



Philosophical Scepticism and Western Medieval Theology. Roger Bacon: “The First True Scientist”

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ABSTRACT: The main aim of this paper is to provide evidence for the inclusion of ancient philosophical scepticism in Christian theological discourse. The context is the environment of 13th-century Western Christianity, more specifically, one of its leading representatives, the theologian Roger Bacon. The study will be structured in three main parts, except for the introductory argument and conclusions. The first part will contain biographical and ideological notes on this author, the second will record the elements of scepticism likely to be taken up by Bacon’s vision, and the last part will show the specific presence of these elements in Western theologian thinking.

KEYWORDS: Roger Bacon, theological scepticism, empiricism, probabilism, anti-dogmatism

INTRODUCTORY ARGUMENT

Accepting the presence of ancient philosophical scepticism in Christian theological discourse provides an obvious hermeneutical issue that continues to spark significant exegetical debates. The aspect is problematic especially because an ideology with strong tendencies for dogmatism proves somewhat incompatible „by nature” with the gnoseological relativization attempts imposed through sceptical attitudes. These two directions of thought would thus be so distinct that they could be considered antagonistic even. But since the human mind is incapable of approaching the world and life within the confines imposed solely by black and white, since scepticism is not only a philosophical current of thought, but also a natural cognitive disposition of the human being, and since the principle of *coincidentia oppositorum* appears to demonstrate its validity in several instances (including gnoseological issues), the eventual presence of philosophical scepticism in Christian theological discourse needs to be at least evaluated.

The cultural phenomenon that enabled medieval theologians to engage and address the ideas of scepticism must also be specified. This fact appears to have been largely owing to the shockwave caused in Christian theological discourse by the availability of the Aristotelian works. The gnoseological approaches of the Stagirite, which promised quasi-infallible knowledge, seduced and disappointed many thinkers who credited them with dedication. Some of these approaches had also drawn along with them, sometimes through the challenges they received, other times through the very ideas they proposed, some topoi of the philosophical scepticism. The present study will focus on the approaches of scholastic theology in the 13th century, specifically, the case of Roger Bacon. If we were to consider the intricacies of scepticism in the thinking of John of Salisbury¹, also a Christian theologian leaning toward the ideas of neutrality doctrine², we would likely find that we are dealing with a genuine *hortamen ad prudentiam*, a type of scepticism summarized by the recommendation of prudence, a discursively promised probabilism, but not actually assumed. Roger Bacon, however, indicates much more concretely through his writings that some subjects of sceptical doctrine can be spotted in his philosophical views. Unlike his predecessor, John of Salisbury, who when approaching the topic of prudence directly and

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¹ John of Salisbury lived before Roger Bacon, in the 12th century, specifically between 1110 - 1180. He proved to be very interested in scepticism, especially that of the Academic philosophers. On this, see Bogdan Guguianu, „John of Salisbury’s skepticism. A veritable exhortation to prudence (*hortamen ad prudentiam*)”, in *Anastasis. Research in Medieval Culture and Art*, vol. IX, nr. 2, 2023, pp. 22-38.

² We use this title to denote philosophical scepticism because of its balanced character, which enforces the equal legitimacy of opposing points of view, a notion that we shall also explore throughout this research.



unreservedly appeals to the academic philosophers, Roger Bacon does not explicitly confirm his allegiance to the principles of scepticism or some sceptical scholars³. Therefore, the study will aim to detect, despite such a scarcity of information, some doctrinal aspects specific to philosophical scepticism in Roger Bacon's reasoning⁴.

Before pursuing the assumed scientific aim, we shall identify a few aspects that we think are important considering the cultural personality of this medieval theologian with a genius mind and encyclopedic cultural profile.

