

PHILOSOPHY - THE MEDICINE FOR BODY AND MIND

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The edition of this summer's number of *Perspectives on Science* is dedicated to a close-up of a particular intellectual context which favored the emergence of Francis Bacon's works on natural philosophy in general and his epistemological account in particular. In the era of great upheavals and general reform Bacon assumed an important part: that of Reformer and Curer of the human mind. He aimed at freeing the faculties of the mind—imagination, memory, judgment, reason, from the false and perilous bridles of vain speculations, rash generalizations and idolatrous tendencies. The wide-spread acknowledgment of Bacon's theory of error is taken up and elaborated in the edition dedicated to Francis Bacon and his "medicine of the mind" in an attempt to answer some challenging questions about the tradition which informs Bacon's entire oeuvre. There is a prevalent use of the *medicina mentis* in Bacon's work that not only gives cohesiveness to his project - be it civil, moral or natural-philosophical, but also reflects the various sixteenth-century intellectual traditions taken up and reinforced by Bacon like neo-stoicism,¹ Augustinianism and its Calvinistic revival.² Some answers are given, thus, in the papers that constitute this summer's edition of *Perspective on Science* and which deal with a particular and highly influential sixteenth-century philosophical heritage of the "de anima" tradition.³ Many important thinkers of the 16th and 17th centuries were convinced that the health of man's body and soul could be treated by the same type of medicine. Moreover, it implied that man could be raised above his condition of cognitively and morally flawed being and brought nearer to the understanding his creator's power and will. In the Age of early modern millenarism, Francis Bacon finds the instruments he needs to sanction his reform in a protestant-humanistic tradition that had freshly emerged out of the critical questioning that addresses nature, God and the position of man in the world.⁴

The well-known Baconian theory of idols is the starting point of his epistemology – the apprehension that the human mind is biased and that the ancient philosophers have failed in their various endeavors to properly cure it - by scattered attempts of building alternative schools of thought, like the Stoics, Sceptics, Epicureists. The Baconian "alternative" also integrates stoical elements, but puts them

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at work in a particular epistemology. In Sorana Corneanu's and Koen Vermeir's article, "Idols of Imagination: Francis Bacon on the Imagination and the Medicine of the Mind", an integrative understanding of Bacon's "medicina mentis" is offered. The authors' argument in favor of the intimate correlation between body and soul, their union being bridged by the faculty of imagination. Imagination was at the same time understood as the image induced in the soul by the process of cognition. Assuming such a union, Bacon proposes both epistemic and physiological means to cure man. His natural historical writings - both epistemological and medical - focus on his main medical and natural-philosophical project: the prolongation of life (p. 198).

Whether Bacon believes that the proper "interpretatio naturae" is a task that natural philosophers all over the world will be able to comply with, still causes heated disputations among scholars. His *New Atlantis* seems to suggest that the true natural philosophy is only meant for the chosen ones to understand and use, a fact which contradicts Bacon's stated ideal of scientific activity as a common good, something to be done by the effort of natural historians and philosophers over centuries. Also, in Bacon's allegory, the Brothers of the Solomon's House are described as divinely elected guardians of the truths of religion and natural philosophy. For Bacon, his age was the age of the triumph of true religion, as it was the beginning of the age of epistemic reformation by the discovery of true philosophy. Yet, if a true philosophy presupposed the preparing activity of natural history, true religion remained, in a Calvinist sense, God's gift to man and not a domain of inquiry. That is what A.T. Lancaster insists upon in his article "Natural History of Religion: A Baconian science?". His contention that Bacon couldn't have written a natural history of religion is sustained by the way religion was understood by the 16th and 17th century philosophers. True religion was not seen as an object of any study, but rather "the soul's intellective posture towards God" (p. 251). Nevertheless, false religion was regarded as a disease of the mind in the same manner that the idols that impeded man to grasp the true structure of nature were seen. Somehow then, the cure of the mind did lead to a better understanding of the divine truths as well, even if they could never be grasped without the help of divine illumination.

These apparently contradictory positions are taken into account by Dana Jalobeanu. At the beginning of her study she correctly identifies the main tension that marks Calvin's thought and is reflected in Bacon's project of the reformation of the mind: the hopes to restore the "commerce between the Mind and Things" and the "restitution and renovation of things corruptible" in spite of man's corrupt nature. The main obstacle in the way of this process of purification resembled by Bacon's method is the idolatrous tendency of the mind. Bacon, unlike Calvin, regards the right "interpretatio naturae" as a good method of training the diseased mind. A number of Huguenots that adopted a particular tradition of neo-stoic Calvinism anticipated Bacon's propositions of cognitive cures by suggesting a similar attentive "literal" study of the Book of Nature along empirical, anti-dogmatic lines. Pierre Viret and Phillipe Duplessis Mornay are considered to be influential Huguenot writers, responsible with the spread of Calvinism in France trying to provide, by encyclopedical writings about man and his relation to God and the world, a "new spiritual medicine"(p. 216). This

medicine aimed at replacing the above-mentioned failed efforts of the ancients. Pierre de la Primaudaye took over much of Viret's natural historical endeavors, sometimes taking over extensive passages and putting them together with quotes out of travel reports and empirical "facts", even suggesting the reproducing of a particular phenomenon by means of experiment. To all of them the interpretation of the Book of Nature represented a process of fighting against the idols of the mind. Francis Bacon is clearly indebted to the particular intellectual milieu that marked Calvinist thought in the late sixteenth century.

