UNIT 1: FRANCIS BACON: "OF GOODNESS AND GOODNESS OF NATURE"

UNIT STRUCTURE

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

The present unit takes up an essay titled “Of Goodness and Goodness of Nature” by the French essayist Francis Bacon. Sir Francis Bacon, 1st Viscount St. Alban (1561-1626) is one of the major essayists of his time and is considered as one of the pioneers of the essay form due to his literary contribution to the genre of essay-writing. He was also a philosopher, scientist, statesman and jurist. The philosophical and scientific ideas of Bacon were held in great regard during the 1630s and he was also considered as the “Father of Empiricism.”

1.2 FRANCIS BACON: THE ESSAYIST

Let us briefly explore the life and works of Francis Bacon before we read through the prescribed essay for the unit.

1.2.1 His Life and Works

Francis Bacon was born in the year 1561 to the Lord Keeper of the Seal, Sir Nicholas Bacon and Lady Anne Cooke who belonged to a noble family of England. Bacon was mostly tutored at home and surprisingly, had received the opportunity of studying at the Trinity College, Cambridge at the tender age of twelve. He went on to study at the University of Poitiers and entered the Honourable Society of Gray's Inn in 1576 to pursue law. As a young man, he had a sharp intellect and was greatly influenced by philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle and Cicero to mention a few. During this phase, he travelled to places like Poitiers, Italy and Spain which had opened up new learning experiences to him. It was at his father's demise that he had to return home. He worked for three years at the Gray's Inn where he went on to received a promotion as a barrister, while also looking out for better work opportunities.

On the personal front, Bacon married the young girl Alice Barnham at the age of forty-five after his unsuccessful courtship with a young widow named Elizabeth Hatton. Bacon was actively involved in politics throughout his career. He received knighthood in 1603 with King James I taking over the throne of England. Bacon served in the Parliament from 1584 to 1617, holding high offices of the Attorney General and Lord Chancellor of England. Although, his career as the Lord Chancellor of England (as appointed by the King) was marred due to legal charges of corruption, Bacon pleaded innocent as any man who would receive gifts without much thought andyet remain true to his conscience at all times.

Bacon believed in the spirit of the new Renaissance humanism and true to the spirit of enquiry he was a skeptical in his thought i.e. he doubted or questioned accepted opinions. His empirical or inductive method of knowledge which emphasised on the relevance of experience, proof and physical observation led to the development of the scientific- method and modern sciences. In

order to discover and verify nature's truth, the empirical method now also known as the 'Baconian method' encourages experimentation, systematic analysis and physical observation.

Among his important works of literary merit are his *Essays* (1597-1625) and some of his other works include: *On the Wisdom of the Ancients*, based on ancient mythology, *The Advancement and Proficience of Learning Divine and Human* (1605), *Novum Organum Scientarium* (1620), *The History of Henry VII* (1622), *Essays or, Counsels Civil and Moral* (1625), *The New Atlantis* (1624) and *Apothegms* (1624).

The great thinkers of the Renaissance period such as Voltaire and Diderot considered Bacon as the 'Father of Modern Science'. He was optimistic that the empirical school of thought would replace the older schools of thought and usher in the spirit of Renaissance Humanism.His concern as the philosopher of science had led to his well known work *Novum Organum* (1620) published in Latin in the year 1620 which had opened up a newer perspective to the scientific way of acquiring knowledge. He had also forwarded the idea of the 'duality of truth' which held that truth to the idealist and the common man is different. Even after his demise in 1626, Bacon had brought about a major scientific reform which came to be embodied in the principles of The Royal Society of London.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Where did Francis Bacon receive his education?

Q2. What is meant by the Baconian method?

Q3. Name a few of the important works by Francis Bacon.

Q4. Who were the great thinkers who considered Bacon as the Father of Modern science?

1.3 EXPLANATION OF THE ESSAY

The essay "Of Goodness and Goodness of Nature" has been taken from Francis Bacon's volume titled *Essays, Civil and Moral*. The essay has been divided into five paragraphs for ease of discussion and reference. It opens with Bacon's opinion of what constitutes goodness and how inherent goodness is the factor that brings in fortune and prosperity for those who 'practice' goodness. This goodness was known as 'philanthropia' among the Grecians and is known as philanthropy in English. Philanthropy is the inner goodness of the human heart and according to Bacon even the word 'humanity' cannot fully define the term. He considers that of all virtues and dignities of the mind, it is philanthropy that is the greatest of all virtues. This quality is akin to that of benevolent deities or goddesses. It is thus the quality that gives man his essence and without which man would simply be an ordinary, miserable and even a destructive being. Although the excess desire of power or the excess desire of knowledge can be harmful to men, yet the virtue of goodness is open to excesses (and is not restricted or limited).