1. Roger Bacon – biographical and doctrinal characteristics

Roger Bacon was certainly one of the most important critical theoreticians of the 13th century, who delved into many problematic aspects from a gnoseological standpoint. Bacon studied at Oxford, and later in Paris, where he was also a professor. He was a member of the Franciscan Order and was under the patronage of both Cardinal Guy le Gros de Foulques and Pope Clement IV. He showed a strong interest in scientific inquiry. His method, *scientia experimentalis*, played a crucial role in the advancement of science, as we know and understand it today. Roger Bacon came to be interpreted in some exegetical views as the first true scientist⁵. Also known by the scholastic accolade as *Doctor Mirabilis*, he appears to have understood quite well the lesson elaborated by his predecessor, Robert Grosseteste, regarding the highlighting of constructive amendments that the theories of Aristotle from *Posterior Analytics* could receive⁶. His writings, which addressed issues related to philosophy, theology, rhetoric, logic, astronomy, alchemy, physics, mathematics, grammar, and „semiotics”, were strongly influenced by thinkers such as Aristotle, Augustine, Seneca, Averroes, or Avicenna. However, influences do not justify the acceptance of the ideas or views of all these authors, as Roger Bacon often demonstrates a very vigilant critical spirit that easily identifies any ideological shortcomings, which brings him quite close to scepticism.

As far as philosophical scepticism is concerned, its presence in Roger Bacon's thinking could be initially noticed by evaluating a fragment of text that sets the ideological criteria on which the Western theologian decides to found *Opus maius*, one of his main texts. We support this view because the fragment appears in the opening lines, essentially constituting the justificatory reason upon which Roger Bacon intends to base and build his gnoseological vision:

„Since, moreover, the subjects in question are weighty and unusual, they stand in need of the grace and favor accorded to human frailty. For according to the Philosopher in the seventh book of the *Metaphysics*, those things which in themselves are susceptible of the most perfect cognition are for us objects of but imperfect apprehension. For truth veiled lies hidden in the deep and is placed in the abyss, as Seneca says in the seventh book of his *De Beneficiis*, and in the fourth of the *Quaestiones Naturales*; and Marcus Tullius says in the *Hortensius* that our entire intellect is obstructed by many difficulties, since it is related to those things which are most manifest in their own nature as is the eye of the night-owl or of the bat to the light of the sun, as the Philosopher declares in the second book of the *Metaphysics*; and as one deaf from his birth is related to the delight of harmony, as Avicenna says in the ninth book of the *Metaphysics*, wherefore in the investigation of

³ We highlight this aspect considering that Roger Bacon seems to have studied John of Salisbury's *Metalogicon*. See Amanda Power, *Roger Bacon and the Defence of Christendom*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2013, p. 125.

⁴ The fact that Roger Bacon was acquainted with philosophical scepticism is somewhat evident based on the exegesis dedicated to him. When citing the literary authorities recommended by Roger Bacon as authentic sources of inspiration, Amanda Power also notes the name of Aulus Gellius. See in this regard Amanda Power, *Roger Bacon and the Defence of Christendom*, p. 98. Roger Bacon speaks quite casually about the Latin author in *Opus maius* I, 4, making a direct reference to *Noctes Atticae*. We know that the famous encyclopedia exposes, among other things, certain doctrinal aspects related to scepticism. It primarily concerns the distinction between radical scepticism and moderate scepticism, as well as some information regarding each of them. See *Noctes Atticae* XI, 5. An even stronger argument in this regard can be the fact that Roger Bacon quotes from *Academica Priora* (Lucullus) and *De Natura Deorum*, works by Marcus Tullius Cicero which contain valuable and no less detailed information about scepticism. On this, see *Opus maius* I, 2.

⁵ On this, see Brian Clegg, *The First Scientist. A Life of Roger Bacon*, Constable, London, 2003.

⁶ On this, see Eileen C. Sweeney, „New Standards for Certainty: Early Receptions of Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*”, in Dallas G. Denery II, Kantik Ghosh, and Nicolette Zeeman (eds.), *Uncertain Knowledge. Scepticism, Relativism, and Doubt in the Middle Ages*, Brepols Publishers, Turnhout, 2014, pp. 38-44. For further facts concerning the influences endured by Roger Bacon from the beliefs of Grosseteste, see also Jeremiah Hackett, „From *Sapientes antiqui* at Lincoln to the New *Sapientes moderni* at Paris c. 1260–1280: Roger Bacon's Two Circles of Scholars” in Jack P. Cunningham & Mark Hocknull (eds.), *Robert Grosseteste and the pursuit of Religious and Scientific Learning in the Middle Ages*, Springer, 2016, pp. 119-142.



truth the feebleness of our own intellect suffices for us, that we may to the best of our ability put extraneous causes and occasions of error at a farther remove from our weak power of sense perception.”⁷

It is true that, except for Cicero, none of the philosophers mentioned in this fragment by Roger Bacon have shown substantial interest in philosophical scepticism or approved of this doctrine. However, the message conveyed by each of the mentioned authors, and especially the subject of discussion, reveals quite concretely serious suspicions considering the powers of human cognition and strong reluctance regarding the validation of gnoseological principles. And things do not stop here. In the following, Roger Bacon identifies the four sources of error which, in his view, represent the most dangerous enemies of any path toward correct and just judgment.

