

14 Toledan Translators, Roger Bacon, and the Dynamic Shades of Experience

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Before the fall of Granada in 1492, the Iberian Peninsula was a fragmented area that, over the centuries, included many different kingdoms and city-states. These communities had either Christian or Muslim majorities, very often hosting large Jewish populations. In numerous cases, their governing elite did not practice the same religion as the majority of their subjects. In this cultural, religious, and linguistic melting pot, translations were a central aspect of the everyday life of many medieval Spaniards.¹ It was in this context that written translations of learned texts of theoretical and practical nature gradually began to appear in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The process found its most eminent manifestation in the second half of the twelfth century in Toledo.

In my contribution, I discuss some aspects of the interaction between translations and “experience” in the translating process and the actors’ meta-discussion of that interaction, through the cases of the medieval Toledan translations and the rhetoric of the English philosopher Roger Bacon. As we will see, “experience” is and was an equivocal term that requires some clarification. Here, I use it to indicate the kind of meaningful epistemic content that is not primarily gained through theoretical reflections. Although I am not committed to this broad notion of experience (which is philosophically questionable), it can usefully be deployed to clarify some less immediately obvious aspects of medieval translations. The chapter addresses first the translations made in Toledo in the twelfth century, then Bacon’s use of “experience” as persuasive tool in his criticism of translations.

Translations as Collective Epistemic Endeavors

Naively, translating can be regarded as a process characterized by two main requirements:

1. Text A, which is written in language x , is rendered into text B, written in language y .
2. Text B maintains a specific semantic relation with text A.

In the cases discussed here, both the origin and the product of this process (A and B) are written texts in the form of manuscripts. In the Middle Ages, the translating experience starts and ends with the materiality of manuscripts that were copied, sold, and dispersed throughout Latin Europe. But notwithstanding the materiality of their starting and end points, the practice by which medieval translations were made was usually quite immaterial, in that it primarily involved spoken rather than written language. This was often the case with the translations made in Toledo in the twelfth century.²

One of these was the Latin translation of Avicenna's *De anima*, made by Abraham ibn Daud and Dominicus Gundissalinus in Toledo (before 1166). The two collaborators had different linguistic skills, both of which were required for the translation. As an Andalusian Jew, Ibn Daud knew Arabic, the language in which the source version was written (input language, x). The Castilian Gundissalinus knew Latin, the output language of the translation (language y).³ Evidently, these were exclusive or predominant skills of the translators: in order to work together, it seems that only Ibn Daud mastered Arabic and only Gundissalinus mastered Latin, although each may have known something of the other language. The linguistic means they used to mediate between these languages x and y was vernacular Castilian (z). First, Ibn Daud translated the text from written Arabic into spoken Castilian, verbally and word by word; then, Gundissalinus translated the Castilian spoken words into written Latin, again word by word. This bi-phasic working dynamic was a crucial factor that governed translating in medieval Toledo, and defines the process as a collective endeavor.⁴

In the thirteenth century, Roger Bacon would strongly criticize the bi-phasic method. In his *Compendium studii philosophiae*, discussing the Toledan translator Herman the German, Bacon observes:

Nor did he know Arabic well, as he acknowledged, for he more assisted the translations than was a translator himself, since he retained Saracens with him in Hispania who took the lead in their translations. Likewise Michael the Scot ascribed many translations to himself, but it is clear that Andrew, a certain Jew, worked more on these. So Michael, as did Herman, translated, but they knew neither the sciences nor languages.⁵

Bacon attacks the (Latin) translators as if they were unduly taking credit for work they had not really carried out, since they did not know either the language or the theories of the work they were translating.⁶ In the prologues to the Toledan translations of that period, however, the actors' descriptions of the process of translating do not appear to hint at an unequal commitment of the translators. There is no acknowledgment that translator A (Arabic to Castilian) was doing "more" than translator B (Castilian to Latin). What is sometimes acknowledged is the division of

tasks that led to the translation.⁷ Such recollections by the actors on how texts were translated leaves space to assume that translators did indeed consider their job a collective one, at least when the bi-phasic method was employed. Unfortunately, not much more can be said about this, especially given the relatively small number of prologues that have survived over time.⁸