The second paragraph discusses how men have a natural tendency towards being good and so much so, that if he is unable to find an opportunity of extending his goodness to fellow men, he does so to all other living creatures. One such example that Bacon provides is that of Turks who are considered as ruthless or cruel people and yet who are kind to beasts and birds. In fact a Christian boy in Constantinople ran the risk of being stoned for having strangled a bird- the long-billed fowl. While noting the risk of errors in the practice of goodness, Bacon is reminded of an Italian proverb "good for nothing" which you must have surely heard of. It simply means that being 'impracticality' good amounts to being good for nothing. In Italy, **Nicholas Machiavelli**, had the courage to write that Christianity which upheld its tenets on goodness and propriety of conduct, was itself guilty of having sacrificed too many good men in the name of religion, while turning a blind eye to those who were cruel and unjust. This was in itself an error that was committed in the pursuit of ideal goodness.

The third paragraph continues the discussion on how Machiavelli had openly stated the same as this was against the tenets of Christianity and the Christian law as well. Thus, in order to avoid goodness, it is advisable to have a clear knowledge of errors of goodness. This would help in entirely avoiding scandal and danger. It is necessary to look for good or good qualities of other men but not in the fascination of their beauty or promises. And if this is not avoided, one would be merely committing another error. An error of goodness occurs when one is taken by others at face-value. This can weaken a good mind and thereby disillusion the goodness of the mind. He further exemplifies that God teaches to give benevolently to the poor but one must not sell away everything to provide for others, nor should one empty all resources to end up in poverty. As long as one has the means or a certain “vocation” through which one may spread or “do”good. Otherwise, “in feeding the streams, one would be guilty of drying the fountain source” just as the Lord says.

In the fourth paragraph, Bacon discusses that while in some people, the habit of goodness is naturally inclined towards the right reason, in some men, there is a natural “malignity” or sense of evildoing even in their good deeds. In fact, this is true to our contexts where we will find many philanthropists who perform good deeds to secure their own self-interests. True philanthropy is about being a true well-wisher of others without any selfish concern and about giving generously and genuinely. According to Bacon, the negative factor of malignity is of two kinds: one is the “lighter sort” that is quick to oppose or cause difficulty and the “deeper sort” which is out of a sense of competitive envy or a sheer sense of mischief. Such malicious people worsen the difficult times of others for an instance, the dogs that licked the sores of a dying **Lazarus.** Bacon compares such men to flies that hover about anything that is raw and such malicious people are called ‘misanthropists’ who are “haters of men” and can never be well-wishers of others. Here Bacon gives another example of **Timon** who could only take advantage of others and have nothing much to do with them. These malicious or harmful inclinations are the errors of human nature, although, such nature proves to be perfect in politics. And thus, he exemplifies how

knee timber makes good ships which is ideal to be tossed about in the seas but the same is unsuitable for construction of houses as such timber holds no promise of standing firm.

The final words of the essay discusses how goodness does reflect multiple virtues in human beings. Bacon opines that when a man is kind and courteous to strangers- it shows that he is the “citizen of the world” and that “his heart is no island” which is isolated from others, as no man can survive without friendship. It shows the ability to build bridges and maintain harmony with others. If a man is compassionate towards the pain or sorrow of fellow men, it shows how his heart is like a “noble tree” which does not fear being wounded in providing solace and comfort to those in need. If a man easily pardons offenses, it shows that his mind is “planted above injuries” or is too superior to be defeated and kind enough to be forgiving at the same time. If a man is grateful even for small mercies, it shows that he “weighs” the noble thoughts of one’s mind, above all other qualities. And Bacon states that if a man has the “perfection” of St. Paul who would not mind disagreeing and even repelling Christ the Lord for having died for the salvation of his brothers and fellow disciples (some of whom had in fact betrayed Christ), then it would show more of a divine nature.



LET US KNOW

Nicholas Machiavelli: Machiavelli was a Italian Renaissance historian, philosopher and politician who wrote the famous work The Prince in 1513.

Lazarus: Lazarus of Bethany is a biblical figure who was restored to life after four days of his death with the blessings of Christ.

Timon: The reference to Timon is found in the New Testament who was one among the seven the elected preachers of Christianity who was thrown into a fire by non believers but survived it without any harm.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q5. What is philanthropy according to Francis Bacon?

Q6. What did Nicholas Machiavelli write with regard to errors of those who upheld Christianity?

Q7. What is necessary in order to avoid errors of goodness?

Q8. What does a compassionate man show or reflect?

1.4 MAJOR THEMES

The major themes that emerge from the essay are as discussed below:

Nature of Goodness :

The natural inclination towards goodness is inherent in all men according to Bacon. The nature of man is so designed that he bears a natural disposition towards goodness. According to him, goodness is equivalent to the theological virtue of charity which also reflects the generosity of the heart. An ideal “habit so excellent” as goodness is what is termed as ‘philanthropia’ by the Grecians. Even the term “humanity” falls short of the term “philanthropy” as it transcends beyond that quality. Thus, it is also the greatest among all other virtues.

