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## Academia between Utopia and Dystopia: Francis Bacon, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Alasdair MacIntyre

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**Abstract:** The paper examines two visions of the relation between science and society through the utopian novel *New Atlantis*, by Francis Bacon, and the dystopian novella *New Atlantis*, by Ursula K. Le Guin. In Bacon's classic utopia scientists enjoy a high social status and have all imaginable resources at their disposal, whereas Le Guin's contemporary dystopia portrays heroic scientists in a totalitarian state, subjected to imprisonment, torture and constant surveillance for practicing ethical science. Taking a cue from these two texts, I employ MacIntyre's framework of internal and external goods of a practice to discuss the relationship between contemporary academia and the state. The internal goods of science (knowledge, 'light', discoveries and inventions) are what scientists contribute to society, whereas the external goods, such as material riches, prestige and power (or the opposites thereof) are what society supplies the scientists with. My conclusion is that values drawn from a religious tradition can help treat the external goods as the means, and the internal goods as the actual ends of academic practice.

**Keywords:** academia, utopia, Francis Bacon, Ursula K. Le Guin, Alasdair MacIntyre

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## Introduction

The myth of the lost island of Atlantis was first mentioned by Plato (2008) in his two dialogues, *Timaeus* and the unfinished *Critias*. Although marginal in Plato's work, the myth of Atlantis proved to exert a great influence on the imaginations of later generations. The Renaissance, in particular, witnessed the revival of this theme, which was connected with the discovery of America by European sailors. The most famous works of that time that were inspired by the tale of the sunken land were Thomas More's *Utopia* (2002), which lent its name to the entire literary genre, and Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1989), which expressly referred to the Platonic myth both in its title and in its narrative of the discovery of an unknown island called Bensalem. The prominent feature of Bacon's account of Bensalem is the description of the ideal institution of natural science called the House of Salomon. From the numerous later literary texts drawing on the Platonic myth I have selected Ursula K. Le Guin's *New Atlantis* (1975), because, apart from its identical title, it provides an interesting counterpoint to Bacon's narrative in its portrayal of the fate of the scientific community. These two contrasting accounts offer a convenient starting point for the discussion of the internal and external goods of academic life, in which I engage with MacIntyre's diagnosis of contemporary academia and its place in society.

## Science in Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*

Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* is a seventeenth century story of European sailors who, on their voyage from Peru to China, accidentally discover an island in the midst of the Pacific Ocean. It turns out to be inhabited by highly civilized people, who extend gracious hospitality to the strangers and gradually introduce them to their culture, their customs and the history of their island, which they call Bensalem. The history they tell the sailors contains the account of the destruction of the Atlanteans' land as punishment for their conquests of other nations motivated by *hubris* and

greed. In contrast, the Bensalemites enjoy prosperity, which is the fruit of their moral integrity. Bensalem's flourishing was safeguarded by the foundation of

an Order or Society which we call Salomon's House, the noblest foundation (as we think) that ever was upon the earth and the lanthorn of this kingdom. It is dedicated to the study of the Works and Creatures of God. (Bacon, 1989, p. 58)

The description of the so-called House of Salomon, an institution devoted to cultivating science and producing new inventions, is the main feature of Bacon's utopian narrative. In Jerry Weinberger's words, "to study the *New Atlantis* is to study the coherence of the utopian promise of modern science" (1976: 866). But, at the same time, Salomon's House, which is also called the College of the Six Days' Works, is deeply rooted in ancient and religious wisdom, as it contains the Biblical reference to the work of Creation, as well as to King Solomon.

*New Atlantis* is the fictional embodiment of Bacon's concept of 'the great instauration'. Travis DeCook (2008: 111) points out that Bacon's key term 'instauration' echoes the same term used in the Vulgate for the foundation of Solomon's Temple, where the Ark of the Covenant was stored. The instauration in the Vulgate meant building and rebuilding, but also edification and re-edification (McKnight, 2006: 29).

According to McKnight (2005, 2006), the wise men of Salomon's House are devoted to interpreting both natural and supernatural events, aware that the use of nature should be regulated by a proper piety. In this interpretation, Salomon's House is seen as complementary to Solomon's Temple, and science (natural philosophy) is not meant to supersede worship, but to be integrated with it in a reverent attitude towards the Creator of nature. King Solomon, the founder of the Temple in Jerusalem, is presented in *New Atlantis* as the author of the *Natural History*, a compendium of the entire scientific knowledge available to the human race. The Fathers of Salomon's House emulate his example by searching for light, which has connotations both with natural philosophy and with religious knowledge.

