The Intellect Naturalized: Roger Bacon on the Existence of Corporeal Species within the Intellect

Yael Raizman-Kedar*
University of Haifa

Abstract
In this paper I challenge the claim that Bacon considered the operation of species as limited to the physical and sensory levels and demonstrate that in his view, the very same species issued by physical objects operate within the intellect as well. I argue that in Bacon the concept of illumination plays a secondary role in the acquisition of knowledge, and that he regarded innate knowledge as dispositional and confused. What was left as the main channel through which knowledge is gained were species received through the senses. I argue that according to Bacon these species, representing their agents in essence, definition and operation, arrive in the intellect without undergoing a complete abstraction from matter and while still retaining the character of agents acting naturally. In this way Bacon sets the intellect as separate from the natural world not in any essential way, but rather as it were in degree, thus supplying a theoretical justification for the ability to access and know nature.

Keywords
Roger Bacon, species, intellect, abstraction, illumination

The works that Bacon sent to Clement IV in 1267, with the ambitious goal of proposing a thorough revision of Christian learning, present the reader with a seemingly contradictory picture.¹ On the
one hand, they comprise a detailed and well-elaborated account of sense perception; yet on the other hand, they display a profound belief in the crucial role of divine illumination in human knowledge.

In trying to make sense of Bacon’s understanding of how the human mind attains knowledge of the natural world, some modern interpreters have chosen to lay stress on the so-called “mystical” aspects of Bacon’s thought. French and Cunningham, for instance, call attention to Bacon’s “illuminationist” understanding of how knowledge and wisdom are acquired. They stress the primacy of the “mystical intellectual grasp of things” in his writings and, out of loyalty to their thesis that Bacon’s thought is to be understood first and foremost as the philosophy of a Franciscan friar, dub Bacon a “Dionysian.” According to their description, “Bacon takes the Aristotelian account of how perception and understanding work and transforms it, without comment, into an essentially Neo-Platonist one.” Maurer, too, is convinced that Bacon thought science was acquired through an inner illumination, by which God revealed the principles of philosophy, and which would afterwards be completed by experience. Maurer interprets Bacon’s return to Oxford after his Parisian period, during which he lectured on Aristotle, as a turn away from scholasticism towards Augustine and his ideal of wisdom. In discussing Bacon’s earlier works, Crowley notes the secondary role played by illumination and stresses that Bacon there adheres to the teachings of Aristotle and never consciously departs

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1) Roger French and Andrew Cunningham, Before Science: The Invention of the Friars’ Natural Philosophy (Brookfield, Vermont, 1996), 243.
2) Ibid., 239. Such a label runs counter to the rarity of references to Dionysius in Bacon’s writings.
3) Ibid., 239.
4) Ibid., 239.
5) Armand A. Maurer, Medieval Philosophy (New York, 1962), 129-130.
6) Ibid., 127.