

## On the affinities between Bacon's philosophy and skepticism

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### ABSTRACT

This text aims at examining the relations between Bacon's reflections on the limits of our faculties and philosophical skepticism — a theme not so dominant in the most recent literature, despite the many references to that philosophy. Even though these references seem at first sight somewhat vague and imprecise, we came to the conclusion that not only a close exam can reveal the relevance of the theme in regard to the comprehension of Bacon's own philosophy, but also show his interest in contemporary skeptical literature. The distinctive features of his own interpretation seem to anticipate how skepticism is to be understood by future philosophers as Hume, for instance.

**Keywords:** Bacon, Skepticism, Idols, Empiricism, Montaigne, Descartes.

As Michel Malherbe says in his edition of the French version of *Novum organum*, this work of Bacon, at times celebrated, at times neglected, has always been poorly read. Although he alludes here to its fortunes in France, his remark is relevant in a much more general way, in spite of the fact that some of the most important modern philosophers have made use of this author in order to define the meaning of their own enterprises. Hume refers to Bacon as the father of experimental physics and depicts his science of human nature as an attempt to continue the work he embarked upon and which was carried on by other British moralists, since they made experience the foundation for reflection.<sup>1</sup> As an epigraph to his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant picked out a passage

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<sup>1</sup> HUME (1984), p. 44. It is worth comparing the Introduction of the *Treatise* with aphorism I, §80 of *Novum Organum*, where Bacon maintains that a new link between natural philosophy and particular sciences could afford progress and depth, not only to mechanical arts and medicine, but also to “logical sciences” and “civil and moral philosophy”. The references to the *Novum Organum* indicate firstly the book, then the number of the aphorism,

from the Preface to *Magna instauratio* in which Bacon presents himself as the one who, instead of founding a new sect, aimed to lay the foundations for a collective work, capable of eradicating a recurrent mistake.<sup>2</sup>

However — and we hope we are not committing an injustice or endorsing an overstatement - not even the relative lack of studies on Baconian philosophy seems to us to justify the shortcomings in the approaches to his relations with philosophical skepticism. We are aware of only one paper entirely devoted to this theme — a quite recent article, incidentally;<sup>3</sup> and the topic received nothing but casual or general mentions by the classic commentaries in the course of the twentieth century, even though Bacon frequently refers to skepticism and its adepts in *acatalepsia* throughout his work, from his earlier writings, such as *The Praise of Knowledge* (1592), up to such mature works as the *Novum organum* (1620).<sup>4</sup> Considering that the commentaries have very often focused on the examination of the connections between Bacon's thought and the intellectual traditions of the Renaissance — such as that by Lisa Jardine, who was concerned with dialectic, or that of Paolo Rossi, who highlighted, among other aspects, Bacon's relationship with so-called “natural magic”<sup>5</sup> — the gap becomes even more noticeable insofar as the works of Charles Schmitt and Richard Popkin provide a clearer vision of how the skeptical traditions of the Renaissance, both academic and Pyrrhonist, have contributed towards the constitution of modern thought in a not yet well-defined

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and finally the page number of the first volume of *The Works of Francis Bacon*, Spedding-Ellis-Heath edition (see Bibliography). All the references to this edition here will include “Sp”.

<sup>2</sup> KANT (1980). This epigraph was included in the Second Edition of this work.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. GRANADA. This author evaluates the state of art of the question closely to the way we do here. We are grateful for his kindness in allowing us to refer to a preliminary version of his article which has not yet been published.

<sup>4</sup> There are other works in which Bacon explicitly alludes to skepticism, such as *Valerius Terminus* (1603), *The advancement of learning* (1605), *Temporis Partus Masculus* (after 1605), *Scala Intellectus* (before 1612) and *De augmentis scientiarum* (1623).

<sup>5</sup> JARDINE (1974); ROSSI (1968); GRANADA

dimension.<sup>6</sup> It is true that, in his classical work, Popkin considers Bacon as a proponent of a kind of “temporary or partial skepticism”, nonetheless assuming that, in this case, he is not dealing with a skeptic, but instead, as he sees it, with the leading figure of an “Aristotelian” strategy to respond to skepticism. Once again, however, these are just passing allusions and, as such, are not developed into a more detailed examination of how he understood and solved the skeptical problem within his personal reflection.<sup>7</sup> However, even if it is hard to determine the sources on which Bacon relied, it seems to us that there are enough elements to argue that skepticism played a much more relevant role in his philosophical reflection than has usually been acknowledged.

Here, we shall neither deal with a close investigation into the question of whether those aspects of Baconian philosophy which seem to bear some relation with skeptical themes are closely connected or not with the skeptical way of advancing doubtful pieces of reasoning, nor shall we offer an examination of the way he expected to respond to skeptical problems. Before doing this, it seems to us important to examine how far we can evaluate the philosophical significance of the affinities acknowledged by Bacon between his ideas and that sort of philosophy, bearing in mind the very passages in which he expresses his opinion about it. As we shall see, they seem to indicate that it is possible to go beyond the general remarks on the “influences” of this philosophy upon his own reflection and to make precise the meaning that he conveyed to that relationship, even though we cannot argue that Bacon considers his own “Doctrine of

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<sup>6</sup> SCHMITT (1972); POPKIN (2001)

<sup>7</sup> Cf. POPKIN (2001), pp. 85, 156, 174, 202. Popkin does not provide a clear justification for this assimilation of Bacon’s case into the Aristotelian type of responses to skepticism. On p. 208, he nevertheless says that all these Aristotelian responses bear the common feature that there would be normal conditions of our faculties functioning according to which we could attain knowledge, but it is doubtful whether we should include the case of Bacon here, as we shall see. Even though we may recognize several points of contact between his philosophy and Aristotelianism— see MALHERBE, 1986, p. 36 — Popkin’s hypothesis has to be contrasted with the many criticisms Bacon directs towards that philosopher, whom he sees as a paradigm of “rationalist” corruption of Philosophy (cf. N.O., I, §§54, 63, 67, 77). The new edition of Popkin’s History (2003) contains nothing new about Bacon. In his turn, OLIVEIRA (2002) devotes to the theme a chapter of his book, which we will consider next.

Idols” as a skeptical doctrine. The affinity that he accepts between the diagnosis of knowledge offered by this doctrine and the skeptical position seems to be so that his revocation would not only depend, according to Bacon, upon the possession of the new method to investigate nature which he aims at announcing, but also upon the complete fulfillment of the project on the foundation of a science of the Forms of the things themselves — something that Bacon himself takes as an impossible task and delegates to the work of future generations. Furthermore, most of the discussions about philosophical skepticism are frequently compromised by the vagueness of this concept — and Bacon’s case is far from being an exception. Therefore, we will also try to keep in mind the way his reflections take into account the different aspects with which the skeptical way of thinking presents itself in the midst of the intellectual atmosphere of the Renaissance (including the association between skepticism and literary paradox), as well as the differences between the skeptical schools. Nevertheless, with regard to this last point, we can notice that Bacon’s thought — apparently through lack of a more direct contact with the works of Sextus Empiricus — conforms to its own theoretical reflections on the theme, thus converging into a type of distinction between “extreme skepticism” and “moderate skepticism” quite similar to the one which would turn out to be usual in the philosophy to come.