But Bacon's criticism also touches a more delicate point in the process of bi-phasic translation: the complex structure of the bi-phasic method bore potential for misunderstandings and mistranslations. What might appear as a single act of translation—text A in Arabic (x , the source language) is translated into Latin (y , the target language), producing text B—actually involves at least four processes of translation. In fact, the bi-phasic method generates two different translations mediated by Castilian (z). An epistemic shift is produced, since the content that the first translator renders into Castilian is implicitly interpreted (or reinterpreted) by the second translator, fragmenting (z) into (z_1) and (z_2). A perhaps weaker epistemic shift is also implied in each translator's passing from the source language (x and z_2 , respectively) to the target language (z_1 and y , respectively). Second, the method implies a translation from written to oral means and then back to written. Accordingly, we have the following situation:

apparent translation $A \rightarrow B$
semantic level ($x \rightarrow z_1$) \rightarrow ($z_2 \rightarrow y$)
modality (written \rightarrow spoken) \rightarrow (spoken \rightarrow written)

The scheme visually renders the complexity of the translating experience. The passage A to B entails slippages at both the semantic and syntactic level.⁹ The individuality of both translators—reflecting their cultural, linguistic, scientific, and social diversity—may have impacted on the process of translation as well. In order to be effective, the translating procedure requires close agreement among the translators on which steps they have to take, a preliminary shared understanding of the work they are translating, and reciprocal trust in each other's interpretive and linguistic skills. In other words, the translating process is grounded on a dialogical intellectual exchange—a collective epistemic endeavor—in which the translators needed to discuss the content of what they were translating in order to ensure reliability as regards both source and target domains. Not coincidentally, both Ibn Daud and Gundissalinus were also authors of original works closely related to the works they were translating.

Another example may illustrate the implications of this translating process. Gundissalinus collaborated with a third member of his team, John of Spain (Johannes Hispanus), on the Latin translation of Ibn Gabirol's Arabic *Fons vitae*. This work has many peculiar features due to Ibn Gabirol's adherence to pseudo-Empedoclean doctrines and Jewish mystical positions. A recent analysis by Sarah Pessin has shown that the

Latin version of the *Fons vitae* systematically reinterprets and reshapes it in an Aristotelian fashion absent from the original text (which is extant only in fragments).¹⁰ Apparently, Gundissalinus and John of Spain reinterpreted Ibn Gabirol's text while translating it, probably during some of the transitions involved in the translation activity: John's verbal rendering of the Arabic or Gundissalinus's interpretation of John's words. But as mentioned above, the translating process implied a moment in which content and theories from the source domain were presumably discussed in order to ensure accuracy. This seems to mean that the particular version of the *Fons vitae* was the result of an agreed interpretation by the team. In his other works, the leading figure of this team, Abraham ibn Daud, criticized Ibn Gabirol's stances from an Aristotelian perspective, which coincides with the reinterpretation embodied in the Latin version of the *Fons vitae*.¹¹

We have seen that the bi-phasic method was a collective epistemic endeavor, as is acknowledged by the division of labor described in some of the translators' prologues. This perspective on translating makes it particularly obvious that the process required expertise. Both translators needed to know the languages they were using, the methods they were adopting, and, to some extent, the theoretical coordinates of the discipline in which the source text arose. However, there is something else that seems to emerge from a consideration of how translations were made: the crucial importance of the collective framework in which the translators were working. When it comes to that framework, the translators' expertise is accompanied by a different kind of experience.

Translators and Their Collective Framework

Before proceeding, let me introduce a preliminary and uncommitted distinction between terms that are both cognate and equivocal: "experience" and "expertise." The two words are cognate in English because they derive from the same Latin verb, *experior*. Latin literates appear to include within the semantic field of *experior* a range of meanings that is at once broader and narrower than we might expect.¹² On the one hand, the semantic field includes both "experience" and "expertise" in contemporary English, plus a set of shaded references to internal states, cognitive endeavors, and external assessments. However, the term does not per se imply "experience" as an epistemically structured empirical ascertainment of states of affairs in order to produce scientific claims about them. Of course, "experience" always implies an epistemic assessment of the outside world that is "felt" by the experiencer. Yet the semantic load that experience has received in the past centuries through empiricism and the Scientific Revolution hardly fits within the Latin *experior*. Though nuances of such an attitude are attested in later medieval texts (as this volume abundantly shows), the main meaning of *experior* seems to be more generic and to express some degree of directedness from the outside

(the world of physical interactions) to the inside (our assessment of those interactions) in the formation of different mental states.

