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**Francis Bacon on Self-Care, Divination, and the Nature–Fortune Distinction**

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# Abstract

In presenting self-preservation as the most general law of nature, set at the summit of the structure of the natural world, Francis Bacon characterized the universal appe- tite for self-preservation as an innate instinct which, in the case of living beings, is primarily associated with the emotion of fear. Bacon’s philosophy offers several tech- niques of self-care to manage the fear of accidents of fortune from which the existence and well-being of the self is under constant threat. This article reconstructs Bacon’s treatment of divinatory arts and their contributions to self-care. We will explore how he adopts traditional divinatory arts and reforms them: oneirocritics, physiognomy, and astrology. We will contend that Bacon’s approach to divinatory arts as techniques for self-care and the management of fortune shows some salient points shared with his natural philosophy: in both cases, the approach is hermeneutical, with the goal of exerting human power. With regard both to nature and to fortune, however, our power to modify the state of things extends only so far. The range of decisions we can make is not unlimited but encompasses only what is “in our power,” that is, what depends on us.

***Peter Groen***

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# Keywords

Francis Bacon – self-preservation – self-care – nature – fortune – divination – physiognomy – interpretation of dreams – astrology

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*El claro azar o las secretas leyes*

*que rigen este sueño, mi destino …*

Jorge Luis Borges, “Oda compuesta en 1960”

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# 1 Self-Care and the ‘Ministration’ of Nature and Fortune

Self-preservation lies at the basis of Francis Bacon’s theory of material appe- tites and permeates several branches of his philosophy.1 He considers the drive to self-preservation a universal appetite in animate and inanimate beings.2 In human beings this drive manifests itself as an innate instinct imprinted in the soul by God and is associated principally with two emotions: fear and pleasure. The pleasure linked to self-preservation consists in the self’s enjoyment of its own nature and of that which is agreeable to it, like food or sexual intercourse.3 Fear arises from those threats that put life at risk and has as its consequence active behavior tending towards self-protection and self-care.4 Around these two basic emotions, the drive to self-preservation in human beings clears the way for the development of an *ars vivendi*. Within this context, Bacon delin- eates techniques for the *cultura animi*, medical hygiene, bodily therapy, pro- longation of life, etc.5

1. For Bacon’s works, I will refer to Francis Bacon, *The Oxford Francis Bacon* (Oxford, 1996– onwards), (hereafter: OFB), and to *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. James Spedding, Robert L. Ellis and Douglas D. Heath, 14 vols. (London, 1857–1874) (hereafter: SEH).
2. Silvia Manzo, “The Ethics of Motion: Self-Preservation, Preservation of the Whole, and the ‘Double Nature of the Good’ in Francis Bacon,” in *Francis Bacon on Motion and Power*, ed. Guido Giglioni, James Lancaster, Sorana Corneanu and Dana Jalobeanu (Dordrecht, 2016), 175–200.
3. Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning* (OFB IV 141).
4. Bacon, *De sapientia veterum* (SEH VI 639): “nature had endowed all living beings with fear and dread, through which they preserve their life and being, and avoid and drive away impending ills.” See also *De augmentis scientiarum* (SEH IV 528).
5. See Sorana Corneanu, *Regimens of the Mind: Boyle, Locke, and the Early Modern* Cultura Animi *Tradition* (Chicago, IL, 2011); Matthew Sharpe, “Georgics of the Mind and the Architecture of Fortune: Francis Bacon’s Therapeutic Ethics,” *Philosophical Papers*, 43 (2014), 89–121; Guido Giglioni, “Medicine of the Mind in Early Modern Philosophy,” in *The Routledge Handbook of the Stoic Tradition*, ed. John Sellars (New York, 2016), 189–203; Leonel Toledo Marín and

The fear derived from the instinct of self-preservation is sharpened by anxi- ety about the unknown and the hidden. Divination is a technique serving to manage this anxiety by disclosing the occult states and tendencies relevant to well-being in the present, and by foretelling future events.6 If properly under- stood and practiced, divinatory arts can be efficient tools to manage the acci- dents of fortune. As was usual in his day, the term “fortune” is employed by Bacon to designate the series of events that God’s providence has designed with respect to human affairs.7 It is not confined to the life of great and power- ful persons like monarchs and prelates, or to great communities like states and commonwealths; it also reaches ordinary people.8

Bacon’s understanding of fortune rests on ideas very widespread in the Renaissance.9 The Stoic tradition, going back to Cicero, had introduced the difference between virtue (*virtus*) and fortune *( fortuna)*. What human beings have by fortune are gifts depending on external factors like wealth, health, and their place and time of birth. By contrast, the virtue of a person depends on the individual, and therefore can be judged toward personal merit. In the

Carmen Silva, “Francis Bacon y las terapias renacentistas del alma,” *Revista de filosofía.*

*Diánoia*, 65 (2020), 73–107.

1. As far as I know, the only study addressing Bacon’s view of divination at length is Andrew P. Langman, “The Future Now: Chance, Time and Natural Divination in the Thought of Francis Bacon,” in *The Uses of the Future in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Andrea Brady and Emily Butterworth (London, 2009), 142–155.
2. Bacon, *Advancement of Learning* (OFB IV 52).
3. For general studies on the notion of fortune, see Vincent Cioffari, “Fortune, Fate and Chance,” in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas. Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, 4 vols., ed. Philip Wiener (New York, 1973), 2: 225–236; Antonino Poppi, “Fate, Fortune, Providence and Human Freedom,” in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. Charles Schmitt, Quentin Skinner, Eckhard Kessler and Jill Kraye (Cambridge, 1988), 641–667; Christoph Lüthy and Carla R. Palmerino, “Conceptual and Historical Reflections on Chance (and Related Concepts),” in *The Challenge of Chance*, ed. Klaas Landsman and Ellen van Wolde (Cham, 2016), 9–47; Franziska Rhelinghaus, “Farewell to Fortuna – Turning towards Fatum: The Transformation of Fate Conceptions in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” in *The End of Fortuna and the Rise of Modernity*, ed. Arndt Brendecke and Peter Vogt (Oldenburg, 2017), 151–174.
4. On Bacon’s notion of fortune and its Stoic and Machiavellian influences, see Rexmond C. Cochrane, “Francis Bacon and the Architect of Fortune,” *Studies in the Renaissance*, 5 (1958), 176–195; Harrold B. White, *Peace among the Willows: The Political Philosophy of Francis Bacon* (The Hague, 1968), ch. 2; John Tinkler, “Bacon and History,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Bacon*, ed. Markku Peltonen (Cambridge, 1996), 232–258; Brian Vickers, “Introduction,” in *Francis Bacon: The History of the Reign of King Henry VII and Selected Works*, ed. Vickers (Cambridge, 1998); Heidi D. Studer, “‘Strange Fire at the Altar of the Lord’: Francis Bacon on Human Nature,” *The Review of Politics*, 65 (2003), 209–236; James Lancaster, “Francis Bacon on the Moral and Political Character of the Universe,” in Giglioni et al., *Francis Bacon on Motion and Power*, 238–242.

Renaissance, an important distinction between virtue and fortune became a central topic of political philosophy owing to the work of Niccolò Machiavelli. The human philosophy of Bacon endorses the moral and political dimensions of fortune involved in these ideas.

As with the divine design for the natural order of things, the events of fortune, according to Bacon, are fulfilled by necessity. The order of nature is formed by a chain of natural causes, like “the famous chain” that was said to be “fastened to the foot of Jupiter’s throne.”10 There is nothing so small that has no cause, nor anything so great that does not depend on another, according to a fixed law (*certa lege*). Bacon considers the fate of individuals to be governed by a causal chain, to the point of identifying fate with nature itself: it is “the nature of things, that reduces these separate individuals to such various conditions; insomuch that the chain of nature and the thread of the Fates [Parcae] are (so far as individuals are concerned) the same thing.” Just as God’s plans are hid- den behind what is apparent to the naked eye, Bacon asserts that the “destinies of things” – like the cave-dwelling Parcae – are hidden and not seen in the light of day.11 God’s wonderful providence “boweth things vnto his will, and hangeth great weights upon small wires.”12

On account of our ignorance, we judge that some events (like the birth of monsters and other irregular, extraordinary happenings) are random or causeless. None of these events, however, escape from the divine plan but are fully involved in it: neither the laws of nature nor the events of fortune can be changed or eliminated. This tenet explains why Bacon’s approach to for- tune in human philosophy resembles his approach to the nature of things in natural philosophy. Famously, he claims that “nature can only be overcome by being obeyed.”13 That means that nature can be mastered and transformed by science only once it has been investigated and known. To get the desired transformations of bodies, it is necessary to “interpret nature” and discover its laws.14 In addition, the proper interpretation of nature requires the expurga- tion of prejudices and tendencies of diverse sorts – the idols of the mind – that