We should note from the start that Bacon’s references to philosophical skepticism constantly bear a critical element, continually taking up the same points: according to him, the skeptics are those who profaned the oracle of the senses and human faculties instead of providing them with the support needed to obtain the truth, and outlined their diagnosis of our cognitive situation so as to substitute the straight path of research for a simple “ride about things” through pleasant dissertations.<sup>8</sup> But these observations offer

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<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, N.O. I, §67 (Sp I, 179).

just a partial image, which can lead us to a false evaluation if we do not bear in mind the fact that, on more than one occasion, his critiques are brought to light in the form of a counterpoint between his own world-view and the skeptical way of thinking. In aphorism I § 37 of *Novum organum*, for instance, Bacon writes — concerning the philosophers who argued for a suspension of assent:

The doctrine [*ratio*] of those who denied that certainty could be attained at all [*eorum qui acatalepsia tenuerunt*], has some agreement with my way of proceeding at the first setting out [*initiis*]; but they end in being infinitely separated and opposed. For the holders of that doctrine assert simply that nothing can be known; I also assert that not much can be known in nature by the way which is now in use. But then they go on to destroy the authority of the senses; whereas I proceed to devise and supply helps [*auxilia*] for the same.<sup>9</sup>

In this text, Bacon exposes the “final” distance that he considers to exist between his reflection and that of the supporters of *acatalepsia* (in an oblique reference to the skeptics of the New Academy, as we shall see better), but only after the acknowledgement of an affinity. In our view, a first important point consists in trying to comprehend better the meaning of this opposition between the beginning (*initium*) and the end (*exitus*) of these paths compared by him. Should it just exhibit the unreliable character of the resemblance between these philosophies and conclude that “initial” would stand here for “at first sight” (as Spedding’s translation proposes)? Or, despite the disagreements mentioned, might this counterpoint have, philosophically speaking, a more essential meaning regarding the possible similarities identified by Bacon between

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<sup>9</sup> N.O. I, §37, Sp. I, p. 162-163; IV, p. 52. I follow the Spedding translation here and go to the original Latin text when necessary.

the skeptical *ratio* and that of his own? It seems that there are reasons to incline towards the second option.

As often happens, the distance marked by Bacon with respect to skeptics is directly connected with the *auxilia*, which he wished to apply to our cognitive faculties. We can safely admit that this corresponds to a general allusion to his own inductive method, through which he aimed at contributing towards the establishment of what he describes as a “genuine marriage between soul and things”;<sup>10</sup> a method able to provide a real interpretation of nature — in contrast to mere “anticipations” created by traditional philosophy — and therefore to reach the knowledge of true Forms, and by the same token, to take human knowledge and power to an entirely new dimension. But it is not until the second book of *Novum organum* (which corresponds to the so-called *pars informans*) that the positive exposition of the method begins (by means of examples designed to illustrate practical procedures by which induction could be guided amongst particular things, especially as regards its position on the “tables of invention”). However much these illustrations can be taken as a completed exposition of the formula of induction — at least in its general features, as Malherbe suggests — the plain exposition of its method could only be fulfilled in the accomplishment of philosophy, that is to say, in the very Interpretation of Nature that would take place after the exhibition of the *Organum* — since the method, by virtue of its own demands, would be able to adapt to the things themselves, in line with the very progress of the research.<sup>11</sup> The *Novum organum* forms, indeed, just the second part of the *Instauratio magna*, and according to what we read in the *Distributio operis*, it is only in the third part (entitled *Phaenomena universi*) that we stop digging up the road and start traveling on it (above all, through the construction of a Natural History based upon new concepts and carried

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<sup>10</sup> This would be confirmed by his use of the usual metaphor of the “path” (*via*) to describe this parallel.

out on an unprecedented scale).<sup>12</sup> In the fourth part, entitled *Scala intellectus*, Bacon intended to offer more examples of particulars according to the Tables of Invention, and to therefore give us something more than just a glimmer of hope on the progress of knowledge, as was temporarily justified by the end of the first part of the *Novum organum*. Nevertheless, he also reminds us that it is a question of giving examples of research for the purpose of clarification.<sup>13</sup> In this fourth part, he says, the things themselves would be presented, “so to speak” (*tanquam*);<sup>14</sup> “so to speak” perhaps because we would not yet be at that ultimate stage he foresaw — the Second Philosophy or Active Science, the only one that can assure us the knowledge of Forms in the strict sense of the term. However, being outlined as the sixth stage of the itinerary,<sup>15</sup> this philosophy, which has been previously prepared by genuine research, purified and severe, is something that goes far beyond his personal expectations, since its fulfillment is inconceivable in view of the actual state of affairs and spirits.<sup>16</sup>

We went back briefly in this itinerary just to give an idea of the difficulties that Bacon himself, despite his optimism, encounters on the way to the actual knowledge of things. As he puts it in the preface of *Instauratio magna*, his own method is essentially one of truly genuine humiliation of the human spirit, as opposed to over-hasty evaluation of the real forces of the mind:

For all those who before me applied themselves to the invention of arts but cast a glance or two upon facts and examples and experiences, and straightaway proceeded, as if

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. BACON (1986), p. 47

<sup>12</sup> *Distributio operis*, Sp. I, p. 140

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, Sp. I, p. 143-144

<sup>14</sup> N.O. I, §92, Sp. I, p. 199

<sup>15</sup> This part would still be preceded by the *Prodroms, or Anticipations of Second Philosophy*, corresponding to the fifth part of the *Instauratio*, in which it would be a matter of offering a collection of what was invented and proved, not with the help of the method, but by the ordinary use of understanding. (Cf. Sp I, 143-144)

<sup>16</sup> *Idem*

invention were nothing more than an exercise of thought, to invoke their own spirits to give them oracles.<sup>17</sup>

Stressing this point is also a way to observe better the methodological continuity that exists between the *pars informans* of the *Novum organum* (where, as we said, the positive dimension of this movement towards the knowledge of Forms becomes clear) and the slow progression that lays the ground for it in the first book, to which belong a *pars praeparans* in the strict sense and a *pars destruens* that precedes it — dedicated to exposing the state of the art in all knowledge in a critical way and contributing to the destruction of impediments that prevent the inquiry into nature from advancing — the so-called “idols”. Although these impediments are frequently mentioned in Bacon’s works, it is in the *Novum organum* that their exposition is most fully developed and systematized. In his view, pointing them out is crucial if we have any hope of avoiding the everlasting repetition of mistakes, and proceed, by means of a purification of human understanding, to a radical reconstruction of all knowledge *ab imis fundamentis*.<sup>18</sup> But if the first movement of Bacon’s own method requires a critical rejection of present knowledge, and if the agreement he intends to make with the adherents to *acatalepsia* can be well expressed by the motto “we know nothing” (however hard Bacon tries to attenuate it by saying that we “know almost nothing” and that this situation is temporary and relative), would it not be reasonable to admit that the “initial” affinity between his philosophy and that of the skeptics includes a reference to his own method (even if it limits itself to its destructive part)? Given that the above-mentioned aphorism marks the distance, could it not equally well be read as a confirmation of a philosophical affinity — noticeable not only in the broadest sense of

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<sup>17</sup> Sp. I, 130; IV, 19

<sup>18</sup> Sp I, p. 139; N.O. I, §31, Sp I, 162.



the idea, but also in more detailed conceptual aspects, as we shall see? It gives us a first indication that Bacon acknowledged a similarity, albeit restricted, between the skeptical percept of the whole of human knowledge and his own, as he finds himself at the beginning of investigation, that is to say, at the very moment when his reflection turns to a future project that has not been fully developed and is fraught with difficulties, as he constantly stresses.

