



Francis Bacon'S Qualification as the Father of Modern Philosophy

QUALIFICATION DE FRANCIS BACON EST LE PERE DE LA PHILOSOPHIE MODERNE

Ochulor, Chinenye Leo^{1,*}; Metuonu, Iheanacho Chukwuemeka²

¹Department of Philosophy, University of Calabar, Nigeria

²Department of Philosophy, University of Ibadan, Nigeria

*Corresponding author.

Address: P.M.B. 1115 Calabar, Nigeria

Email: Leoochulor@Yahoo.Com

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to determine if there is any basis for regarding Francis Bacon as the father of Modern Philosophy. This involves effort to determine what constitutes, in essence, Modern Philosophy and the goal of Modern Philosophy. Are there criteria that qualify one as the father of Modern Philosophy? Proceeding with this inquiry, our paper examines, on the one hand, the views of those who argue in defence of Bacon's qualification as the father of Modern Philosophy. Here it is argued that "if Modern Philosophy is, however, understood as beginning from the Renaissance period, it seems more appropriate to regard Francis Bacon as the father of Modern Philosophy" (Omogbe, 1991, p.v). On the part of those opposed to Bacon's qualification as the father of Modern Philosophy, it is argued that "Descartes is called the father of Modern Philosophy.... This title of the father of Modern Philosophy has been disputed in favour of Francis Bacon. As Descartes' reputation rose, that of Bacon fell" (Ozumba 2005, p.146). After a critical examination of the above views, amongst others, we discovered that the major task of Modern Philosophy is getting certainty in knowledge. Bacon did not tackle this question of certainty in knowledge. Perhaps Bacon equated knowledge with certainty. But Descartes tackled this question of certainty in knowledge and reached a foundation (foundationalism) for certainty. And it was on this foundation that Modern Philosophy was built. The above views, among others, strongly question Bacon's qualification as the father of Modern Philosophy. Our paper, therefore, argues that it is more appropriate to regard Descartes as the father of

Modern Philosophy.

Key words: Father; Modern Philosophy; Certainty in Knowledge

Résumé

Le but de ce document est de déterminer s'il existe une base pour ce qui concerne Francis Bacon comme le père de la philosophie moderne. Cela implique des efforts pour déterminer ce qui constitue, en substance, la philosophie moderne et le but de la philosophie moderne. Y at-il des critères qui qualifient l'un comme le père de la philosophie moderne? En procédant à cette enquête, notre document examine, d'une part, les opinions de ceux qui soutiennent dans la défense de la qualification de Bacon comme le père de la philosophie moderne. Ici, il est soutenu que «si la philosophie moderne est, toutefois, entendu comme début de la période de la Renaissance, il semble plus approprié de considérer que Francis Bacon, le père de la philosophie moderne» (Omogbe 1991: v). De la part de ceux qui s'opposent à la qualification de Bacon comme le père de la philosophie moderne, il est soutenu que «Descartes est appelé le père de la philosophie moderne Ce titre de père de la philosophie moderne a été contestée en faveur de Francis Bacon. Comme la réputation de Descartes a augmenté, celui de Bacon est tombé "(2005:146 Ozumba). Après un examen critique des points de vue ci-dessus, parmi d'autres, nous avons découvert que la principale tâche de la philosophie moderne devient une certitude dans la connaissance. Bacon n'a pas abordé cette question de la certitude dans la connaissance. Peut-être Bacon assimilé les connaissances avec certitude. Mais Descartes a abordé cette question de la certitude dans le savoir et atteint d'une fondation (fondationnalisme) pour la certitude. Et c'est sur cette base que la philosophie moderne a été construit. Les opinions ci-dessus, entre autres, fortement question de la qualification de Bacon comme le père de la philosophie moderne. Notre papier, par conséquent, fait valoir qu'il est plus approprié de

considérer Descartes comme le père de la philosophie moderne.

