of cunning speech such as hinting, flattering, beating about the bush, attributing negative comments to others, prompting others for a desired utterance, or approaching difficult matters in a light manner. Examples abound, and they are all employed to demonstrate how communication can be distorted to the user's advantage.

His virulent attacks from *Of Truth* target fraud and dishonesty: "There is no vice that doth so cover a man with shame as to be found false and perfidious." [1:342] In opposition, Bacon intends to uncover the truth. In 1592, he had confessed in a *letter to Lord Burghley*: "for I have taken all knowledge to be my

province." [1:20] Although grandiose in appearance, this objective corresponds precisely to the Renaissance creed inherited from the ancient world, according to which a man had to be proficient in all fields of human knowledge. Knowledge meant power, and, to paraphrase Martin S. Day [4:253], Bacon encompassed exactly the magnitude of this Renaissance spirit.

Accordingly, he devoted most of his thoughts to the discovery *Of Truth*.

'What is truth?' said jesting Pilate; and would not stay for an answer. (...) Truth may perhaps come to the price of a pearl that showeth best by day, but it will not rise to the price of a diamond that showeth best in varied lights. A mixture of a lie doth ever add pleasure.[1:341]

It was a common perception that imagination added flavour to life and lies embellished reality, but Bacon tolerated neither artificial spices nor ornaments. Instead, he saw truth as "the sovereign good of human nature." [1:342] The important thing, as highlighted in *Of Wisdom for a Man's Self*, is to "be so true to thyself, as thou be not false to others," [1:386] a line which Shakespeare modified in *Hamlet* to read "To thine own self be true: thou canst not then be false to any man." Self-consistency is the prime virtue.

Nevertheless, virtues are often prone to corruption. The main danger, in Bacon's view, was the craft of dissimulation, as presented in the essay *Of Simulation and Dissimulation*. Dissimulation is a second-rank instrument, "but a faint kind of policy, or wisdom," [1:349] affecting mainly weaker politicians who lack the courage to tell the truth and the rationality to know when to do it.

Bacon uses a rationalistic approach to present this habit and distinguishes between three degrees of "this hiding and veiling of a man's self" [1:350]: secrecy, dissimulation in the negative, and simulation in the affirmative.

The first, also referred to as closeness or reservation, is definitely a virtue. It is "the virtue of a confessor" [1:350], who can acquire more knowledge by keeping things to himself rather than by opening his mind to others. It is also a safe way to avoid vanity and futility for, as Bacon warns us, "he that talketh what he knoweth, will also talk of what he knoweth not." [1:350] Therefore, as mentioned before, the habit of secrecy is highly recommendable as both prudent and moral. As a matter of fact, many Renaissance scholars recommended isolation and discretion of language and behaviour in order to avoid opposition and allow free space for manoeuvres. Moreover, the precept of *aurea*

*mediocritas* decreed that little exposure and much distance from excess could help gain public acceptance.

The second, if used rationally, may be the means to virtue. Dissembling is thus the prerequisite of secrecy, namely, in order to become discreet, almost invisible, one needs to pretend that he is not what he actually is. This is in tone with Castiglione's idea of honest dissimulation, using the gift of underestimation, thereby repressing the inner self, in order to create the image that is required by social life.

Unlike the first two degrees, the third is to be held more culpable and clearly less prudent. The fact that men take pains to profess qualities they do not possess is a vice, "rising either of a natural falseness or fearfulness, or of a mind that hath some main faults" [1:351]; it is the appanage of the shy, the weak, and the poor-spirited.

Furthermore, Bacon also offers a threefold classification of the advantages and disadvantages of simulation and dissimulation in the perfectly balanced vein of ancient rhetoricians.

On the one hand, the advantages are, in his words, firstly "to lay asleep opposition, and to surprise," secondly "to reserve to a man's self a fair retreat," and thirdly "the better to discover the mind of another." [1:351] Intentions should be kept secret in order to appease adverseness, ensure escape, and most importantly to decipher the thoughts of others, as suggested by the Spanish proverb Bacon resorted to for confirmation: "Tell a lie and find a truth." [2]

On the other hand, the disadvantages refer firstly to lacking boldness, which damages all social

efforts, secondly to creating suspicion, which alienates all one's fellows, and thirdly to generating distrust, which deprives man of all possibilities of social action.

Finally, Bacon's conclusion is that "the best composition 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," [1:351] which embodies perfectly the ideal of this superb *age of genius*.

The Renaissance *Zeitgeist* brought to the foreground the figure of the skilful courtier, who, according to Bacon, was expected to master not only the virtues of truth, wisdom, secrecy, honesty, discretion and moderation, but also the vices of pretence, cunning, simulation and dissimulation. The latter were often perceived as a necessary evil, the excusable means to an end of honour and power. The hardheaded struggle to social success sometimes implied a divide between reality and appearance, which however did not endanger the inner self as long as it remained faithful to one's true nature. This was precisely the challenge of the age: to keep a favourable balance between public and private life.

The recipe for immediate success included the secret ingredient of dissimulation. Whether secrecy in dissembling may substitute inborn gifts still remains to be seen, but it is certain that the right amount of dissimulation improves the art of social acting. More than one hundred years later, Philip Dormer Stanfield, Earl of Chesterfield, wrote in a letter to his son "It has been long said: Qui nescit dissimular nescit regnare. [3] I go still farther, and say, that without some dissimulation, no business can be carried on at all." [8]

[1] A liberal translation would be *Much ado about nothing*

[2] The Spanish original is *Di mentira, y sacras verdad*

[3] He who knows not how to dissemble knows not how to rule.

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