Applying these considerations to the Toledan translations, we may distinguish the *expertise* of the translators, as the set of meaningful knowledge required by the process of translation (e.g., knowledge of languages or translating methods), from the different kinds of *experience* that might have affected their work. Taking “experience” in the broad meaning mentioned above, I will now disentangle the different kinds of collective experiences that were entailed in the process of translation, at different levels. This offers us a better appreciation of the collectiveness of the translating process and the irreducibility of that process to the epistemic endeavor described in the previous section, in which expertise, rather than experience, seems to be mostly implied.

As we have seen, translations were often made collectively, and as a result they qualify as interpersonal experiences that may have influenced the work of translating beyond the theoretical endeavor of rendering a text into another language. In other words, there are aspects inherited from the biographical and social framework of the translators that could be meaningful in relation to the making of a translation. In addition, the social and institutional framework in which the translators were working impacted differently—and, one may speculate, profoundly—on the making of Latin translations.

A first case of such impact is the choice of the material to be translated. For the Toledan translations, Arabic texts were needed, and a selection had to be made about which text to prioritize and which to avoid. Whose choice was that? This is a problem that entails questions of different orders, from the availability of texts to the institutional context of the translator’s activities. Only on rare occasions is it clear who chose the works to be translated. As Amos Bertolacci has pointed out, when Ibn Daud translated the prologue to Avicenna’s *Liber sufficientiae*, he addressed it to John II, archbishop of Toledo, implicitly asking him to sponsor the translation of the entire work (the encyclopedic *Kitāb al-Shifā’*, which was translated in Toledo over a period of several decades).¹³ It seems that Gerard of Cremona chose to translate Ptolemy’s *Almagest* along similar lines: he seems to have moved to Toledo for that purpose, as his students recall in his eulogy.¹⁴

In the majority of cases, however, the actors choosing the works to be translated are not mentioned. It seems fair to suppose that the translators, especially those skilled in Arabic, had some leverage, as they had first-hand access to—and in some cases, direct knowledge of—the works that could be translated. It is also possible, though, that the chapter of the Cathedral of Toledo, which sponsored the translations, made the decision on which works would be beneficial for the Latin audience to access.¹⁵ Although no extant documents can substantiate either of these hypotheses, it is likely that the choice arose from a combination of both factors. We can conjecture that the translators discussed at a preliminary stage

what works might be translated, then proposed them to the chapter, which had the last word.

Another form of impact arises from the organization among teams. In the second half of the twelfth century, Toledo hosted at least two translating teams, one led by Abraham ibn Daud and the other by Gerard of Cremona. Duplications needed to be avoided, in order not to waste time and funds on translating the same work twice.¹⁶ Accordingly, the translating teams needed to agree on which works to translate, a discussion that probably led to some degree of specialization by the two teams in selected subjects and authors.¹⁷ In fact, this process of redundancy avoidance does not always appear to have worked—both Gundissalinus and Gerard of Cremona translated al-Farabi's *Iḥṣā al-Ulūm* into Latin (as *De scientiis*), though the reasons behind the dual translation are still debated.¹⁸ One may certainly speculate that translations required a preliminary phase of discussion and decision that unfolded, first, among the members of one team, second, between the two teams, and third, with lay and ecclesiastical functionaries of the Toledan chapter. Such collective decision-making directly influenced the choice of what was to be translated, by whom, and how.