1. Bacon, *De augmentis scientiarum* (SEH I 437; IV 322).
2. Bacon, *De augmentis scientiarum* (SEH I 524; IV 322); *De sapientia veterum* (SEH VI 637). Bacon’s interpretation of the Parcae draws on Cicero, *De divinatione*, 1 lv 125–126.
3. Bacon, *History of King Henry* VII (OFB VIII 132).
4. Bacon, *Distributio operis* (OFB XI 44–45): “Neque enim vllae vires Causarum catenam soluere aut perfringere possint; neque Natura aliter quam parendo vincitur.” See Bacon, *Novum organum*, I, 52 (OFB XI 64). Cochrane, “Francis Bacon and the Architect of Fortune,” 186, has briefly suggested a parallel between nature and fortune in Bacon.
5. On Bacon’s notion of interpretation of nature, see Richard Serjeantson, “Francis Bacon and the ‘Interpretation of Nature’ in the Late Renaissance,” *Isis*, 105 (2014), 681–705.

obstruct the acquisition of knowledge. This expurgation entails a permanent self-control of the mind’s operations and emotions, so that Bacon’s method can be seen as a curative regimen to take care of the mind’s distempers.15

Hermeneutics does not imply *per se* an automatic modification of nature. The results obtained from the interpretation of nature and fortune are the basis from which different ways of intervention on bodies or the self can take place. Our operative power for transforming nature is enacted only after we reach an understanding of nature by properly interpreting it. However, opera- tive science has limits: “no powers can loosen or break the chain of causes.”16 Operative science can neither change nor eliminate the *laws of properties* – in Bacon’s terms, *the forms or laws of simple natures* – discovered by hermeneutical research. However, it can introduce properties into bodies according to human purposes and for human benefit. In other words, bodies in their ordinary state are endowed with certain properties; science can introduce new properties into them by reproducing the laws of nature. If one wants to make a cup of tea, one boils a kettle with water and introduces into the water the property of heat according to the law of heat. If one wants to get orange lemons, one can graft an orange-tree onto a lemon-branch with the aim of introducing the orange color in the fruit of the lemon-tree. These are different ways of modifying the constitution of bodies without changing the laws of bodily properties. In the case of boiled water, the change of temperature is just temporary; in the case of “orange lemons,” if our attempt is successful the result may be permanent. In both cases, we neither change the law of heat nor the law that determines the color orange; we change only the constitution of water and lemons. In this way, human power can alter and modify nature up to a certain point, that is, within the limits permitted by the laws of nature.

Within this view, the human being is described as “minister and interpreter of nature.”17 If the expression *minister naturae* echoes the medical and magical meaning of “servant” of nature, helping nature to bring forth its effects, Bacon’s original account of operative science transforms the work of assistance into

1. Bacon, *Novum Organum*, I, 38–67 (OFB XI 78–107). Corneanu, *Regimens of the Mind*, ch. 3.
2. Bacon, *Distributio operis* (OFB XI 44–45): “Neque enim vllae vires Causarum catenam soluere aut perfringere possint.”
3. Bacon, *Novum organum*, I, 1 (OFB XI 64): “Homo Naturae minister, & interpres, tantum facit & intelligit, quantum de Naturae Ordine, re vel mente observaverit, nec amplius scit, aut potest.” Bacon also uses the verb “administro” and “subministro” and its derivates in the same context. They can be rendered as “administer,” and “provide.” See, for example, Bacon, *De interpretatione naturae sententiae XII* (SEH III 785): “Dotes hae per se tenues et ineptae, rite tamen et ordine administratae tantum possunt, ut res a sensu et actu remo- tissimas judicio et usui coram sistant.”

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a work of command (*imperium, regnum*). In so doing, the human genus can partially restore its prelapsarian role, which had been lost as a result of Adam’s Fall.18 Hence, Bacon portrays the human being as a sort of demiurge who arranges a preexisting matter by superinducing properties according to laws already established by a superior God. In directing the laws of nature toward human self-care, the end-result is certainly “another nature.”19 Thus, human intervention in nature does not consist in a simple repetition of what has been discovered, but in a transformation of nature, regardless of the fact that the original laws of nature are left untouched. When nature is manipulated, it is partially changed. It becomes “another nature,” because it is different from its former state. It is *partially* changed: the laws and appetites that constitute the matter in question remain the same, yet the arrangement of bodily proper- ties is now different. This is the kind of “command” over nature that human beings can exert.

Just as the secret nature of things can be examined through “the interpreta- tion of nature,” the hidden events of fortune can be discovered, at least in part, by the interpretation of signs performed in divinatory arts. Having acquired a knowledge of fortune, human beings can be in a position to manage future events. Like the laws of nature, the events planned by God for the life of indi- viduals, societies, and states, can neither be changed nor eliminated. By fore- telling fortune, however, human beings are able to prepare themselves for taking advantage of good luck and minimizing the damaging consequences of bad luck. In this limited way, they can adapt themselves to fortune and thereby in some sense “master” fortune. Bacon is very explicit about the role that human power can play in this respect. As he states, specifically regarding the scope of medicine in the prolongation of life: “Human art and industry do not command [*imperant*] fate and nature *[ fatum et natura]*, but minister them.”20 Within this medical context, *natura* refers to the bodily complexion of the sub- ject, and *fortuna/fatum* means his/her luck (including the duration and the different circumstances across his/her life). One’s fortune can be administered but never commanded, because it never falls completely under our control. As we shall see, one tenet of Bacon’s human philosophy states that wisdom requires a clear awareness of what is in human power and what is not.

1. Bacon, *Novum organum*, I, 119 (OFB XI 194–195): “Naturae enim non imperatur, nisi par- endo.” Cf. ibid. II, 9 and 52. On Bacon’s idea of the command over nature in the context of the regimen of the mind, see Corneanu, *Regimens of the Mind*, 30–31.
2. On Bacon’s view of art and nature, and the notion of *altera natura*, see Sophie Weeks, “Francis Bacon and the Art–Nature Distinction,” *Ambix*, 54 (2007), 117–145.
3. Bacon, *De augmentis scientiarum* (SEH I 591; IV 384): “Ars autem et industria humana naturae et fato non imperant, sed subministrant.”

The “ministration” of fortune, however, does not amount to resignation and passive acceptance: it entails negotiation and paves the way to action and self-control. Bacon recalls a series of widespread adages, *Faber quisque fortunae suae, Sapiens dominabitur astris*, *Invia virtutis nulla est via*, and inter- prets them in a way that reconciles human free will with the plans of God’s providence.21 He conceives fortune in a non-deterministic sense.22 Only the past is absolutely inalterable. The present and future are, at least partially, in human hands: “That which is past, is gone, and Irrevocable; And wise Men have Enough to doe, with things present, and to come.”23 However, the power of human beings to manage the present and future state is not a power of full dominion but is limited by the conditions imposed by fortune. Hence, human beings should not believe that they are capable of taking *full* control of their lives and enterprises. Instead, they have to administrate their own fortune and make the most of it. That includes being prepared to deal with the events that will inexorably happen. “Providence” is a key feature of human nature as indicated by the etymology of the name “Prometheus,” the pagan figure repre- senting human nature.24 Accordingly, Bacon asserts that “the Mould of a Mans Fortune” is chiefly (but not entirely) in “his owne hands.”25 The counsels and precepts developed in human philosophy teach us to “prevail in fortune”, to “press”, “make”, and “raise” our fortune.26 This attitude requires an adaptation to circumstances: we should not vainly insist on trying to achieve our primary goals if fortune makes them impossible to obtain.

1. *Faber quisque fortunae suae* (“Everyone is the maker of his/her own fortune”): This adage is attributed to Appius Claudius in Plautus, *Trinummus*, II, ii, 82. Bacon mentions it *Essay of Fortune* (OFB XI 122), *Advancement of Learning* (OFB IV 164), etc. *Sapiens dominabi‑ tur astris* (“A wise person shall rule the stars”): This saying, which was widespread in astrological writings since the Middle Ages, was attributed to Ptolemy. Cf. *Advancement of Learning* (OFB IV 164). In his contribution to this special issue, “Astrological Self- government at the Fifteenth-century Court of Bourbon,” Steven Vanden Broecke exam- ines the meaning of this expression in late-medieval astrology. *Invidia virtutis nulla est via* (“There is no path closed to virtue”) is from Ovid, *Metamorphose*, XIV, 113. Cf. Bacon, *Advancement of Learning* (OFB IV 164).
2. Langman, “The Future Now,” 142–158, maintains that Bacon had a deterministic position in his early work (mainly in his *Meditationes sacrae*), which was later changed by the development of a scientific methodology that aimed to control chance. A discussion of this interpretation is beyond the scope of this present article. For further discussion on providence, fortune, and freedom within astrological and divinatory thought, see the con- tribution by Vanden Broecke and that by Regier in this special issue.
3. Bacon, *Essay of Revenge* (OFB XV 16).
4. Bacon, *De sapientia veterum* (SEH VI 670–1).
5. Bacon, *Essay of Fortune* (OFB XV 122).
6. Bacon, *Advancement of Learning* (OFB IV 163–165).