A second point, quite similar to this last one, has to do with the “doctrine of the idols”, the centre of the *pars destruens*, in which Bacon distinguishes four types of impediments to our expectations of gaining access to truth: the “Idols of the Tribe” (*idola tribus*), that follow from the imperfections of our faculties of knowledge — the intellect, as a deforming mirror that mixes its own nature with the nature of things when exposed to their rays, falsifying and shuffling them; or, even, as a faculty that becomes a hostage of the systematic mistakes that it cannot rectify by itself, neither through its own powers nor through dialectic;<sup>19</sup> the imperfections of the senses, which are weak and deceptive in themselves, and cannot be helped by the instruments designed to improve and strengthen them,<sup>20</sup> in spite of the fact that the senses constitute the very field to which questions should be addressed in the inquiry into nature, “unless we are willing to be delirious”, as he says. Next are the “Idols of the Cave” (*idola specus*), created, according to Bacon, by the multiplicity typical of each individual, and depending on the differences of the body, soul, education, habit, casual circumstances and also the way they are affected by objects. The “Idols of the Marketplace” (*idola fori*) are, in turn, those that can be found in the imperfections of human language, whereas the “Idols of the Theatre” (*idola theatri*) are those by means of which Bacon metaphorically alludes to the imaginary worlds made up of the different philosophical systems, which are

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<sup>19</sup> See N.O., I, §14, §§45-52 and also Sp. I, 121-129.

formed by fanciful and imperfect notions (such as “being”, “substance”, “element”, “matter” and so forth), as well as by insufficient proofs, which are, in his words, the systems in potentiality.<sup>21</sup>

As Granada observed, the aphorisms of the *Novum organum* that clearly deal with his relations with skepticism occupy strategic positions regarding the exposition of this doctrine.<sup>22</sup> More precisely, the first of them in order of exposition is the above-mentioned aphorism I § 37, which could be understood as a transitional aphorism between the previous movement of the text — where the commitments of the logic which operates in research are discussed, as well as the difficulties in establishing a suitable method for the investigation, and exposition, of the idols. It thus marks the beginning of the exposition of the idols, whereas the next aphorism dedicated to the subject (I § 67) takes up the counterpoint with a predominantly critical slant — the skeptics are accused of an intemperance in abolishing assent similar to the intemperance that dogmatic philosophers display when subscribing to their doctrines, and of adopting a position which, even when they leave room for investigation, leads to it being abandoned due to their despair of reaching the truth — and paves the way, in the next aphorism, for the following remark: “That is enough about the different types of Idols, and their equipage”<sup>23</sup>. Thus, however much the slow progression of Bacon’s text may appear at first sight to have a nonlinear development, in which anticipations and repetitions of previously introduced terms are frequent,<sup>24</sup> these aphorisms indicate that

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<sup>20</sup> Sp. I, 138; N.O. I, §50.

<sup>21</sup> N.O. I, §68; See N.O. I §44, §61.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. GRANADA, p. 4

<sup>23</sup> N.O. I, §68, Sp I, 179, IV, 69.

<sup>24</sup> It is no easy task to establish a clear division of the logical moments in the progression of this text. In spite of what we remarked concerning I §68, it would be better to include in the exposition of the Idols of the Theatre his criticism of faulty demonstrations (which Bacon considered the rampart of the idols), offered in aphorisms 69-70, as Malherbe does (cf. BACON, 1986, pp. 15-16). Moreover, it is not clear how the fourfold division of the species of idols can be reconciled with the threefold one offered in I, §115, on which Spedding bases himself for his own division (cf. Sp. I, pp. 165, 172)

Bacon encompassed two clear references to skepticism in his exposition of the doctrine of the idols. Although he does not state this explicitly, these references could be perhaps read, according to the same hypothesis, as a sign of his proximity to the skeptics; this would then allow us, in a more detailed approach, to delve deeper into the counterpoint in a critical way, but only after the presentation of his own version of the critique of human knowledge, as this doctrine formulates it. If this is so, these aphorisms would indicate that Bacon focuses his affinities with skepticism primarily on the development of that doctrine.<sup>25</sup>

These two indications of the affinities between Bacon and skepticism, taken from his most famous work, are certainly somewhat indirect and conjectural. Nevertheless, their interest lies in the fact that they allow us to transpose to a reading of *Novum organum* what he says in a more explicit way in other passages concerning the same parallel. In a concise text entitled *Scala intellectus sive filum labyrinthi*, composed, it seems, as a preface to the homonymous part of the *Magna instauratio*, Bacon writes:

“(...) We cannot however absolutely deny that, if there was not an opposition to a society between our philosophy and those of the ancients, *it is with this philosophical gender* [that is, that which proposes that “nothing is known”] *that we would be more akin*; we would agree with much of their wise sayings and remarks on the variations of the senses and the lack of firmness of the human judgement, and on the contention and suspension of assent. To those we could add many other similar [remarks], to the point that between us and them remains only this difference: they say that nothing is known simply [*prorsus*] and we affirm that nothing can be known along the way the human race has up until now followed...”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See PRIOR (1968), p. 141

<sup>26</sup> Sp II, p. 688.

In this text, developed entirely around the comparison between his philosophy and that of the skeptics, elements that undermine the proximity reappear. Especially in the passage quoted above, they are projected in the form of a more general opposition between his philosophy and that of the Ancients. In fact, Bacon frequently stresses how the forms of human knowledge are related, amongst other aspects, to their time and place of origin, and to the society that produced them, and in general tends to condemn the wisdom of the Greeks by ascribing to it a rather professorial and rhetorical approach, which prevented it from going deeper in the quest for truth.<sup>27</sup> In a passage of *Novum organum*, he brings up the name of the academic skeptic Carneades together with those who, in his view, with more or less dignity, were all Sophists.<sup>28</sup> Even so, could he be more explicit in pointing out the aspects of his reflection that, in his view, reveal an agreement with the skeptics — that is to say, the philosophers with whom they were most connected, despite their antiquity? Moreover, he offers us details about the points on which he was in agreement with them, namely about their “wise sayings” concerning the precariousness of the senses and human intellect, as well as the suspension of assent.<sup>29</sup> However peculiar the way in which these themes are dealt with by Bacon, they are directly included in the scope of the doctrine of the idols, both the *idola tribus* — which concern the poverty of our cognitive faculties — and the *idola theatri* — which, in turn, demand a refusal of the fantasies created by philosophical theories and their methods up to that time.

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<sup>27</sup> See N.O., I §32, 34, 61.

<sup>28</sup> N.O. I, §71

<sup>29</sup> This is why it does not seem to us quite exact to affirm that Bacon makes “non-explicit use” of “skeptical philosophical arguments”. (see OLIVEIRA, 2002, p. 75) On the other hand, I do not think we are allowed to call him “skeptical”, even though “mitigated” or “constructive”. Bacon stresses that it is not possible for there to be a society between his philosophy and that of the Ancients, a remark that has a conceptual range which has to be taken into account if we want to understand how he reconciles his avowed proximity to this philosophy with his criticism.