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One of the island's officials, the governor of the House of Strangers, states that the quest for Light, that is, knowledge, 'the first creation of God', is the sole purpose of Salomon's House. This is why, apart from conducting their own research and experiments, some members of Salomon's House who are called Merchants of Light travel to other parts of the world in order to learn about the advances of science and technology and to avail themselves of this knowledge back at home.

Another item rich in Biblical symbolism is the ark, in which the Bible and the letter from Apostle Bartholomew reportedly arrived at Bensalem's shores, accompanied by a miraculous pillar of light. It is a reminder both of the ark of Noah and of the Ark of the Covenant. So is the whole island of Bensalem, for it alone was spared the destruction caused by a universal deluge (DeCook, 2008). The fact that the ark contained a complete text of the Bible, including books that had not yet been written at the time of its miraculous arrival, reflected Bacon's Protestant emphasis on the *sola Scriptura* as the basis of faith. It could also have been the expression of Bacon's longing for a peaceful and unproblematic Christian community, free from the theological disputes and controversies of the age of the Reformation. Therefore, as Travis DeCook (2008) points out, there is a stark contrast between the static, atemporal character of the divine Revelation in Bensalem with the dynamic, developmental aspect of natural knowledge, accumulated by Salomon's House.

As Stephen A. McKnight underscores, the activities of Salomon's House can be understood as a preservation of the original form of natural philosophy, which already existed in the past. Tradition features prominently in the structure of Salomon's House, in which knowledge and skills are passed from the masters to the apprentices in order to secure the continuity of natural philosophy and to build upon the previously amassed knowledge.

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### Science in Ursula K. Le Guin's *New Atlantis*

Le Guin's *New Atlantis* (1975) is a novella, one of the lesser known of her numerous works classified as fantasy or science fiction. In Le Guin's short story, twenty-first century America's West Coast is ruined by a totalitarian government, pollution, and the exhaustion of natural resources. This leads to a sharp decline in economic and technological standards, as exemplified by dilapidated buses breaking down regularly on the road, and constant power outages. This civilizational decline is accompanied by natural cataclysms, which bring to mind the fate of the original Atlantis. The collapsing American West Coast, including Portland, Oregon, where the Le Guins settled in 1958, is the antithesis of Bensalem, which survived natural disasters due to its moral, religious and scientific integrity.

The text is composed of six fragments of a Portland woman's journal, each of them followed by the collective voice of the mysterious inhabitants of the underwater land. Thus Le Guin adds a note of hope to her otherwise gloomy vision, as new continents are reported to be rising from both the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans to replace the present ones. In fact, the rising land is not new, but an ancient one. As Elizabeth Cummins put it:

Le Guin has caught both the old and new existing for a moment. And in that juxtaposition she has acknowledged that there is a vision which endures from past to present even through the cataclysmic changes of the rise and fall of nations. (Cummins, 1993, p. 176)

The main protagonists of the 'terrestrial' sections of the novella are Belle, a violist and the author of the journal, and her husband Simon, a scientist. Upon returning to Portland from a trip to the Mount Hood Wilderness, Belle is surprised to find someone lying in her bed. The person turns out to be her emaciated husband, released from a detention camp. Simon is persecuted because he belongs to a group of researchers striving to construct a solar cell, 'the sun tap', to remedy the adverse effects of the constant power shortages. They pursue their project in secret, meeting

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in Belle and Simon's apartment. Belle plays the viola to drown out their conversations, as the apartment has been wiretapped by the FBI. The physicists' research is aimed at the well-being of all the citizens, but the oppressive state authorities do not allow it for fear of losing their monopoly on energy supplies. Through the viola music she plays, Belle manages somehow to get in touch with the mysterious inhabitants of the submarine land and to wake them back to life. Their voices, coming from the rising continent, are simultaneously the voices of the past and of the future, thus establishing the link between antiquity and the time to come. When the scientists finally succeed in constructing the solar cell, Simon proposes to use the enormous energy, which is now at their disposal, to accelerate the rising of the new continent. He is soon detained again by his oppressors, this time on the pretence of health issues. In view of the upcoming deluge Belle intends to put her journal into a bottle so that it could be carried away by the ocean and possibly read by people belonging to a civilization in the time to come.

### **Internal and external goods of science: academia and society**

These contrasting images of Bacon's Bensalem and Le Guin's West Coast set the scene for my appraisal of certain aspects of contemporary academia and its relationship to society at large in general, and to state authorities in particular. For this purpose I employ the MacIntyrean framework of internal and external goods of a practice (2007). Internal goods are those that can only be achieved by engaging in a practice; they encompass both the skills and virtues of the practitioner, and the excellence of performance or products, such as a game of chess or a work of architecture. External goods – such as wealth and prestige – are not necessarily connected with a particular practice, and they depend on institutional arrangements. In the world of academia, internal goods of science might be construed as the scientists' contribution to the common good of society, whereas external goods may be viewed as rewards supplied to the scientists by society.

