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THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE UTILITARIAN AND ANTI- UTILITARIAN IN EUROPEAN PHILOSOPHY AND CULTURE

Abstract: *It has already been recognized that the philosophy of Francis Bacon, with utilitarian theory of knowledge and his view that man has rights over nature and should become her "servant and master" is the philosophical foundation for technological civilization. This paper sheds some light on the process of spreading of utilitarian values from the gnoseology to the moral and aesthetic field. This process is key offspring of the British philosophy. Another key offspring of the British philosophy is aesthetic reaction to the utilitarianism. Together, the two trends represent crucial philosophical events to have occurred on European soil, from the time of the renaissance to this day.*

Key words: *Technological civilization, culture, value, philosophy, gnoseology, aesthetics, utilitarianism*

It is interesting that Francis Bacon, the first thinker of great significance to Great Britain was, at the same time, the man who set the course for crucial events in Europe, at least on the spiritual and cultural scene. Francis Bacon was the thinker who formulated the principles and laid the philosophical groundwork for the technological civilization which is, beyond doubt, the essential determinant of the modern world, regardless of the

attitude we may take towards it, either at the emotional or the theoretical level.

Francis Bacon made an extremely sharp critique of ancient Greek philosophy and science which, even today, seems almost sacrilegious to philosophers. It is known that ancient Greeks treated true knowledge as theory (*theoria* - the ancient Greek word meaning observation with the connotation of both sensory and spiritual observation, and which the Romans later translated as *contemplation*). They believed that the supreme value of knowledge lies in its self-purpose, in its anti-utilitarian beauty and resistance to the possibility of being instrumentalized. In other words, knowledge (be it philosophy or science) must not be utilized. It ought not to be used for benefit (of any kind) because it loses its value thereby. Instrumentalizing knowledge also means annihilating its value. One of Aristotle's oft quoted hypotheses is that philosophy is the most divine of all the sciences for the very reason that it is not a means to another, outer cause, but a purpose unto itself, and is studied for knowledge itself and for the beauty of such knowledge, and the subtle sophisticated pleasure knowledge brings, which, to the ancient Greeks, was a very important aesthetic factor.

What illustrates the attitude the ancient Greeks had towards theory as the supreme value of knowledge is the famous comparison of human life to an Olympic stadium, attributed to Pythagoras and mentioned by Diogenes Laertius:

“He [Pythagoras] used to compare life to a festival, and some people come to a festival to contend for prizes, and others for the purposes of traffic, and the best as spectators; so in life, the men of slavish dispositions are born hunters for glory and covetousness, but philosophers are seekers after truth”.¹

It was precisely this *bios theoretikos* as Aristotle named it, and which the Greeks appreciated the most, the theoretical and spectatorial way of life which Francis Bacon and the upcoming era he heralded in regarded as wrong.

Bacon proclaimed that all the wisdom and knowledge we inherited from the ancient Greeks was a “childish science” which was “incapable and too immature to create”. Why childish, incapable and immature? According to Bacon there were too few discoveries, too few technological and mechanical inventions.

The famous British empiricist believed that one should only practice science and philosophy if it is towards a benefit, and

1 Laertius, D. (1979) *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Belgrade: BIGZ, p. 263.

this benefit is, quite specifically, to control nature. Knowledge is not a purpose onto itself. It is a means, and benefit and power are its immediate objectives. Man should, in Bacon's opinion, be a "servant and interpreter" of nature – servant and interpreter in the sense of keeping his finger on nature's pulse and penetrating into its rhythm and its laws. However, the "interpreter" is only a "servant" until he penetrates the laws of nature. Understanding ends the process of serving, and also initiates control and mastery over nature. The servant is meant to become a "master", because, according to Francis Bacon, man is "entitled to nature", and his "mastery over nature" is a logical and natural manifestation of his power.²

Control over nature for the purpose of human power is the key hypothesis of Bacon's philosophy of science, and also the theoretical foundation of technological civilization. It is also the answer to the question of why ancient Greek civilization, spiritual and subtle as it was, was not a technological one. The anti-instrumental and anti-utilitarian attitude the Greeks had towards science made it impossible for technological civilization to be generated, i.e. it prevented the progress of ancient civilization in that direction. The Greeks regarded the instrumentalization of science as a barbaric attitude towards knowledge.

