

## On the meaning of Francis Bacon's supposed motto 'Science is power' and its relevance today.

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way, symmetrical approach of communication was the main goal. The perspective of a popular message which is fully controlled by the scientist, programmed to the smallest details, gives way to a potentially contradictory way of reception. The public can compose its own meanings from the alternatives offered by popular science produced by professional science communicators. The positive attitude towards science and the recognition of its privileged social and epistemic position, which make up the intended message of the scientist, are equally preserved. Power is a product of meaning negotiation in the contemporary public communication of science.

**Keywords:** science communication, science and society, public understanding of science, two cultures, science wars

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## On the meaning of Francis Bacon's supposed motto 'Science is power' and its relevance today. (ID 446)

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The adage 'Science is power' is generally attributed to the seventeenth century English philosopher Francis Bacon. However, nowhere in his writings can this phrase exactly be found. In his *Meditationes Sacrae* he did write 'ipsa scientia potestas est', but he indisputably talked there about God's wisdom and power — which clearly concerns an altogether complete different meaning than what is nowadays understood by the decontextualized saying 'science is power', understood by many as 'knowledge leads to submission'. In his *Novum Organum* Bacon wrote about the relation between science and nature. That relation is not straightforward at all, as if — simply put — scientific knowledge necessarily implies control over nature (or any part of it) let alone other people. For Bacon this complex relation regards the individual scientist, science, society and nature, and not a controlling relation between two individuals. In his fictional story *Nova Atlantis* it becomes clear what he meant. Following a strict scientific methodology, based on induction, through (repeated) experimentation and teamwork, scientists are able to discover the laws of nature. Experimentalists must obey nature, since only those phenomena can occur which are natural; i.e., only what is physically possible can be made explicit. This implies humility from the part of humans towards nature. The purpose of knowledge is "for the benefit and use of life [...] not either [...] for superiority to others, or for profit, or fame, or power, or any of these inferior things." For Bacon, man can gain power through knowledge, but power cannot be the reason to perform knowledge, nor does it concern the plain idea of dominance over nature or a fellow human being. In my presentation, I will not only analyse the Baconian meaning of the words in question (and set the record straight for that matter), but also look into the relevance the Baconian interpretation can have for the (different) ways we perform science today. During those 400 years motivations changed in directions opposite to the Baconian ideal. Nowadays, scientists are sloppy from time to time and some even commit fraud in order to strengthen their academic position. Not publication pressure but the academic culture and career stage lead to scientific misconduct and non-science. Can Bacon inspire us enough to change the academic culture once again and to perform science only to gain understanding for the benefit of all? Or are we merely interested in the subjugation of others (our fellow humans and academic peers) and the subjection of nature through science?

**Keywords:** Francis Bacon, Science ethics, Scientific integrity

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