However, due to the fact that Bacon presents his “idols” with the explicit purpose of “purifying the understanding” with a view to obtaining the truth, it could be thought that this doctrine already overcomes the skeptical point of view. But things are not that simple. However different the Baconian idols may be from skeptical modes of suspension, and although its exposition aims at surmounting them (and not at repeating them indefinitely), Bacon never stops stressing the difficulty and limits of this task before the power of such impediments. He qualifies two types of idols as being “innate” (namely the *idola tribus*, regarding our cognitive faculties, and the *idola specus*, regarding our individual differences), as opposed to those which, although “adventitious” (the *idola fori* and the *idola theatri*), maintain close relations with the former idols. And whereas the adventitious idols, as he says, are quite difficult to root out, the innate ones are described as impossible to eradicate:

All that can be done is to point them out, so that the insidious action of the mind may be marked and reprov'd (else as fast as old errors are destroyed new ones will spring up out of the ill complexion of the mind itself, and so we shall have but a change of errors, not a clearance)...<sup>30</sup>

Thus, it is not just a question of neutralizing the idols that block access to truth, like a fortuitous refutation of skepticism. Even if there are, according to Bacon, effective measures to consistently face them before going down the path of research — such as what he presents as signs (*signa*) of the sad state of current philosophy, as well as the causes of this phenomenon<sup>31</sup> — the only proper cure would, in his view, lie in the axioms and notions that could be produced by true induction.<sup>32</sup> As he says

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<sup>30</sup> *Distributio operis*, Sp. I, 139; IV, 27

<sup>31</sup> N.O. I, §70. These signs and causes are effectively discussed near the exposition of the idols, in N.O. I, §§71-91

<sup>32</sup> See N.O., I §40. In I § 36, Bacon says that the only way to transmit the method is to carry men to the particular things and to claim that they deny their notions and start to get acquainted with these very things.

metaphorically, in the *Redargutio philosophiarum*, just as we cannot write something new on tablets before having erased the earlier inscriptions, it will be hard to erase the earlier inscriptions in the spirit without having written something new.<sup>33</sup> Far from being just a result of the act of overcoming those impediments to knowledge, the possession of knowledge of nature is, to some extent, a condition of its self-overcoming. But the access to such knowledge, although restricted, does not necessarily imply the total extinction of those impediments. One of the ways to comprehend the tortuous situation that seems to be brought about here consists in accepting that we still have, to some degree, the same cognitive impediments, as, by the same token, the method still operates according to an incomplete formulation, based on insufficient experimental material or provisional conclusions.<sup>34</sup> But if this is indeed the case, the same agreement with the skeptical perspective is justified, in one way or another, be it partial, be it temporary. For if a type of methodical incorporation of skepticism does correspond to the initial affinity that Bacon acknowledged between his philosophy and that of the skeptics, although it eventually reveals itself as a complete opposition, everything looks as if the progression towards the knowledge of things could be understood as the continuous overcoming of this partial agreement.

This being so, the problem of determining how and at what moment in this progression the overcoming would take place turns out to be a relevant one. Indeed, the reservations expressed by Bacon in the manifestations of his affinity with the skeptics offer a strong indication that it is worth searching for “preparatory” elements of that

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<sup>33</sup> Sp. III, p. 557-558

<sup>34</sup> According to Oliveira, “Bacon’s method of science is not... the harbor that, maybe as it is to Descartes, would assure the access to certainty...” (OLIVEIRA, 2002, p. 77) But we should not infer from the recognition of such difficulties that Bacon gave up hope of attaining certitude through his method. Since for Bacon the object of knowledge is reality, even though we cannot gain a perfect knowledge, universal and necessary, of it before the final step of the *Instauratio*, the intermediate steps will carry some definite degrees of certainty (see MALHERBE, 1996, pp. 80, 85, 90, 93-94). This distinction seems relevant if we wish to see better how Bacon understood his position with regard to skepticism.

overcoming within the very formulation of the doctrine of the idols. But it is impossible to come up with a good answer to this question without carrying out a meticulous examination of the content of that doctrine, in order to know how far it reproduces the problems concerning the skeptical tradition, or offers us, in its possible innovations, elements designed to outline an alternative way. We shall not enter this area of concern, but it is worth stressing that Bacon's acknowledgement of the power of the idols creates an identification with the skeptical diagnosis that is frequently underestimated — despite the way he stresses the built-in constraints in their position. Besides the text of *Filum labyrinthi* mentioned above, in the *De augmentis scientiarum* (1623), where he examines the difficulties arising from the absence of reliable principles and demonstrative methods planned for the investigation of physics, he states:

[...] It was not without great and evident reason that so many philosophers, some of them most eminent, became Sceptics or Academics and denied any certainty of knowledge or comprehension, affirming that the knowledge of man extend only to appearances and probabilities.<sup>35</sup>

It could be objected to our reading that the indications for a skeptical origin of the doctrines of the idols are inconclusive. But what alternatives do we have when it comes to the identification of the skeptical sources that are philosophically relevant? Attempts have been made to approximate this doctrine to the four “impediments to truth” (*offendicula veritatis*) enumerated by Roger Bacon at the beginning of his *Opus majus* — the use of an “insufficient authority”, custom, public opinion and the disguising of ignorance together with the presumption of knowledge — but Spedding consistently

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<sup>35</sup> Sp. I, 621; IV, 411-412.

demonstrates that such a proximity is artificial and unlikely.<sup>36</sup> More recently, Deleule opposed the attempts to approximate the Baconian doctrine to skepticism, and preferred to refer the notion of *idolum* to Platonism and Epicureanism, which he claims Bacon mentioned explicitly — when he refers, for instance, to Cotta’s critique of Epicurean anthropomorphism in Cicero’s *De natura deorum*.<sup>37</sup> However, it must be remembered that, within this dialogue, Cotta is the character intended to represent the New Academy, of which the author expresses his personal approval.<sup>38</sup> Deleule’s hypothesis also fails to convince due to the fact that the notion of *idolum* is normally referred by Bacon to the vocabulary of imagination and fantasy — as happens, for example, in his approach to the “Idols of the Theatre”, which result from the way in which human understanding allows itself to be led by the imagination.<sup>39</sup> This theme is familiar within skeptical literature, although Bacon takes it up in a quite peculiar way. Sextus Empiricus himself refers to Plato’s theory of the soul as something “fanciful”, and employs a term — *eidolopoiesis* — that, etymologically speaking, is related to the one Bacon chose in his critique.<sup>40</sup> The same theme is expanded and developed in works that reveal skeptical elements and are contemporary with Bacon — such as the *Quod nihil scitur* of Sanchez and Montaigne’s *Essays*. In the *Apology of Raimond Sebond*, where he qualifies the concepts of natural philosophy as “dreams and fanciful follies”,<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. Sp. I, 163. According to Spedding, not only does the principle of classification differ in these two doctrines, but also the problems enumerated by Roger Bacon are much more restricted (and could at best be related to the *idola fori* and *idola theatri*). Moreover, he says, it is unlikely that Francis Bacon would have read his homonymous philosopher, given the absence of printed editions of his work and the lack of signs of a specific interest in it.