„Now there are four chief obstacles in grasping truth, which hinder every man, however learned, and scarcely allow any one to win a clear title to learning, namely, submission to faulty and unworthy authority, influence of custom, popular prejudice, and concealment of our own ignorance accompanied by an ostentatious display of our knowledge.”⁸

Each of these will lead us to various correlations that can be made concerning the principles of philosophical scepticism. We will pinpoint these correlations concretely throughout the present study, focusing particularly on the first three references: *submission to a faulty and unworthy authority*, *the influence of custom*, and *popular prejudice*. However, in attempting to argue that Roger Bacon accepts and even demonstrates his intention to utilize the principles of philosophical scepticism, we will now rather our direct attention to the fourth mentioned reference: *concealment of our own ignorance accompanied by an ostentatious display of our knowledge*. The specified aspect certainly denotes the condemnation by the Western theologian of blind trust in one's own ideas, of the ostentatious promotion of such views, and of their total assumption in the absence of any kind of critical spirit⁹. Roger Bacon explicitly acknowledges that human beings are unable to acquire infallible knowledge: “It is impossible therefore for man to attain perfect knowledge in this life, and it is exceedingly difficult for him to attain imperfect truth¹⁰ and he is very prone and disposed toward whatever is false and empty.”¹¹ The worst and saddest part is that even when individuals are in the deepest darkness of error, they believe they are in the full light of truth, claims the Western theologian¹². The presence of philosophical scepticism can thus be noted based on the correlation that can be established between such perceptions and the distinction between *appearance* and *reality*, a fundamental distinction considering many theories of neutrality doctrine¹³.

Eileen C. Sweeney also highlights Roger Bacon's critique of people's naïve reliance on their own cognitive powers. The example concerns the possibility (or rather, impossibility) of human beings knowing the entire creation in all its grandeur.

⁷ Roger Bacon, *Opus maius*, vol. 1, a translation by Robert Belle Burke, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Oxford University Press, 1928, pp. 3-4.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

⁹ The character of philosophical scepticism with strong critical implications is confirmed in a sufficient number of exegetical sources. See in this regard, R.J. Hankinson, *The Sceptics. The Arguments of the Philosophers*, Routledge, New York, 1995, p. 210; „Academic views and criticisms” in Keimpe Algra *et al.* (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 475-478; Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism. From Savonarola to Bayle*, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 24.

¹⁰ We point out that the translation in the quoted version is incorrect: „imperfect truth” should have been correctly translated as „perfect truth”. We argue this by providing the text fragment in Latin: „Est igitur homo impossibilis ad perfectam sapientiam in hac vita, et ad perfectionem veritatis nimis est difficilis, et pronus et proclivis ad falsa et vana quaecunque; (...)” Roger Bacon, *Opus maius*, vol. 1, edited, with introduction and analytical table by John Henry Bridges, Clarendon Press, London, 1897, p. 22.

¹¹ Roger Bacon, *Opus maius*, ed. cit., p. 24.

¹² *Opus maius* I, 1.

¹³ We know that the ancient philosophical scepticism played an especially important role in the development of subsequent philosophical analyses and theories based on the appearance-reality dichotomy, specifically in establishing the framework for such an approach. On this, see, „Aenesidemus: the Pyrrhonian revival” in Harald Thorsrud, *Ancient Scepticism*, Routledge, London & New York, 2009, pp. 122.