Mots clés: Père, La Philosophie Moderne; Certitude dans la connaissance

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INTRODUCTION

Is Francis Bacon the father of Modern Philosophy? The great 17th century philosopher Francis Bacon (1561-1626) has been described by some as the father of Modern Philosophy. Copleston describes him as the father of Modern Philosophy in Britain in his book, *A History of Philosophy*. Again Joseph Omoregbe in his book, *A Simplified History of Western Philosophy Vol. 2*, describes Bacon as the father of Modern Philosophy, but adds that this position is held by Bacon only in Britain. Some other philosophers do not recognize Francis Bacon as the father of Modern Philosophy. Samuel Enoch Stumpf, in his book, *Philosophy: History and Problems*, describes Descartes as the father of Modern Philosophy. The view that Francis Bacon is the father of Modern Philosophy is, therefore, a controversial issue in the domain of Philosophy. The issue of who is the father of Modern Philosophy is contested by two renowned modern philosophers: Rene Descartes (1596-1650) and Francis Bacon (1561-1626). While some hold that Bacon is the father of Modern Philosophy, some others insist that Descartes is the father of Modern Philosophy. Although Descartes has been popularly honoured with this position, there are still some contestable issues as regards who should father Modern Philosophy, whether Bacon or Descartes. For us to iron out issues in this debate, it is expedient we look at the philosophical contributions of these two great minds beginning with Bacon. What is it that makes one philosopher more outstanding than the other? One may opine here that a philosopher becomes more outstanding to the extent his philosophical speculations, articulations and intellectuality prove potent to the solution of problems and understanding of reality around him or her; plus his contributions to the body of existing knowledge and advancement of learning. To this end a brief look at the philosophical credentials of Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes as modern philosophers requesting honour respectively as the father of Modern Philosophy becomes a necessity.

FRANCIS BACON AND HIS INDUCTIVE

METHOD

Francis Bacon (1561-1626) who was greatly influenced by the Renaissance spirit made a lot of impact in the modern era in terms of the reformation of knowledge. For Francis Bacon, "knowledge is power". He believed that man should dominate the world by the help of the knowledge he ought to possess. Bacon who saw the need to rely on the power of knowledge was greatly disturbed by the epistemological havocs caused by the church dogmatic doctrines of the medieval times. For him, the medieval period had distorted knowledge thereby clothing the philosophical atmosphere with pessimism. Bacon on this note set out to bring hope back to the acquisition of the knowledge of philosophy and science. He wanted to brighten the future of the philosophical and scientific enterprises.

For Bacon, there are three impediments to knowledge. These he called the distempers of knowledge. They are: Fantastical learning: when people prefer the use of high sounding language to focusing on the matter in question. Contentious learning: here people prefer dogmatism to new inquiries. Delicate learning: where people believe that they know more than possible e.g. Aristotle whose work he opposed and regarded as nonsensical. Bacon also talked of the four idols which hamper our understanding and interpretation of phenomena. As Russell (1979, p.528) puts it:

One of the most famous parts of Bacon's philosophy is his enumeration of what he calls 'idols', by which he means bad habits of mind that cause people to fall into error. Of these he enumerates four kinds. 'Idols of the tribe' are those that are inherent in human nature; he mentions in particular the habit of expecting more order in natural phenomena than is actually to be found. 'Idols of the cave' are personal prejudices, characteristic of the particular investigator. 'Idols of the marketplace' are those that have to do with the tyranny of words. 'Idols of the theatre' are those that have to do with received systems of thought; of these naturally, Aristotle and the scholastics afforded him the most noteworthy instances.

For him, these "idols" must be eliminated for adequate and accurate interpretation of phenomena. Bacon admired the works of one of the pre-socratic philosophers, Democritus. He also developed interest in the scientific postulations of Kepler and Galileo. Although he went through these works, he was not satisfied and wanted the philosophy of his time to be reformed.

For philosophy to be reformed, he came up and advocated the "method of induction". As Russell (1979, p.527) puts it:

Bacon was the first of the long line of scientifically minded philosophers who have emphasized the importance of induction as opposed to deduction. Like most of his successors, he tried to find some better kind of induction than what is called induction by simple enumeration.

He advocated this method as a result of his belief that this inductive method can be of use to a lot of man's daily

activities. This method of his was based on reason. And for him, systematic reason was paramount. The inductive method was actually not articulated by Bacon, but he made it popular. The method of induction, according to Bacon, is such that one has to sample all the data before coming up with a conclusive fact. This, therefore, means that every information gathered must be experimented upon one by one. Further more in inductive reasoning, the past, the present and future must be observed before drawing a conclusive conclusion, otherwise the conclusion remains only probable. This method, therefore, is on its own a problem and as such is unreliable because, it is impossible for one to carry out experiment about the past, present and future aspects of any material object. And as a result of this, our knowledge claims remain limited.