In Bacon's *New Atlantis* the search for Light is the primary internal good of the practice of natural philosophy, whose institutional framework is provided by Salomon's House. In terms of external goods, the Fathers of Salomon's House lead luxurious lives, and are abundant in wealth, power and prestige. Bacon's narrative clearly shows that science leads to prosperity. In this connection Katherine Bootle Attie (2013) makes a direct reference to the Second Book of Chronicles (1, 10-12), where King Solomon prayed for wisdom, and because of that was granted both wisdom and material prosperity. For Bootle Attie the very phrase 'merchants of light' represents the commodification of science, which marks the beginning of modernity. She reads *New Atlantis* as a protocapitalist manifesto, based on the assumption that there is no inherent opposition between self-interest and the common good. But so interpreted, Bacon's Merchants of Light act in an exploitative way, since the Bensalemites use other nations' research results, but keep their own knowledge to themselves. Howard White (1968) and Jerry Weinberger (1976), for example, therefore claim that the message of *New Atlantis* is in fact subversive and anti-Christian, and that it advocates material prosperity brought about by human rational endeavor as opposed to the Christian other-worldly spiritual quest.

The Finnish moral philosopher Timo Airaksinen (2011) adopts a slightly different perspective; he argues that Bacon divides knowledge into two spheres: exoteric and esoteric. In fact, only the Fathers of the House of Salomon have full access to the accumulated knowledge. The other inhabitants of Bensalem are admitted only to the exoteric store of knowledge – they enjoy the practical benefits of the inventions and discoveries. Even the ordinary laborers of science operate on the exoteric side of it. The power inherent in the possession of knowledge demands special moral qualifications from those who aspire to attain it. If knowledge is light, illumination is reserved for the few who satisfy the entrance criteria, and the Fathers of the House of Salomon are certainly qualified, intellectually and morally, to pursue this noble profession.

The teleological dimension of the project carried out by the physicists in Le Guin's *New Atlantis* corresponds to that of the enterprise of Salomon's House, but the circumstances in which they pursue their

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experiments are the exact opposite of those enjoyed by the Bensalemite researchers: they suffer imprisonment, torture, and destitution. They therefore need much more virtue to endure their plight than the wise men of Salomon's House. In Le Guin's novella, where the scientists lead lives of heroic self-sacrifice, there can be no suspicion of the materialistic and selfish motivation of the scientific work, and no risk of the corrupting influence of the institutions.

### Conclusion

Let us now look at MacIntyre's idea of science as a practice, and the university as the institution which sustains it, to see how it relates to Bacon's and Le Guin's fictional accounts. As MacIntyre put it, "no practices can survive for any length of time unsustained by institutions" (2007: 194). First of all, it is obviously the case that in the former narrative science will flourish, whereas in the latter it will perish. Even if Simon and his friends succeed with their invention, their scientific community is doomed to destruction due to institutional persecution, not to mention the natural catastrophe which is about to begin. External goods are necessary means to achieve the internal goods as proper ends of practice. At the most fundamental level, MacIntyre claims that the necessary condition for moral enquiry and scientific deliberation is freedom from coercion and danger of death. That is how he argues for the validity of natural law in view of contemporary moral disagreements (2006: 78–80). This claim obviously translates into the relationship between academia and the state: the state should secure the proper environment for science and philosophy to flourish, and the scientists should work to improve the general well-being of society. This standard is met in Bensalem but violated in Le Guin's *New Atlantis*.

Looking at the relationship between internal and external goods of science from another angle, we may ask to what extent knowledge or a research result is a common good, and to what extent it is private property, which may be commodified, traded and marketed for individual



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profit. A liberal perspective stresses the intellectual rights of the individual, whereas an Aristotelian standpoint underscores the good of the community which sponsors the research and provides the institutional framework for it. Thus, from an Aristotelian point of view, we should promote the culture of open access, and stress the exoteric moral competence of the lay persons, rather than the esoteric knowledge of professional experts.

Finally, we can see the affinity between Bacon's view of science based on religion as an enquiry into nature understood as the creation and work of God, and Newman's and MacIntyre's idea of theology as the integrative core of all the disciplines of science. MacIntyre nurtures an arguably utopian vision of the unity of science redeemed from compartmentalization and united on a theological and philosophical foundation (2009, 178). I subscribe to the view that such universalism and integration of knowledge can safeguard the proper relationship between the internal and external goods of academic practice, that is to say, a suitable order among means and ends of academic endeavor.

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