<sup>37</sup> BACON (1987), p. 36

<sup>38</sup> See CICERO (1994), P. 11-14

<sup>39</sup> Cf. N.O. I, §44, §15, §47.

<sup>40</sup> See SEXTUS EMPIRICUS (1993), I, 189. We will refer to his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* as HP. Sextus comments, for instance, the Pythagorean theory of numbers in these terms: “Those are the fictions they imagine...” (HP III. 156) In HP III, 114, as he concludes his critical examination of the dogmatic notions of generation and corruption, he says that their physics is “unreal and unconceivable”. The same Greek term is employed in the context of a more general criticism of the dogmatists (see, for instance, HP II, 222).

<sup>41</sup> MONTAIGNE (1993), p. 110: “...These are dreams and frantic folly. If only Nature would deign to open her breast one day and show us the means and the workings of her movements as they really are (first preparing our eyes to



Montaigne also characterizes reason itself and the human understanding as sources of illusions.<sup>42</sup>

For the same reason, it seems to us that Plato could not be regarded as the source of this doctrine — unless by virtue of irony or some skeptical reading. It is true that, in *The advancement of learning* (1605), Bacon explicitly refers to Plato's Allegory of the Cave in order to illustrate how personal expressions and habits engender everlasting mistakes and false opinions, and offer, therefore, a kind of sketch of the forthcoming *idola specus*. But he stresses, in a footnote, that he did not have the intention of giving these considerations the meaning Plato himself gave to the metaphor.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, although he admits in the *Novum organum* that this philosopher should be held responsible for the introduction of *acatalepsia*, he takes him as a model of the class of “superstitious” philosophers.<sup>44</sup> Finally, in line with these considerations, though Bacon set the idols created by human nature against the ideas exclusively found in divine understanding,<sup>45</sup> it is worth remembering that he never employs the term *idolum* in the ordinary sense of the word, as “false gods”,<sup>46</sup> not to mention his insistence on the distinction between natural science and theology.<sup>47</sup> If it is worth following the

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see them). O God, what fallacies and miscalculations we would find in our wretched science! Either I am quite mistaken or our science has not put one single thing squarely in its rightful place, and I will leave this world knowing nothing better than my own ignorance...” Also Sanchez regards traditional philosophical explanations as fictions, as, for instance, when he criticizes the Platonic identification of knowing and remembering: “[...] But with apologies to this otherwise brilliant thinker, this is a quite baseless fiction (*leve admodum figmentum*) not supported by experience or by rational argument — like many other dreams he dreamed concerning the soul, as I shall demonstrate in my *Treatise on the Soul*.” (SANCHEZ, 1988, 17)

<sup>42</sup> “I call reason our ravings and our dreams, under the general dispensation of Philosophy who maintains that even the fool and the knave act madly from reason, albeit from one special form of reason” MONTAIGNE (1993), p. 94 (translation slightly changed)

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Sp. I, 396. According to Spedding, Bacon adds marginally to the Allegory: “*missa illa exquisita parabolae subtilitate*” (leaving aside the subtleties of this allegory)

<sup>44</sup> See respectively I, §67; I §65

<sup>45</sup> N.O. I, §23, Sp. 60

<sup>46</sup> As remarked by Spedding (cf. Sp I, p. 89). Yet there seem to be three exceptions noted by LE DOEUFF (1985, p. 43), whose authority is, nevertheless, doubtful, as she herself recognizes.

<sup>47</sup> See for instance Sp. 132, I, §§65, 68. Le Doeuff presumes that the doctrine of idols contains a hidden theological sense. (cf. op. cit. p. 43) However it seems to us that her interpretation fails as it tries to project an “epistemo-

indications given by the author himself, would the elements mentioned above not be safer and philosophically more relevant by pointing out the affinities between the doctrine of the idols and skepticism?

However, there are long-standing problems upon which these speculations seem to depend, and that might be crucial to the development of our analysis: what are the skeptical sources that Bacon really employed? How did he understand them? Without exhausting the theme, we intend here to suggest some ideas that might be useful for a deeper approach.

Firstly, though the problem of determining the exact sources of Bacon's text is particularly delicate (amongst other reasons because, in line with the literary codes of that period, he never identifies them), a text that we already mentioned reveals that Bacon is, to some degree, quite aware of the diversity of the skeptical sources, and even differentiates *sceptici* and *academici*. Besides, however much he tends, in general, to treat these skeptical approaches together, according to the conceptual bias of his own criticism, there are texts in which he takes into account some differences that tell those schools apart. In aphorism 67 of *Novum organum*, after a brief account of the position of those who professed *acatalepsia*, which was introduced by Plato against the Sophists and then transformed into a tenet by the New Academy, he writes:

and though their's is a fairer seeming way than arbitrary decisions, since [these philosophers] say that they by no means destroy all investigation, as Pyrrho and the Ephetics, but allow of some things to be followed as probable, though of none to be maintained as true...<sup>48</sup>

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theological" status on the Baconian concepts (like "hope"), since it conflicts with the distinction Bacon clearly wants to keep between science and theology. (ibid, p. 38, 42) This does not mean that we could not recognize some aspects in Bacon's philosophical reflexion as being completely in harmony with theological themes invoked by him, so long as we take care not to confuse these two domains that he himself keeps apart.

<sup>48</sup> N.O. I, § 67, IV 69, slightly modified; cf. I, 178: "[...] Quae [acatalepsiam tenere] licet honestior ratio sit quam pronuntiandi licentia, quum ipsi pro se dicant se minime confundere inquisitionem, ut Pyrrho fecit et Ephetici, sed habere quod sequantur ut probabile, licet non habeant quod teneant ut verum..."

Bacon then goes on to criticize those philosophers who did not intend to give up investigation, because, as he says, once human spirit loses its faith in finding the truth, its interest in investigation weakens and degenerates into mere disputes and pleasant dissertations.<sup>49</sup> But who might *those* philosophers be, according to Bacon? Although the text admits some ambiguity, the context points not to the Pyrrhonist skeptics, but to the defenders of the New Academy, that is to say, to those who, without hindering investigation, take opinions as *probabile* — the practical criterion according to the traditional formulation of these philosophers, such as we find in Cicero, for instance. This interpretative detail might be useful to evaluate Bacon's contact with the traditional skeptical sources. In fact, in the *Academia*, Cicero assumes the position of these philosophers by maintaining that certainty is not really necessary in order to act according to common life and to be engaged in the "arts", and even refers to the pleasure that academic skeptics seem to find in the investigation of large and hidden themes, as well as in reaching some result that has only a resemblance with the truth.<sup>50</sup> But did Bacon put forth this counterpoint with regard to the relation between suspension of judgment and interest in investigation, and also bear in mind how Sextus refers to Pyrrhonist skeptics, at the beginning of *Hipotiposes*, as those that "keep on investigating" precisely in opposition to the defenders of the New Academia, which supported the impossibility of knowledge as a kind of negative dogmatism?<sup>51</sup> Although Bacon's critiques have something to do with the particular conception of Pyrrhonist inquiry as it was planned by Sextus (conceived as a neutralizing activity of the dogmatic's precipitation, essentially negative), the terms that he normally uses to

