

THE MEDICINE OF THE SOUL AND THE BACONIAN LEGACY IN EARLY MODERN CONTEXT

Sorana Corneanu, *Regimens of the Mind: Boyle, Locke, and the Early Modern Cultura Animi Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), ISBN-13: 978-0-226-11639-6, pp. VII+301

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Recent years have witnessed an increase in the number of scholarly works concerned with one particular aspect of the early modern period. This important feature can best be summarized as the anthropological core of the early modern experimental enterprise. Specific perspectives on human nature and implicitly on the human affective and cognitive constitution were fundamental in grounding different approaches to the study of nature. Both Stephen Gaukroger¹ and Peter Harrison², for instance, make compelling cases in favor of the view that the early modern natural philosophers' primary concern was with the limitations of the human cognitive capabilities and the proper methods for knowledge acquisition according to these limitations. This stance eventually led to objectified, institutionalized investigative practices.

Sorana Corneanu's *Regimens of the Mind: Boyle, Locke, and the Early Modern Cultura Animi Tradition* fits within this trend and represents a major contribution to the field of early modern studies. The excellence of this book resides not only in the extensive scholarship the author displays in handling a multitude of issues, genres, topics, and authors but also, and most importantly, in the novel insights into the writings of the early modern sages her paradigmatic *cultura animi* framework occasions. A careful and meticulous reading of the major works of this period, guided by the tradition of the medicine of the soul, sheds new light on luminaries such as Robert Boyle and John Locke.

Before proceeding with a systematic discussion of the book, Sorana Corneanu's understanding of the *cultura animi* tradition, as well as her position regarding the anthropological premise, requires a preliminary clarification. For Corneanu, *cultura or medicina animi* is a discipline that favors a practical approach to the cultivation of the virtues, instead of a purely contemplative one, representing an eclectic mix of Stoic, Sceptical, and Christian doctrines (p. 8). By opting for the peculiar configuration of *cultura animi* as an interpretative and organizing device in regards to the early modern literature she investigates, the author also highlights her primary concern with the therapeutic aspects of early modern anthropological views. The corrupted state of man necessarily implies a remedial preoccupation. In this sense

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the experimental method possesses a double feature, one concerned with external investigation, the other with an internal examination of the defects of the mind and soul, and the appropriate remedies for these.

The book can be divided into two parts. The first part comprises chapters 1 to 3 and deals primarily with the early modern reception of the *cultura animi* tradition. Chapter two for instance seeks to highlight the major strains of thought relevant for the early modern guise of this particular practice. Chapters 4 to 7 form the second part of the work, where a reassessment of the works of Robert Boyle and John Locke against the backdrop of this medicine of the soul is undertaken.

The first chapter, “Francis Bacon and the Art of Direction”, discusses Bacon as having a major influence for the later experimental approach to nature, though not necessarily in terms of the methodological novelties he proposed, but much more because of his efforts to diagnose the distempers of the mind and offer an efficient method for its alleviation. The Baconian interpretation of nature guides the mind on the path to genuine knowledge by constantly indicating its shortcomings in the form of the “idols”, but also by procuring the means to keep them in check through the very exercise of the experimental method. The author stresses the importance of Bacon’s generalization of the distempers of the mind to all the faculties, both moral as well as intellectual (p. 15). Consequently, a remedy is equally applied to all the faculties. This important development is also mirrored in Bacon’s expansion of moral philosophy from the will and affections to the *Arts Intellectual*, namely, the domain of the understanding. The particular emphasis Corneanu places on aspects of Bacon’s work that are consistent with the major coordinates of a practice of the self has important implications for how she articulates some key Baconian concepts. For instance, the *vita activa*, although possessing a social dimension, claims its relevance in virtue of the dynamical process which characterizes it, and which is assimilated in the mind’s continual struggle with its own disabilities. The experimental investigation into the workings of nature thus gains a double feature. As we progress on the path to proper knowledge of the external world we simultaneously undergo an internal process by which the distempers of the mind and soul are remedied (p. 27). The investigation of nature goes hand in hand with a reflection on and amelioration of our feeble cognitive capacities. It is interesting to note that Corneanu’s position on this issue marks a shift in emphasis from that of Peter Harrison which favors the view that the culture of the mind is a prerequisite for the interpretation of nature³.

