



## 23<sup>rd</sup> World Congress of Philosophy (WCP 2013)

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School of Philosophy, National & Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

### Abstract & Paper Submission Form

(All fields marked with \* should be completed and written in English to avoid technical problems)

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2) PAPER TITLE (Please note that the duration of speaking time is 20' minutes)

Orpheus and “second nature” in Francis Bacon

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#### 4) ABSTRACT (a maximum of 200 words-keywords are not included)

While Francis Bacon's interpretations of mythological figures such as those of Prometheus, Proteus and Vulcan have received quite a bit of attention by scholars, the myth of Orpheus shows a wealth of meanings almost entirely still to be explored. In particular we argue that Aristotle's ethical notion of "second nature" plays a role in how Bacon frames this myth. By parallel reading *De Augmentis scientiarum*, I, 41 and *De Sapientia Veterum*, 11, it becomes evident that Bacon 1) extends to animals the notion of "altera natura", by 2) showing the civilizing effects of order and harmony and 3) assigns to moral and civil philosophy the political function of letting men's second nature emerge as an attitude to be pacific and social. In doing so he 4) subscribes to a cyclical view of the motion of history, menaced by the recurring falls in barbarian times. Harmony set by philosophy seems therefore to possess a binding power (*vinculum*) that is both fragile, compelling and liberating: the underlying concept of "nature bound" helps explaining why in Orpheus' principle of harmony Bacon can trace the activity of both natural and moral philosophy.

#### 5) PAPER (a maximum of 1800 words)

### Orpheus and "second nature" in Francis Bacon

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Francis Bacon's interpretations of mythological figures, expounded in his work *De sapientia veterum* (1609), have been used by scholars in the last decades to encapsulate fundamental concepts of his thought, conveyed by recurring to images taken from Greek mythology. So that, just to make few examples, Bacon's mission toward establishing scientific knowledge has been deemed effect of "Promethean ambitions" (see: Newman), but be the pursuit a Promethean one, the struggle with nature to uncover its secret laws lays under the spell of wrestling with Proteus, regenerating as he is in shapes and ways

always new (see: Pesic). Insights into Bacon's critical assessment of alchemy have been gathered by his treatment of Vulcan (see: Linden; Debus) and in particular by its relationship with Minerva (see: Deleule, 1985). If the Sphinx has been considered a good case-study to illustrate how Bacon deals with emblems (see: Hutton), this figure has also been put on the same level as Prometheus, Atalanta, Erichthonius and Orpheus, inasmuch they all serve the purpose to indicate the aim of philosophy (see: Rossi). However, it has been argued, the model for Bacon's notion of science, much better than in Prometheus, is rather to be found in Orpheus (see: Stephens) for the way this figure embodies the aim of science towards the "prolongation of life" (see Fattori's paper at Warburg Institute Symposium June 2010; Deleule 2012). Not just that: Orpheus conquers new spheres of reality illustrating the analogy between science and exploration (see: Till), and Bacon himself purportedly identifies with this figure (see: Sewell), and attributes great importance to the civilising role of music (see: Luppi and Roche).

Rather than adhering to the customary views that consider Bacon's interpretation of myths as a mere strategy of style (see: Stephens; Lewis), here we choose to focus on the myth of Orpheus in order to discuss which relationship binds natural and moral philosophy together according to Bacon. We go therefore beyond the somewhat simplistic conclusion of a superiority of natural philosophy grounded on this myth (see: Garner), and in particular we aim to show that the notion of "second nature" (*altera natura*), drawn from the Aristotelian ethical tradition, plays a role in how Bacon frames this myth and therefore helps explaining the underlying unity and common pursuit of both natural and moral philosophy. Relevant to our analysis are both the narrative of the myth itself as presented in DSV, 11 and the references to Orpheus' activity in AL, I and DAS, I, 41.