His definition of technology is exceptionally interesting – he believed it to be "magic in its purified meaning" and modernized magic, and he defined it as a judicious utilization of nature for the purpose of human power. Brilliantly formulated as it was, to us moderns, it sounds both exciting and also frightening.

Another lucid hypothesis of Bacon's was that a nation which has more technological inventions increases its political power thereby. At the time when it was formulated, this idea might have sounded exotic, even extravagant, but today it is a confirmed fact which has become a part of our everyday life to such extent that it is difficult for us to even imagine it could ever have been otherwise.

The technological project of Francis Bacon – let us call it so – is the axiom on which technological civilization rests in the field of spirituality of mankind, and is, as such, undoubtedly a recognizable segment of the European culture. Therefore, the technological project of Francis Bacon is recognized as the first crucial contribution that British philosophy made to the European culture.

2 Bacon, F. (1879) *The Works of Francis Bacon*, London: Longmans, Vol. I, p. 222.

A singularity of European philosophy and spirituality in general is the warm reception that Rene Descartes, otherwise an opponent of British empiricism, gave to Bacon's utilitarian concept of science. As the only acceptable element of the philosophy of British empiricism, Descartes, the father of rationalism on the European continent, took precisely Bacon's hypothesis that the purpose of human knowledge was to master and control nature, and that personal gain, success and power are its ultimate goals.

Formulated as a philosophical platform at the end of the 16th and throughout the 17th century, it has prevailed to this very day carrying the monumental (and somewhat awkward and cumbersome) edifice of technological civilization in which we survive to this very day.

However, what is particularly interesting but far less well-known is the way instrumental rationality (utilitarian rationality) spread from the field of gnosiology into other fields of human spirituality. Moreover, it is almost a kind of metastasis of the utilitarian values which quite unexpectedly spread into an area, seemingly least likely to be infected by it – the field of ethics and aesthetics, i.e. of morality, beauty and art.

The process of transposition of utilitarianism from the field of gnosiology into the other fields of spirituality, and recognizing it as a value, began soon after its triumph in the theory of knowledge. The domination of utilitarianism in both the ethical spiritual field as well as in the field of aesthetics was noticed as early as the 17th century. Thomas Hobbes, Bacon's disciple and follower, introduced the category of *utilitas* in grand style into the field of morality by formulating the hypothesis that man's morality is a result of selfish urges, and that it is essentially an egoistic interest in self-preservation and the promotion of his own existence. Hobbes's ethics are a textbook example of utilitarianism. They are also evidence of the process of transposition of the value *utilitas* from Bacon's gnosiological positions to other forms of human spirituality. Hence, man acts in a moral way because he deduces that such behaviour best serves his selfish aims. Anything that seems like a noble and moral action at first sight can, according to Hobbes, be reduced to love for the self and to fear for the self.

Furthermore, in Hobbes's ethics, there is none of that refined self-interest, the refined utilitarianism of the epicureans, where one of man's ultimate goals, apart from physical survival, is to promote his spirituality. With Hobbes we see a sharp, genuine, wolfish egoism in whose realm people exist as a disturbance and a threat to each other. Ethos is, therefore, interpreted as a

sycophantic manifestation of fear whose *spiritus movens* are egoism and personal gain.

The philosophy of Thomas Hobbes itself continues the process of transposition of the value *utilitas* into the field of political philosophy. Hobbes's ethics are completely coherent with his political philosophy with its famous hypothesis *homo homini lupus* – man is a wolf to a man – meaning that all men in their natural state are each other's potential enemies. What is more, Hobbes saw equality among men as their ability to harm each other equally. However, in the civil state, man relinquishes a part of his selfish desires, thus securing the conditions for a peaceful and safe life. It is a utilitarian "contract" between selfish individuals – citizens, and the state authority which keeps them in fear of punishment. Fear of punishment is the only thing which, according to Hobbes, makes people obey both moral and state laws.