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<sup>49</sup> In the *Filum Labyrinthi* Bacon presents the same lack of hope as cutting the nerves of human investigation. (Sp. II, 687)

<sup>50</sup> See *Academica*, II, 108, 127-128.

describe how skepticism distorts investigation (transforming it into pleasant dissertations or a “ride about things”) do not seem to evoke the texts of Sextus but, rather, those of Cicero himself or even Montaigne.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, if we bear in mind the comments of Sextus on the affinities between Pyrrhonism and Greek Methodic Medicine, on practical assent to *phainómenon* and especially on how this is compatible with the practice of the *tékhnai*, which are aimed at searching for what is useful for human well-being, as some recent studies have shown, it would be reasonable to admit that Bacon certainly accepts an even greater affinity between his own perspective and that of the skeptics.<sup>53</sup> At least, this seems to suggest that Bacon probably did not read Sextus (or at least the *Hipotiposes*) — even though Spedding has acknowledged the *Adversus logicus*, by the same author, as the source of a Baconian allusion to Heraclitus in the presentation of *idola specus*.<sup>54</sup>

In *De augmentis scientiarum*, after affirming that many of the great philosophers were right to become skeptics and academics, just following appearances and probabilities, Bacon says that both Socrates and Cicero did not “sincerely” support the view that the mind was incapable of obtaining the truth (but only with regard to ironic and rhetorical purposes), and declares: “It is certain however that there were some here

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<sup>51</sup> See HP I, 1-4, 7

<sup>52</sup> See particularly *Les Essais*, I, 50, 301-302 (ed. Villey): “[A]...Le jugement est un util à tous subjects, et se mesle partout. A cette cause, aux essais que j’en fais icy, j’y employe toute sorte d’occasion... Tantost, à un subject vain et de neant, j’essaye voir s’il trouvera dequoy lui donner corps, et dequoy l’appuyer et estançonner. Tantost je le promenne à un subject noble et tracassé, auquel il n’a rien à trouver de soy, le chemin en estant si frayé qu’il ne peut marcher que sur la piste d’autrui. Là il fait son jeu à eslire la route quy luy semble la meilleure, et, de mille sentiers, il dict que cettuy-cy là, qui a esté le meilleur choisi. Je prends de la fortune le premier argument. Ils me sont également bons. Et ne desseigne jamais de les produire entiers.[C] Car je ne voy le tout de rien: ne font pas ceux qui nous promettent de le faire veoir. De cent membres et visages que a chaque chose, j’en prens un tantost à lecher seulement, tantost à effleurer; et par fois à pincer jusqu’à l’os. J’y donne une pointe, non pas le plus largement possible, mais le plus profondement que je sçay. Et aime plus souvent à les saisir par quelque lustre inusité. Je me hazarderoy de traiter à fons quelque matière, si je me connoissoy moins. Semant icy un mot, icy un autre, eschantillons despris de lur piece, escartez, sans dessein et sans promesse, je ne suis pas tenu de faire bon, ny de m’y tenir moy mesme, sans varier quand il me plaist et me rendre au doubte et incertitude, et à ma maitresse forme, qui est l’ignorance.”

<sup>53</sup> Following the pioneering studies of FREDE (1987), in Brazil the works of BOLZANI (1991), SMITH (1995) and PORCHAT (2005) have stressed several points relating the Pyrrhonism of Sextus to modern empiricism.

<sup>54</sup> See Sp. I, p. 164, N.O. I, §42, Adv. Math. I, 133; II, 186.

and there in both academies (both old and new) and much more among the Sceptics who held this opinion in simplicity and integrity”.<sup>55</sup> Thus, in addition to his distinction between these philosophical schools, Bacon seems to consider different modes of adopting a skeptical position: a more radical mode, which accepted the impossibility of recognizing the truth entirely and at once (mainly associated with Pyrrhonism but maybe also, as he says, with some academics), and a milder mode, exemplified by Socrates and Cicero, according to which it is possible to admit a suspension subjected to different purposes, or a non-integral refusal of the possibility of recognizing the truth. If we compare this passage with aphorism I § 67 of *Novum organum* quoted above, it seems to suggest that Bacon was inclined to see a greater proximity between his own way of thinking and the position endorsed by some of the philosophers generally associated with the New Academy, insofar as he projects on them a weaker kind of skepticism, without explicitly using this expression, however (and thereby closer to enabling the development of an investigation concerning the truth). Moreover, this text seems to strengthen the suggestion that Bacon had some contact with the skeptical works of Cicero (an author who, according to him, belongs to those who joined the New Academy in order to hold forth eloquently *in utramque partem*, i. e., regarding both sides of the question),<sup>56</sup> and even, in view of the contents of his interpretation, with the presentation of skepticism offered by Diogenes Laertius in his *Life of the Philosophers*, as has been suggested by Emil Wolff.<sup>57</sup>

Even so, it is noticeable how some aspects of the exposition of the doctrine of the idols seem to evoke the skepticism exposed by Sextus — especially in regard to the

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<sup>55</sup> See Sp. I, 621-622; IV, 412.

<sup>56</sup> According to E. Wolff, even though Bacon distinguishes between Pyrrhonians and Academics, he always quotes from Cicero and Diogenes Laertius (*apud GRANADA*). As we saw, he seems to rely also upon the *De Natura Deorum* when considering the notion of *idolum*.

<sup>57</sup> See the note above. Granada seems to equally tend towards the same evaluation concerning the sources Bacon relied upon.

*idola specus*, which refer, as we saw, to the individual differences in relation to the body, soul, education, habit and circumstances as they are affected by objects in general. The Second Trope of Enesidemus claims that the differences between men, whether with regard to their bodily constitution (also including the diversity of preferences and how they are affected by sense organs), or regarding the supposed difference of their souls (derived from the irreducible variety of their opinion), must lead us to a suspension of judgment given the nonexistence of criteria by means of which we could put an end to the controversy.<sup>58</sup> Notwithstanding the differences that could be stressed between these texts — concerning, for example, the modality of oppositions established or, as Moody Prior pointed out, the absence of the kind of reasoning that is proper to the Pyrrhonist trope<sup>59</sup> — here and elsewhere in the doctrine of the idols, there are several other themes that could be conceptually approximated to what we observed in the texts of Sextus: for instance, the Baconian refusal of the anticipation of spirit that is present in traditional philosophy (described as similar to the Pyrrhonist critique of *propéteia*, the dogmatic’s precipitation in the quest for truth),<sup>60</sup> the way in which “novelty” or habit can distort cognitive activities (as Sextus says in the Ninth Trope of Enesidemus, based upon the rarity and frequency of things),<sup>61</sup> or even the critique of inaccuracy and mistakes of the senses (which seem to refer to the themes of the Third Trope, based on opposing perceptions according to different human senses, or to the Fifth Trope, based on the opposition according to the diversity of perspectives and situations of perception).<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> N.O., I §41, §§53-58; HP I, 80.

<sup>59</sup> See PRIOR (1986), p. 141. Nevertheless we think he overstates the case when he proposes that we can find all the “skeptical modes” in the doctrine of the idols, even if they are embodied in a new analysis.