In DSV, Bacon articulates his interpretation of Orpheus around three main aspects, dealing in the first place with the exposition of three events reported by the mytographical tradition of Orpheus, then in the second place going back to illustrating their individual interpretations. But, before that, a preliminary warning introduces us to this myth, highlighting how "the story of Orpheus [...] seems meant for a representation of universal Philosophy", as this figure has been considered a "master of all harmony" and therefore "may pass by an easy metaphor for philosophy personified". This introduction enables us to consider the common root and the motives of unity that are to be found between the two aspects of philosophy here considered, that is to say natural philosophy on one side, and moral and civil philosophy on the other side. Natural philosophy is the key to interpret the first event reported by Bacon, namely Orpheus' descent to Hell to recover Eurydice, as an instance of the attempt aimed at "restitution and renovation of things corruptible, and [...] the conservation of bodies in the state in which they are, and the retardation of dissolution and putrefaction". Similarly the operations of moral philosophy are conveyed in the second event selected by Bacon, that is Orpheus' singing to wild beasts and the woods (or "Orpheus' Theatre" as Bacon refers to this

scene in AL, I and DAS, I, 41). Moral philosophy can therefore engage her “powers of persuasion and eloquence to insinuate into men’s minds the love of virtue and equity and peace”. These are effects of an acquired second nature (*altera natura*) that “upon recognition of the inevitable necessity of death sets men upon seeking immortality by merit”, science and natural philosophy being one of the best possible results of such a quest for immortality.

The civilizing effects of order and harmony due to the role of philosophy embodied by the singing ability of Orpheus are not at all stable acquisitions, though. As the third event shows, Orpheus is torn to pieces by the Thracian women, the attributed allegorical meaning hinting at the menace of “a season of barbarism” setting in, dispelling every trace of civilisation “like planks from a shipwreck”, till when “the appointed vicissitude of things” will allow “works of wisdom” to “break out and issue forth again, perhaps among other nations, and not in the places where they were before”. Quite interestingly philosophy is considered with respect of harmony as the sole antagonist struggling against a fall into barbarianism, in a confrontation that seems unequal and that sees philosophy falling prey to the return of men “to the depraved conditions of their nature”. Bacon assigns therefore to moral and civil philosophy the political function of letting men’s second nature emerge as an attitude to be social and pacific, enabled only by establishing a moral bond keeping passions and appetites under check. His subscribing to a cyclical view of the motion of history, menaced as it is by the recurring fall in barbarian times, is justified by the interplay between the original human nature, “full of savage and unreclaimed desires, of profit, of lust, of revenge” (DAS, I, 41) and the second nature developed thanks to the work of philosophy and namely thanks “to precepts, to laws, to religion, sweetly touched with eloquence and persuasion of books, of sermons, of harangues, so long is society and peace maintained”.

The ethical notion of “second nature” developed by the Aristotelian tradition and applied only to the world of human customs is broadened by Bacon and extended to include minerals, vegetables, animals, as well as human beings. Together with Vulcan and Atalanta, Orpheus becomes therefore the emblem of this ability to enhance nature to its second grade level. It is Orpheus’s song that “moved the woods and the very stones”, attracting wild beasts and making them put off their ferocious nature and it is for natural philosophy to uncover by means of experiments and work of art the second nature of natural phenomena, binding them to show their form and higher true nature. Harmony set by universal (both natural and moral) philosophy seems therefore to possess a binding power (*vinculum*) that is at once fragile, compelling and liberating: the underlying concept of “nature bound” (see: Weeks) helps explaining why Bacon can trace back the activity of both natural and moral philosophy to Orpheus’ principle of harmony. This solution implicitly addresses the problem of the relationship between necessity of nature and the realm of possibility and human freedom, showing that, in Bacon’s view, while human beings enjoy more “latitude” in their development compared to beings that display a much lesser one (DAS. VII, 3), *vinculum*

which originates from order and harmony is key in both cases to unlocking their “second nature”, and mutually such a developed “second nature” reinforces and is conducive to harmony.

Abbreviation list of Bacon's Works:

AL= Of the Advancement of Learning

DAS= De augmentis scientiarum

DSV= De sapientia veterum

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