„As an antidote, Bacon again recommends an attitude of scepticism. ‘Since the truths about God and his creatures are infinite, and in each there are innumerable gradations, it follows that few things are known by any one, and thus no one should glory in the many things he knows’.”¹⁴

Roger Bacon acknowledges the principles of scepticism even by reflecting on the concept's etymological origin:

„Since then the facts are as stated, we should not give adherence to all that we have heard and read, but we should examine most carefully the philosophical statements of older writers, that we may make up their deficiencies and correct their errors, with all modesty, however, and consideration.”¹⁵

Concerning terms like σκέψις or especially σκέπτομαι, the attitude recommended by the Western theologian is blatantly similar. These terms allude to a form of mindset characterized by prudence, circumspection, and enhanced attention in investigation and inquiry¹⁶. Any kind of adherence given by the cognitive subjects without an extremely rigorous critical examination, risks leading them astray. On an attitudinal level, the noted reference point proves to be a very strong reference regarding the thinking of a sceptical philosopher.

However, all these aspects presented in the first section of this study are generalities that can be formulated concerning the presence of philosophical scepticism in Roger Bacon's views. Yet, to grasp the concrete principal aspects, it is necessary to present some of the essential characteristics of the neutrality doctrine.

2. Scepticism and its philosophical implications

What Roger Bacon capitalized on doctrinally by referring to scepticism, this philosophical product consolidated in Western culture by Greek philosophers could be observable by direct reference to the status that the doctrine of neutrality represented in antiquity. Philosophical scepticism is a δυνάμις, states Sextus Empiricus in the definition¹⁷. It is an *ability* that will guide its protagonist in his spiritual ascent and, implicitly, in the attainment of inner peace. In order to be acquired by the sceptic, this peace of mind must be preceded by two previous and inevitable stages, also related to the philosopher's way of life. These involve the valorisation of *antinomy* and the practice of *judgment suspension*:

„Scepticism is an ability, or mental attitude, which opposes appearances to judgements in any way whatsoever, with the result that, owing to the equipollence of the objects and reasons thus opposed, we are brought firstly to a state of mental suspense and next to a state of «unperturbedness» or quietude.”¹⁸

We can detect here the three identifying marks of the neutrality doctrine: *antinomy* (equal strength of argumentation), *suspension of judgment*, and *absence of disturbance*. In terms of Greek philosophy, these three elements correspond to the following concepts: ἰσοσθένεια τῶν λόγων, ἐποχή, and ἀταραξία. Through them, or rather, by their correct administration, the sceptic philosopher can gain access to the proposed way of life. It is very important to specify and note that medieval theology preserves from this somewhat idealised version of scepticism only the first reference, ἰσοσθένεια τῶν λόγων (equal strength of argumentation). Henrik Lagerlund confirms in one of his studies that the practice of scepticism as a way of life by Christian theologians, in an ancient manner, is quite difficult to discern. The matter is, moreover, understandable, at least in the context where the stakes were different: the Christian theologian sought God, not inner peace. Even if, under certain exegetical conditions, quite ambitious and no less debatable, ἀταραξία (*absence of disturbance*) could be correlated with ἡσυχία (*silence*), we must understand that accessing this absolute peace of soul was achieved in a completely different way by the sceptical philosopher, through *antinomy* and *suspension of judgment*, and not thought prayer, as a Christian. Henrik Lagerlund, however, is even more unequivocal on this matter: “Obviously, much more can be said about the Pyrrhonian approach to scepticism, but it is clear right from the start that there was

¹⁴ Eileen C. Sweeney, „New Standards for Certainty: Early Receptions of Aristotle's Posterior Analytics”, ed. cit., p. 47.

¹⁵ Roger Bacon, *Opus maius*, ed. cit., p. 17.

¹⁶ Liddell and Scott, *Greek English Lexicon*, s.v. σκέψις, σκέπτομαι.

¹⁷ *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I, 8.

¹⁸ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, vol. I, with an English translation by R.G. Bury, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts/William Heinemann LTD, London, 1977, p. 7.



nothing like this in the Latin Middle Ages, that is, there was no scepticism with the aim of the suspension of judgment and tranquillity".¹⁹

Such a fact leads us to focus especially on $\text{ισοσθένεια τῶν λόγων}$ (equal strength of argumentation), which we find correlated, as we have also stated, with the concept of antinomy. Antinomy is for a sceptic the principle according to which an argument and a counterargument acquire equal epistemological value when analyzed on logical criteria. Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* provides the most effective explanation of this topic²⁰. Of course, the theory has precedents in the thought of ancient authors such as Sextus Empiricus, for example: „The phrase «opposed judgements» we do not employ in the sense of negations and affirmations only but simply as equivalent to «conflicting judgements.»"²¹ The perspective on antinomy is also presented in the chapter dedicated to Pyrrho of Elis, from the study *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*: „when facts disagree, but the contradictory statements have exactly the same weight, ignorance of the truth is the necessary consequence.”²² This procedure of sceptical testing of gnoseological truths, some exegetes argue, constitutes the very foundation of philosophical scepticism²³. We will thus consider antinomy particularly important when it comes to the goal of this study and we will try to demonstrate the existence of this concept in Roger Bacon's thought by presenting his adoption and advancement of the thesis *audiatur et altera pars*.

