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Karine Durin

A Female Dissenter in Counter-Reformation Spain: Oliva Sabuco de Nantes, Between Epicureanism and Stoicism

The philosophical project developed by Oliva Sabuco de Nantes y Barrera (1562–1622) in her *Nueva filosofía de la naturaleza del hombre, no conocida ni alcanzada de los grandes filósofos antiguos: la qual mejora la vida y salud humana* (*New Philosophy of Human Nature: Neither Known to nor Attained by the Great Ancient Philosophers, Which Will Improve Human Life and Health*), published in Madrid in 1587, is an example of dissent in multiple ways.¹ The treatise reveals a complex relationship with philosophical erudition that invites the reader to consider the legacy of Epicureanism and Stoicism in relation to the author's specific ideas on human nature. This chapter aims to demonstrate how Sabuco reformed medicine's relationship with health and illness by approaching these questions in a philosophical way that is both innovative and disruptive. According to Sabuco, self-knowledge is the starting point that leads to the knowledge of what she considers the pillars of health: the passions. As Sabuco shows, human passions are the site of exchanges and internal movements, as well as of multiple correspondences between the inner self, its natural, social and political environment, and its relationship to a larger macrocosm. Sabuco's text consists of seven parts, mostly in dialogue form.

This chapter will address the difficulty of separating Epicureanism and Stoicism in light of the medical experience developed in this treatise. The *New Philosophy of Human Nature* proposed a naturalistic approach to morality, as Sabuco sought to demonstrate the usefulness of natural history for self-knowledge and ethical living. I propose to analyze how the experience of nature (present in natural spaces and animal species) contributed to the definition of a new interpretation of subjectivity. As such, Epicureanism made it possible to understand the natural world and the self.

In this context, I will address the manner in which Sabuco dealt with the most controversial issues of Epicurean doctrine, specifically, divine providence and the immortality of the soul, by investigating her treatment of death in the book. The originality of Sabuco's philosophical reflection comes from the fact that

¹ The title of the English edition comes from the first translation into English by Waithe, Comoler Vintró and Zorita, 2007.

her conception of Stoicism remained closely linked to Epicureanism. Furthermore, the search for inner harmony leads Sabuco to consider ways of improving human existence in the world. In this way, political reflection moves her far beyond the doctrines that she had initially integrated, in order to highlight their limitations.

The Critical Reading of Authorities and the Rise of a Naturalistic Subjectivity

“How and why did a woman become a philosopher in the seventeenth century?” This question raised by Paula Findlen (2002, 186) is also relevant to the case of Oliva Sabuco de Nantes. The details of her existence are still a mystery. The *Nueva filosofía* is the sole work of a woman whose intellectual authority has for a long time been contested. The book, however, met with remarkable success, even during her lifetime, for a second edition appeared within a year of the 1587 edition in Madrid. Several sections of the original text were deleted by inquisitors in this second edition. However, a third edition appeared in Portugal, in 1622. The *Nueva filosofía* was included in the *Index librorum prohibitorum et expurgatorum* of 1632. The critical edition of the book published in Albacete in 2009 (Sabuco Álvarez 2009) reproduces the modifications mentioned in the Index while restoring the original edition. The pre-eminent philosopher and anatomist of the *Novator* movement, Martín Martínez, edited the text again in 1728, and the editorial success of Sabuco’s text was constant until the end of the nineteenth century.² The first complete English edition, on the other hand, was not published until 2007.

Despite all this, Sabuco’s authorship was denied by critics in the early twentieth century and the work was attributed to her father, Miguel Sabuco.³ According to Waithe and Vintró’s research (Waithe and Vintró 2003), this falsehood was originally promoted by her father himself, and was later supported by flawed arguments.

Regardless of the contested attribution, Oliva Sabuco represents the archetype of a learned Renaissance woman. Like other young female scholars of her

² For an overview of the editorial fortunes of the text, see Pomata 2010, 10–12. Pomata provided a translation of a part of the book, the dialogue *De vera medicina*. Among the recent studies on Sabuco’s thought, see Caridad García Gómez 1992; *Al-Basit* 1987; Bidwell-Steiner 2012; Barbone 2015; Plastina 2019.