A third factor is the institutional framework of which the translators were part. The capitular archive of the Toledan cathedral repeatedly refers to Gerard of Cremona as “magister” and to Dominicus Gundissalinus as archdeacon of Cuéllar.¹⁹ Like other translators, both Gerard and Gundissalinus were part of the chapter and received prebends allowing them to work as translators, while, plausibly, other members of the translating teams were paid, either directly or indirectly, through emoluments.²⁰ Gerard's and Gundissalinus's capitular offices required them to carry out additional functions within the cathedral, aside from translating into Latin. Gerard was almost surely a master of the cathedral school of Toledo, in which clergy were educated, in line with the dispositions of the Council of Coyanza.²¹ More difficult to assess is Gundissalinus's additional work, if any. Historical documents do not locate him in the area of Segovia (where Cuéllar is located) before 1190.²² As a consequence, no specific hypotheses may be proposed, especially since Gundissalinus may have been working on the translations alongside his role in the cathedral with bureaucratic and pastoral functions in Toledo.

In any case, both Gerard and Gundissalinus were involved in the ecclesiastical institutions, managing the archbishopric and participating in the discussions of its chapter. In different ways, these activities—marked by a collective dimension and defining the translators' sets of personal experiences—can be considered influential factors in their translating activity. Gerard's work as a master may have led him to privilege the translation of works connected to his classroom teaching; Gundissalinus's work as an archdeacon may have led him to choose works with special relevance to the chapter and to the clergy more generally. Unfortunately, the complete absence of data allows a plurality of speculations on

this point—or none. What is clear is that the collective framework in which the translators were working took concrete shape in a plurality of experiences (chats, fights, aims, enmities, duties, etc.) of which only a small part can be qualified as “expertise” in the meaning of enabling knowledge to pursue a specific task: translating. Such a richness factors that are not purely theoretical—experienced by the translators in their personal interactions with their world—cannot be reconstructed but only speculated, suspected but not proved. That alone, however, is not enough to justify neglecting it when we discuss how premodern translations were made, whether in Toledo or elsewhere.

Roger Bacon and Travels across the Sea

Premodern Arabic-to-Latin translations were immensely influential on medieval debate: they were discussed, criticized, and assimilated by most of the later medieval practitioners. Notwithstanding that pivotal impact, few thinkers at the time entered into meta-discussion of how translations should be made and used. The most important and original of those who did was undoubtedly Roger Bacon (1214/20–post 1292). Having examined Bacon’s theory of translation elsewhere,²³ I focus here on a particular aspect of his reasoning: How does Bacon use “experience” in his discussion of medieval translations? Again, I use “experience” in the broad meaning given above, although Bacon on some occasions does use the field of *experior* in a more specific way in connection with scientifically valuable empirical assessments.²⁴

Before I turn to two cases in which Bacon expands on experience in reference to translations, a few preliminary remarks are necessary. First, Bacon was not a translator, yet he discussed translations more than any medieval translator. Second, he often uses rhetorical exaggeration in his texts, especially those with a specific social or political aim. Third, in the cases I will discuss, he gives his own account of “experiences” that he or someone else had. These accounts are all related to translations and translated material. They are very difficult to assess on many points, one of which is particularly significant: whether such experiences actually occurred or not. Either way, however, Bacon’s references to “experience” fulfill a particular function, as persuasive tools to sustain his own line of reasoning.

Indeed, experience held, and still holds, special value as an epistemic justification of the validity of any item. Its functioning can be appreciated through a simple example from the present day. Suppose the flight attendant is asking for dinner preferences. I am sleepy and slow in responding. The flight attendant, perceiving my indecisiveness, suggests the vegetarian option, saying: “I have tried it and it is delicious.” Of course, I can choose not to believe her (totally or partially), for many different reasons, or to do so, for other reasons. Yet complex epistemological implications aside, the reference to her personal experience

implicitly works as an epistemic factor of persuasion, contributing to my belief in the goodness of that meal. Something similar happens with written accounts of experience.