<sup>60</sup> N.O. I, §9, §§19-30, §56; cf. HP I, 20, 177, 186; II, 17, 21, 37; III, 280.

<sup>61</sup> N.O. I §§56, §119; cf. HP I, 141.

<sup>62</sup> N.O. I §50, cf. HP I, 91, 118.

A possibility that should be taken into account is that Bacon had access to these materials through other sources. According to Granada, in the critique of the idols, in regard to the senses as well as to the intellect in its spontaneous activity, it is possible to find a “coincidence” with skeptical critique, both Greek and Renaissancist.<sup>63</sup> The fact that the tropes are equally exposed by Diogenes Laertius, however imprecisely, suggests that their presence does not necessarily refer to Sextus. Even though Bacon’s explicit mentions of skeptics and academics seem to refer fundamentally to the ancient philosophers, maybe we should give more importance to the contemporary sources that he considered akin to skepticism. Moreover, it is important to bear in mind the way Bacon acknowledges the presence of skeptical elements in authors who, according to him, did not “sincerely” support the suspension of judgment, for it shows that he could have admitted them in the elaboration of his doctrine of the idols without having considered them to be totally skeptical.

At any rate, Bacon also alludes to contemporary authors that he relates to skepticism. However critical they might be, these allusions reveal his attention to the peculiarities of skepticism of that period. In the opuscule *Temporis partus masculus*, he refers to Agrippa of Nettesheim, author of *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum et atrium* (1531), as a kind of laughable “street buffoon” (*trivialis scurra*) who distorts everything, and describes skepticism as a philosophy that “cheers him up and makes him laugh” by making philosophers “walk in circles”.<sup>64</sup> As Granada proposed, it may be possible that this evaluation is justified by virtue of Bacon’s rejection of the anti-intellectualist fideism espoused by that author. In turn, we should perhaps consider that, throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> century, skepticism was frequently the subject of a literary

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<sup>63</sup> See GRANADA. OLIVEIRA (2007, p. 536.77) holds that Bacon’s work would be a “fundamental link between the kind of skeptical perspective developed by the generation of Montaigne and Sanchez and that later espoused by the founders of the Royal Society.”

<sup>64</sup> See Sp III, p. 536.

association with paradoxical and ironic rhetoric, as in Erasmus' *The Praise of Folly*, in the works of Rabelais and in Agrippa's *Vanitate scientiarum* itself.<sup>65</sup> As we saw, Bacon admits the possibility of this kind of association in authors who maintain ambiguous positions, as in Socrates' case, and in the same passage of *Temporis partus masculus* he confesses that he himself is writing under the veil of invective (*maledictus*), which allows him to expose his critique concisely and to pick and choose the expressions to aim at each of the authors he criticizes.<sup>66</sup> Might not Bacon's critique of Agrippa, to some degree, be a product of the same rhetorical and ironical procedure? This would be quite in accordance with the hypothesis proposed by Deleule, for whom that opusculum, as well as others made before the *Novum organum*, consists of a rhetorical experiment aimed at convincing different readers towards the collective task of *Instauratio*.<sup>67</sup> In this case, Bacon's critique of skepticism would merely be the paradoxical result of a skeptical literary strategy connected with the tradition of paradox. The initial impression of this critique of skeptical philosophers (for the way their own investigation leads them to an erratic research) could then give rise to another reading, apparently more faithful to the text, and according to which skepticism amuses him by exhibiting the shortcomings of those philosophies who claim to have arrived at the truth (perhaps by pointing out how they move in demonstrative "circles"). Would not this reading be more appropriate for the praises that Bacon heaps on skeptical philosophers in the texts above? In one way or another, this passage appears to show that Bacon was sensitive to different facets of contemporary skepticism.

However, Agrippa is probably not the most relevant reference in regard to the skeptical affinities accepted by Bacon. Formigari and Granada have consistently pointed

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<sup>65</sup> On this ? theme see COLIE (1966) and TOURNON (1989).

<sup>66</sup> See Sp. III, p. 536-537.

<sup>67</sup> BACON (1987), p. 15.



out how some aspects of *Quod nihil scitur* (1581), by Francisco Sanchez, resemble certain features of the doctrine of the idols — with reference to the attacks on the Aristotelian notion of science understood as perfect knowledge of the causes, as well as to the critique of language or to the recognition of the obstacles derived from the social organization of knowledge and brevity of life.<sup>68</sup> Besides, like Bacon in the *idola tribus*, Sanchez also intends to expose the mistakes and imperfections of the intellect and human senses, which are incapable of offering us access to how things are in themselves.<sup>69</sup> Although he introduces a method that would give us access to the very form of things, Bacon likewise admits an “internal” dimension of nature itself, beyond the things offered to us by the conjunction or disjunction of natural bodies, and which would certainly be unintelligible to us due to the limitations of our faculties.<sup>70</sup> And even though Sanchez grants that it is impossible to ever acquire “perfect knowledge”, he admits that experience can offer us a limited form of knowledge of things, capable of distinguishing them regarding their aim, clarity and degree, and also announces a work aimed at elaborating a method designed for this.<sup>71</sup> Thus, however different both perspectives might be in regard to the potential extent of our knowledge, both philosophers consider experience to be a privileged source of knowledge, without thereby claiming that our perceptions can give us any sort of immediate certainty. Even though Sanchez develops his reflections mainly from Academic sources, and apparently was not acquainted with the texts of Sextus, he is a strong candidate to represent the version of skepticism most in accordance with Bacon’s own philosophical positions.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> See GRANADA, p. 3-5; FORMIGARI, 1970 apud GRANADA; SANCHEZ (1988), p. 20-28, 68.

<sup>69</sup> See SANCHEZ, p. 55-57, 59-62.

<sup>70</sup> N.O. I, §4, Sp. I, p. 157.

<sup>71</sup> SANCHEZ (1988), p. 55.

<sup>72</sup> There are scholars who hold an opposite view. We agree on this point with POPKIN (2000, p. 84-85), who refers to scholars who thought of Sanchez not as a skeptic, but as an empiricist opening new roads and preparing the ground for Francis Bacon, and using skeptical arguments only to refute Aristotelianism. But even if we leave aside this

For the same reason, however, *Quod nihil scitur* seems to be an insufficient source to explain the existence of the Pyrrhonist elements which, as we said, appear here and there in Baconian doctrine, if the hypothesis that he did not have direct access to the *Hipotiposes* is correct. That would be an additional reason to take equally into consideration the *Essays* (1580-1588) of Montaigne — in which, as Popkin pointed out, almost all the items of the Pyrrhonist armory of argument are present according to Sextus' presentation.<sup>73</sup> In a remarkable though seldom mentioned study, Pierre Villey shows us that Bacon really read and referred to Montaigne's *Essays* — translated into English and published by John Florio in 1603 — at different points in his intellectual career.<sup>74</sup> In Villey's opinion, Montaigne's strongest influence on Bacon's thought is not to be found in Bacon's *Essay*, the similarities of which with Montaigne's work are quite small, although the Baconian title was surely inspired, according to that interpreter, by the French work.<sup>75</sup> According to Villey, the philosophical affinities show up more clearly in his mature works, and especially in respect to the relation between the critiques of human knowledge, as featured in the doctrine of the idols, and the skeptical pieces of reasoning of the *Apology*, as demonstrated by the multiple and detailed approximations enumerated by the interpreter (including texts that suggest Bacon characterized Montaigne as a skeptic, as was usual at that time).<sup>76</sup> Villey is cautious

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interpretation, we still have good reasons to see a similarity between Sanchez and Bacon due to a re-evaluation of the doctrine of idols.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 103

<sup>74</sup> VILLEY (1973), p. 10-14. Besides the fact that Bacon's diplomat brother Anthony lived for twelve years in France and kept up a correspondance with Montaigne, Villey lists as a sign of the contact of Francis Bacon with *Les Essais* the very title of his own *Essays*; an explicit mention of Montaigne in the *De Augmentis Scientiarum*, and an example of psychological explanation that surely comes from his book. However, Villey suggests that his influence may be much greater than it appears, due to the codes of citation of this period and the rather unsystematic way Montaigne expounds his ideas.

