Francis Bacon and the Four Idols of the Mind

Francis Bacon lived in medieval time between the year 1561 and 1626.

He was one of the earliest thinkers to truly understand the nature of the mind and how humanity truly progresses in collective knowledge.

Bacon argued that human beings should never fall for the idea that that most of our knowledge has already been found or discovered (as propagated by Aristotle's teaching in The Organon) and therefore, present generations should just go back to read what is already written and rediscover knowledge from the past.

He wanted human beings to always pursue objective knowledge through inductive reasoning.

He argued that human folly arose from a virtual enslavement of the mind to the intellectual idolatry.

He was of the view that wholesome, effective and productive thought is blocked by biased obstacles which are manifest in a worship of the four idols. The idols are metaphorically speaking pre-conceived attitudes, ideas and fixations are acquired a posteriori (from experiences) of our lives.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno observe that Bacon shuns "knowledge that tendeth but to satisfaction" in favor of effective procedures.

He distinguished them as idols of the Tribe, idols of the Cave, idols of the Marketplace and idols of the Theater.

1. *Idols of the Tribe* are deceptive beliefs inherent in the mind of (wo) man, and therefore belonging to the whole of the human race. It has its foundation in human nature itself. This particular idol comes from the false assumption that humans most natural and basic sense of thing is the correct one. This false assertion makes man believe that s/he is the measure of all things. This is belief is a false mirror which distorts the true nature of things as they are.

2. *Idols of the Cave* are those which arise within the mind of the individual. Here the mind is symbolically a cave that distorts and refracts light (knowledge) to fit its biases. The thoughts of the individual roam about in their dark cave and are variously modified by individual’s temperament, education, habit, environment, and accidents. Therefore, an individual who dedicates his mind to some particular branch of learning becomes possessed by his own peculiar interest and interprets all other things according to the colors of his training. For example, The Engineer tends to see every problem as requiring engineering solution and scientific are prone to highlight difference while a philosophical may be more drawn to the similarities.
3. **Idols of the Marketplace** are errors arising from the false significance bestowed upon words. According to Bacon men form their thoughts into words in order to communicate their opinions to others. However, the moment words substitute the thoughts, it there is misrepresentation of their opinion, hence fails to communicate original thoughts. In most cases human beings use words variously without attention to their true meaning. Also words often betray their own purpose, obscuring the very thoughts they are designed to express.

4. **Idols of the Theater** are those which are due to false learning. These idols are built up in the field of theology, philosophy, and science, and because they are defended by learned groups in those disciplines. These are ideas accepted without questioning by the masses. For example, for a long time it had been cultivated that Pluto was part of the planets and it had attained a wide sphere acceptance in the world of the intellect that it was no longer questioned. However, this idol is not innate to mankind, rather it has been brought forth by philosophical systems and may therefore be removed by these same systems.

There are three classes of these idols that Bacon believed should especially be paid attention to:

- The Rational or Sophistical School of philosophers who collect a variety of similar occurrences that are yet to be fully examined and leave the rest to rationale.
- Empirical philosophers who have invested time and work into a theory but have only conducted few experiments and ignore facts may be contrary to their theory.
- Superstitious type that mix philosophy with theology and traditions
In summary;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The four idols are</th>
<th>My interpretation they stand for</th>
<th>A restatement of the four obstacles for clear thinking</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tribe</td>
<td>prejudice</td>
<td>- for the anecdotal, personal, idiosyncratic, narrow or provincial views</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cave</td>
<td>myopia</td>
<td>- tunnel vision, widespread delusions, common habits of belief &amp; distortion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marketplace</td>
<td>rhetoric</td>
<td>- language distorts by the very description of the things described</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theater</td>
<td>deception</td>
<td>- traditions of authority based on age, impression, credulousness, or negligence</td>
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