Bernard Mandeville follows the same line of reasoning in his famous *Fable of the Bees*. He argues that "private vice is public benefit", and that the welfare of a state rests not on the virtues but on the vices of its citizens. What does this actually mean? Mandeville believed that vice is the *spiritus movens* of human progress and civilization – lust for luxury products (which would nowadays be called the consumer mentality) is the precondition for progress in science, and science in turn spurs invention; prostitution is the precondition for social virtue, and large, disproportionate, fabulous wealth stimulates art. Mandeville wondered what would happen, if all the thirst for wealth, vanity and dishonesty suddenly disappeared, if people only ate as much as they needed to, if they treated clothes as something that cover and protect the body, if they did not deceive, lie to and fight each other? Society would collapse. Lawyers and judges would starve to death, craftsmen and manufacturers of sundry products (miscellaneous items of luxury) would go bankrupt, nobody would want to become a soldier. The wheel of progress in civilization would come to a definite halt. Man is, therefore, according to Mandeville, exclusively guided by self-interest. He is moved by vanity, thirst for wealth and belligerence, but these individual vices become, on a larger scale, at the level of society, a public benefit.³

Naturally, Mandeville's cynicism caused a wave of indignation, but it also intrigued and gave the British public a fresh and unconventional perspective on the principles of both human nature and social structure and organization.

3 Mandeville, B. (1934) *The Fable of the Bees*, London: George Allen & Unwin, pp. 82 – 88.

In the 17th century, something happened on the aesthetic spiritual plain which, seen from the sociological point of view, is nowadays regarded as something natural, but which was then seen as a revolutionary step begot by Protestant Holland. What was this? The value of art, more specifically of painting, began to be determined according to the rules of supply and demand on the market. A painting was worth as much as a potential buyer was willing to pay for it. The price was the equivalent of his liking for it. Until the 17th century, and particularly during the Renaissance period, the value of a work of art was determined by the taste of the patron, of the person who commissioned it, be it a nobleman, a member of high clergy, or a banker and lord of commerce. A patron determined the style when it came to art. Which principle was better? Or, better said, which was worse? What would ruin the value of a work of art less – a single patron and his individual taste, or the mechanism of supply and demand on the market? Naturally, neither was good for artistic value itself. It seemed that the negative effect in both cases remained the same.

Finding the answer to such a question through this kind of discourse is difficult, nor is it our intention to do so at the moment. What is of interest to us now is the transposition of the utilitarian value prioritized by Bacon, from the gnosiological onto the aesthetic spiritual field. It is not only a question of money or the mechanism of supply and demand, which became the exalted manifestation of artistic value. It is about the penetration of the utilitarian principle into the very essence of the aesthetic response. If seen from the point of view of reception, both a work of art and a scientific discovery are valued only as long as they function and operate. In science, the element of functionality is verified through experiment, and at the level of reception of a work of art, by liking. A work of art is valuable if it appeals to and communicates with the recipient (who will, in turn, be willing to pay for it).

The principle of utilitarian value of understanding which Bacon formulated, penetrated even into everyday thought. The well-known questions of the young people “Why am I learning this?” and “What do I need this kind of knowledge for?” are essentially Baconian, and are imbued with the notion that personal gain is the ultimate value of understanding.

British culture is, therefore, recognized as the cradle of the so-called technical project, or more precisely, the technical-utilitarian project, of the notion that what brings happiness is technology as “masterly use of the essence of things for the purpose of human power”, human power over nature (or perhaps it is safe to say from this point - against nature) by making

progress through history. In the philosophy of science, British thought is the theoretical basis for technological civilization. It is the foundation of the entire European way of life from Francis Bacon until the present day, and has been, in one way or another, imported into other civilizations around the world.

However, the British philosophy also produced a reaction to the Baconian spiritual model. It is this fact which is of particular interest.

British culture is also the cradle of a completely different philosophical idea which belongs, not to the well-known and thoroughly studied British empiricism, but to a far less well-known but equally interesting British Neo-Platonism which set the tone of the British philosophy of the 17th and 18th centuries.⁴

The reaction to utilitarianism as the spirituality axiom started in the field of ethics. The scene was set by the British Neo-Platonists of the 17th century – Ralph Cudworth, Benjamin Whichcote, Henry More, and John Smith, known together as the Cambridge Platonists because they were all bound to Cambridge for life, first as students and later as teachers. The reaction continued, reaching its final form in the field of aestheticism, in the 18th century, in the philosophical thought of the masters of British and European aesthetics, Anthony Ashley Cooper the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, Joseph Addison, editor of the famous and prestigious magazine *The Spectator*, and Francis Hutcheson.