Bacon advocated the theory of dual truth: truth of reason and truth of revelation. He advocated that there are two distinct ways of acquiring knowledge: knowledge through reason and knowledge through revelation. He maintained that philosophy should rely only on reason as a source of knowledge while theology should use revelation as its source of knowledge. That Bacon preferred reason to revelation as the source of philosophical and scientific knowledge can make one regard Bacon as a rationalist to some extent but more of an empiricist. But the reason Bacon has in mind is the systematic reason on which his inductive method is based. And inductive reasoning is very different from deductive reasoning.

For Francis Bacon, it is only through the concept of experimentation and observation that one can arrive at true knowledge. He brought about the inductive method into modern science and philosophy and believed that induction was the surest way to knowledge. But we notice in this connection that he did not totally cut off from Aristotle with whom the inductive method started, his criticism of Aristotle notwithstanding. The major weakness in Francis Bacon's work is that it lacked hypothesis. For any good work in science, one needs hypothesis so that one may have many relevant facts for one's experiments, on the platform of induction. But Bacon says that one may look at facts and the hypothesis would suggest itself. Induction and deduction are major ways of acquiring knowledge in the modern sciences, but Bacon acknowledged only the inductive method.

RENE DESCARTES AND HIS METHODIC DOUBT

Now having explicated Bacon's philosophy, let us look at Rene Descartes' philosophy before we can make any judgment based on their contributions to the epistemological enterprise.

Descartes is a man of renowned repute who set out to establish certainty in the knowledge of philosophy. He was a rationalist as opposed to Bacon who was an

empiricist. He used the method of deduction as opposed to Bacon who used the method of induction. Descartes who led the quest for certainty both in the sciences and in philosophy was in search of knowledge that is indubitable and devoid of all uncertainty. As Descartes (1968, as cited in fourth Discourse) puts it:

Because I wished to give myself entirely to the search after truth, I thought that it was necessary for me to adopt an apparently opposite course and to reject as absolutely false everything concerning which I could imagine the least ground of doubt, in order to see whether afterwards there remained anything in my beliefs which was entirely certain.

Based on this he arrived at his "cogito ergo sum" (I think, therefore I am) which was achieved through his methodic doubt. His major works are *Discourse on Method and The Meditations*. Descartes discussed the method to be used in getting knowledge, namely: intuition and deduction. His criteria for certainty are distinctness and clarity. Based on his acclaimed criteria for certainty, he was acclaimed "the father of Modern Philosophy" by some and based on his placement of deductive reasoning as the only source of certain knowledge, he was described by some as the father of Rationalism.

Descartes is admired by these authors because of his quest for certainty and the challenge which he formulated that threatened the philosophies of the skeptics. As Descartes (1968, as cited in fourth discourse) puts it:

...I noticed that even while I was endeavoring in this way to think that everything was false, it was necessary that I, who was thinking this was something. And observing that this truth 'I am thinking, therefore I exist' was so firm and sure that all the most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics were incapable of shaking it, I decided that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking.

Descartes is known to have doubted even his own existence until his skepticism brought him to his dictum "cogito ergo sum" (I think, therefore I exist). In his "Meditations" which are presented in six discourses, Descartes came to the conclusion that God exists and cannot deceive; but that deception comes from the evil one who controls his imagination or dreams while sleeping. Descartes, who is generally seen as the father of Modern Philosophy wanted to start philosophy on a fresh foundation, by producing a method which will aid him in the quest for certainty. He saw that philosophy had dampened and that one needed to clear the rubbish that encumbered the ground, to make for a clear search. He advocated the method of mathematics and deduction in the quest for certainty. He was also the father of rationalism, placing emphasis on reason as the source of human knowledge. His philosophy stands against that of the empiricists who saw experience as the sole source of indubitable knowledge, truth and certainty.

The critical, systematic and ultimate quest for certainty which characterized the philosophy of Descartes influenced and consequently changed the thinking pattern

of the era, the modern era, and marked it out as a distinct period in the philosophic enterprise; as such it became known as the modern period of philosophy. What is more, Descartes came to the realization that all he had believed in and set his knowledge on are doubtful. He discovered that his knowledge and that of the era before him including knowledge as articulated by Francis Bacon had been founded on quick sand. He then furthered his quest for the attainment of knowledge that cannot be doubted on which to build his new philosophy. This his methodic doubt led to his doubting anything and everything till he got to a point he could not doubt namely that he thinks. According to him that which doubts thinks, and that which thinks must exist before it can think. This culminated in the "cogito ergo sum" (I think, therefore I am). This approach to knowledge made a wave of change in the orientation of thinkers and in the conception of reality in his time. He reoriented researchers in their search for certainty.

