

Bacon as a teacher of morality

There is no doubt that the essays of Bacon are a treasure house of worldly wisdom. Worldly wisdom means the kind of wisdom that is necessary for achieving worldly success. Worldly wisdom does not imply any deep philosophy or any ideal morality. It simply means the art or the technique that a man should employ to achieve success in his life. It therefore implies shrewdness, tact, foresight, judgement of character and so on.

Bacon's essays are full of wisdom of this kind. He teaches us the art of how to get on in this world, how to become rich and prosperous, how to rise to high positions, how to gain influence, etc. It is true that Bacon is a philosopher and a moralist, but critics have rightly pointed out that in his essays as in his own career, he treated philosophy and morality as being subordinate to worldly success. It is for this reason the wisdom of his essays is of a somewhat cynical kind. It is significant that he described his essays as "Counsels, civil and moral", which means that he intended his essays to provide such guidance to his readers as could help them in attaining success in civil life while at the same time observing certain basic moral laws.

Bacon is both a philosopher and a moralist as is clear from his essays. A philosopher is, broadly speaking; a person who is deeply interested in the pursuit of truth, while a moralist is a person who teaches human beings the distinction between what is right and what is wrong and urges them to tread the right path only. Bacon appears in this dual role in many of the essays that he has written. In the essay, Of Truth, Bacon says that truth is the supreme good for human beings. He describes the inquiry of truth as seeking it, the knowledge of truth as its presence and the belief of truth as the enjoying of it. Making an obvious reference to the Bible, Bacon says that the first thing created by God was light and the final thing created by Him was the rational faculty that he bestowed upon man. First God breathed light upon matter or chaos; then He breathed light into the face of man; and afterwards he has always been breathing light into the faces of those whom He chooses for his special favour. All these, we might say, are the observations of a philosopher-cum-moralist. Bacon's object in writing this essay is manifestly to instil into the minds of his readers a love of truth.

The essay, Of Friendship, is the work of a pure utilitarian. Bacon does not speak of friendship in terms of an emotional bond intimately linking two persons. He makes a purely worldly approach to the subject. He gives us the "uses" of friendship. A friend enables us to give an outlet to our suppressed discontents. A friend clarifies our understanding. A friend's advice is most reliable. A friend can speak or act on our behalf in situation in which we ourselves cannot speak or act. There is no idealism involved in all this. Bacon seems to suggest that we need friends only for our worldly happiness and worldly good. This essay clearly shows that Bacon's wisdom is of cynical kind, and that utilitarian considerations determine his morality. He does not speak of the emotional or moral aspect of friendship at all.

In the essay, Of Marriage and Single Life, Bacon's wisdom again, is not of the profounder philosophical variety; it is worldly wisdom, and much of this wisdom is cynical. The opening sentence of this essay is cynical because Bacon here expresses the view that a married man with children cannot undertake great enterprises: "He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune." Moreover, he goes on to say, what is certainly not true, that the "best works and of greatest merit for the public have proceeded from the

unmarried or childless men.” What could be more utilitarian than the remark that, a wife is a mistress of the young husband; a companion of the middle aged and nurse of the old aged husband? He wants soldiers to be married because then they will fight better! He thinks that by getting married a dishonest judge will become honest! However, it is the essay, *Of Suitors*, that completely exposes Bacon. He certainly indulges in a lot of moralizing here. For instance, he disapproves of persons who undertake suits without any real intention to have them granted; he disapproves of a man giving false hopes to a petitioner whose suit he has undertaken; and so on. But he comes to terms with morality when he suggests that if a patron wants to favour the undeserving of the two parties in a legal case, he should bring about a compromise between the two parties instead of pronouncing the judgement in favour of the deserving person; on the contrary, he wants the undeserving person to be accommodated. Again, he goes on to say that if a patron wants to appoint a less deserving candidate to a post, he should do so without passing adversary marks against the character of the more deserving applicant. Here is a great moralist willingly condoling a patron’s action in appointing a less deserving candidate to a post that lies in his patronage.