# 2 Interpreting Fortune: Divination

The connection between fortune and self-care becomes visible in two domains (among others) of Bacon’s human philosophy, that is, in the branch of philoso- phy that studies the human being. These domains are, first, the “culture of the mind,” devoted to the well-being of the embodied self, and secondly, the “archi- tecture of fortune,” engaged in the shaping of a good politician, skilled in the art of negotiation.27 Both pursuits rely ultimately on the general Stoic practical rule of distinguishing “what is in our power, and what not: for the one may be dealte by waye of alteration, but the other by waye of application onely.”28 As for the culture of the mind, this implies that, as the physician cannot com- mand the natural constitution of body nor the illness and accidents that affect it, individuals do not command their natural inclinations [*Nature in Men*] nor their fortune. While we can alter that which is in our power, “our work is limited and tied” by that which is not under our command. With regard to those factors beyond our control, we can only “accommodate” or “apply” our- selves. This means that we can exert “a wise and industrious sufferinge, which draweth, and contriueth vse and aduantage out of that which seemeth aduerse and contrary.”29 The same rules hold for the architecture of fortune. The mind must discern the occasion, be obedient to it and choose what is most passable. The highest political wisdom consists, therefore, in making “the wheels of our mind concentrique and voluble with the wheels of fortune.”30

Divinatory techniques are instrumental in the two facets of Baconian self- care: first, in the knowledge of oneself, which participates not only in the culture of the mind but also in the architecture of fortune; secondly, in the knowledge of others with whom one interacts in civil negotiation.31 Different kinds of divination can provide information about individual characters and about future events. While Bacon considered that the mantic arts – which are related to scientific branches – were potentially useful for the care of the self and of society, his overall evaluation of them was quite negative.32 This

1. For “culture of the mind,” see ibid. (OFB IV 146–155); for “architecutre of fortune,” see ibid. (OFB IV 163–181); *De augmentis scientiarum* (SEH I 770–792).
2. Ibid. (OFB IV 147). This maxim goes on the lines of ancient Stoicism, see Epictetus,

*Enchiridion*, i–vii.

1. Bacon, *Advancement of Learning* (OFB IV 147); see also *Essay of Nature in Men* (OFB XV 118–120).
2. Bacon, *Advancement of Learning* (OFB IV 172–173). Cf. *Essay of Fortune* (OFB XV 122–124).
3. On knowledge of self, see Bacon, *Advancement of Learning* (OFB IV 170–176); on knowl- edge of others, see ibid. (OFB IV 165–169).
4. See, for example, ibid. (OFB IV 104, 349); *De augmentis scientiarum* (SEH I 554, 607); *Essay of Prophecies* (OFB XV 112–114); *Novum organum*, I, 46 (OFB XI 83).

criticism is to be interpreted within the context of the examination and diagno- sis of the arts and sciences on which the *Instauratio magna* relies. Concerning divination, Bacon argues that it has noble ends but has been corrupted by superstition and imposture. A reform of divination was in order, so that its interpretation could be based on sound physical reasons.

While divination could prove highly beneficial to the care of the self and of society, its effects, by the same measure, were seen as potentially very damag- ing if wrongly practiced. Bacon was aware of the dynamic whereby forecasts made in the public sphere – of unfortunate events in the life of the monarch, of the outbreak of wars or famines, etc. – can themselves provoke political revolts and turmoil. He was certainly familiar with the political uses of astrol- ogy in English history. Since the late Middle Ages, the service of astrologers was sought out by the nobility, courtiers, and members of royal families with the aim of obtaining political advantage over their opponents. Astrological advice was sought when making decisions on matters such as the arrangement of tac- tical marriages, decisions on when to go to war, establish alliances, when to enact coronations, etc. Through their privileged knowledge of the stars, how- ever, astrologers could also find themselves accused of sorcery or of attempt- ing to hurt the interests of political leaders.33 Astrology continued to have an important presence in English society and politics during the Renaissance and flourished especially during the Interregnum. After the Restoration, however, its association with political radicalism and religious sectarianism led, by the end of the seventeenth century, to the precipitous decline of astrology as an intellectually respectable discipline. Parallel to this decline, astrology became more and more marginalized as a popular-cultural phenomenon.34

In view of their political import, and in order to secure social control, Bacon reckoned that prognostications ought to be surveilled by the law.35 In the “Essay of prophecies,” he relates some famous predictions in order both to criticize them and to uncover the mechanism that make them trusted and successful.

1. Hilary M. Carey, *Courting Disaster: Astrology at the English Court and University in the Later Middle Ages* (New York, 1992), 1–24.
2. Patrick Curry, *Prophecy and Power: Astrology in Early Modern England* (Princeton, NJ, 1989); Ann Geneva, *Astrology and the Seventeenth Century Mind: William Lilly and the Language of the Stars* (Manchester, 1995).
3. In the *Essay of Prophecies* (OFB XV 113–114), Bacon alludes to the condemnations against “phantastic prophecies” during the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward IV, and Elizabeth I. On astrology in English politics and society, see below; see also Vickers’s comments in Francis Bacon, *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford, 1996), 758. In *De sapientia veterum* (SEH VI 660, 736), Bacon recognizes, however, that “they are not so easily bridled by law as convicted by their own vanity.” (“Et certe si verum omnino dicendum est, non tam feliciter legum frenis coercentur, quam coarguuntur ex vanitate propria.”)

For instance, he mentions “the prediction of Regiomontanus” for the year 1588, which was thought to be fulfilled by the destruction of the Spanish Armada, and the nativity of King Henry II of France, which forecasted the latter’s kill- ing in a duel.36 Bacon criticizes them all, explaining that, behind their wide acceptance and success, the fundamental reason is credulity. This credulity he describes as an attitude constitutive of the human mind; being one of the idols of the tribe, credulity is the universal tendency by which the mind is more affected by affirmative cases than by negative cases, “so that a few times hitting or presence, countervails oft-times failing or absence.”37 In this way, the preju- dice in favor of the success of the prediction is always reinforced and is never undermined. Indeed, this idolatrous tendency is the “root of all superstitions”: as in astrological judgements, interpretation of dreams, omens, divine retribu- tions and things of that kind, where men – charmed by such vanities – notice predictions which come true but overlook and ignore the ones (though they are more common) which do not.38 Astrology, natural magic, and alchemy are the arts in which credulity reigns supreme, for they are more engaged with imagination than with reason. Besides, credulity or the “aptness to be decei- ued” complements “imposture” or the “delight in deceiuing.”39 Fake divina- tions are often intentionally produced after the “predicted events” have already happened. However, divinations are not all purposefully fake. Some amount to deductions from “probable conjectures” or “obscure traditions” that are then turned into prophecy.40

The opposite to credulity regarding fake divination is incredulity regard- ing true, credit-worthy divination. The way Bacon interprets Cassandra’s myth draws attention to the opportunity or *kairós* of divination and addresses a fundamental technique of ancient self-care: parrhesia.41 Bacon maintains

1. Bacon, *Essay of Prophecies* (OFB XV 113–114). On the famous predictions for the year 1588, see Wolfgang Hübner, “The Culture of Astrology from Ancient to Renaissance,” in *A Companion to Astrology in the Renaissance*, ed. Brendan Dooley (Leiden – Boston, MA, 2014), 30–36.
2. Bacon, *Advancement of Learning* (OFB IV 116).
3. Bacon, *Novum organum*, I, 46 (OFB XI 82–85): “Eadem ratio est fere omnis superstitio- nis, vt in Astrologicis, in Somnijs, Ominibus, Nemesibus & huiusmodi; in quibus homines delectati huiusmodi vanitatibus, aduertunt euentus, vbi implentur; ast vbi fallunt (licet multo frequentius) tamen negligunt & praetereunt.” Cf. Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, Ex. 988 (SEH II 668).
4. Bacon, *Advancement of Learning* (OFB IV 25–27); *De augmentis scientiarum* (SEH I 456–457).
5. Bacon, *Essay of Prophecies* (OFB XV 114). Cf. Seneca, *Medea*, 374–378.
6. Bacon, *De sapientia veterum* (SEH VI 629–630); see Michel Foucault, *Herméneutique du sujet: Cours au Collège de France, 1981–1982* (Paris, 2001).

that parrhesia involves not only frankness and liberty of speech but also an unfailing sense for the best moment at which a prognostication ought to be conveyed. A prediction pronounced at an inopportune time and circumstance produces disbelief. Moreover, its potential benefit gets lost especially when it announces unwanted news.

