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# Francis Bacon on Motion and Power

 Springer

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FRANCIS BACON  
ON MOTION AND POWER

Guido Giglioni, James A.T. Lancaster,  
Sorana Corneanu, Dana Jalobeanu

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# Francis Bacon on Motion and Power

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# Preface

This volume collects some of the papers delivered over the course of two colloquia on Francis Bacon held at the Warburg Institute in 2011 and 2013. The first colloquium, on ‘Francis Bacon and the Materiality of the Appetites: Science, Medicine and Politics’ (17–18 June 2011), gave participants an opportunity to engage in fruitful discussions on topics such as matter, desire and Stoicism in Bacon’s philosophy. The second, on ‘The Alphabet of Nature and the Idols of the Market: Bacon on Languages, Natural and Human’ (14–15 June 2013), focused on the notion of language in a variety of Baconian contexts (e.g., natural history, magic, rhetoric and moral philosophy).

From different angles, *Francis Bacon on Motion and Power* revisits some of the most controversial issues in Bacon scholarship today (on topics such as matter, experimentation and the nature of political organizations). It looks at Bacon as a complex figure, but one who was able to move with a certain ease across the universes of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature, science and philosophy, and it does so on three levels: by exploring the relationship between metaphysics and experimental knowledge in Bacon’s thought; by emphasizing the close intertwinement of the natural, moral and political aspects of his philosophy; and by highlighting his lifelong concern with the most pressing theological questions of the age (the status of natural theology, the possibility and the limits of a theologico-political order and the controversial value of pagan wisdom). Tying together these strands, *Francis Bacon on Motion and Power* ultimately highlights Bacon’s particular focus on the appetitive nature of reality, shared by both humans and nature, and placed, as he understood it, between the opposing forces of life and death.

Both colloquia were an integral part of the activities related to the European Research Council project ‘Medicine of the Mind and the Reconfiguration of Natural Philosophy: A New Interpretation of Francis Bacon’. This five-year research project

(2010–2014) was carried out by the editors of this volume in conjunction with the New Europe College (Colegiul Noua Europă) in Bucharest. We would like to thank the Warburg Institute and their staff for helping us to organize these colloquia, especially Catherine Charlton, Natalie Clarke, Jane Ferguson, Folake Ogundele and Anita Pollard.

Bucharest and London  
September 2015

Sorana Corneanu  
Guido Giglioni  
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# Chapter 1

## Introduction: Francis Bacon and the Theologico-political Reconfiguration of Desire in the Early Modern Period

Guido Giglioni

**Abstract** Bacon's ideas on motion rested on an appetitive and acquisitive consideration of life in which nature was identified with a tendency to preserve order, virtue with the unceasing effort to expand the boundaries of life, and government with the art of maintaining and balancing power (reason of state). A remarkable outcome of this view was the opinion that, in a universe ruled by the principle of self-preservation, life appeared to be constitutively vulnerable, being always exposed to episodes of aggression and violence that originated in its own environs. In the teleological framework of Aristotelian metaphysics, by contrast, life was an indication of perfection, for it signalled the fulfilment of potentialities brimming with energy and knowledge. To be alive, for both Plato and Aristotle, meant to attain a higher degree of ontological perfection. For Bacon, to be alive meant to counter a deeper and stronger tendency to rest. Compared to Aristotelian and Platonic ideals of life as self-fuelling *activity*, Bacon shifted the emphasis away from the notion of spontaneous self-organization towards that of *reactivity*. From this point of view, he rightfully belongs to the early modern history of *conatus*, understanding by *conatus* the struggle to remain in existence and expand the scope and power of one's being. By elaborating an original theory of conative motions, Bacon adopted and reinterpreted some of the most controversial issues of Renaissance philosophy concerning both nature and politics (above all from Bernardino Telesio and Niccolò Machiavelli), and bequeathed them to a number of seventeenth-century philosophers eager to explore new ways of addressing life's puzzling tangle of desires, power and knowledge.

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## 1.1 History, Medicine and Politics: The Disciplinary Coordinates of Early Modern *Conatus*

Why motion when everything could be eternally peaceful and immutable? If the paths of nature all drive inexorably to death, why indulge in seemingly superfluous detours? These are formidable questions which Bacon pondered throughout his career as both a philosopher and a politician with strong interests in medicine and history. In his philosophy, he laid bare a radically new view of motion, in which, departing significantly from the Aristotelian and scholastic approach, he explained motion not as a condition of partially unactualized potentiality, but as an actual tendency inbuilt in matter. Even more removed from Bacon's mind was any attempt to provide a mechanical and kinematic understanding of motion. He looked at motion as appetite, and this for him was the very essence of reality, its source of activity. His was a cosmos in which there was ceaseless motion and action, followed by knowledge and contemplation. This position was rather unconventional when compared to previous opinions. For Plato and Aristotle, for instance, motion was an accident, a reaction, a transitory state meant to end with either the full disclosure of intelligible reality (Plato) or the complete actualization of potential energy (Aristotle). Bacon, by contrast, thought that the dynamic and affective dimensions of reality were more original than the cognitive ones. Things first adjusted themselves to reality (all things, animate and inanimate, for everything, so Bacon assumed, was in the grip of desire); then they were able to contemplate reality (that is, if they ever reached the level of focus and the state of leisurely detachment required for contemplation).