BACON AS THE FATHER OF MODERN PHILOSOPHY: A CRITIQUE

According to Vol. iii of Copleston (2003, p.292) "The first outstanding philosopher of the post-medieval period in England was Francis Bacon: it is his name which is forever associated with the philosophy of the Renaissance in Great Britain". It has to be stated, however, that Copleston was not completely right to have seen Francis Bacon as belonging to the Renaissance period and not to the Modern Period of Philosophy. According to Vol. iii of Copleston (2003, p.21) "Francis Bacon (died 1626) who, though often assigned to 'modern philosophy' may reasonably be assigned to the Renaissance period". There is no error in assigning Francis Bacon (1561-1626) to the Renaissance period between 14th – 17th century AD. What is wrong, however, is to exclude Francis Bacon from the list of Modern Philosophers because the Renaissance period constitutes the early part of the Modern Period of Philosophy. As Omoregbe (1991, p.v) put it:

Modern Philosophy in this book is understood to mean the philosophy from the Renaissance period to the end of the nineteenth century. The Renaissance movement was a landmark in European History as well as in the History of Western Philosophy. It marked the end of medieval philosophy and the beginning of Modern Philosophy. The Renaissance Philosopher whose ideas reflect this new scientific outlook and whose philosophy can be taken as a typical product of this movement, is Francis Bacon ... While in Britain Francis Bacon is regarded as the father of Modern Philosophy, Descartes occupies that position in the continent of Europe. If Modern Philosophy is, however, understood as beginning from the Renaissance period, it seems more appropriate to regard Francis Bacon as the father of Modern Philosophy.

Omoregbe (1991, p.4) further opines thus:

Bacon's philosophy marked the beginning of the new scientific era. A new movement with a new outlook. Hence he is

considered in Britain as the father of Modern Philosophy, a position which is generally reserved for Descartes in the continent of Europe.

Ozumba agrees with the view that the Renaissance is part of Modern Philosophy. According to Ozumba (2005, p.143) "The Modern Period of Western Philosophy is the period of the Renaissance... This was the period that philosophy once again stepped out of the trammels of authority worship and took on the garb of criticality". On the view that Francis Bacon is the father of Modern Philosophy in Britain, Ozumba (2005, p.146) argues thus: "Descartes (1596-1650) is called the father of Modern Philosophy... This title of the father of Modern Philosophy has been disputed in favour of Francis Bacon (1561-1626). As Descartes' reputation rose, that of Bacon fell". In other words, Ozumba is of the view that the influence of Bacon which qualified him as the father of Modern Philosophy in Britain was gradually eclipsed by the more captivating influence of Descartes. But Copleston, who greatly influenced Omoregbe upholds the view that Francis Bacon is the father of Modern Philosophy in England/Britain. Volume iv of Copleston (2003, p.1) argues that "Modern Philosophy is generally said to have begun with Descartes (1596 -1650) or with Francis Bacon (1561-1626) in England and Descartes in France". Copleston's view on this matter greatly influenced the view of Omoregbe on the issue at stake. On the other hand, Ozumba's view on this matter appears to have been influenced by the views of Bertrand Russell and Samuel Enoch Stumpf both of whom argue in favour of Descartes as the father of Modern Philosophy. Arguing in favour of Descartes as the father of Modern Philosophy, Russell (1979, p.542) maintains that "Rene Descartes (1596-1650) is usually considered the founder of Modern Philosophy and, I think, rightly". On his part Stumpf (1977, p.212) arguing in favour of Descartes opines that:

...The debate over the appropriateness of employing philosophy as the handmaiden of theology led finally to the conclusion that as a discipline philosophy is wholly separate from theology and religion. Accordingly ...philosophy was reinstated, most dramatically by the father of Modern Philosophy, Descartes, as an autonomous discipline.

So while Copleston and Omoregbe argue in favour of Francis Bacon as the father of Modern Philosophy in Britain, Russell, Stumpf and Ozumba argue in favour of Descartes as the father of Modern Philosophy.