Having mentioned these warnings on the risks of credulity and the need for parrhesia, we can now move to Bacon’s positive doctrine of divination, which he addresses when analyzing the faculties of the human mind. Divination entails the discovery of present states of things and predictions of events to come. Bacon endorses the classic distinction between “natural” and “artificial” divination.42 Natural divination occurs internally, without the help of external signs, either by a “native power” of the individual – often taking place during sleep, at ecstatic moments, or shortly before death – or by the intervention of a divine influx. Artificial divination departs from external signs and tokens and infers consequences from them. The latter works by connecting signs with their causes (rational divination) or by a kind of blind authority, that is, only from experience and mere perception (experimental divination).43 Artificial divination holds in astrology, medicine and politics. The physician predicts deaths, recoveries, illnesses, etc., based on signs observed in the human body, medicines and the environment. The politician anticipates wars, the decay of empires, etc., by interpreting signs observed in the material conditions, dispo- sition and behavior of people, governors, foreign countries, etc. The astrologer prognosticates on the basis of signs observed in the heavens.

Bacon’s understanding relies on a wide tradition in conceiving divination as a hermeneutical practice, decoding disguised messages.44 As we shall see in the next sections, the different divinatory arts considered in his works involve interpretation of signs provided by dreams (oneirocritics), by the physical appearance of persons (physiognomy), or by the heavens (astrology). The signs can be manifested to the interpreter internally (as in dreams or divine rev- elations) or externally (as in the sky, the faces of people, etc.). In the case of

1. The treatment of divination is found in Bacon, *Advancement of Learning* (OFB IV 104– 105); *De augmentis scientiarum* (SEH I 607–608). The *locus classicus* of the distinction between natural and artificial divination is Cicero, *De divinatione*, I, vi, 11; II, xi, 28.
2. On blind authority in astrology, see also Bacon, *De augmentis scientiarum* (SEH I 552). The meaning of the sub-distinction into kinds of divination, as presented in *Advancement of Learning* and *De augmentis scientiarum*, becomes clearer in *Sylva Sylvarum* (SEH II 602–603).
3. On divination as an interpretative art, see Ian Maclean, *Logic, Signs and Nature in the Renaissance: The Case of Learned Medicine* (Cambridge, 2007), 315–326. See also Jonathan Regier’s contribution to this special issue (“Shadows of the Thrown Spear”).

fortune, codified messages represent either a discovery of an actual state that remains hidden to simple perception or represent foresight of personal and political fortune.

Humans, in their capacity for divination, have much to learn from inani- mate bodies and non-human animals, which under certain circumstances reveal hidden qualities or anticipate future events.45 All bodies are endowed with perception: they perceive other bodies and – on account of the appetite for self-preservation – “embrace that which is agreeable” and “exclude or expel that which is ingrate.”46 Some bodies have a finer capacity of perception than other bodies. Some even have a more acute perception than the human senses. By such perception, bodies “discover that which is hid” and “foretell that which is to come.” For instance, the water-glass perceives the temperature, and the loadstone perceives the presence of a piece of iron at a distance.47 Hence, it is useful to investigate the powers of the most perceptive bodies and design “sub- tile trials” on the basis of these investigations. For instance, south dry winds and plentiful numbers of frogs “portend” pestilential and unwholesome years; the “obscuring of the smaller star is a sign of tempests,” etc.48

In addition, Bacon provides examples in which prediction departs from external signs, and in which inferences are based on causal knowledge:

We see in Oake-Apples, which are found chiefly vpon the Leaues of Oakes; And the like vpon Willowes: And Countrey People haue a kinde of Prediction, that if the Oake-Apple, broken, be full of Wormes, it is a Signe of a Pestilent Yeare; Which is a likely Thing, because they grow of Corruption.49

Hence, the prediction indicates a pestilent year; worms in the oak-apple con- stitute the sign; the cause which makes the prediction probable is that worms grow from corrupted matter.

Divination can help to manage human uncertainty and anxiety about the future and offer orientation for the decisions to be made. Despite the vague- ness of his vocabulary, Bacon maintains both natural and artificial divination,

1. Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum* (SEH II 602–609): “Experiments in consort touching perception in bodies insensible, tending to natural divination or subtile trials.”
2. Ibid. (SEH II 602).
3. On the notion of perceptive instruments in Bacon, see Dana Jalobeanu, “Francis Bacon’s ‘Perceptive’ Instruments,” *Early Science and Medicine*, 26 (2020), 594–617.
4. Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, Ex. 818 (SEH II 606). 49 Ibid., Ex. 561 (SEH II 516).

indicating how both ought to be reformed.50 Divination is fully integrated into his project of a new science and included in the catalog of topics of natural his- tory and in the list of *magnalia naturae*.51 The utopian science portrayed in the *New Atlantis* requires that members of the scientific institution, the House of Salomon, “declare natural divinations of diseases, plagues, swarms of hurtful creatures, scarcity, tempest, earthquakes, great inundations, comets, tempera- ture of the year, and diverse other things.”52 Divination is to be used directly for the care of the embodied self and civil society.53 In the next sections, I will point out how different kinds of divination work in the Baconian culture of the mind and architecture of fortune.

# 3 Oneirocritics

A typical manifestation of natural divination occurring by an internal power of the mind is the interpretation of dreams or oneirocritics. Since antiquity, dream interpretation was employed as a technique of self-care.54 In the Renaissance,

1. Although the doctrine on divination expounded in *Advancement of Learning* and *De aug‑ mentis scientiarum* is the same, the vocabulary employed is slightly different and pro- duces some confusion. In *Advancement of Learning* (1603), Bacon presents “divination” as the genre and then draws a distinction between “natural” and “artificial” divination. In *De augmentis scientiarum* (1626), the abstract of Book IV, chap. III announces the treatment of “natural divination” as a genre and then proceeds to draw the distinction between “nat- ural” and “artificial.” As we shall see, the label “artificial divination” is no longer used in other writings. Instead, he usually speaks of “natural divination” or of “divination” without further qualification. In my opinion, this is just a terminological inconsistency and does not involve a transformation of the ancient notion of natural divination by assimilating it with artificial (scientific) divination; this latter reading was suggested by Langman, “The Future Now.”
2. Bacon, *Parasceve* (OFB XI 488); *New Atlantis* (SEH III 168).
3. Bacon, *New Atlantis* (SEH III 166). Bacon’s natural histories contain many divinatory instances. Besides the section of *Sylva Sylvarum* mentioned above, see, for example, *Sylva Sylvarum* (SEH II 554–5, 561, 576), and the prognostication of winds in *Historia ventorum* (OFB XII 106–120).
4. “Dowry-men or benefactors” draw out “things of use and practice for man’s life and knowledge, as well for works as for plain demonstration of causes, means of natural divi- nations, and the easy and clear discovery of the virtues and parts of bodies”; see Bacon, *New Atlantis* (SEH III 165).
5. See S.R.F. Price, “The Future of Dreams: From Freud to Artemidoros,” *Past and Present* 113 (1986), 3–37; Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, book 3, 1. 1–3 (Paris, 1984); Patricia Cox Miller, *Dreams in Late Antiquity. Studies in the Imagination of a Culture* (Princeton, NJ, 1994), part I; William V. Harris, *Dreams and Experience in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA, 2009).

it was practiced in popular and learned cultures. Learned magi, philoso- phers and physicians attentively read the works of Artemidorus, Macrobius, Aristotle, Synesius, Hippocrates, and Galen to develop a theory of dreams serv- ing divinatory goals with medical, moral, and political implications. The basic tenet of this approach – as expressed by Girolamo Cardano, one of the most convinced practitioners and theorists of the period – maintained that dreams are coded messages which require proper interpretation. Behind the outward events represented in them, there are clues that must be decoded, as they are signs revealing the mental and physical state of the sleeper and revealing future events.55

Bacon deals with the exposition of dreams along with physiognomy and presents them both as arts relying on the concordance and union between mind and body. Indeed, he does not engage in a theory of dreams, but sim- ply provides some brief remarks on the subject. As he acknowledges, he does not have much insight into “voluntary trances” and “concentrated and deep thoughts.”56 He assumes that some dream images indicate the actual state of the body and that others announce illnesses or future accidents of the body. Besides, he probably thinks that some dreams require interpretation by allegory – the same procedure that he applied for the interpretation of classi- cal myths –, while others can be interpreted by their outward content.57

In this context, he refers exclusively to “natural dreams” or “prophetic dreams,” in which there is no intervention of God or of demonic spirits. He acknowledges Hippocrates as the illustrious authority on this subject and sup- ports the latter’s naturalistic approach.58 From this perspective, dreams are considered as products of physical states of the human body and, therefore,

