

THE PHILOSOPHICAL RESEARCH SOCIETY

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THE FOUR IDOLS

DEAR FRIENDS:



FRANCIS BACON was acknowledged by his contemporaries as the most extraordinary mind of his time. He was a devoutly religious man, a philosopher of outstanding ability, a pioneer in the world of science, and an astute statesman. Among his apothegms he considers the fallacies of the human mind under four general headings, which he calls "idols," listing them as follows: (1) Idols of the Tribe, (2) Idols of the Cave, (3) Idols of the Marketplace, and (4) Idols of the Theatre. These types of intellectual idolatry are responsible for a general frustration of learning. As most of his conclusions are extremely relevant today, it may be useful to devote some consideration to his conclusions.

To Bacon, idols are objects of false veneration leading to the perpetuation of errors in all systems of knowledge. He points out that they lead sincere persons away from truth, and prevent natural and necessary progress in the various levels of society. They gradually transform native ignorance into learned misconceptions which, perpetuated from one generation to another, pervert mental honesty. Misconceptions become the order of the day and are supported by a constant intermingling of errors.

THE IDOLS OF THE TRIBE are fallacies supported by the veneration of ages. They have descended from time immemorial and have received almost universal acceptance. Outstanding examples are the common belief that war, crime, and poverty have always existed and therefore must continue to exist. As a result of such convictions, little or no practical effort is made to cure these dilemmas. They have imposed a status quo upon human endeavors on the assumption that the mistakes of the past cannot be remedied. Ancient systems set up to curb injustice have not succeeded, and each new generation inherits the troubles of the past. Wars have never led to peace, even though the causes may seem to be righteous. Punishment has had little effect upon the crime rate, and various bounties and benevolences have never ended poverty. The solution must be found through an earnest endeavor to root out the causes of evil. To accomplish this mankind must come to

understand that the universe was fashioned by a Divine Power manifesting through immutable universal laws. Such a labor is the true work of science, which must seek out First Cause and not drift into speculations of less importance. The wisdom of the past is useful only if thoroughly examined and its inconsistencies weeded out or reconciled.

THE IDOLS OF THE CAVE are those which originate in those mental faculties residing within the human skull. It is improper to venerate the thinking process or its productions. If one allows his thoughts to seem so important that they are worthy of veneration, he is bowing down to a false god. The infirmities arising within and from mentation are as fatal as any ailment of the flesh. Prejudices, opinions, and all intolerances generally arise from overconfidence in our own rational faculties. Infallibility is not granted to mortals, and overconfidence in personal conclusions is both unwise and impractical. Education as it is known today neither disciplines the mind or nourishes its needs. It is a common fault to accumulate the thoughts of others and pass them on as valid knowledge. Among scholars there is a tendency to play games with ideas. They are classified, compared, analyzed, and expanded without any basic comprehension of facts. Blocked by such preoccupations, the faculties are deprived of their observational and reflective values and function only to support the conflicting vagaries of the intellect. There must be a solid basis strong enough to support interpretations and censor them with substantial judgment; otherwise, learning is a rehashing of conflicting ideas which each person makes his own according to inclination. Modern science is especially subject to this fault. It sets up various hypotheses which are widely applauded for a time and then discarded by further research. All human knowledge is relative, and if this is not accepted as a fact, progress in all areas is retarded.