In the 18th century, A. A. Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, criticized the dominant ethical and political theory of Thomas Hobbes and his followers from the position of the philosophy of Neo-Platonism. Relying on his own experience and on common sense, Shaftesbury gave instances of situations in which man acts according to the law of morality, even though it opposes his egoistic interest in self-preservation and promotion of physical existence. Furthermore, he cited a myriad of examples of situations when people feel moral admiration for the enemy (in a war, for instance) who poses a direct threat, but who, even though feared, cannot but be revered. According to Shaftesbury, these are the examples of *disinterested* behaviour and disinterested admiration.

This is the first time that the term *disinterestedness* appeared in this context in Shaftesbury's philosophy as a subject of dispute with Hobbes. His original intent was to contrast the term with the egoistic connotation the term interest had with Hobbes. Shaftesbury claimed that such self-interest (action inspired by

4 Draškić Vićanović, I. (2002) *Estetsko čulo*, Beograd: Zavod za udžbenike, str. 55.

the motive of reward or fear of punishment), is “fatal to virtue”, and that when an action is inspired by such motives, there can be no mention of virtue or morality.⁵ Virtue is, simply, a notion that must not be instrumentalized because it would lose its essence thereby. Virtue cannot be a means to anything else beside itself, regardless of what it is. Virtue is a purpose unto itself and must be treated as such.

Shaftesbury used the category of disinterestedness to unite moral and aesthetic experience because, according to his particular method of philosophical introspection which he took from his master John Locke and which is known in the British philosophy as the new way of ideas, disinterested pleasure is a common feature of the moral and the aesthetic in the act of reception, i.e. in the act of becoming aware of both moral and aesthetic phenomenon.

Following this line of reasoning, Shaftesbury formulated one of his key hypotheses, which is also recognized as one of the fruits of British culture and spirituality that marked European cultural trends – the hypothesis that the recognizable aesthetic response is the backbone of morality.

In line with the Neo-Platonism which Shaftesbury supported, virtue, in his philosophical concept, belongs to the theoretic contemplative stand and is a synonym for its righteousness.

Shaftesbury decidedly claimed: “Virtue is love for order and beauty”. By analyzing this position of Shaftesbury’s, we come to the conclusion that the ethical position contains two elements – a perceptive element, which refers to man’s ability to perceive another’s noble actions, and the element of pleasure, which ensues directly from contemplation, i.e. the ability to approve or disapprove. Approval implies pleasantness based on which a judgment is formed. And, as mentioned before, virtue lies, according to Shaftesbury, in a sound theoretic stand, which is similar to the Socratic-Platonic model, with the exception that Socrates talked about true knowledge (if I know what is good, I will undoubtedly act accordingly). Shaftesbury introduced the following model: if I admire the beauty of an action, I will certainly act in the same way. Ethos is therefore, aesthetically determined – I know what is good based on my aesthetic experience.

“People are governed by their taste”, claimed Shaftesbury. “They may believe, or even be certain of what is right and what is wrong... however, if a person’s taste and affections are

5 Shaftesbury, A. A. C. (1991) *An Inquiry Concerning Virtue*, Scholar’s Fascimilis and Reprints, New York: Delmar, p. 36.

contrasted with an honest action, their behaviour will imminently turn in that direction”.⁶

Therefore, affection for the beauty of an act, admiration and love of beauty have the power to govern our will.

This hypothesis is actually the backbone of that wave of thought which can be named aesthetic, and which was, in the form of a specific reaction to the technological project, created in the 18th century as yet another spiritual product of British philosophy and culture, and from there it spread to the European continent, particularly Germany. The German philosophers of the Enlightenment welcomed the idea of the aesthetic dimension of morality as relevant and determining, and the most significant manifestation of the transplantation of this British idea in German soil are the well-known “Letters Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man” by Friedrich Schiller, in which, directly influenced by the British aesthetics of the Enlightenment, he insisted on the importance of the aesthetic for morality.

