

Superstition

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In 1572, Tycho Brahe observed a sudden and continuous rain of light emanating from the celestial realm of Cassiopeia. After a number of weeks, he noted that this new source of light failed to shift in position relative to the fixed heavenly sphere. The source lacked parallax and must then have been located upon the surface of the celestial realm of Cassiopeia. He published *De Nova Stella* in 1573, claiming a new star had come into existence above the sublunary realm (“with the expressed conviction that the world [was] hastening to its end”).¹

Tycho’s “new star” is known today to have been the electromagnetic trace of SN 1572. We now have the technical vocabulary to describe that which he observed: a star, which, “under enormous pressure” (whereby the “free electrons [of the] stellar interior” were “forceably melded” with protons to create “a single giant atomic nucleus”), had “implode[d] violently,” with an exterior (a plasma of nuclei, nucleons, electrons and positrons)² collapsing only to rebound gallantly outwards.³

With the 1620 publication of the *Novum Organum*, Francis Bacon proclaimed the newness of method available to human thought, by which the species might “establish progressive stages of certainty.” This new method is differentiated from the Socratic “midwifery,” in that Bacon “retain[s]” the “senses, helped and guided by a certain process of correction.”

SOCRATES: Well, my art of midwifery is in most respects like theirs; but differs, in that I attend men and not women; and look after their souls when they are in labour, and not after their bodies: and the triumph of my art is in thoroughly examining whether the thought which the mind of the young man brings forth is a false idol or a noble and true birth.

(*Theaetetus*, translated by Benjamin Jowett)

However (and this statement is to be distinguished from the former), Bacon’s method is *new* because he “for the most part reject[s]” “the mental operation which follows the act of sense.”⁴

My intention is both to hunt, apprehend, and appropriate his method and to embark, explore and discover its contradictions.

SOCRATES: Take a look round, then, and see that none of the uninitiated are listening. Now by the uninitiated I mean: the people who believe in nothing but what they can grasp in their hands, and who will not allow that action or generation or anything invisible can have real existence.

THEAETETUS: Yes, indeed, Socrates, they are very hard and impenetrable mortals.

SOCRATES: Yes, my boy, outer barbarians. Far more ingenious are the brethren whose mysteries I am about to reveal to you.

(*Theaetetus*, translated by Benjamin Jowett)

This poem is about magic.⁵ Bacon identifies that in superstition “arguments are fitted to the practice in a reversed order.” Further, “it was gravely said by some of the prelates in the council of Trent, where the doctrine of the schoolmen bore great sway, that the schoolmen were like the astronomers, which did feign eccentrics and epicycles and such engines of orbs to save the phenomena, though they knew there were no

1. Hiram Haydn, *The Counter-Renaissance* (New York: Grove Press, 1950), 251.

2. M. Hempel, “Statistical Model for a Complete Supernova Equation of State,” *Nucl. Phys.*, 2009, 4.

3. Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (Random House, Inc., 2002), 238.

4. Francis Bacon, “Novum Organum,” ed. Mortimer J. Alder (William Benton, 1952), Preface.

5. Bert Hansen, “Science and Magic,” in *Science in the Middle Ages*, ed. David C. Lindberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 483-498.

such things.” This poem is also about epicycles and eccentrics.⁶ “[The monks’] solydary lyfe, . . . hath brough forth, wyth lytyl prfyt to the publyke state, much superstycyon.”⁷ “Superstition is, when things are either abhord or obserued, with a zealous or fearefull, but erroneous relation to God.”

EVS: “1. A tendancy to fly up too quickly to generalizations.”⁸

CCG: “2. A tendency . . . to identify its own sense of order with the cosmic order.”⁹

EVS: “3. A tendency to ignore or suppress whatever does not accord with its own notions.”¹⁰

CCG: “4. A tendency to assent to forms—logical, rhythmical, syntactical—rather to empirical evidence”¹¹

EVS: I feel like I am looking into a set of cases.

“After distinguishing divine from human knowledge, Bacon divided the latter into history, as a function of memory, and philosophy, as a function of reason. He then went on to subdivide these broad categories.”¹² The method of subdivision is important as a tool for analysis. Aristotelean logic, as applied in scholastic style, “started off with *quaestiones*, considered various *objectiones*, and concluding with *responsiones*.”¹³ “For it you consider [the scholastics’] methods and divisions, they appear to embrace and comprise evreything which can relate to the subject. And although this frame be badly filled up and resemble an empty bladder, yet it presents to the vulgar understanding the form and appearance of a perfect science.”¹⁴

To subdivide into categories, which can be filled up to give the appearance of completeness is Cantor’s Set (dust). And there is a limit to subdivision: Planck’s constant.

Bacon’s essays are constructive. He didn’t need any dialectic method. Rather than flipping between figure and ground, Bacon gives straight figure.

6. Joseph Anthony Mazzeo, *Renaissance and Revolution* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965), 164.

7. Thomas Starkey, *England in the Reign of King Henry the Eighth: Starkey’s life and letters*, ed. Sidney John Hervon Hertridge (C. Scribner & Co., 1878), 189.

8. Stanley E. Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), 84.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., 85.

12. William J. Bouwsma, *The Waning of the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 182.

13. Ibid., 184.

14. Bacon, “*Novum Organum*,” I. 86.

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