Bacon, Aristotle (and all the others) on Natural Inferential Signs

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Introduction

We have no commentary on Aristotle’s logical works written by Roger Bacon. In particular, we have no commentary on Prior Analytics II 27, that would be a very good starting point for an article on Bacon and Aristotle on natural signs. Bacon’s reflections on signs, language and the disciplines of the Trivium, however, are scattered in many of his extant works. In particular, his Summulae dialectics (ca. 1250),1 the newly discovered part of the Opus maius devoted to signs (1267),2 and his late Compendium studii theologiae3 are the best witnesses of Bacon’s attitude towards Aristotle, and all his other sources, on this subject.

In recent literature, a leading role in the development of medieval semiotics has been attributed to Bacon; furthermore, the doctrinal background from which he worked out his theories has been recently highlighted. Thanks to the studies of Alain de Libera4 and Irène Rosier,5 in

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particular, Bacon’s eclecticism and originality came fully to light. Th.S. Maloney, revising a contribution by A. de Libera on the summulist form, acknowledged that Bacon’s attitude towards the *Corpus aristotelicum*, as shown in his *Sumule dialectics*, “results in a less global reorganization” of its *ordo disciplinae* as compared to Sherwood’s: the inclusion in Bacon’s treatise of a consideration of the categories, the placement given to the properties of terms (between the tracts on proposition and on syllogisms), and the treatment of fallacies under the heading of *syllogismus peccans in materia* show that “Bacon was concerned to write a work in greater harmony with the Corpus than Sherwood.” In this paper, I will point out that Bacon’s theory of natural inferential signification is in deep agreement with Aristotle’s, but it is also the result of a convergence of different influences that shows his fundamental eclecticism.

1. *Bacon’s definitions of “sign”*

Bacon’s semiotics and definition of sign do not come out of the blue. They originate as a reaction to common opinions or as a conflation of disparate sources. Before Bacon it was not frequent to apply the notion of sign to logical or grammatical matter. Furthermore, when it was used, it had a derogatory connotation: on one hand it served the purpose of distinguishing dialectic (or *scientia Topicorum*) from the science of demonstration, and assigned to the former a weaker cognitive status (*opinio et probabilitas*), on the other hand it could give dialectic a higher stance when compared to rhetoric. As will be clearer in what follows (par. 2),

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8 This paragraph partially coincides with the first chapter of C. Marmo, *Semiotica e linguaggio nella Scolastica: Parigi, Bologna, Erfurt 1270-1330. La semiotica dei Modisti*, Roma 1994.
9 “Ista scientia (sicl. Topicorum) dicitur inuentiua, co quod docet inuenire medium per signa exteriora, id est per locos, que quidem signa sunt fallibilia; sicut si aliquis inuenit aliquid rubrum <et> propter signum rubrum credit se inuenisse aurum, et hoc per signa exteriora, similiter est de ista scientia que procedit secundum opinionem et probabilatem; et propter hoc ista scientia dicitur esse inueniua. Set scientiia//demonstratiua et Priorum dicitur resoluticia et non inuentiua, quamuis doceat inuenire medium, quia non docet ipsum inuenire per signa exteriora, set per causas necessarias.” (Nicholas of Paris, *Notule super librum Topicorum Boethii*, I, ms. München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, clm 14460, f. 152rv).
10 “Differens modus et processus ipsi rectoris facit ipsum habere proprios locos, quia enim intendit persuadere, quod scilicet non potest facere per media necessaria, set per signa que fallibilia sunt, que quidem consistunt circa singularem personam et negotium;