In keeping with the overall direction of the book, if one endorses the position that Bacon was a significant influence on the later Royal Society virtuosi, it also becomes necessary to place Bacon’s output within the larger framework of the early modern discipline of the soul in order to adequately grasp his subsequent reception and assimilation. The second chapter elaborates on this cultural milieu. The major coordinates of this practice are predicated upon two major traditions in Western culture: the Socratic and the patristic tradition. Seneca, Cicero, and Plutarch were pivotal in shaping early modern speculations about the maladies of the mind, and in denouncing the passions as diseases of the soul that precipitate a movement of the mind contrary to reason. Conversely, wisdom is associated with a constant mind (p.

48). For the Church Fathers the ancient preoccupation with the cultivation of the soul becomes a concern for the Christian life understood as *askesis*, which is a discipline for purging the soul and the mind. Underlying this practice under its Christian guise is the primordial sin which also accounts for our unbalanced constitutions. The author contends that this amalgamation of ancient and Christian sources enabled the early modern physicians of the soul to tap both theological and philosophical sources, as well as to reconcile reason and grace in their quest for efficient remedies for the mind and soul. (p. 52)

In discussing the Baconian and *cultura animi* legacies in the Royal Society virtuosi in chapter 3, Sorana Corneanu explicitly embraces an anthropological view regarding the issue of knowledge. This preference suggests an affinity with Peter Harrison's thesis⁴, while also marking a departure from the negative consequences the latter draws from his anthropological focus. Instead, Corneanu proposes a mitigated Augustinian anthropology which leaves room for a systematic attempt at correcting the distempered mind. The author advances this form of Augustinianism by appealing to the *cultura animi* literature which in her view evinces a moderate form of pessimism relative to the human condition (p. 8). For St. Augustine the original transgression entails a severe and irreversible fall into corruption and sin. There is virtually no hope for ever regaining our prelapsarian state. The early modern practice of cultivating the soul assimilates this premise with the important amendment that although fallen creatures, it is our duty to engage in the search for knowledge (regardless of how probable), while at the same time advance on the path to the virtuous life (even if our prelapsarian perfection can never be recovered). It becomes apparent that a reasonably pessimistic view of the human faculties does not exclude the possibility of gaining some measure of truth about the external world. It is precisely because ultimate truth is an ideal rather than something attainable in this life that the process of knowledge acquisition is ongoing. Under this reading, the experimental method advocated by the Royal Society virtuosi had the function of assisting the mind in its inquiries (p. 97).

As already indicated chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 form the second part of the book and deal with issues related to knowledge, reason, virtue in the philosophical and theological writings of Robert Boyle and John Locke. The two philosophers are considered in the larger context of the Baconian legacy as well as the *cultura animi* tradition. Both share a skeptical view regarding human reason which is limited, a "dim candle", ill equipped for the task of gaining access to genuine truth. This nevertheless represents an incentive for the search for truth and the improvement of reason in this process. What is paramount is not the attainment of fundamental truths; given the huge complexity of God's creation, at all ontological levels, natural as well as supernatural, such an ambition would be pure folly. What is essential for the enlargement of our faculties as well as for becoming aware of the majesty of the divine maker as expressed in his creation is the very process by which we come to be acquainted with the two "books": that of nature, and that of Scripture.

Regimens of the Mind: Boyle, Locke, and the Early Modern Cultura Animi Tradition is a scholarly tour de force which marks an important date in early modern studies.

Written in an elegant and engaging style, full of profound and illuminating new insights, it also establishes a novel interpretative paradigm which is sure to fertilize further research in this field.

References

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- ³ Harrison, P., "Francis Bacon, Natural Philosophy, and the Cultivation of the Mind", *Perspectives on Science* 20/2 (2012): 139-158.
- ⁴ Harrison, P., (2007).