³ The authorship of the text was discussed by Hidalgo 1903. The defence of Oliva’s authorship was the object of archival investigations conducted by Waithe and Vintró, 2003.

time, Oliva Sabuco did not pursue her studies outside the domestic sphere and did not frequent universities and other erudite circles. She grew up in Alcaraz, a city marked by the presence of *judeoconversos*, crypto-Jewish Christian converts. She received a sophisticated education within her family milieu, and developed her own personal curiosity and erudition over the years. She was strongly influenced by the humanist Pedro Simón Abril (1530–1595), teacher of grammar and rhetoric between 1578 and 1583 in Alcaraz. Strongly committed to the teaching of ancient philosophy, which he believed to be necessary for the “common good” (*la bienandanza de un pueblo*), he wrote a treatise on “rational philosophy,” *Primera parte de la Filosofía llamada la Lógica racional o parte racional*, published in Alcalá de Henares in 1587, the same year as Oliva Sabuco’s book.⁴

Oliva Sabuco’s father, Miguel Sabuco, was a pharmacist and an expert in herbal medicine and botany. Through him she had access to the writings of physician and botanist Nicolás Bautista Monardes (1493–1588), who is quoted in her book. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that sixteenth-century Italian women were intimately involved in the apothecary trade as wives and daughters of apothecaries. Comparable studies are still lacking for early modern Spain, a context marked by a growing professional identity for pharmacists that would place them on an equal level with physicians: “The monarchy expanded the medical arena to include the professional activities of the apothecaries, spice merchants, and herbalists in the interest of preserving the public health. This expansion of royal authority also marked an important moment in the development of the professional identity of the apothecaries” (Clouse 2011, 114).

Nonetheless, the main motivation in Oliva Sabuco’s learning was the search for human health through philosophical virtue, derived at least in part from her father’s pharmaceutical culture. Sabuco sought to be a physician and a philosopher by intertwining two approaches to human nature, which was not in fact unusual at the time. As we shall see, she balanced an interest in the empirical knowledge of particulars with a conviction about the usefulness of medicine on a broader social level.

In Oliva Sabuco’s view, self-knowledge is a remedy against the greatest evil, “violent death,” which is caused by an illness of the soul reinforced by the uncontrolled power of the passions. Thus, the prolongation of life was at the centre of her intellectual project, which was at the same time philosophical, medical and political. All the dialogues that compose the book, however, lack erudite referen-

⁴ The complete title is *Primera parte de la Filosofía llamada la Lógica racional o parte racional, la qual enseña como ha de usar el hombre del divino y celestial don de la razon: assi en lo que pertenece a las ciencias, como en lo que toca a los negocios. Colegida de la dotrina de los Filósofos antiguos, y particularmente de Aristoteles*, Alcalá de Henares, 1587.

ces to its sources, except for Galen, Plato and especially Pliny the Elder. This choice corresponds to the search for a clear, readable, even didactic subject, judging by the dialogue structure and the use of the vernacular.

However, the main objective of the author consists in a re-foundation of medical knowledge based on a critical reading of ancient authorities:

Y reciba V. M. este servicio de una mujer que, pienso es el mayor en calidad que cuantos han hecho los hombres, vasallos o señores, que han deseado servir a V.M. Y aunque su cesárea y católica Magestad tenga dedicados muchos libros de hombres, a lo menos de mujeres pocos y raros, y ninguno de esta materia. Tan extraño y nuevo es el libro cuanto es el autor. Trata del conocimiento de sí mismo y de la doctrina para conocerse y entenderse el hombre a sí mismo y a su naturaleza, y para saber las causas naturales por qué vive y por qué muere o enferma. (Sabuco 2009, 83)

And may Your Majesty receive this pledge from a woman, for I think it is of higher quality than any others by men, by vassals, or by lords who had vowed to serve Your Majesty. And even if your Caesarean and Catholic Majesty has had many books dedicated to Him from men, only few and rare were from women, and none about this subject matter. This book is as unique and new as its author. It deals with the knowledge of one's self and presents a doctrine that enables humans to know and understand themselves and their nature and to learn about the natural causes by which they live and die or become ill. It has much noteworthy advice on how to avoid violent death. It improves the world in many ways. (Sabuco 2007, 44)

This critical position was developed further in one of her last dialogues, titled “Colloquy on Errors of Traditional Medicine.” To what extent then could this quest for true medicine express heterodox ideas? Here, Sabuco presented her philosophy through an empirical and rationalistic approach, based on the connection between mind and body. In this manner, she affirmed the capacity of mind to develop all the ingredients necessary for physical health, not only of the individual, but also of the collectivity. She underlined the role of the mind in the acquisition of physiological and emotional equilibrium, similar to the Stoic thesis of the control of the passions derived from the idea of *ataraxia*, which was deeply rooted in the literary and philosophical culture of Renaissance Spain.