Another reference that can be noted in the realm of possible instruments upon which philosophical scepticism built its doctrinal identity, and which Roger Bacon might have considered in his analyses, is the guiding criterion of some sceptical philosophers, such as Carneades of Cyrene. The direct reference is to the concept of $\tau\acute{o}\ \pi\iota\theta\alpha\nu\acute{o}\nu$ ²⁴. Interpreted most often in philosophical language by the term *probable*²⁵, the concept implies in Carneade's vision the following references and, implicitly, degrees: 1 - a thing may be *probable*, 2 - *probable and empirically verifiable*, 3 - *probable, empirically verifiable, and uncontradicted*²⁶. We note in this exegetical context the status of gnoseological legitimacy that a certain fact can gain in relation to the third degree (probable, empirically verifiable, and uncontradicted), and, much more importantly, the validity of empirical research, an aspect that can find a serious correlate concerning the theory elaborated by Roger Bacon and interpreted as *scientia experimentalis*.

Finally, the last important aspect to be noted from the doctrines of sceptical philosophers and also relevant to the present study can be identified thanks to the *Theory of the Ten Modes of Doubt*, a theory elaborated by the sceptic Aenesidemus of Knossos. At marker number 5, this philosopher warns about certain things that can disturb the validity of knowledge: these include dogmas, beliefs in myths, conventional ideologies, divergent views on what is beautiful, ugly, good, bad, the birth of gods, etc.²⁷ Aenesidemus's vision thus condemns dogmatism implemented based on a certain way of life, myth, and tradition, which impose conventional ideas not entirely justified from a gnoseological standpoint. Backed by the authorities of certain communities, such principles eliminate factual truth, which becomes undetectable in this manner. Attitudes like these certainly represent irreparable

¹⁹ Henrik Lagerlund, *Medieval Scepticism and Divine Deception*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, 2019, pp. 128-129.

²⁰ On this, see „The antinomy of pure reason”, in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 459-549.

²¹ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, ed. cit., p. 7.

²² Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. II, with an English Translation by R.D. Hicks, London: William Heinemann & New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1925, p. 489.

²³ Leo Groarke, *Greek Scepticism. Anti-Realist Trends in Ancient Thought*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal & Kingston/London/Buffalo, 1990, p. 31.

²⁴ The concept could be translated using terms such as „persuasive”, „plausible”, „credible”. On this, see Liddell and Scott, *Greek English Lexicon*, s.v. $\pi\iota\theta\alpha\nu\acute{o}\nu$. It differs in the intended sense from $\tau\acute{o}\ \phi\alpha\nu\acute{o}\mu\epsilon\nu\omicron\nu$, a criterion of practical orientation for philosophers considered radical (Pyrrho of Elis, Timon of Phlius, Enesidemus, or Sextus Empiricus), and also from $\tau\acute{o}\ \epsilon\tilde{\upsilon}\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\nu$, translated as „reasonable”, „credible”, „correct”, „creditable”, or „honorable” and attributed to Arcesilaus of Pitane. For more details regarding $\tau\acute{o}\ \kappa\rho\iota\tau\eta\rho\iota\omicron\nu$, understood as an instrument of orientation for the sceptical philosopher in matters of practical concern, see our study *Scepticism silografic și ethos critic. Timon din Phlius – o monografie*, Editura Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”, Iași, 2022, pp. 94-96, 104-105, 160-166.

²⁵ Cicero translated it into Latin as *probabile*. On this, see Walter Nicgorski, *Cicero's Skepticism and His Recovery of Political Philosophy*, University of Notre Dame, Indiana, 2016, p. 19.

²⁶ *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I, 227.