1. On dream theory and interpretation of dreams in the Renaissance, see Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture* (Oxford, 2007), ch. 9; William Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature: Books of Secrets in Medieval and Early Modern Culture* (Princeton, NJ, 1996), 280–281; Carol Schreier Rupprecht, “Divinity, Insanity, Creativity: A Renaissance Contribution to the History and Theory of Dream/Text(s),” in *The Dream and the Text: Essays on Literature and Language*, ed. Schreier Rupprecht (Albany, NY, 1993), 112–132; Nancy G. Siraisi, *The Clock and the Mirror: Girolamo Cardano and Renaissance Medicine* (Princeton, NJ, 1997), 174–191; Jean-Yves Boriaud, “Cardan et le songe,” in *La pensée scientifique de Cardan*, ed. Boriaud (Paris, 2012), 23–44; Regier, “Shadows of the Thrown Spear.”
2. Bacon, *Historia vitae et mortis* (OFB XII 264).
3. Bacon, *De sapientia veterum* (SEH VI 625; 695): “Chrysippus long ago, interpreting the oldest poets after the manner of an interpreter of dreams, made them out to be Stoics.” (“Nam et olim Chrysippus Stoicorum opiniones vetustissimis poetis, veluti somniorum aliquis interpres, ascribere solebat.”)
4. See Hippocrates, *Regimen IV or Dreams*, in Hippocrates, ed. and transl. W.H.S. Jones (Cambridge, MA, 1931), vol 4.

they are interpreted for the sake of medical diagnosis. Bacon is convinced that, if purged of superstition and vain fantasy, the exposition of dreams can be ben- eficial for the medicine of the body. That is because certain dreams can disclose “the state of the bodie, by the imagination of the minde.”59 Imagination takes central stage in predictions obtained from dreams, “for Imagination is like to worke better vpon Sleeping Men, than Men Awake.”60 Divinatory dreams can take place under certain mental and bodily circumstances. They happen when the mind is withdrawn, collected into itself and not dispersed throughout the organs of the body. This state of the mind can be stimulated by incenses and perfumes, and it is furthered by abstinences.61 All of this makes it possible for the mind to be free from external impediments and enjoy its own nature.

Besides the medical approach of oneiromancy, Bacon was interested in investigating other possible predictive powers of dreams. Given that the anticipation of bodily sicknesses relies on the correspondence between the mind and body of an individual, Bacon wonders if the sympathy and antipathy between different persons could cause one of them to have dreams referring to the present or future state of the other. Hence, he proposes investigating the subject. These dreams are “so vncertaine, as they require a great deale of Examination, ere wee conclude vpon them.”62 Indeed, Bacon narrates various cases of dreams anticipating the death of relatives, enemies, and friends; the dream, for example, of Julius Caesar’s wife, Calpurnia, foretelling the death of her husband the day before he was killed.63 He even records an autobio- graphical episode from his youth, when during a stay in Paris he dreamed of his father’s house “plastered all ouer with Black Mortar,” an image that antic- ipated the death of his father in London, which occurred two or three days later.64 Sometimes, dreams serve as orientations for those on the brink of mak- ing important decisions. Thus, in *The History of the Reign of King Henry VII*,

1. Bacon, *Advancement of Learning* (OFB IV 94–95); *De augmentis scientiarum* (SEH I 584–585).
2. Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, Ex. 933 (SEH II 650); Ex 995 (SHE II 659).
3. Ibid., Ex. 933 (SEH II 650): “There be some Perfumes, prescribed by the Writers of Naturall Magicke, which procure Pleasant Dreames; And some others, (as they say,) that procure Propheticall Dreames; As the Seeds of Flax, Fleawort, &c.” On the value of abstinences in the regimen of the body, see Bacon, *Advancement of Learning* (OFB IV 95; 104); *De aug‑ mentis scientiarum* (SEH I 584–585; 607–608).
4. Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, Ex. 986–987 (SEH II 666–667). It has been noted by James Spedding (SEH II 327–328) that Girolamo Cardano’s *De subtilitate* (1550) is the princi- pal source of the examples on sympathy and antipathy reported in century X of *Sylva Sylvarum*.
5. Bacon, *Essay of Friendship* (OFB XV 82). See Plutarchus, *Vitae Julius Caesar*, 3 XI.
6. Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, Ex. 986 (SEH II 666–667).

Bacon narrates that the future wife of King Henry VII foresaw in a dream which of her competing suitors she should marry.65

# 4 Physiognomy

Physiognomy, a practice combining divination with the medical theory of humors and temperaments, aimed at judging the character and nature of a per- son from the visual analysis of physical appearance.66 The body was thus con- sidered a “window” of the soul, revealing the invisible moral nature of human beings and their inclinations to particular virtues and vices. For that reason, physiognomic divination was often taken as sound and valuable informa- tion by political authorities from the Middle Ages through to the seventeenth century. Some varieties of physiognomy combined the former with judicial astrology. Thus, in assuming that the stars influenced individuals, analysis of physical appearance was thought not only to unveil the moral inclinations of a person but also to predict his or her behavior.

Bacon’s short account of physiognomy admitted it as a scientific branch soundly based in the correspondence, “bond” or “league” between mind and body. He thought that physiognomy has been wrongly mixed with superstitious and fantastical arts, and that it should be purged and restored to its true state. In his catalog of natural history, he devoted an item to the “physiognomic his- tory” of “man’s figure, members, stature, frame, looks and lineaments together with the way these things vary with people and climate, or other slighter differences.”67 A correct physiognomic interpretation may also serve to predict a person’s longevity.68 His endorsement of physiognomy conceives of it as both disclosing moral inclinations and predicting behavior. Reformed physiognomy should take into consideration not only the “lineaments” of the body but also its gestures or motions. While bodily lineaments are signs of the general dis- positions and inclinations of the mind, the gestures of the face and motions

1. Bacon, *History of the Reign of King Henry VII* (OFB VIII 168–169).
2. For Renaissance and early modern physiognomy, see Manuela Bragagnolo, “Physiognomy in Renaissance Science,” in *Springer Encyclopedia of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. Marco Sgarbi (Cham, 2018) <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02848-4\_1131-1>; Martin Porter, *Windows of the Soul: Physiognomy in European Culture 1470–1780* (Oxford, 2005).
3. Bacon, *Parasceve* (OFB XI 478–479). “41. Historia figurae, & Membrorum externorum Hominis, Staturae, Compagis, Vultus, & Lineamentorum; eorumque varietatis secundum Gentes & Climata, aut alias minores Differentias. 42. Historia Physiognomica super ipsa.” I have lightly modified the translation.
4. Bacon, *Historia vitae et mortis* (OFB XII 152–153).

of the bodily members disclose the particular state of mind and desires of an individual at a given moment.69 Bacon thus draws on the distinction between permanent and temporary physiognomic signs maintained by authors like Della Porta, the most famous exponent of Renaissance physiognomy.70

Physiognomic remarks frequently appear in Bacon’s writings on civil knowledge, as they are deeply related to techniques of simulation and dissimulation.71 The ability to feign and to hide one’s intentions in a well- articulated and proper way is integral to Bacon’s formula for ideal political behavior: “The best Composition, and Temperature is, to have Opennesse in Fame and Opinion; Secrecy in Habit; Dissimulation in seasonable use; And a Power to faigne, if there be no Remedy.”72 In his youth, Bacon was instructed by his uncle Thomas Bodley to act as an information-gatherer in France. There is no conclusive evidence that he actually worked as an intelligencer during his stay in France, but one could imagine that he might have judged accom- plished diplomats and spies to be the best practitioners of “simulation and dissimulation.”73 Occultation also featured in Bacon’s “politics of knowledge.” The House of Salomon in *New Atlantis* organizes espionage expeditions whose mission is to acquire knowledge of “the sciences, arts, manufactures, and inven- tions of all the world.”74 In Bacon’s science different forms of secrecy apply not only to the production but also to the communication of knowledge obtained by scientific research.75

Bacon believed that attention to physiognomy might contribute both to dis- covering the secret intentions of others and to feigning one’s own intentions. Physiognomic analysis reveals the innermost nature of individuals, “which dis- simulation will conceal, or discipline will suppress.”76 For instance, in order to pretend to be wise, some people “help themselves with Countenances and

1. Bacon, *Advancement of Learning* (OFB IV 94); *De augmentis scientiarum* (SEH I 583).
2. In treating physiognomy, Bacon only mentions (pseudo-)Aristotle, author of *Physio‑ gnomonica*. Bacon was well acquainted with Della Porta’s *Magia naturalis* (1558), so we can conjecture that he also knew his famous tract *De humana physiognomia* (1587).
3. In endorsing this approach, Bacon draws heavily on ancient sources like Cicero, Ovid, etc. and Renaissance sources like Guicciardini. On the connection to Guicciardini, see Vickers, *Francis Bacon: The Major Works*, 723.
4. Bacon, *Essay of Simulation and Dissimulation* (OFB XV 20–23).
5. Lisa Jardine and Alan Stewart, *Hostage to Fortune: The Troubled Life of Francis Bacon*

(London, 1999), 47–50.

