Hieronymus Hirnhaim’s *De typho generis humani* (1676) and Scepticism about Human Learning

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This paper focuses on scholarly vices in early modern discussions and specifically in the writings of one seventeenth-century polemicist, the philosopher Hieronymus Hirnhaim (1637–79), an abbot of the monastery of Strahov in Prague. Hirnhaim was one of the important, but now forgotten, religious critics of his day who endeavoured to invalidate the power of human reason in favour of religious faith. Hirnhaim criticised learning and scholarly sins from the Christian and sceptical perspectives. He declared that all human knowledge was uncertain and harmful, since it gave rise to many vices and did not contribute to salvation. He composed a major polemical work on a humanity swollen with pride, *De typho generis humani* (1676), which has been called one of the most provocative publications of the seventeenth century and one of the most violent attacks on secular science. Hirnhaim’s work is noteworthy, because it is exceptionally rich in images and polemical commonplaces which criticise the vices of learning. Furthermore, it must be read as a text that functions as part of the wider contemporary discussion on scholarly vices. A sceptic who expressed contempt for human knowledge and who declared that man should seek knowledge only from God and revelation, Hirnhaim questioned the self-sufficiency of the human mind and claimed that learning was evil unless it was supported by virtue. For him, revelation from God and an internal spiritual light were the only foundations of human knowledge.


2 See Robert J.W. Evans, *The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy, 1550–1700* (London, 1979), 329. The word scepticism is used here in a broad sense, referring to the weakness of the human intellect. Hirnhaim does not refer to ancient Academic scepticism (Sextus Empiricus or others), and his sceptical views rely mainly on Augustine and later sources. On scepticism, see, e.g., Gianni Paganini and José R. Maia Neto, eds., *Renaissance Scepticisms* (Dordrecht, 2009).
Although Hirnhaim was a Catholic, his work was frequently quoted by Protestant scholars, such as the Lutheran pastor and scholar from Augsburg, Gottlieb Spitzel (1639–91), who composed several comprehensive volumes on the happy and the unhappy scholar. Hirnhaim’s work in turn drew on abundant quotations from the Roman Stoics, the Church Fathers – Augustine in particular – and many other Christian, scholastic and mystical writers.

As Hirnhaim himself mentioned on the title page, *De typho generis humani* was written as a consolation for the unlearned and a warning to the learned ("idiotis in solatium, doctis in cautelam"). Referring to Aristarchus, Hirnhaim deplored the scarcity of the unlearned in his day, when everyone had a passion for education; if in antiquity there had been only seven wise men, now it was difficult to find seven “idiotae.” Even those to whom nature and God had given no qualifications whatsoever for intellectual work were wasting time on literary studies, and their vain efforts resulted in incurable insanity. Hirnhaim attacked secular science, comparing it to the Sphinx of Thebes, which posed unsolvable riddles to passersby. The Sphinx beguiled men with her alluring female figure, but once she caught their attention, she lashed them with her dragon’s tail and tore them to pieces with her lion’s claws. The Sphinx sat on a high cliff; this love of high places, together with her wings, indicated pride and presumption. Several chapters of Hirnhaim’s book closed with pessimistic anagrams of the word *scientia*: “scientia iis necat,” “scientia ait nesci,” and “scientia iste cain.” He also cleverly observed that the word *scientia* was easily corrupted into *iacentis*, “of the braggart.”

Hirnhaim’s polemical book had a strong anti-scholastic tendency. He undermined trust in human reason, because in his view the human mind was purely receptive and based its judgements on sense perceptions, which were unreliable. In the first half of his volume Hirnhaim dealt with the unreliability of sense perceptions and human reason. He was particularly pessimistic about the human capacity to know and the ability of science to explain the causes of such natural phenomena as sympathy, antipathy, magnetism or electricity. His book examined miracles that surpassed human understanding, even though they had natural causes: How can one explain why the flowers of the orchid imitate the shapes of living creatures – humans, birds and dolphins? How could a little fish called the remora stop a ship from sailing or pull it against the wind? Hirnhaim’s scepticism was evident in his words, namely that it was

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3 Hieronymus Hirnhaim, *De typho generis humani tractatus brevis* (Prague, 1676), 8: “Olim vixerunt septem sapientes, nunc haud facile totidem invenias Idiotas.”
4 Ibid., 251–2.
5 Ibid., 237.