Pierre Viret's account of the "medicina mentis" amounts in Raphael Garrod's view to a specific expression of Calvinist Pastoralism. In "On Fish: Natural History as Spiritual material medica: Calvinist Pastoralism in Pierre Viret's *Instruction Chrestienne* (1564)" the author follows Viret's method of using natural history as a theological instrument of curing the human spirit. The natural-historical accounts of the surrounding world - such as those of the whale and the John Dory - help the reader and listener of the sermon to understand the moral examples given in the Bible. Viret's account is clearly a consequence of the Reformation's "linguistic turn" that oriented biblical exegesis towards literal and less allegorical interpretation.⁵ In Viret's view, natural knowledge alone could not manage to save the fallen man from erroneous erudite thinking, therefore the spectacles of Scripture were needed in order to provide man with an accurate account of nature-as the creation of God. Natural knowledge can turn into spiritual medicine only as far as it provides the material for a natural-theological meditation and sermon. Man comprehends God's attributes by observing His creatures, as God cannot show himself to the limited human mind in another way than by "accommodation" and adaptation to the human epistemological capacity (through his works). By addressing our memory (through the scriptural examples) and our imagination, by means of the particulars experienced every day, man can be directed towards the right path towards proper "ratiocination" and moral judgment. Once he does that, man can rightly understand his fallen nature and comprehend his limitations. Only thus can he properly acquire sparse but accurate knowledge of his creator and worship him.

Calvinist pastoralism was nevertheless indebted to the revival of Augustinianism in the sixteenth century, when the African Bishop's doctrine of grace⁶ was taken over by important theologians like Luther and Calvin and used as the core of their religious doctrine, respectively natural theology. According to Peter Harrison and his account exposed in "Francis Bacon, Natural Philosophy and the Cultivation of the Mind", Augustinianism has also influenced - among other traditions like the stoic philosophy - Bacon's "culture of the mind" model (p. 139). In Bacon's view, the religious virtue of charity may be seen as an essential feature resulting from a thorough "medicining" of the mind. That places the cure of the mind in "the province of theology" (p. 146), as Bacon also sees it as belonging to "sacred divinity" and promoting the good in the mind and the extirpation of evil. That the medicine of the mind is taken to be part of Bacon's moral philosophy is an assumption that can be sustained by a reading of Bacon's *Essays*.⁷ Natural knowledge has been flawed along with man's morals at the Fall, as Bacon states in his *Novum Organum*.⁸ The religious

reformation would go together with the reformation of knowledge by means of an active life - not a material-oriented use of the world as advocated by Luther and Calvin - but a constant systematic natural-philosophical inquiry which would reinstall the rule of reason over the passions and facilitate a proper understanding of the created world.

In his aim at curing the impure mind, Bacon also relied on the use and benefits of history and its implications concerning the value of learning. Guido Giglioni examines in his article, “*Historia and Materia, The Philosophical Implications of Francis Bacon’s Natural History*” the role played by *historia* and *fabula* in Bacon’s system of knowledge. History is seen by Bacon as a way of conveying knowledge by means of examples that determine the human mind to acknowledge and interpret particulars and, afterwards, attempt to see the general pattern behind them. If memory could be ascribed to history as the faculty mostly used in the employment of the historical discipline, the fable is considered to require the imagination for the grasping and interpretation of its hidden maxim or aphorism. History and fables are employed in either displaying or hiding their meanings and truths. The level of descriptive narration that occurs in historical accounts is transgressed in fables where the symbolic content is hidden and challenges the mind in searching behind the surface of the allegory. The fable was used, according to Bacon, in ancient times to codify some essential natural-philosophical truths that transmitted unconsciously and unintended, a “genuine reflection of the innermost motions of matter”. A process of restoration of the truths by means of natural histories is seen as a “collective effort towards enlightenment” (p. 85). Whether the truth can be acquired by induction-going backwards-and lead to the rediscovery of accurate philosophical accounts had been Bacon’s principal and never completely settled question.

In the light of the productive and inspiring readings of Bacon’s proposals for curing the mind briefly presented above, an inherent Baconian “disease” pervades in these interpretations. They are written under the convictions that they might give rise to further investigation of Bacon’s thought and to the investigations of more expositions of the early modern tradition of the medicine of the mind. So the quest for knowledge never really ends and the results may be only provisional. However, they have managed to shed light upon the diversity and the thoroughgoing field that has nourished and sustained a particular understanding of natural philosophy, as a method that could, if properly build and used, clear the mind of its own figments. Aided by theological, philosophical and historical convictions, such a stance deserves and has been given significant attention in this summer’s edition of *Perspectives on Science*. It has also lit some more dark in the history of ideas that focuses on the early modern period.

References

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