²⁷ Diogenes Laertius IX, 83.



gnoseological errors, as they directly attack the objectivity of the world and life, practically imposing subjective, unfounded, and unjustified points of view. They are treated by Aenesidemus himself as causes of cognitive error. Roger Bacon also perceived such phenomena as causes of cognitive error. The aspect is demonstrable primarily by the title he gave to the chapter in which he rigorously criticizes all these principles, which is named *Causes of Error*. Roger Bacon also condemned such attitudes²⁸ through the position he took about *the principles accepted based on defective and unworthy authorities, the influences of tradition, common opinion, and ostentatious trust in one's own cognitive powers*.

We, therefore, note the three topoi that can be noticeably related to the Baconian vision: *antinomy* or the equal validity of arguments, *empiricism as a method of orientation in pragmatic matters*, and *distrust in the conventional, dogmatic, and unjustified prejudices*.

3. Aspects of scepticism in the Baconian thinking

When it comes to antinomy we are certainly engaging in overly rash speculation by asserting that this principle is available in Roger Bacon's thinking in an authentic form, in which it can be found in ancient scepticism. However, the antinomy still manifests itself in Baconian thought, even if in an instance not fully exploited doctrinally. The explanations are as follows: the principle *audiatur et altera pars* can be specifically noticed in Roger Bacon's theories. The Western theologian proposes this principle in resolving some problems that Christian doctrine faces at that time. The expression *audiamus libenter contraria consuetudini vulgatae*²⁹ reveals, if not the acceptance of the contrary thesis as a validgnoseological principle, at least the openness to a much more impartial evaluation of a discussion topic. Eileen C. Sweeney essentially confirms the existence of this tendency in Roger Bacon's thinking:

"In order to avoid these errors and find our way to true authorities, reason, and the wise, we must, Bacon argues, 'freely hear what is contrary to vulgar convention'. The point seems to be to examine received opinion critically, to take the opposite side of a question from that which is accepted by common opinion. One must, in other words, cultivate scepticism about what is usually thought. Truth is usually on the side of what is unpopular, Bacon warns, so one can make a practice of scepticism about what the masses think as a way of avoiding error more effectively."³⁰

The fact itself does not appear to be derisory, but rather largely significant, at least if we consider the context. Aiming an eminently dogmatic ideology, one that cannot accept any compromise in doctrinal matters, the openness to a different (or even contrary) point of view from those who oppose the common opinion constitutes, we believe, immeasurable ideological progress made by a Christian theologian, an attitudinal challenge with very concrete inclinations towards the evident consideration of philosophical scepticism. It is true, we cannot know if once accepted by authorities, which was rather unlikely, such Baconian theses could have followed the course of the overt acceptance of antinomy by their issuer, in the sense of considering the equal validity of thesis and antithesis. Still, we can note the medieval theologian's openness in this regard and the beginning of a path he outlined in such a direction: „(...) because the multitude is not accustomed to consider the opposite side of a question, while those philosophizing take many things into consideration."³¹ We can't know if Roger Bacon had the sceptical philosophers in mind when he formulated this idea, but we know for sure that they were the ones for whom the antinomy was one of the main doctrinal elements. As a supplement to the intended meaning, we could add that *Doctor Mirabilis* drew the attention of his community members to the fact that even Muslims, for example, could have good things to say, and those things, even if ideologically opposed to Christian doctrine, could still be precious in the evolution of Christianity³². Rejecting without any analysis, research, or even evaluation of a certain

²⁸ *Opus maius* I, 1.

²⁹ *Opus maius* I, 8.

³⁰ Eileen C. Sweeney, „New Standards for Certainty: Early Receptions of Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*”, ed. cit., p. 47.

³¹ Roger Bacon, *Opus maius*, ed. cit., p. 19.

³² Here we could consider the significant progress made by the Muslim community in the exact sciences or the fact that it had at that time thinkers much better acquainted with the writings of prestigious Greek philosophers, especially Aristotle, such as Avicenna or Averroes. Roger Bacon seems to have appreciated the writings of Arab thinkers to a considerable extent. See Eileen C. Sweeney, „New Standards for Certainty: Early Receptions of Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*”, p. 44. His concerns in this regard are quite evident. He sees in this situation a major deficit of the Christian community compared to the Muslim one and tries to address the



principle, solely based on considerations related to rejecting anything that contradicts commonly assumed ideas and dogmas, would certainly constitute an unforgivable mistake for Christians, a mistake that could cost the community dearly. This is one of the things that Roger Bacon drew attention to, and he did so using, albeit in a very subtle and ingenious way, the doctrinal tools of sceptical philosophers. Aenesidemus himself specified in his theory of modes that the world and life most often follow an objective course and are not stabilized based on personal ideas and viewpoints: "An object of the same shape is made to appear different by differences in the mirrors reflecting it."³³ or "Obviously the same thing is regarded by some as just and by others as unjust, or as good by some and bad by others."³⁴ For a more accurate perspective on the world and life, there must be openness to contrary viewpoints.