THE IDOLS OF THE MARKETPLACE are those created and sustained by popular opinion. They are present on all levels of society and exercise an undue influence over the public mind. It is convenient to assume that majorities or large groups attain validity by numbers alone. When a person makes a serious error, he may excuse himself on the grounds that he is following prevailing policies. If others are extravagant, he has a right to live beyond his means. If a peer group condones moral or ethical corruption, this should be considered a way of life and one should not be expected to live above the level of his time. What is now called "the fun generation" establishes a standard of personal pleasures which must ultimately end in sorrow for all concerned. Luxury becomes the principal concern of the many who have convinced themselves that extravagance contributes to contentment and security. It is easy to feel abused and underprivileged when one cannot share in the foibles of the rich. Idols of the Marketplace are commonly met with in politics, and economics. Candidates to public office, overinfluenced by propaganda, give their allegiances to programs which they do not understand or have no way of fulfilling. Riots gain momentum from numbers alone, and often perpetrate hideous offenses in the process of dramatizing unreasonable opinions. To remain clear from contemporary pressures requires considerable strength of character and much discrimination. Each person must either stand firmly upon enlightened principles or be overwhelmed by the motion of masses.

THE IDOLS OF THE THEATRE have nothing to do with thespianics. It takes the ground that "all the world's a stage and men and women merely actors on it." In the theatre plots are built upon fantasy and the stories are acted out by professionals who have little interest in the significance of the production. Bacon likens stage plays to huge industrial enterprises, great corporations, combines, and cartels which exist for the advantage of the few at the expense of the many. The audience

is composed largely of escapists who wish to forget the daily monotonies of a highly industrialized society. A world of make-believe may amuse the mind, but contributes little to individual or collective security. Bacon would have us understand that a magnificent city with its towering buildings, its parks, and freeways, is not a proof that civilization is a success. It is like a stage setting behind which is nothing worthy of admiration. Obsessed by the elegant confusion which he, himself, has caused, the human being is led from one absurdity to another until the final curtain falls. Each successful person wears a mask and his inner life is burdened with tragedy as well as comedy. He is envied by his associates as a proof that he has accomplished or accumulated fame or wealth, and his true nature is well concealed from public gaze. The mind of such an individual can no longer protect him from his own conceits, and in terms of enduring values he leaves this world poorer than he entered it. Truly "each man in his day plays many parts," but all too seldom does he properly represent the potential locked within himself. Man, who is given dominion over the natural world, has betrayed his trust and the mind which should have guided him in his search for truth has been sacrificed to inordinate ambitions.

In his new instrument of science Bacon advocates the cutting of the Gordian knot of intellectual confusion. A newer and better way of life requires a new and better philosophy for living. Bacon did not regard himself as a judge of other men, but as a guide leading the way to a higher order of human relationships. He advanced the inductive system, in which all ideas were subjected to the best aspects of tradition, observation, and experimentation. Upon his foundation the Royal Society of London developed a comprehensive program to establish facts, truths, and realities, and rescue them from prevailing opinions. His Lordship was therefore regarded as the founder of the modern scientific method and the moving spirit behind the rise of industrialism. Unfortunately, most of his followers overlooked the most vital element in his plan. He actually based everything upon the reality of a Divine Power. He did not conceive of science as a factory for commodities dedicated to the expansion of theoretical knowledge. God is the proper end for all truth seeking. The world cannot be saved by a Godless learning which begins and ends in futility.

When the light of the Divine Will shines upon the human heart and mind, righteousness directs conduct. Without faith in a power superior to himself, the individual falls from one dilemma into another. His personal purposes are too small; his horizons are too close and his dreams are too dim to inspire dedication to principles. This is not a platitude, for it is justified by experience and the most obvious of human needs. Bacon also made reference to a kind of mirror which each person can hold before his own face. If he behold his features as they are, he will be inspired to grow, but if he mistakes his countenance for something worthy of immediate veneration, he is worshipping an idol.

Most sincerely yours,

Manly P. Hall

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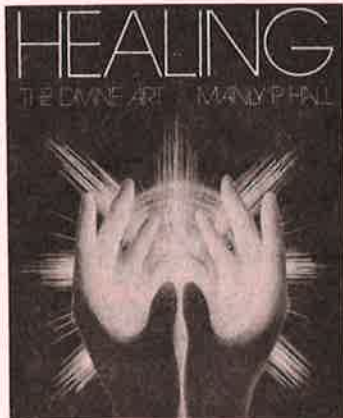
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