In this respect, Bacon's ideas on motion rested on an appetitive and acquisitive consideration of life in which nature was identified with a tendency to preserve order, virtue with the unceasing effort to expand the boundaries of life, and government with the art of maintaining and balancing power (reason of state). A remarkable outcome of this view was the opinion that, in a universe ruled by the principle of self-preservation, life appeared to be constitutively vulnerable, being always exposed to episodes of aggression and violence that originated in its own environs. In the teleological framework of Aristotelian metaphysics, by contrast, life was an indication of perfection, for it signalled the fulfilment of potentialities brimming with energy and knowledge. To be alive, for both Plato and Aristotle, meant to attain a higher degree of ontological perfection. For Bacon, to be alive meant to counter a deeper and stronger tendency to rest. Compared to Aristotelian and Platonic ideals of life as self-fuelling *activity*, Bacon shifted the emphasis away from the notion of spontaneous self-organization towards that of *reactivity*. From this point of view, he rightfully belongs to the early modern history of *conatus*, understanding by *conatus* the struggle to remain in existence and expand the scope and power of one's being. By elaborating an original theory of conative motions, Bacon adopted and reinterpreted some of the most controversial issues of Renaissance philosophy concerning both nature and politics (above all from Bernardino Telesio and Niccolò Machiavelli), and bequeathed them to a number of seventeenth-century philoso-

phers eager to explore new ways of addressing life's puzzling tangle of desires, power and knowledge.

It is therefore important to make clear from the beginning that Bacon's new science of motion was not influenced by Aristotelian physics or the recovery of Archimedean mechanics, nor did it embrace in any way the mathematizing vision of nature that was taking shape at the time. Rather, his new science drew inspiration from the disciplines of history, medicine and politics, as is evident from his reinterpretation of both *conatus* and *conservatio*. Bacon was fully aware that the parcelling out of power, happening on many levels at the time, dovetailed with a view of life characterized by the atomizing of drives and interests. Crucially, in the self-preservative framework of natural organizations, embraced by authors as diverse as Machiavelli, Telesio and Bacon (and later Spinoza), the emphasis was on the 'self'. As a collective enterprise, the survival of the whole depended on myriad material selves adjusting to each other and discovering ways of coexisting together. 'Dionysian' (i.e., human) desire was confronted with the ravenous hunger of 'cupidinous' (non-human) desire, to use Bacon's categories of emblematic philosophy (see Chap. 7 in this volume). This was a momentous shift, both in metaphysical and theological terms: belief in an original unity of nature was being radically questioned, while the assumption that reality corresponded to one intelligible template of divine origin began to lose intellectual appeal once compared with a new world of economic expansion and political conflict. In this sense, as I argue in the rest of this introductory chapter, the self-preservative model of reality characteristic of Bacon's philosophy was of a distinctively theologico-political character.

## 1.2 The Power of the Idols

One of the most original and characteristic lines of inquiry that defines early modern philosophy, from Machiavelli to Spinoza, is the investigation of that unique constellation of reasons and conditions that make desire, power and language inextricably intertwined in human lives. Bacon came up with a particularly successful term to denote that entangled knot of imagination, appetite and manipulation: *idolum*, that is, a 'phantom' or a 'spectre', a distorted representation of reality induced by expectations and passions, and capable of crippling man's abilities to express and communicate his opinions and thoughts. As tokens of the lustful and idolatrous nature of human beings, *idola* signalled for Bacon the constitutively delusional character of desire. From the 'films' (εἰδωλα) of the ancient Atomists, endlessly released from all natural beings, to Calvin's effigies of blasphemous worship (Calvin's *Treatise on Relics* had been translated into English in 1561), *idolum* possessed a long, chequered history as a technical term in philosophy. *Idolum* was idol (of both amorous and religious devotion), figment of the imagination and object of unrestrained desire. Bacon appropriated the term to signify that the object which one might take for reality could in fact be an image of nature refracted through the prism of human desire. In a culture that, from Henry VIII to Elizabeth I, had witnessed official acts

of iconoclasm and popular attacks against images (from statues to paintings, from stained-glass windows to rituals, from ballads to plays), the ‘idoltrous eye’, to use Michael O’Connell’s phrase, had become a pervasive concern, one that helps to explain specific attitudes and fears towards reality. It was a culture that was profoundly uneasy with *idola* because of their blasphemous, erotic and artistic implications. Religious iconoclasm, Petrarchism and the recovery of pagan imagination all helped create an atmosphere of anxiety fuelled by a perceived rift between appearance and reality (O’Connell 2000; Phillips 1973; Collinson 1986).