1. Bacon, *New Atlantis* (SEH III 146).
2. See Claire Jowitt, “‘Books will speak plain’? Colonialism, Jewishness and Politics in Bacon’s *New Atlantis*,” in *Francis Bacon’s New Atlantis: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. Bronwen Price (Manchester, 2002), 129–155.
3. Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum* (SEH II 603).

Gestures, and are Wise by signs.”77 Although simulation and dissimulation (concealment) can be useful, a skillful physiognomic analysis can discover what is behind those impostures:

an Habit of Secrecy, is both Politick, and Morall. And in this Part, it is good, that a Mans Face, give his Tongue, leave to Speake. For the Discovery, of a Mans Selfe, by the Tracts of his Countenance, is a great Weaknesse, and Betraying; By how much, it is many times, more marked and beleeved, then a Mans words.78

For that reason, the architect of fortune should find “windows” through which to peer into the natures and actions of other people, examining their counte- nances and gestures, which – in Cicero’s words – are the “doors of the soul” (*animi janua*).79 Conversely, this involves the fact that “the passions of mind” make impressions on the body.80 Physiognomic interpretation, moreover, involves an esthetic dimension manifested in the correlation between beauty and virtue, ugliness and vice. Indeed, beauty and deformity, like sex, age, geo- graphic origin, health and sickness, etc., are “impressions of Nature” imposed on the mind.81 However, Bacon’s non-deterministic approach to human affairs means that this parallel between the esthetic-physical aspect and the ethical- spiritual character need not be fatal, determined, and unalterable. While the physical-esthetic appearance is necessary and imposed by nature, the ethical condition can be altered by human will. The physical process of generation is responsible for bringing forth beautiful or deformed bodies. When nature is “Busie not to erre,” it produces ordinary, beautiful bodies, but when it does stray slightly it brings forth deformed and ugly creatures. However, human beings have the power to modify their minds by education and habit. Neither beauty nor deformity determine in a necessary way the moral condition of the soul. Beauty is easy to corrupt, and only if it alights on a worthy owner “it maketh Vertues shine, and Vices blush.” As for deformity, it should not be taken without exception as a physical “sign” of moral evil. While ugly people

1. Bacon, *Essay of Seeming Wise* (OFB XV 78–80).
2. Bacon, *Essay of Simulation and Dissimulation* (OFB XV 20–23); see also *Advancement of Learning* (OFB IV 157–158; 173–174); *De augmentis scientiarum* (SEH I 747–748; 782–783).
3. Bacon, *Advancement of Learning* (OFB IV 165–166). See Cicero, *De petitione consulatus*, xi, 44.
4. Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, Ex. 713–722 (SEH II 567–571): “Experiments in consort touching the impressions which the passions of the mind make upon the body.”
5. Bacon, *Advancement of Learning* (OFB IV 148).

are usually bad, says Bacon, there remains the possibility that through good habits they voluntarily oppose their natural inclination toward vice.

there is in Man, an Election touching the Frame of his Minde, and a Necessity in the Frame of his Body, the Starres of Naturall inclination, are sometimes obscured, by the Sun of Discipline, and Vertue. Therefore, it is good to consider of Deformity, not as a Signe, which is more Deceivable; But as a Cause, which seldome faileth of the Effect.82

Even if every person has external “impositions,” personal inclinations or sub- jective innate drives, they can be manipulated and transformed by custom. In the tradition of the culture of the body and mind, custom (*consuetudo*) is a practice, a training that alters and transforms nature. Due to this transforma- tive capacity, custom is called “second nature” (*altera natura*).83 Bacon draws on this tradition and maintains that custom is the only thing that can “alter and subdue nature.”84 Custom, or “the force of custom both upon mind and body” is “the principal magistrate [master] of man’s life.”85 Hence, he recom- mends a regimen of custom, as a wise and proper way of conducting one’s mind and taking care of the body. There is no doubt that harmful customs exist. However, when they are good, they counter the spontaneous course of human postlapsarian nature, which tends by a “natural motion” to evil.86 The self-shaping – the transformation of externally imposed nature – paves the way for the administration of fortune.

# 5 Astrology

Ever since its ancient origins, astrology embraced a complex set of practices and beliefs based on the main assumption that the stars influence earthly

1. Bacon, *Essay of Beauty* and *Essay of Deformity* (OFB XV 132–134).
2. See Lorraine Daston, “Nature’s Customs versus Nature’s Laws,” in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, 24, ed. Grether P. Peterson (Salt Lake City, UT, 2004), 392–412; John Sellars, *The Art of Living: The Stoics on the Nature and Function of Philosophy* (London, 2009); Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley, CA, 1967), 82–88 and ch. 3.
3. Bacon, *Essay of Nature in Men* (OFB XV 119).
4. Bacon, *Essay of Custom and Education* (OFB XV 121).
5. Bacon, *Essay of Innovations* (OFB XV 75): “For ill, to man’s nature, as it stands perverted, hath a natural motion, strongest in continuance; but good, as a forced motion, strongest at first.”

affairs. From antiquity onwards, two branches of astrology were distinguished: natural astrology predicted the influence of the heavens on organic and physi- cal objects and events; judicial astrology prognosticated about individual and collective human actions and destiny. The Christian tradition approved of nat- ural astrology, widely accepting astrological prognostication in medicine, agri- culture and navigation, although it also considered the claims of astrologers to be often excessive and wrong. In contrast, judicial astrology was controver- sial for its consequences bearing upon free will and moral responsibility. As a result, astral determinism was criticized, attacked, and suppressed in different ways both in Protestant and Catholic culture.87

In the Renaissance, astrology underwent a revival that was followed by critical review and then attempts at reformation. During the sixteenth and the seventeenth century, the movement that rose up for astrological reform counted among its participants Girolamo Cardano, Phillip Melanchthon, John Dee, Johannes Kepler and William Lilly.88 Bacon also engaged in efforts at a reform of astrology and devoted a long section of *De augmentis scientiarum* to an explanation of the reforms he deemed were necessary.89 Astrology must be “purified” from superstition and fiction and turned into “healthy astrology,” basing itself on the physical causes provided by astronomy – astrology and astronomy were themselves a part of physics.90 According to Bacon, the par- ticular aim of astrology consists in discovering the “correspondence or concat- enation” between the superior and the inferior globe.91 He was aware both of the widespread practice of astrology since antiquity and of its negative effects,

1. Carey, *Courting Disaster*, 11–15; see also Ugo Baldini, “The Roman Inquisition’s Condemnation of Astrology: Antecedents, Reasons and Consequences,” in *Church, Censorship and Culture in Early Modern Italy*, ed. Gigliola Fragnito (Cambridge, 2001), 79–110.
2. See Geneva, *Astrology and the Seventeenth Century Mind*; Ornella Faracovi, “The Return to Ptolemy,” in Dooley, *Companion to Astrology in the Renaissance*, 87–98; Dorit Malz, “Astrology in the Renaissance,” in *Encyclopedia of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. Marco Sgarbi (Cham, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-14169-5\_898>.
3. For a general exposition of Bacon’s view of astrology, see Mary E. Bowden, “The Scientific Revolution in Astrology” (PhD diss., Yale University, 1974), 164–169; Geneva, *Astrology and the Seventeenth Century Mind*, 77; H. Darrel Rutkin, “Various Uses of Horoscopes: Astrological Practices in Early Modern Europe,” in *Horoscopes and Public Spheres: Essays on the History of Astrology*, ed. Günther Oestmann, H. Darrel Rutkin and Kocku von Stuckrad (Oldenburg, 2005), 173–176; Brendan Dooley, “Astrology and Science,” in idem, *Companion to Astrology in the Renaissance*, 233–266, 238–241. On Cardano and the res- toration of classical astrology, see Anthony Grafton, *Cardano’s Cosmos: The Worlds and Works of a Renaissance Astrologer* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), ch. 8.
4. Bacon, *De augmentis scientiarum* (SEH I 551–559).
5. Bacon, *Advancement of Learning* (OFB IV 27); *De augmentis scientiarum* (SEH I 574).

particularly in politics. Bacon maintains the superior and the inferior globes to be constituted of the same matter, which is endowed with competing and interacting appetites of several intensities and degrees of power. This dynamic of material appetites informs the relationship between active celestial influ- ence and its passive reception among terrestrial bodies, including the embod- ied self and the body politic. His account of the “purification” of astrology entails a complex explanation of its use for self-care. He believes that, *for the most part*, astrological prognostications are hardly creditworthy; they are not sufficiently based on physical reasons. However, he admits that there are some cases in which astrological prognostications are reliable. Even in these cases, he warns, the events announced by them should never be judged as irrevers- ible and fatal. I shall explain the different facets of this complex stance.