Roger Bacon wrote some of his works with the aim of persuading the Pope to sponsor his reform of Latinate education. The first case I wish to discuss is a text directly related to these: a passage from a letter he sent to Pope Clement IV outlining his *Opus maius*. The letter is a valuable witness to Bacon's political agenda and philosophical thought. It details the ambitious reforms of Latin education that Bacon envisioned in order to "save" Christendom.²⁵ It also makes a series of attacks on proponents of other approaches to science and wisdom (for example, the Scholastic method of commentary and the lack of knowledge of foreign languages), summarizing the harsh criticism that Bacon expresses in the three *Opera*. Discussing the need for Latinate librarians to collect as many scientific and philosophical books as possible, Bacon observes:

And finally—since the authors contradict each other in many things and have written down many things on the basis of mere rumor—it is necessary to check the truth of the evidence, as I demonstrate in the treatise on experimental science. *This is why I have often sent messengers across the sea*—both to various other areas and to large commercial markets—to see the things of nature with my own eyes, and to test the truth of creation by sight, touch, smell, sometimes even hearing, and by the certainty of experience, since I could not observe their truthfulness by books alone—just as Aristotle sent several thousand people to various regions to learn the truth about the things of this world.²⁶

Bacon's claim is radical: You must not trust the books, because their authors contradict each other constantly. Hence, it is necessary to include a further assessment that can provide evidence of their reliability. Bacon alludes to his *scientia experimentalis*, a topic that goes beyond the scope of this chapter,²⁷ but in fact he says something else. He claims to have sent "messengers across the sea" to see, touch, smell, and hear matters on which the books alone cannot be trusted. The context of this passage makes it quite clear that the "books" to be mistrusted are foreign books, that is, translations. We can read the passage following either a weak or a strong interpretation. The former would take "across the sea" as the English Channel (assuming that Bacon was in Oxford, not Paris) and the "commercial markets" as the large hubs in the Continent, such as Bruges. A stronger interpretation would read the "sea" as being the Mediterranean and the "markets" as the commercial hubs in the Islamic and Greek world, such as Byzantium and Tunis. The latter seems more plausible, since it would make little sense for Bacon to tell the Pope that he sent messengers to modern Belgium to find out what books were misdescribing. In turn, claiming to have sent messengers to

the other side of the Mediterranean has a specific persuasive function. It appeals to the direct experience that Bacon's messengers have garnered by going to see the things described in Arabic and Greek books. According to this function, the passage works as criticism of the translations by contrasting a direct assessment of the state of affairs (by the messengers and the source books) with its Latin accounts (the translations), pointing out the untrustworthiness of the latter.

Yet if persuasion was the main goal that Bacon wanted this passage to achieve, should we even suppose that the trips "across the sea" really did happen? It is known that Bacon spent all his money early in his career, investing it in books.²⁸ Probably for this reason, he entered the Franciscan Order apparently in the mid-1250s. One may therefore wonder how he could have sent messengers across the Mediterranean to check the validity of the assertions he had read in the books. He might have used the wide network of Franciscans stretching across the Mediterranean, but there are no traces of that.

Moreover, Bacon's passage is quite close to the preface of Michael Scot's *Ars alchemie*, a work likely known to him.²⁹ A translator, Scot offers another account of travels across the Mediterranean in order to discover the secrets that some books—alchemical ones—did not detail:

Therefore, after having studied and consulted for long time the books of the philosophers, as I said, I have decided to engage personally with a clarification of this darkness. I have gone to the countries beyond the [Mediterranean] Sea and talked with Latin, Hebrew, and Arabic sophists and wise men, acquiring their philosophy and keeping it in my heart.³⁰

Scot recalls that he "went" to the other side of the Mediterranean, "talked" with wise men from different cultures, and "acquired" knowledge. The result of these travels and the data he collected—proceeding from indirect experience, for they are accounts by practitioners, yet direct, because Scot collected them himself—is the list of recipes that constitute Scot's treatise. Leaving aside the cognate question of whether Scot did go to Africa, the closeness to Bacon's text is remarkable. They both use the experience of going across the sea as a validating epistemic item ("by seeing it, I know it") and a persuasive tool ("believe me because I have direct experience of it"). It is possible that Bacon drew inspiration from Scot's work when he decided to tell the Pope that he sent messengers to see how things are at first hand. Although it may well be that he never sent anyone across the sea to smell things, the function of the reference to direct experience in the text is quite similar. The message conveyed by Bacon's reference to experience is clear: the Pope should not believe what is written in translations because, when experienced (seen, touched, smelled, heard), things appear rather different from the accounts in those texts. The texts are therefore unreliable and a cause of error for their readers. To address

this problem, the Pope should sponsor educational reforms including a complete restructuring of how translations are made. That was the aim of Bacon's letter, and the persuasive end to which he turned his account of the experience across the sea.