This aestheticism in ethics sounds at the very least strange nowadays. We are not accustomed to treat ethical problems aesthetically. However, it must be emphasized that this approach to the problem is not absurd, and it sheds light on an important feature of man’s moral consciousness. This idea is reflected in the everyday way of thinking – we say “I find it repulsive to act in such a way” or “I admire his personality”. These examples clearly illustrate the aesthetic approach to the morality of the so-called common awareness, and it is a fact that the experience of common awareness must not be disregarded by philosophy. Moreover, the experience of common awareness is a valid argument with the ethicists of deontological orientation.

This theory of the aesthetic dimension of moral awareness is recognized as one of the greatest contributions that British thought has made to European culture and philosophy.

Friedrich Schiller later on also insisted on the moral importance of aesthetics, particularly with young people, where it can play a successful role as an education factor. Since moral awareness can be formed and shaped, the best way to lead it on to the right path is by forming aesthetic awareness – taste, as they referred to it in the 18th century. The aim of education is to induce children to admire and relish the beauty of a moral act, as well as to abhor the wickedness of vice and crime.

6 Shaftesbury, A. A. C. (1900) *Miscellaneous Reflections*, Chapter II, *Characteristics*, London: Robertson, vol. 2, p. 65.

Schiller's philosophical concept suggested that the relation between the aesthetic and the ethical was such that the aesthetic was a prelude to the ethical; the aesthetic precedes the ethic and is the foundation for its creation and development. However, we believe that the idea of the British philosophers of the Enlightenment, fronted by lord Shaftesbury, that the aesthetic is an element of moral awareness as such and not only its antecedent; it is the more accurate one.

Shaftesbury did not, however, conform with aestheticizing morality. He perceived an aesthetic dimension even in the field of politics, thus adding yet another shade of Platonism to the British philosophy of the Enlightenment. Shaftesbury believed that taste was an infallible indicator of the condition of a state and its political situation. The structure of a government is reflected in a people's taste. If we take a look at what the people enjoy, what they find beautiful, listen to the sort of music they like, we will immediately understand the political climate of that nation, and the structure of its government. For this sort of analysis, music is of the utmost importance, being the art which is the most immediate expression of the soul. Taste in music is the most authentic, in the sense that it is almost impossible to "learn" what we should like. Therefore, taste in music is the best indicator of the condition and level of aesthetic awareness.

Shaftesbury's notion of the link between taste and freedom is interesting as well as indicative. It is a notion which greatly influenced his contemporary Addison, and in Germany, Kant's *The Critique of Judgement*, and Schiller's *Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man*.

People need to be free, both physically and spiritually, in order to be able to form the right judgement about beauty, and to have a criterion for artistic value. Lack of freedom is devastating for taste which is necessarily stunted in the atmosphere of spiritual constraint.

Just as the British philosophy of the 16th and 17th centuries was recognized as the *spiritus movens* of the technological project whose supreme value *utilitas* was promoted by Francis Bacon, and as the *spiritus movens* of the transposition of this value to other fields of human spirituality (a process which in ethics and political philosophy was initiated by Thomas Hobbes), thus it is recognized in the 18th century and even later on, as the initiator of the reaction to the technological project, i.e. as *spiritus movens* of the aesthetic project which would also reverberate across the European continent.

This wave of criticism for the technological project and promotion of the aesthetic project continued with John Ruskin

in the 19th century as well, in the form of reaction to the values of industrial society, and especially in the form of reaction to the utilitarian concept of art. Ruskin basically resumed the spirit of British thought of the 18th century, especially the philosophy of lord Shaftesbury, and revived his ideal of aestheticising the entire human spirituality. Ruskin's thought was the expression of weariness of modern man with the values theoretically composed and promoted by Bacon – usefulness, knowledge in the function of mastering nature, labour in the function of mastering nature, technology as “judicious use of nature for the purpose of human power”, and the Liberal notion of labour whose exclusive objective is a utilitarian one – money, profit – I work in order to make money and not because I even slightly enjoy the process of work itself.