The second reference considered relative to the views of sceptical philosophers, and translated in the present analysis through the lens of Bacon's preference for experimental science, proves to be also relevant to the issue at hand. Roger Bacon's gnoseological perspective is based primarily on empiricism. *Doctor Mirabilis* seems to have had the „audacity” to challenge the Aristotelian doctrine that implied the subordination of experience to reason. In his view, rational knowledge should be based on experience, validated by it, and not the other way around³⁵. This perspective can offer serious hermeneutical bridges in arguing that the subsequent consolidation of philosophical positivism could have been achieved based on the association with the probabilistic scepticism patented by the doctrine of Carneades of Cyrene. The exclusive reference to facts, to natural laws understood here as ascertainable and uncontradicted experiences owe a great deal to the sceptical theory, more precisely to the third attitudinal degree concerning τὸ πιθανόν, understood as a pragmatic guiding principle: a thing can be *probable, empirically verifiable, and uncontradicted*. Roger Bacon was perhaps, in such a context, a „relay” thinker, through whom epistemological attitudes of this kind may be transmitted to posterity, particularly to the scientific community. He practically opened a new direction of research in this regard, a direction that imposed radical paradigm shifts, relying especially on what was interpreted as „experiential-experimental” philosophy³⁶. This „new” method of philosophy, understood by the Franciscan friar as an authentic *scientia experimentalis*, attempted to establish rules for a science of nature that would bring considerable benefits to humanity in various fields such as politics, morality, or military technique³⁷. The fourth book of *Opus maius*, *Mathematics*, represents a developed plea by Bacon regarding his trust in the methods of science.

For Roger Bacon, certainty is regarded as a vice, and uncertainty as a virtue³⁸, a fact that draws attention to the real openness of this medieval theologian in accepting philosophical scepticism. *Doctor Mirabilis* encouraged with great dedication, as we have specified in the first section of this study, polemical attitudes towards the principles accepted based on defective and unworthy authorities, influences of custom, and popular prejudice. Roger Bacon even makes a hierarchy of these principles and, more precisely, of their negative influence that resides in determining error:

”However little authority may be depended upon, it possesses, nevertheless, a name of honor, and habit is more strongly inducive to error than authority; but popular prejudice is more forceful than either of them. For authority merely entices, habit binds, popular opinion makes men obstinate and confirms them in their obstinacy.”³⁹

The fact that Roger Bacon condemned such attitudes can be argued based on the text fragment from *Opus maius*, where the theologian exposes, not without a subtle note of irony, the reasoning by which people guide themselves when making firm decisions without any critical thinking: „For people without distinction draw the same conclusion from three arguments, than which none could be worse, namely, for this the authority of our predecessors is adduced, this is the custom, this is the common belief;

issue. Bacon was practically convinced that if the Church did not respond with the same weapons to such threats, its chance of survival would be completely lost. See Amanda Power. *Roger Bacon and the Defence of Christendom*, pp. 203-204.

³³ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, ed. cit., p. 495.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 495-497.

³⁵ On this, see Jeremiah Hackett, „Roger Bacon”, in Jorge J.E. Gracia & Timothy B. Noone, *A Companion to Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2002, p. 623 or Eileen C. Sweeney, „New Standards for Certainty: Early Receptions of Aristotle's Posterior Analytics”, p. 48.

³⁶ Jeremiah Hackett, „Roger Bacon”, ed. cit., p. 616.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 617.

³⁸ Eileen C. Sweeney, „New Standards for Certainty: Early Receptions of Aristotle's Posterior Analytics”, ed. cit., p. 44.

³⁹ Roger Bacon, *Opus maius*, ed. cit., p. 10.



hence correct.”⁴⁰ So here is a theoretical (and especially attitudinal!) presence of sceptical principles that emerge clearly in Roger Bacon’s thinking.