Against this background, it was the Democritean sense of *idola* which prevailed in the way Bacon developed his theory of idolatrous representation. Lucretius had insisted that the myriad phenomena in our lives impeached the credibility of the senses (*violare fidem quasi sensibus ... quaerunt*), but he likewise blamed the projections superimposed by the mind onto reality (*opinatus animi quos addimus ipsi*, in *De rerum natura*, IV, 463–465). For Lucretius, as well as for Bacon, to desert sensory evidence and chase the dreams of the mind was tantamount to violating the primordial bond of trust between things (*violare fidem prima*, which Bacon rephrased as *commercium mentis et rerum*) and therefore to uprooting the very foundations of life and safety (*convellere tota | fundamenta quibus nixatur vita salusque*, IV, 505–506). Bacon adopted some characteristic themes from Lucretius, and devised an ontology of dynamic realism opposed to the fleeting constructions of deceiving appearances incessantly being fashioned by the human mind. He defined motions as real appetites constitutive of things, while rejecting idols as wish-fulfilling desires that were wholly incompatible with reality.

There is no doubt that *idolum* is a keyword in Bacon’s philosophical language, both in Latin and in English. Depending on the context, it variously taps into the resources of mythology, emblematic literature, poetry and rhetoric. This is an aspect of Bacon’s philosophizing that has often been undervalued, dismissed as ‘literary’ and not sufficiently ‘philosophical’, or worse, not ‘scientific’. Due to a host of reasons (rhetorical, ideological and propagandistic), the normalization of Bacon’s thought and vocabulary started very early in the seventeenth century (Giglioni 2013a, 2014b). Marialuisa Parise, in the final chapter of this volume, reports the significant testimony of Antoine de Lasalle (1754–1829), who in 1799 complained about Bacon’s decision to use the word *idolum*. That word, in Lasalle’s opinion, was an infelicitous choice, for it referred at once to mistakes, prejudices and delusions (*‘une erreur, un préjugé et un fantôme de l’esprit ou une idée fantastique, ne sont pas précisément la même chose’*, in Lasalle 1799–1800, IV, 103–104, and Parise in this volume). In fact, Bacon’s *idolum* is a word that captures very well that most elusive combination of desire, imagination and language. *Idola* testify to the constant threat of delusional apprehensions of reality, imbued with lust and expectation. Above all, they bring to the fore the awareness that Bacon had of the power of language, as both a historical and a social artefact. It was precisely because of this intertwinement of desire, imagination and language that, according to Bacon, philosophy should become mythopoetic and explore the most ancient testimonies of the original productivity of nature. Not by coincidence, as we will see in the next section, philosophy was symbolized by Orpheus in Bacon’s thought.

### 1.3 ‘Orpheus’s Theatre’, or What Bacon Meant by Philosophy

What is philosophy for Francis Bacon? Its primary meaning coincides with the experimental attempt to preserve the life of natural bodies, what in the *Sylva Sylvarum* he called the ‘great secret of preservation of bodies from change’. In this work, the investigation was remorselessly experimental. Permanence of life could be achieved by denying access to air, by preventing a body from being assimilated by other bodies, and by restraining parts from moving within the same body (Bacon 1857–1874, II, 384). In *De sapientia veterum* (1609), the question of the preservation of life had already taken on metaphysical overtones: ‘by far the most noble work of natural philosophy (*opus naturalis philosophiae longe nobilissimum*) is the very restoration and renewal of perishable things (*ipsa restitutio et instauratio rerum corruptibilium*)’ (Bacon 1857–1874, VI, 647–648). Both works (*Sylva Sylvarum* and *De sapientia veterum*) and both approaches (the experimental and the mythographic) confirmed the theoretical and practical difficulties involved in the attempt (*experimentum*) to preserve life. Since Bacon recognized that this aim could not be achieved due to the rudimentary state of technology, in *De sapientia veterum* he introduced a secondary meaning of philosophy, related to the preservation of social bodies:

this concern for public affairs (*rerum civilium cura*) takes place in due order after the attempt to renew the mortal body has been assiduously made and in the end it failed (*post experimentum corporis mortalis restituendi sedulo tentatum et ad extremum frustratum*, Bacon 1857–1874, VI, 648).