Industrial society governed by the utilitarian principle brought to its ultimate expression – profit – was a place where, by definition, there was no room for beauty. Ruskin believed that it was necessary to reform society in order to reform taste. However, since society and people's taste, i.e. society and the art it produces form a certain vicious circle which Shaftesbury noticed, Ruskin believed that the process of reforming society and that of reforming taste should run simultaneously. One could not and would not yield results without the other. As Ruskin said: “the art of any country is the exponent of its social and political virtues”.

On the subject of reforming the economy, Ruskin suggested a touching model of an aesthetic utopia, which has occasionally seemed appealing and possible to the theoreticians of society throughout history – labour must not be something mechanical and void of humanity as imposed by modern industrial society and the principle of profit. It was necessary to return to craftsmanship – to labour which includes the physical component as well, i.e. to labour which is both manual and spiritual and which, as such, engages man's entire personality including the moral dimension in particular. A craftsman's moral character resides in the beautiful forms he produces, which again brings us back to Lord Shaftesbury's notion that affinity for beauty is the essential expression of man's moral character, the moral character of both the individual and that of a nation : “Every nation's vice or virtue is written in its art”.⁷

On the other hand, the reform of taste implied, Ruskin believed, a resort to the gothic past, especially in terms of architecture which he knew and loved. Neogothicism, which Ruskin swore by, was the link to the past and the road to the future. Ruskin

7 Ruskin, J. (1904) *The Crown of Wild Olive*, London: George Allen, p. 73.

profoundly believed that Gothicism and Neogothicism were the incarnation of the moral virtues of nobleness and courage. Virtues incarnate are the backbone of the wonderful project by Charles Barry and Welby Pugin - the Houses of Parliament, which are sophisticated Neogothicism imbued with the scent of gothic history.

The simultaneous reforms of economy and taste with their reciprocal effects – the level of taste is raised by improving the principles of labour, and vice versa – was the utopian aesthetic project of John Ruskin.

His disciple, William Morris, also made his contribution to the dissolution of the utilitarian mentality of modern European man. He displayed an anti-Baconian tendency of thought. “This is not an age of inventions”, he said as if retorting to Bacon. Industrial labour, with its accompanying elements – excessive industrial production, duress and weariness – is not compatible with the human essence of man. Morris’s ideal, his cure for the cancer of the modern utilitarianism, alienation and dehumanization, is craftsmanship seen as art and identified with art. It is labour which is a value in itself and “that which is in itself pleasant to do”,⁸ labour where duress and weariness are abolished (the two are logically intertwined because, naturally, we grow weary far less quickly by doing what we like and what makes sense, and when we are not working under duress). This is, according to Morris, the so-called “joy in labour” which is the expression of man’s artistic nature, of his human essence, and also an expression of Morris’s refined aesthetic utopianism.

It seems that we are nowadays driven into a corner by the utilitarian mentality, so the attempts to dissolve it sound interesting and appealing. The conflict between the utilitarian and anti-utilitarian, between Baconian and anti-Baconian, i.e. the conflict between the utilitarian project and the aesthetic project as the most plausible version of anti-utilitarian mentality, appear to us as the future of European cultural and philosophical changes.

8 Morris, W. (1910) *Art and Socialism*, The Collected Works of W. Morris, London: Longmans Green and Co.

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СУКОБ ИЗМЕЂУ УТИЛИТАРИСТИЧКОГ И АНТИ-
УТИЛИТАРИСТИЧКОГ У ЕВРОПСКОЈ ФИЛОЗОФИЈИ
И КУЛТУРИ

Сажетак

Одавно је прихваћено да филозофија Френсиса Бејкона, са својом утилитаристичком теоријом знања и ставом да човек има права над природом и као такав би требало да буде њен „слуга и господар”, представља филозофско полазиште технолошке цивилизације. Овај рад у одређеној мери расветљава процес ширења утилитаристичких вредности, почев од поља гносеологије до морала и естетике. Тај процес је кључно исходиште британске филозофије. Још једно кључно исходиште британске филозофије је естетска реакција на утилитаризам. Заједно, ова два тренда представљају круцијалне филозофске догађаје који су се одвијали на европском тлу, почев од времена ренесансе до данас.

Кључне речи: технолошка цивилизација, култура, вредност, филозофија, гносеологија, естетика, утилитаризам