Roger Bacon and the Inadequacy of Latin Translations

Roger Bacon also made direct criticism of Latin translations.³¹ Discussing why Latins should learn foreign languages (specifically, Greek and Hebrew), he repeatedly criticizes the Latin translations of Aristotle and other works that were used by Latin philosophers and scientists. One of the harshest passages reads as follows:

This is the explanation for [the tenth reason why Latins need to study languages, namely,] problems with translation, especially in the case of the books of Aristotle and his sciences, which are the foundation of the whole study of wisdom. Whoever is unaware of his efforts labors in vain, ploughs the shore, and will never be able to be promoted to other [sciences]. And even the basic sciences have been translated in this way, e.g., logic, natural philosophy, mathematics, so that *no mortal could reliably understand anything worthwhile from them, as I have fully experienced* [*sicut ego expertus sum omnino*]. For this reason I have diligently *listened to many* [lectures on those works] *and have lectured more* [on them] *than any other has, as all who have been nourished in study are aware.*³²

A *topos* of Bacon's programmatic positions, bad translations are a fundamental and despicable cause of error to such a degree that it would be better not to have translations at all. Bacon's criticism is as stern as possible. The translators did a terrible job in rendering Aristotle's text and, consequently, his Latin works are riddled with mistakes that mislead the reader. Because of this, Latins need to learn the languages in which wisdom was originally written and gain direct access to the text.

Bacon appeals to experience to substantiate his position. His appeal is dual: he uses experience as a foundation for his knowledge of the mistaken interpretation to which the translation is prone, and he uses it to claim that, after having become aware of the mistaken interpretation, he has experiential knowledge of an alternative, and correct, interpretation of the text, acquired by attending and giving many lectures. These two types of experience have different grounds and, consequently, should be taken as expressing two different parts of the *experior* semantic field discussed above: the two cognate terms "expertise" and "experience."

Bacon's first statement ("no mortal could reliably understand anything worthwhile from them, as I have fully experienced") can be qualified as "experience" in its broader meaning. Bacon here directly claims *ego expertus sum*, using the past participle of *experior*. The passage starts from

an external state of affairs that has been known directly (experienced) by Bacon and produced a general statement about it (translations are inadequate). Evidently, that statement is not theoretical (or even scientific) in nature, but moves towards being a universal assessment of the state of affairs. The general claim may be either a rhetorically exaggerated generalization or an experience repeated over time; it may articulate Bacon's evaluation of a general state of affairs—his continuous experience of facing bad translations—or refer to some particular event in his firsthand experience. The latter interpretation is suggested by a passage earlier in the *Compendium*, where Bacon recalls what happened during his Parisian lectures on pseudo-Aristotle's *De plantis*. Teaching his students, Bacon referred to *belemum* (henbane, a poisonous plant) taking it to be a technical Latin term. Since it is actually a Castilian colloquial term, Bacon's Spanish students derided him—an embarrassment that Bacon probably kept in mind for years, as he recalls the incident at least twice in his works.³³ Without wishing to reduce Bacon's criticism to the memory of this mishap, it is plausible that his personal experience in the classroom affected his desire for better Latin translations.³⁴

Bacon's second assertion ("I have diligently listened to many lectures on those works and have lectured more on them than any other has") points to the expertise that he professes to have acquired on the matter. It is evidently designed to substantiate Bacon's direct and vast knowledge of Aristotelian philosophy. Bacon wants to show that after long training in Aristotle, he himself has the expertise required to criticize others' translations.

There are many similarities between this text and the previous one. Here, too, aspects related to rhetorical *topoi* are at work: Bacon's acrimonious style, his rhetorical overstatements, and his desire to advance a global reform of the university. Most remarkably, both texts suggest that the corrective function of experience could be deployed to remedy the mistakes made by translators. Experience in its broad meaning led Bacon to the conclusion that errors and misunderstandings abounded in Latinate universities because of bad translations. Yet it was by gaining expertise on the subject that Bacon was able to address the problem and, one might say, alleviate it through the reform of education that he proposed to the Pope.