Bacon’s view of astrological divination concerning both individuals and col- lective bodies is permeated by his view of fortune. One of the rules he prescribes for reformed astrology evokes a widespread argument against determinism attributed to Ptolemy: “there is no fatal necessity in the stars; […] they incline rather than compel.”92 More specifically, Bacon rejects fatalist interpretations of three types of prognostication of judicial astrology: nativities, elections, and interrogations. Nativities were birth charts of persons which predicted the character, health, and fortune of the subject and depended on the position of celestial bodies at the time of birth, or occasionally the supposed time of con- ception. Elections provided a means of selecting the most propitious time for a specific undertaking, such as entering into a battle, coronating a monarch, etc. Interrogations were predictions answering specific queries, such as the suitability of a military campaign, or a marriage, and were based on the astral position at the moment in which the question was asked.93 We can consider Bacon’s account of these forecasts:

Those fatalities, that the hour of nativity or conception influences the fortune of the birth, the hour of commencement the fortune of the enter- prise, the hour of inquiry the fortune of the thing inquired into, and in short, the doctrines of nativities, elections, interrogations, and the like

1. Bacon, *De augmentis scientiarum* (SEH IV 351, I 556): “nulla insit astris fatalis necessitas; sed quod inclinent ea potius quam cogant.”
2. See Carey, *Courting Disaster*, 117; William Eamon, “Astrology and Society,” in Dooley, *Companion to Astrology in the Renaissance*, 153–158. Cardano also objected to interro- gations and elections; see Grafton, *Cardano’s Cosmos*, 144; Anthony Grafton and Nancy Siraisi, “Between the Election and my Hopes: Girolamo Cardano and Medical Astrology,” in *Secrets of Nature: Astrology and Alchemy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. William R. Newman and Anthony Grafton (Cambridge, MA, 2001), 69–132.

frivolities, have in my judgment *for the most part* nothing sure or solid, and are plainly refuted and convicted by physical reasons.94

One of Bacon’s strongest criticisms addresses nativities, that is, personal horo- scopes. To argue against astral determinism, he draws a comparison with the physical world: “many inceptions are but, as Epicurus termeth them, *tenta‑ menta*, that is, imperfect offers and essays, which vanish and come to no sub- stance without an iteration.”95 The view that the hour of birth determines the disposition, natural inclinations, and fortune of a person is ridiculous, all the more so given that the moment of birth is often delayed or advanced on account of accidents.96 However, he positively observes that astrology pro- vides some “pretty and apt” distinctions of the characters and dispositions of human beings according to the predominance of planets: “louers of quiet, louers of action, louers of victory, louers of honour, louers of pleasure, louers of arts, louers of change: and so forth.”97 These classifications, and above all those provided by the best civil histories, are very useful for reaching the knowledge of oneself that constitutes one of the main parts of the culture of the mind.98

In general terms, on the one hand, Bacon retains the influence of the greater revolutions of the stars, but, on the other hand, he rejects the influences of the

1. My italics. I have lightly modified the translation of Bacon, *De augmentis scientiarum* (SEH I 555; IV 350): “*Fatalia* illa, quod hora nativitatis aut conceptionis fortunam foe- tus regat, hora incoeptionis fortunam incoepti, hora quaestionis fortunam reí inquisitae, atque (ut verbo dicamus) doctrinas de nativitatibus, electionibus, et quaestionibus, et istiusmodi levitates, maxima ex parte nihil certi aut solidi habere, et rationibus physicis plane redargui et evinci judicamus.”
2. Bacon, *Colors of Good and Evil* (SEH VII 90–92); cf. Bacon, *De augmentis scientiarum*

(SEH I 682–683).

1. Bacon, *De augmentis scientiarum* (SEH I 574; 682). Despite this criticism of nativities, Bacon metaphorically uses the notion of nativity, for instance, to talk about the origins of philosophy in *Novum organum*, I, 72 (OFB XI 116). Ironically, despite Bacon’s strictures against nativities, his chaplain, William Rawley – who according to Spedding had a “taste for astrology” – alludes to Bacon’s nativity as follows: “It may seem the moon had some principal place in the figure of his nativity: for the moon was never in her passion, or eclipsed, but he was surprised with a sudden fit of fainting; and that, though he observed not nor took any previous knowledge of the eclipse thereof; and as soon as the eclipse ceased, he was restored to his former strength again.” (SEH I 17 and note 2).
2. Bacon, *Advancement of Learning* (OFB IV 148). In a letter to William Cecil (from ca. 1590– 2), Bacon uses these astrological characterizations apparently for ornamenting his prose in describing himself “not as a man born under Sol, that loveth honour; nor under Jupiter, that loveth business (for the contemplative planet carrieth me away wholly); but as a man born under an excellent Sovereign, that deserveth the dedication of all men’s abilities.” (SEH VIII 108).
3. Bacon, *De augmentis scientiarum* (SEH I 733–734).

lesser revolutions, along with the distribution of houses calculated according to precise moments in time (*thema coeli ad puncta temporis certa*). He believes that celestial influence operates on large areas and extends to masses rather than to individuals. One must have an understanding of matter, in order to ground astrology on “physical reasons”:

Who knows the passions and processes of matter will necessarily compre- hend the sum of all things past, present, and, moreover, of things to come, although such knowledge will not extend to the parts and singularities.99

This entails that the influence of the heavens only indirectly affects those indi- viduals who are more susceptible to a specific planetary influence. For that reason, astrological inquiry must consider the material conditions of the recip- ients as much as that of the celestial bodies. In this way, Bacon is very explicit about the fact that the influence of the heavens can be properly understood only if the material – physical and human – appetites of the recipients are taken into consideration. The selves and the collective bodies of the “inferior globe” are endowed with their own drives and purposes, so that the influence of the celestial globe is not absolute but rather conditioned by them. In this way, the “passive role” of the inferior globe implies that the recipients them- selves are agents, insofar as they are endowed with their own appetites and reactions.100 Whether or not they prove susceptible to being “impressed” by influences of the celestial agents, depends on their material constitution.

Bacon explicitly accepts two types of astrological judgment insofar as they are based on physical reason and taken in a non-determinist sense: “predic- tions” (*praedictiones*) and “elections” (*electiones*) – “Sane astrology is applied more confidently to predictions, more cautiously to elections; in both cases however within due limits.”101 By “predictions,” he meant annual general prog-

1. Bacon, *De sapientia veterum* (SEH VI 651): “Necesse est enim, ut qui materiae passiones et processus noverit, rerum summam et earum quae factae sunt, et quae fiunt, et quae insu- per futurae sunt, comprehendat, licet ad partes et singularia cognitio non extendatur.” My translation.
2. For an account of the importance of the different “modalities of reception” in astrology, see John D. North, “Celestial Influence: The Major Premise of Astrology,” in “*Astrologi hallucinati*.” *Stars and the End of the World in Luther’s Time*, ed. Paola Zambelli (Berlin – New York, 1986), 45–100; Steven Vanden Broecke, “Self-Governance and the Body Politic in Renaissance Annual Prognostications,” in *From MashaʾAllah to Kepler: Theory and Practice in Medieval and Renaissance Astrology*, ed. Charles Burnett and Dorian G. Greenbaum (Ceredigion, 2015), 491–512.
3. Bacon, *De augmentis scientiarum* (SEH I 558, IV 353): “Adhibetur autem Astrologia Sana ad praedictiones fidentius, ad electiones cautius, ad utraque autem intra terminos debitos.”

nostications about typical subjects of natural astrology and also about massive human actions and entire human groups. The forecasts envisaged by him are about comets, meteorological phenomena, floods, droughts, heat, frost, earth- quakes, inundations, eruptions, plagues, epidemic diseases, plenty and dearth of grain, wars, seditions, schisms, and transmigrations of peoples. Bacon thinks that these astrological divinations are more worthy of credit, as they are based on the observation of the “greater revolutions” of the sky.

