

Prometheus Reborn: Francis Bacon and the Birth of Modern Technology

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Since the seventeenth century, philosophers have heralded Francis Bacon as the prophet of modern technology. On one side, the architects of the Enlightenment read Bacon as a prescient voice who announces the coming of a new age. On the other side, the Enlightenment's critics castigate him for his contribution to the disenchantment of the world. In this paper, I argue that the historical Bacon differs significantly from what we might call the "mythical" Bacon. More specifically, I argue that Bacon's conception of technology is by no means disenchanted. On the contrary, he "enchants" technology in three respects. First, he endows technology with a providential purpose. Second, he does not present nature as a servant to be subdued, but as a formidable force with which humans must wrestle. Third, he believes that technology will inject the spirit of adventure into an otherwise sclerotic society. Faith, wonder, and vitality. Combined, these elements of Bacon's project paint an altogether different picture of his world, one much further removed from our own. In fact, I argue that the discrepancies between the historical Bacon and the mythical Bacon capture the broken promise of modern technology. If the mythical Bacon is a prophet of technology and disenchantment, the historical Bacon shows us that the two need not go hand in hand. By reconstructing Bacon's account of technology, I frame his approach as an alternative, rather than a precursor, to our own.