In the practice of goodness, Bacon advices practicality, right discretion and measure so that a good person is self-sufficient, remains free from being cheated and continues his or her philanthropic activities without suffering any form of setback. As the saying goes “charity begins at home”, it is necessary to take care of one’s own necessities first before reaching out to others. A good deed, however, small can make a great difference and almost always good deeds have good repercussions as well. Being truly good even in the face of all odds and difficulties is a reward in itself. Bacon also highlights the natural inclination of some people towards malignity who are referred to as misanthropists and such people must be watched out against by those who believe in the value of goodness and in the goodness of mankind.

The Importance of Discretion and Self-sufficiency :

In his essay, Bacon measures the virtue of being good in a practical way as he opines that there is always the possibility of committing errors in the practice of goodness and charity. There is thus, a judicious balance that has to be met in the being good and charitable. When Bacon says, “Neither give thou **Aesop’s cock** a gem, who would be better pleased and happy if he had had a barley corn”, he means to say that one must give freely but also apply correct judgement in giving wisely i.e., giving that which one deserves or requires and not that which one fancies.

Bacon provides the example of God who taught the true lesson that God sent rain and sunshine to all on earth equally, to both the just and the unjust. But He did not shower wealth, honour or virtues equally on all men. There are common benefits which are shared with all but privileges or special benefits must be shared or given through the exercise of correct “choice”. If divinity makes self-concern or self-love a natural “pattern” in good people, then the love of neighbours makes a complete “portraiture.” Bacon warns that while making this portraiture or acting in the love of our neighbours, we must not leave our own natural patterns or needs and concerns unattended. It is important to be self-sufficient and not to spend one’s entire efforts or resources. If one is not careful to do so, it is nailing one’s own feet or in other words an indirect invitation to endless trouble.



LET US KNOW

Aesop’s Cock: It refers to a fable by Aesop titled “The Cock and the Jewel” which portrays a cock who comes across a jewel while searching for food but remains indifferent as it appeared of no use for a hungry bird.

1.5 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

The essay centers its discussion on goodness, the errors of goodness, the right measure of being good, dangers of malignity and the reflections of a good person. Bacon's essays as also discussed by Mary Augusta Scott in the introduction to *The Essays of Francis Bacon*, she writes thus, "[i]n the *Essayes or Counsells, Civill and Morall*, the method is ever to reduce reflection to its lowest terms, to try discover the fundamental principle of conduct that influence the actions of men." The volume contains a total of fifty-eight essays of which the present essay is the thirteenth in the table of contents. The essays of *Counsel, Civil and Moral* contain interesting areas of discussion as the titles suggests such as: "Of Truth", "Of Death", "Of Unity", "Of Unity in Religion", "Of Revenge", "Of Adversity", "Of Parents and Children", "Of Marriage and Simple Life", "Of Envy", "Of Love", "Of Great Peace", "Of Boldness", "Of Nobility", "Of Superstitions", "Of Travel", "Of Wisdom For Man's Self", "Of Friendship", "Of Suspicion", "Of Youth and Age", "Of Beauty", "Of Anger" among others.

The essay titled "Of Goodness and Goodness of Nature" is a reflection of Bacon's moral philosophy which he presents in a clear and crisp style of writing. The text of the essay that we read is an English translation from the Latin version in which it had been written. The Latin translation was first published in the year 1838. These essays are somewhat reminiscent of the moralistic or reflective essays written by Montaigne or the Plutarch. Bacon was himself a voracious reader of the classical masters who had inspired his own style of writing. You would be interested to know that Bacon had a habit of jotting down proverbs and sayings. Moreover, we will find plenty of historical, mythological or even religious references in his essays. For instance, in the present essay itself, Bacon alludes to the Bible, drawing from Italian quotations, citing from medieval references.

You may also note the old archaic use of the English language in the usage of words such as "he spake", "doth", "taketh", "teacheth", "sendeth", "maketh", "all thou hast" etc. Some of his words almost read like sayings such as: "[s]eek the goodness of other men, but be not in bondage to their

faces or fancies; for that is but facility or softness; which taketh an honest mind prisoner" or "[c]ommon benefits are to be communicated with all; but peculiar benefits with chance." Although Bacon uses a free conversational style in the essay, yet he maintains the tone of a preacher throughout the text. His essays make an easy reading and bear moral truisms that have a universal relevance in developing a sense of morality in individuals.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q9. What is the effect of good deeds?

Q10. Name a few of the essays in the volume *Counsel, Civil and Moral*.

Q11. Mention some of the archaic use of English words in the essay.



1.6 LET US SUM UP

After having gone through this unit, you will be able to discuss the life and works of the essayist Francis Bacon, who is considered as one of the pioneers of essay writing as a literary form. A thorough reading of the essay "Of Goodness and Goodness of Nature" will enable you to appreciate the importance of virtues of goodness and charity which forms the central theme of the essay. Further, the provided explanation of the text, the major themes together with the style and language employed by the essayist will give you a complete idea of the essay. You are also recommended to read more such essays by Bacon which are little treatises on life and living itself.



1.7 FURTHER READING

(1) Scott, Mary Augusta. *The Essays of Francis Bacon*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908.