He argues, furthermore, that from “general predictions,” less certain “spe- cial and even singular” predictions can be derived. These are obtained by con- sideration of “physical and political” judgments that apply to those groups or individuals more susceptible to the celestial influences expected for that year. From an astrological annual weather prognostication, one can infer “physi- cal judgments” foretelling, for instance, whether events to come will be “more favourable or injurious to olives than to vines, to pulmonary than to liver com- plaints, to the inhabitants of hills than to those of valleys, to monks than to courtiers (by reason of their different manner of living).”102 In addition, from the knowledge of the influence that planetary configurations exert upon differ- ent social and political groups, and types of individuals, it is possible to antici- pate whether the annual planetary revolution will “be more favourable or more adverse to peoples than to kings, to learned and inquisitive men than to the bold and warlike, to men of pleasure than to men of business or politicians.”103 Bacon thinks that elections are less worthy of credit than general, special, and singular predictions. He concedes, all the same, that elections may not be “altogether frivolous” if submitted to the rules of reformed astrology. They hold good “in those cases only where both the virtue of the heavenly bodies is such as does not quickly pass, and the action of the inferior bodies is such as is not suddenly accomplished.”104 Both requisites are met, for instance, in elections referring to the best time for grafting or sewing. In contrast, elections do not hold good for changes that take place in an instant, as happens in most civil affairs, in which elections should be calculated upon the exact moment

1. Bacon, *De augmentis scientiarum* (SEH I 558, IV 353): “veluti si quis ex praecognitione tempestatum anni, eas reperiet (exempli gratia) magis oleis quam vitibus, magis phthisi- cis quam hepaticis, magis incolis collium quam vallium, magis monachis quam aulicis (propter victus rationem diversam) propitias aut perniciosas.”
2. Bacon, *De augmentis scientiarum* (SEH I 558, IV 353–354): “aut si quis ex cognitione influxus quem coelestia habent super spiritus humanos, reperiat eum talem esse ut magis populis quam regibus, magis viris doctis et curiosis quam animosis et militaribus, magis voluptariis quam negotiosis aut politicis, faveat aut adversetur.”
3. Bacon, *De augmentis scientiarum* (SEH IV 354, I 558): “valere Electiones in illis tantum casibus, ubi et virtus coelestium talis sit quae non subito transeat, et actio inferiorum similiter talis quae non statim absolvatur.”

in which the undertaking would start. In sum, he accepts some types of elec- tions connected with agriculture and the weather, but does not accept those addressing civil affairs.

# 6 Fortune and Human Agency

The most frequent examples of divination in Baconian self-care belong to med- ical and political matters. Due to his commitment to politics and his role as a political adviser, his writings relate above all to historical instances of politi- cal forecasts. Let us now consider two opposing instances in Bacon’s corpus wherein we see the use of divination in politics – one bad, the other one good. Both examples will serve to outline Bacon’s account of the relation between self-care and fortune. In general, Bacon demands that human decisions will not follow naively the advice of dream interpreters, masters of physiognomy, or astrologers. The most solid and sound arguments to inform human agency must be provided by experts in the subject under consideration, mainly physi- cians, politicians, or moral or natural philosophers. In the case of politics, this imperative is explicitly stated: “the best divinations and predictions are the politic and probable foresight and conjectures of wise men.”105 Good political predictions require knowledge of the individuals in question, the body politic, and the extent to which human power can “press” and minister fortune.

The incorrect use of divination in political matters is a case where a future marriage was established via excessive trust in nativities. In one of his histori- cal writings, Bacon notes that skillful astrological calculation is not enough to reach groundbreaking political decisions like the arrangement of royal wed- ding. Bacon relates that “there was a great deale of Astronomie” in the arrange- ment of the marriage of Catherine of Aragon to Arthur, prince of Wales, in 1501. Alfonso X, King of Castile, who was famous for patronizing astronomers in his court, was “brought in to be the fortune-teller of the Matche.” However, the death of Arthur a few months after the wedding indicates that “it is not good to fetch Fortunes from the Starres.”106 It was very common in royal and noble families to request the service of astrologers to determine the prospects of marriage. The birth charts of prospective spouses were analyzed not only for the compatibility of their characters and fortunes – mainly, health and

1. Bacon, *The Beginning of a History of Great Britain* (SEH VI 276).
2. Bacon, *History of the Reign of King Henry VII* (OFB VIII 143).

longevity – but also the fertility of the bride and groom, with a view to produc- ing prosperous and healthy heirs.107

Bacon’s positive example of divination is autobiographical and refers to another of the most common political uses of astrology. In 1599, Bacon was called upon to give advice to the Earl of Essex, who was at that time prepar- ing an expedition to Ireland. In reply, Bacon “presages” the success of the imminent expedition and acknowledges that his presage is based on “oracles and divinations; none of them superstitious.”108 In his capacity as a political adviser, Bacon’s prediction combines political prudence and the interpretation of relevant external signs. Perhaps as a rhetorical flourish, he briefly admits a hint of supernatural inspiration by saying that “some good spirit” has led his pen, so that his divination is “not all natural.” However, his forecast is explicitly inferred from God’s providence, the character of Essex and of the Irish people, and a maxim of political prudence about fortune.

First, from observing the “course of God’s providence,” he infers that God “hath disposed” the defection of Ireland and gives “an urgent occasion” to conquer it. Secondly, by regarding the vices of the Irish people (disloyalty, ingratitude, and insolence!), he announces that Essex’s campaign will halt the impending doom that would derive inexorably from those faults. Thirdly, the signs provided by the personal inclinations of Essex allow Bacon “to ground a better divination of good than upon the dissection of a sacrifice”; that is, the cause that motivates Essex is good and just, aiming at recovering former sub- jects. Finally, Bacon recalls “another kind of divination familiar in matters of state,” to be found in Demosthenes: “That which for the time past is worst of all, is for the time to come the best: which is, that things go ill, not by accident, but by errors.”109 If something went wrong on account of an error of human free agency, the error can more easily be repaired. But, if things went wrong by an accident of fortune, that is, by external events not depending on human agency, the solution is more difficult to obtain. This example of good divina- tion in politics defines the range of expectations that can be reasonably held regarding the expedition and the actions that should be taken to control the end-result as much as possible. It is a matter of ministration, maximizing the benefits of good luck and minimizing the harm of bad luck.

1. Monica Azzolini, “Are the Stars Aligned? Matchmaking and Astrology in Early Modern Italy,” *Isis*, 112 (2021), 766–775.
2. Bacon, “Letter of advice to my Lord the Earl of Essex, immediately before his going to Ireland” (March 1599) (SEH IX 129–133). On this episode and on how Bacon narrated to the Queen his intervention, later in 1604, see Jardine and Stewart, *Hostage to Fortune*, 209–215.
3. Bacon, “Letter of advice to my Lord the Earl of Essex” (SEH IX 130).

# 7 Conclusion

This study of Bacon’s views on the uses of divinatory arts serves to comple- ment our current understanding of his conception of self-care. It confirms the general reading maintained by scholars according to which Bacon thinks that self-care techniques are tools of great value through which people shape their subjectivity. To apply these techniques successfully, it is necessary that indi- viduals have a clear awareness of what is under their power and what is not. By means of habit and self-discipline, they can make modifications and improve- ments, but only to those things that fall under their command.

Compared to other self-care techniques already studied by scholars, divi- natory arts are salient in two aspects: 1) they unveil what is hidden; 2) they relate to the temporal dimension of self-care. Divination makes the invisible visible and provides prophetic insight into present and future. The most valu- able signs – from those interpreted in dreams, in the physical appearances and gestures of people, and in the heavens – allow us to anticipate the future; other techniques lack this future orientation. Proper management of the insight pro- vided by correct divination allows us to better prepare ourselves to manage our fears, anxieties, uncertainties and frustrations. It helps us more cunningly to calculate the outcome of our plans and strategies in social and political life. As we have seen, however, Bacon is extremely cautious about the use of divination and warns us that it should be employed with the utmost prudence. Individuals must critically consider the predictions and revelations provided by soothsay- ers, and, if necessary, ask for advice from wise people well-acquainted with the pertinent subject matter. Within a non-fatalist approach, Bacon believes that we can minister our fortune, though we will never completely own it.

Divination provided by oneirocritics, astrology and physiognomy relies ulti- mately on natural philosophy – in particular, on astronomy and physics – for practitioners in these disciplines all need to know the appetites and motions of matter in order to interpret the signs revealing the invisible. Astrology must be based on knowledge of celestial and earthy matter; interpretation of dreams and physiognomics require us to know the matter of the bodies attached to human souls, and to understand the “league” between mind and body. This connection of divination with natural philosophy explains the structural par- allel that we find between them. In both cases, the approach is hermeneutical, with the goal of exerting power and control over nature and human luck, albeit only insofar as possibility will allow.

In fact, human beings cannot achieve full command either of nature or of fortune. The human power of modifying the state of nature and fortune extends only up to certain limits: the laws of nature and the fortune of human

individuals and societies are imposed by God and lie beyond our control. Natural philosophy, in its theoretical aspect, interprets nature and discov- ers the secret laws therein. Its operative aspect allows us to command bod- ies based on the knowledge gained by interpretation. This power, however, is restricted to our capacity to introduce properties in bodies according to our ends. Divination, in turn, interprets signs; these signs, whether in dreams, human appearance and behavior, or in the heavens, reveal hidden events in the present or forecast things to come. Via reliable practices of divination, humans can make decisions for capitalizing on good luck, or for minimizing the con- sequences of bad luck. The range of decisions we can make is not unlimited, because we can never eliminate the external circumstances that God has set in place for our future. For self-care, the wise use of the insights provided by reli- able divination ultimately lies in the distinction between “what is in our power, and what not.” Accordingly, we can modify only what depends on us. The rest is left up to fortune.