To provide a universal model of philosophy (*philosophiae universae imago*), Bacon referred here to the fable of Orpheus – ‘an extraordinary man, of a truly divine nature, expert in all kinds of harmony, capable of attracting and winning over everything by using pleasant means’. And since Orpheus’s labours represented the hard work of knowledge, they were even superior to Hercules’s labours, traditionally taken as a symbol of virtue and fortitude. The story as recounted by Bacon is divided into two main parts: the first concerned Orpheus’s ability to convince the infernal deities (*Manes*), through his singing and playing, to bring back to life his wife Eurydice; the second described the effects that his music had on natural beings:

through the sweet sound of his lyre and his singing, he first drew to himself all kinds of wild animals, in such a way that they were sitting around him, as if in a theatre (*in more theatri*), all attentive to the harmonious sounds of his lyre, all behaving kindly and meekly with each other, having divested themselves of their previous nature, oblivious of their anger and ferocity, without being led to act precipitously by the urges and rage of inordinate desire (*stimuli et furores libidinis*) and no longer bothered to satiate their voraciousness or to chase after preys. And this wasn’t all, for the force and the power of his music was so great that it moved even woods and stones, so that they too moved and arranged themselves in an orderly and proper fashion around him (Bacon 1857–1874, VI, 647).

By representing philosophy as Orpheus, Bacon highlighted the role that an accurate and patiently acquired knowledge of nature played in prolonging the effects of

life and postponing death (as signified by the bringing back of Eurydice to life). Knowledge of the innermost desires of nature (the motions of matter) and control of human desires (passions) were complementary plans of action in Bacon's philosophical programme:

Orpheus's singing is of two kinds: one is directed to placate the infernal deities, the other to attract animals and woods. The former refers in the most apposite way to natural philosophy, the latter to moral and political philosophy. And the reason is that the most noble work of natural philosophy is by far the very restoration and renewal of perishable things, and – at a lower level – the preservation of bodies in their state (*corporum in statu suo conservatio*), and the delaying of dissolution and putrefaction (*dissolutionis et putredinis retardatio*). And if this goal can ever be achieved, certainly it can only be done by refining the temperaments of nature in the most appropriate way, as if through the harmony of the lyre and by following accurate rhythms and measures (Bacon 1857–1874, VI, 647–648).

This, however, was for Bacon the most difficult thing to achieve, especially because human beings were often overwhelmed by the urge to satisfy their material pleasures in an immediate way. For this reason, they directed their philosophical efforts away from nature and concentrated on the refinement of their culture:

Being therefore unable to accomplish such a momentous task (*tantae rei fere impar*), and understandably sad for this reason, philosophy turns itself to human affairs (*vertit se ad res humanas*). By resorting to persuasion and eloquence, philosophy instils love for virtue, justice and peace into the soul of human beings. In doing so, it brings people together and sees to it that they accept the rule of the laws, submit to power and forget the untameable passions (*affectus indomiti*), while following and obeying precepts and disciplines. After that, buildings are built, cities are founded, fields and gardens are kept with trees, so much so that not without a reason stones and woods are said to be drawn and moved. And this care for civil matters (*rerum civilium cura*) takes place in due order after the attempt to renew the mortal body has been assiduously tried, in the end with no success; and since the unavoidable necessity of death appears increasingly more evident to the eyes of human beings, this encourages them to pursue eternity through their merits and the glory of their name (Bacon 1857–1874, VI, 647–648).

It is certainly possible to interpret the secondary meaning of philosophy for Bacon as a solution for political order. In fact, both the primary and the secondary meanings of philosophy are political. Bacon writes of philosophy like a Lord Chancellor, but *pace* William Harvey, who came up with this famous quip, we can now say that that remark loses its originally sarcastic tone, and we are ready to accept the idea of a chancellor-philosopher who held a political view of the universe (Aubrey 1958, 130). The two meanings of philosophy as the activity that aims at preserving the life of both natural and social bodies derive from the ontological core of Bacon's philosophy, that is, appetite or desire. As will be argued in many of the contributions to this volume, appetite is for Bacon natural and social at the same time. A passage from his early work *Valerius Terminus*, written around 1603, illustrates this point with flair and ingenuity: the universe, encompassing both the natural and the human worlds, is ordered according to four principal appetitive forces – the 'quaternion of good':

if the moral philosophers that have spent such an infinite quantity of debate touching good and the highest good, had cast their eye abroad upon nature and beheld the appetite that is in all things to receive and to give; the one motion affecting conservation and the other