APPRAISAL OF THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF BACON AND DESCARTES TO MODERN PHILOSOPHY

Now having seen the contributions of these two great minds, the question is, who actually is the father of Modern Philosophy? For us to answer this question, we

also need to ask ourselves the goal of Modern Philosophy. In the history of Western Philosophy, each period has its own characteristics and main features. In the Ancient Period it was to shape the philosophical minds of the then philosophers and discover the constitutive element of reality. The Medieval Period focused on the unification of faith and reason in the philosophical enterprise. That time the church was in control of almost everything and determined the direction for all forms of learning. This Medieval Period and its content tended to make learning and its advancement too slow and almost stagnant because no level of intellectual feat could go beyond the hegemony of the church.

In the modern period which started with the Renaissance between 14th – 17th century AD, the focus was, as put forward by Samuel E. Stumpf (1977, p.209) "...the unfolding world of science". Science was the dominant feature in this period, methods of science and learning were revisited and revived. It would appear convenient to say that Francis Bacon is the father of Modern Philosophy, because he came emphasizing on the method of induction in science. His area of specialization or interest in this period was that of scientific development. He put it that the Aristotelian deductive method cannot fit into science. He engaged in lots of scientific researches and was the one who discovered refrigeration. Unfortunately he died due to cold of the ice after a refrigeration experiment on a dead chicken. Today the world is enjoying refrigeration and other cooling electrical appliances, thanks to Francis Bacon.

Bacon discovered the bare dormancy of knowledge and wrote to wake the world from its intellectual slumber as he titled the book *The Advancement of Learning and New Atlantis* and he is popularly known for his dictum "knowledge is power". Dearth of knowledge may lead to death of a generation, hence the part played by Bacon was to bring the then world, nay, the entire world back to life. The Bible says in the book of Prophet Hosea 6:4: "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge". From that time on, other scientists picked up from where he had stopped to build up scientific enterprise till today. The inductive method, he advocated, allows for simple enumeration or experimentation of instances for a general conclusion or theory to be established. This has been the stock in trade in science. From all these we see that Francis Bacon is well qualified to be the father of modern science, a position that has never been contested, the prominence of Kepler, Galileo and others notwithstanding. But his qualification as the father of Modern Philosophy remains controversial and hotly contested. Many insist that Francis Bacon is not the father of Modern Philosophy but of modern science. The father of Modern Philosophy, according to this view, is Rene Descartes. This opinion maintains that Francis Bacon was more outstanding than Descartes when it comes to modern science; but coming to Modern Philosophy, the thesis is that Descartes did more

regarding laying the foundation for philosophy within the era than Bacon did. It, therefore, accepts Descartes as the father of Modern Philosophy instead of Francis Bacon.

There is need to emphasize the fact that Bacon has made a lot of impact in the context of waking men up from their dogmatic slumber. He made the modern era to see the need to progress in inquiry. He has also advocated the practicability of knowledge. For him, knowledge must be used to reform the society. His position as the father of modern science is not contestable. If scientific knowledge were to be equivalent to philosophical knowledge, then Bacon would have doubled as father of modern science and Modern Philosophy. But there is a demarcation between scientific knowledge and philosophical knowledge; scientific knowledge being an aspect of philosophical knowledge. Bacon as the father of Modern Philosophy would be disapproved by many, reason being that if we are to bring out the major task of philosophy, we will discover it to be that of getting certainty in knowledge. Here Descartes has put more emphasis on certainty when compared with Bacon. Bacon was not even treating the issue of certainty. Perhaps he equated knowledge with certainty. In other words, when he talks of knowledge the idea of certainty is embedded in it. Although Bacon dragged ancient philosophy into modern era, he primarily made us to see its porosity. After exposing the porosity of ancient philosophy particularly those of Plato and Aristotle, he was geared towards giving it a better outlook but he did this focusing on science, which is only a part of philosophy. To see him as the father of Modern Philosophy is, therefore, unacceptable; reason being that he only treated a part of philosophy and this had to do with the re-modernization of science. This does not mean that science wasn't in existence in ancient philosophy but rather this was science being brought into modern era and with better application. Rather than refer to Francis Bacon as the "father of Modern Philosophy", he is better referred to as the "father of modern science".

CONCLUSION

Descartes is the father of Modern Philosophy. He brought about the methodic doubt. He was actually a skeptic and continued to doubt until he reached a foundation (foundationalism) for certainty. And it was on this foundation that modern philosophy was built. This reason and many others earlier enumerated make Rene Descartes adequately qualified to be the father of Modern Philosophy, while Bacon retains the position of father of modern science.

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