Conclusions

My short discussion has shown that translations are both the result and the object of "experiences" of different sorts. Such experiences may be the roots of the actor's expertise or a series of personal states of mind induced by her interaction with the external world. In both cases, they affect the making of a translation, either directly or indirectly. As the result of experience, translations, being human products, reflect their translators' experiential universe to an extent far beyond what can be

reconstructed by historians. They arose from the interaction of many biographical factors, in which the outside world, regarded as the opposite of pure theoretical reflection, affected the outcome. The process itself is too complex to be fully dissected, even if the historical actors were really giving accurate accounts of their work.

As an object of experience, translations are read, discussed, passed to other practitioners, sought and criticized, burned and banned. But even in their criticism, "experience" plays a pivotal role as persuasive tool. The epistemic implications of a recourse to experience were (and still are) extremely valuable in rhetoric. Bacon's repeated reference to experiences of different sorts shows his strategy of contrasting direct experience with dependence on books, particularly translations. Translations are unreliable, and that unreliability is demonstrated by assessing what happens in "the real world." This rhetorical strategy might seem surprising, for as I mentioned above, Bacon was an eager reader (also of translations), craved the missing books of the ancients, and supposedly even went bankrupt in his effort to buy as many books as possible. There is no contradiction, though: whether direct or not, experience and its implicit directedness, meaningfully connecting extra-mental and mental worlds, are important rhetorical tools and as such they are often used by Bacon, among many others.

In both cases, the role of experience exceeds all particular semantic fields and proper definitions. This is reflected by translations at the different levels of their production and use. Indeed, translations can be considered epistemic vessels of experience. Explicitly, they contain sets of told experiences that are recalled by the written text as meaningful accounts of the author's experience of the extra-mental realm. Implicitly, they also reflect the plane of personal encounter with the external world from which translations were generated as intellectual and material objects. Such is the experiential world of the translators and, one may add, of the manuscript copyist, acknowledging the materiality of each translation individually purchased, read, and interpreted. Translations are also generators of new experiences. These experiences may arise directly from the textuality of the translations: from both reading and understanding the text or from the practical application of an item described by the translation (a recipe, a procedure, an ethical attitude, and so on). However, experiences can also relate to the translations in a different way, when practitioners discuss their impact on different levels of the external world, either descriptively (elucidating a state of affairs) or prescriptively (requesting changes to a state of affairs). Like any written text taken in its temporal dimension, a translation is a multiplier of experiences, collecting and originating experiences of different kinds.

Experience as a complex, many-layered structure is impossible to capture. That is probably due to its overarching presence in human life: experience is the main feature of our mental encounter with the outside world. Consequently, the human world is an experiential world. In the course

of time, that dynamic dimension of human life crystallizes into a series of testimonies, objects, and items. Historians collect and examine these remnants of past lives with the aim of reconstructing at least some of the elaborate framework of variables, choices, and actions that surrounds any event. There are cases, though, in which historians can reconstruct almost nothing: they cannot assess the myriad of experiential variables characterizing the life of a translator, or whether Bacon did send messengers across the sea or witness deplorable misunderstandings in Paris. There is no way around the limitation that time imposes on our lives by constantly flowing away. Nonetheless, to mistake the static endurance of historical witnesses for the lively complexity of human existence would, I think, be an inexcusable error, both methodologically and philosophically.