We thus note the three sources of cognitive error in Roger Bacon’s approach and their ideological concordance with the fifth reference from the *Theory of Modes of Doubt* elaborated by Aenesidemus of Knossos:

”The *fifth* mode is derived from customs, laws, belief in myths, compacts between nations and dogmatic assumptions. This class includes considerations with regard to things beautiful and ugly, true and false, good and bad, with regard to the gods, and with regard to the coming into being and the passing away of the world of phenomena.”⁴¹

The ideas presented in this text fragment provide very tangible proof of the convergence between Roger Bacon’s way of thinking and ancient philosophical scepticism.

CONCLUSIONS

The main goal assumed by Roger Bacon would have been to revitalize Western Christianity, which was threatened at the time by numerous dangers, such as the spread of various heresies, endless wars, or permanent tensions within the clerical institution and European society. Amanda Power attempts to prove this by referring to Roger Bacon’s most important writing:

„The point of the *Opus maius* was to instruct the papacy on how the Church and the community of Christendom might be properly organised and equipped to carry out their essential tasks on earth. These tasks were the strengthening of Christian society through various reforms and the improvement of its position in relation to the rest of the world so that it would have the power to defend itself and to spread the true faith among the nations, leading as many people as possible to salvation.”⁴²

Doctor Mirabilis’ approaches were recognized by his way of thinking as possible solutions to the issues that threatened so concretely the destiny of the Christian community at that time. The dedication with which Roger Bacon attempted to implement them was more than guaranteed, and the price he paid for this dedication was by no means trivial. In the last years of his life, *Doctor Mirabilis* did not appear to have an ideal relationship with his superiors. There are some testimonies left in his writings regarding this matter:

„In his writings of the late 1260s, as we will see, he expressed discontent with the state of his order and complained of difficulties with his superiors. He was severely critical of some of the scholars among the brethren. There appears to be little explicit praise of the order to set against the negativity.”⁴³

The problems seem to have started for Roger Bacon from the moment he attended the Council of 1245, where Pope Innocent IV declared the following phenomena as terrible afflictions of Christianity: the moral corruption of the clergy and the laity, the threat of the Crusader states by the Muslims, the schism between the Greek and Catholic churches, the Mongol invasion, and disputes with the emperor⁴⁴. Deciding to make it his primary goal to try to solve all these problems, Roger Bacon thus assumed the mission of strengthening Christianity by spreading throughout its realm the virtues of humility, poverty, obedience, and love. To these, he added his own philosophical vision, whose peculiarities materialized especially through openness to any opinion that could contradict the common view of the community, confidence in the progress of science, and overcoming unjustified dogmatism. All these methods obviously could not be easily accepted. The conservatism of Christian ideology, a principle considered probably much more valuable at that time in relation to the innovative, revolutionary, and too risky methods proposed by Bacon, could not accommodate his way of thinking as he would have liked. *Doctor Mirabilis* seems to have been quite close to Pope Clement IV and communicated to him the results of his research and, implicitly, his somewhat controversial ideas. However, the support that was supposed to come from the Pope was not up to expectations, so Roger Bacon faced many problems in his theological career, having to endure the consequences of his reformist proposals alone. Indeed, the mistakes attributed to him by the authorities of Christian ideology were quite serious. In such a register, we could note, for example, the criticism from a certain Richard Rufus of Cornwall, an influential figure and disciple of the mystic Bonaventure, the possible writing of a treatise on alchemy (*De leone viridi*), the

⁴⁰ Roger Bacon, *Opus maius*, ed. cit., p. 4.

⁴¹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, ed. cit., p. 495.

⁴² Amanda Power, *Roger Bacon and the Defence of Christendom*, ed. cit., p. 125.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 41.



doctrinal promotion of „suspect novelties”, or the recommendation of using magic or Antichrist's techniques to cleanse the Church of sinners⁴⁵. Probably, concerning all these, adherence to the principles of philosophical scepticism might not have constituted precisely a sin so condemnable committed by Roger Bacon concerning Christian ideology. As for the possible effects of Baconian approaches presented in the context of this study, we believe that the history of European civilization after the time of *Doctor Mirabilis* can speak for itself, and very honestly indeed.

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