<sup>75</sup> See note below.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. pp. 77, 110. The text by Bacon that Villey refers to is from *De Aug. V, II*, which he compares with Montaigne's discussion on the likenesses between men and animals, in the *Apology*. Villey himself, however, feels it is going too far to see Montaigne as a skeptic. (p. 105) For a different interpretation I venture to refer the reader to my own EVA (2007).

enough to keep his approximations on a hypothetical level, given the lack of conclusive evidence. However, the existing indications not only impelled him to conclude that Bacon surely read Montaigne, but also that such reading would have awakened and kindled his critical spirit, so as to appreciate the weakness of available philosophical methods as well as of human reason left to its own powers. In consequence, an approximation between these two authors is more justifiable than the one commonly made between Montaigne, Descartes and Pascal.<sup>77</sup>

In short, it is possible that Bacon was an important link in the very constitution of the so-called *mitigated* skepticism,<sup>78</sup> as well as in the modern construction of the image of Pyrrhonist skepticism — which is historically inaccurate — as a philosophy whose radicalism fatally opposed it to the modern ideals of natural investigation. Bacon has been read with great interest by other philosophers who were fundamental in the way this image was spread by posterity — such as Hume, for instance. On the other hand, as we saw, this does not mean that he did not assimilate skeptical and even Pyrrhonist elements into his own reflections, however transformed and adapted, in a much more expressive philosophical dimension than that which can be observed in other modern authors more often associated with skepticism. However different the philosophies of Descartes and Bacon might be, it is plausible to say that in the First Cartesian Meditation as well as in the Baconian doctrine of the idols we are dealing with methodic reconstructions that were not only inspired by skeptical doubt, but which aim to express, to some extent, the cogency and actuality of the skeptical diagnosis concerning the lack of grounds for knowledge. Without being skeptical in themselves, those reconstructions

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 109. Even here the links between Bacon, Montaigne and Sanchez could be tightened, both regarding the separation of religious questions and natural research and the evaluation of experience that we observe also in Montaigne, as stressed by OLIVEIRA (2002), p. 78. The latter author's remarks concerning relations on the theme of the "limits of knowledge" and the passage from the "phenomena to nature" do not seem to me so clear and precise.

<sup>78</sup> For similar remarks, see OLIVEIRA (2002), p. 75.

aimed to embrace the profundity of the problems exposed by the very authors they wished to overcome. Equally, the singularity of the strategies applied by each one of them is already noticeable in the reformulation of those problems, i. e., in the “destructive” and “dubitative” parts of their reflections, by virtue of which both prepare the ground for the advent of a new philosophy.

But it is worth noticing here the gap that separates Descartes from Bacon. In the first case, even though the methodic doubt lasts till the end of the Sixth Meditation, the road to its suppression begins in the opening of the Second Meditation, where it is already possible to admit the Archimedean certainty of the *cogito*, which will acknowledge clear, distinct ideas as a criterion of truth. In fact, however important the doubt might be in the construction of metaphysics, its ceaseless activity is limited to the First Meditation, and in the Sixth, by the end of the journey, it might reappear, according to the author, as “hyperbolic and ridiculous”.<sup>79</sup> Whereas Descartes presents himself as a philosopher capable of achieving a certainty beyond the most radical doubt a skeptic could ever imagine, Bacon is not willing to advance any complete or universal theory, nor can he take it as something possible due to the actual state of affairs and spirits.<sup>80</sup> He limits himself to the exposition of a viable alternative to overcome the poverty of human knowledge, by offering relevant indications for a new induction able to lead men progressively to a complete reinvention of principles and axioms.<sup>81</sup> The undertaking he aims at announcing is not a task for one man alone, nor can it be limited to individual talents, whose power of persuasion cannot be mistaken for real research

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<sup>79</sup> We argued in EVA (2001) that Descartes did not himself take the arguments of his hyperbolic doubt as possessing an autonomous validity. They should be seen as tied to the methodological decision taken at the beginning of the Meditations, where, looking for something “solid and stable in sciences”, he decides to identify the false and the doubtful, deliberately distorting our usual cognitive standards. This would be why Descartes describes his own doubt as only “pretended”, “hyperbolic and ridiculous”.

<sup>80</sup> See N.O., I, §116.

<sup>81</sup> See N.O., I §§101-105.

into nature.<sup>82</sup> However, this collective enterprise remains useless if we do not manage to rectify the fatal mistakes that are already to be seen in the first digestion of experience — or, putting it another way, if it is not possible to find a way round the idols, whose presence strengthens the skeptics whenever they suspend their judgment before any available knowledge.<sup>83</sup>

Thus, even if the causes of our incapacity to know — identified by Bacon in his doctrine of idols — might be different from those pointed out by the skeptics, he aimed at taking the philosophical relevance of skepticism into his own thinking in a more generous way than Descartes did. The “temporary skepticism” that should be adopted by this doctrine, although it corresponds to just one part of the method — according to Bacon’s exact formulation — is not limited to a methodic resolution that could be suppressed together with this same resolution, but is the reflection of the evaluation of our actual cognitive limitations. Hence, in spite of the fact that posterity has usually referred to Cartesian methodic doubt whenever it looked for a modern version of skepticism, might it not be better echoed in the doctrine of the idols — which, according to Bacon, carries an autonomous interest and a latent philosophical actuality in its problems, without however being skeptical, beyond its own attempt to solve them? At least, Bacon’s philosophy offers itself, in this respect, as an exclusive chapter — all-

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<sup>82</sup> Arguing for the need for a new Natural History, he says: “Those however who aspire not to guess and divine, but to discover and know; who propose not to devise mimic and fabulous worlds of their own, but to examine and dissect the nature of this very world itself; must go to facts themselves for everything. Nor can the place of this labor and search and worldwide perambulation be supplied by any genius or meditation or argumentation; no, not if all men’s could meet in one. This therefore we must have or the business must be for ever abandoned...” (Sp. I, 140; IV, 28)

<sup>83</sup> Cf. I, §30, Sp. IV, 52: “Though all the wits of all the ages should meet together and combine and transmit their labours, yet will no great progress ever be made in science by means of anticipations; because radical errors in the first concoction of the mind are not to be cured by the excellence of functions and remedies subsequent.”

important and insufficiently explored — of the transmission and modification of the critical legacy of Ancient skepticism in modern times.<sup>84</sup>

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