Notes

- 1 I use the term “medieval Spaniards” to refer to the people dwelling in the Iberian Peninsula during the Middle Ages, without implying any sociocultural, religious, or linguistic characterization.
- 2 See Burnett, “Translating.”
- 3 On the collaboration between Ibn Daud and Gundissalinus, see Polloni, *Twelfth-Century Renewal*, 1–19. The two translators also appear to have influenced each other philosophically (or, at least, Ibn Daud surely influenced Gundissalinus). See Polloni, “Toledan Ontologies.”
- 4 Ibn Daud describes the method in the preface to their translation of Avicenna’s *De anima*. See d’Alverny, “Les traductions”; Bertolacci, “Community.”
- 5 Roger Bacon, *Compendium studii philosophiae*, ed. and trans. Maloney, 175.
- 6 For a detailed examination of Bacon’s criticism of Latin translators, see Polloni, “Disentangling.”
- 7 For instance, see Ibn Daud’s and Gundissalinus’s prologue to the Latin translation of Avicenna’s *De anima*: Avicenna Latinus, *Liber de anima*, I. 4.
- 8 This scarcity is exacerbated by corruptions and losses due to the history of the text’s transmission. The translators of many texts are still unknown and, in some cases, only one translator is mentioned instead of two, for instance in Gundissalinus’s later translations. Manuscripts sometimes give only Gundissalinus’s name, or they do not name any translator. Does this mean that Gundissalinus learned Arabic and translated without collaborating with any other member of his team? Different interpretations are possible, considering the scanty data; it may be that the name of the other translator was simply lost during the transmission of the text. See Burnett, “Some Comments,” esp. 166. Concerning unnamed translators, see Hasse and Büttner, “Notes.”
- 9 Translators themselves underlined the difficulty of rendering Arabic syntax and vocabulary into Latin. Burnett, “Translating.”
- 10 See Pessin, *Ibn Gabirol’s Theology*.
- 11 See Polloni, “Misinterpreting Ibn Gabirol?”
- 12 I cannot expand further here on the semantic nuances of *experior*, but they can be appreciated by consulting the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* (<https://tll.degruyter.com/>) and dictionaries of medieval Latin such as DMLBS (<https://dmlbs.ox.ac.uk/>). On the multifarious declinations of “experience” in the Latin Middle Ages, see Benatouïl and Draelants, *Expertus sum*.

- 13 See Bertolacci, "Community."
- 14 See Burnett, "Coherence."
- 15 Supposedly, a great number of Arabic works were available in Toledo. It is true that Toledo held a vast library proceeding from the possessions of the Banu Hud family, a large collection of Arabic manuscripts that was moved from Zaragoza to Toledo before the beginning of the translation movement (Burnett, "Coherence"). But the material availability of original works alone did not make them available for translation.
- 16 On duplications and revisions, see Burnett, "Scientific Translations."
- 17 See Burnett, "Coherence," 275–81.
- 18 This is a very controversial point, as Gundissalinus's *De scientiis* is a vari-ously altered version that challenges the label of "translation" in favor of an acknowledgment of the text as an original work. See Polloni, *Twelfth-Century Renewal*, 20–29; Galonnier, *Le "De scientiis Alfarabii"*; Galonnier, "Dominicus Gundissalinus."
- 19 See Burnett, "Communities of Learning."
- 20 Gundissalinus was archdeacon of Cuéllar before he moved to Toledo, and was probably called into town by the archbishopric in order to collaborate with Ibn Daud. See Polloni, "Toledan Translation Movement."
- 21 See García Gallo, *El Concilio de Coyanza*.
- 22 See Polloni, *Twelfth-Century Renewal*, 14–15.
- 23 See Polloni, "Disentangling."
- 24 See Hackett, "Ego Expertus Sum."
- 25 See Power, *Roger Bacon*.
- 26 Roger Bacon, *Letter to Pope Clement IV*, ed. Gasquet, 502; trans. Egel, 151. Emphasis added.
- 27 On Bacon's *scientia experimentalis*, see the fundamental studies by Jeremiah Hackett, especially "Roger Bacon on *Scientia experimentalis*."
- 28 On Bacon's life, see Hackett, "Roger Bacon."
- 29 On Scot's biography, see Thorndike, *Michael Scot*.
- 30 Michael Scot, *Ars alchemie*, ed. Thomson, 533.
- 31 For a thorough examination of this aspect of Bacon's thought, see Polloni, "Disentangling."
- 32 Roger Bacon, *Compendium studii philosophiae*, ed. and trans. Maloney, 165. Emphasis added.
- 33 See *ibid.*, 163. Bacon recalls the same incident, giving additional details, in *Opus maius*, I. 3. 1.
- 34 See Théry, "Note." Against Théry's reductive approach, Alessio, *Mito e scienza*, 44–45.

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