This new philosophy was nevertheless part of a deep-rooted movement of criticism of the authorities, which allowed for the expression of various positions that could go as far as heterodoxy. The denunciation of the errors of Galen and the Ancients, in Paracelsus for example, was in line with a current of contestation of Aristotelianism from the margins of the universities that had begun in the

early fourteenth century.⁵ This critical movement had a broader European dimension as well, operating as a powerful force for the renewal of philosophical and scientific reflection on natural philosophy. It allows us to understand the development in Spain of an empiricist conception applied to natural things. Here, the empirical attitude favoured by the emergence of a conception of natural philosophy was marked, in a decisive manner, by a renewed reading of Pliny's *Natural History*, which henceforth provided the impetus for a progressive reversal of Aristotelianism, while at the same time expressing the search for other philosophical and scientific approaches that would accommodate the practical imperatives and the imperial aims of the Spanish monarchy.⁶

Oliva Sabuco's dispute with the ancient authorities begins with the emphatic affirmation of the possibility of empirical truth, probably inspired by Lucretius' words about relying on our own senses to distinguish between truth and falsehood and so attain certainty (Lucretius 2015, Book VI, lines 699–700). She repeatedly quotes Hippocrates, Galen and Pliny, in order to discuss the degree of legitimacy that could be attributed to philosophical and medical doctrines.

Prior to Sabuco, Antonio de Torquemada, author of the *Jardín de Flores curiosas* (Salamanca, 1570) described Pliny as a guide to the mysteries of nature:

Él habla como buen filósofo conformándose con lo más posible y restringiendo los límites de naturaleza, como cosa de por sí sola, y no nascida y criada y conservada en la voluntad y mente divina, como vos en el principio de nuestra plática nos dijistes que lo decía Livino Lenio; que si por aquí nos guíamos más fácil se nos harían de créer estos misterios y maravillarse de las edades tan largas y entender los secretos de naturaleza más modernos (Torquemada 2012, 660).

[He speaks as a good philosopher conforming himself to what is most possible and restricting the limits of nature, as a thing of itself, and not born and bred and preserved in the divine will and mind, as, in the beginning of our talk, you told us that Livinus Lemnius said; that if we were guided by this, it would be easier for us to believe these mysteries and wonder at the long ages and understand the more modern secrets of nature.]⁷

5 This empirical break seems to be particularly marked by the effects of the polemic opened by the Ferrara physician, philosopher and mathematician Niccolo Leonicensi (1428–1524) on the errors of Pliny. On the critical currents with regard to Aristotle's philosophy and their effects on the philosophies related to natural questions during the Renaissance, see Martin 2014, and Falcon 2005, in particular chap. 4: "The Limits of Aristotle's Science of Nature."

6 On the influence both in Spain and in Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo of the Italian polemic on the criticism of Pliny's errors, see Durin 2020.

7 Unless noted otherwise, all translations are mine.

Furthermore, Sabuco's dialogues in the *Nueva Filosofía* show a solid line of argumentation that defines in an entirely novel manner the relationship between philosophy and medicine, moving far beyond the traditional books on recipes and secrets or *arcana* that constituted the main production of female writers in the Renaissance.⁸ For this reason, the *Nueva filosofía* can be placed within the tradition of treatises on the nature of man that flourished during the Renaissance. The popularity of the subject was first linked to the diffusion of translations and abridgements of the *Theologia naturalis* (1434–1436) by the Spanish monk Raymond of Sabunde. Three adaptations of Sabunde's work circulated under different titles: *Lumbre del alma* (1542); *Despertador del alma* (Seville, 1544); and *Violeta del ánima*, a 1549 translation into Spanish of Petrus Dorlandus' abridgement *Viola animae sive De Natura hominis* (published in Latin in 1499), and consisting of seven dialogues. They were sometimes followed by an added dialogue on the Passion of Christ, which made it a source of spiritual literature in the sixteenth century, combining an emphasis on the dignity of man with self-knowledge, with the aim of leading man out of his misery by giving him a glimpse of perfection (Bujanda 1974, 78–84).

This form of self-knowledge, whose purpose is spiritual and religious, is quite different from that espoused by Sabuco. Rather than following the lead of Sabunde and the Christian philosopher Nemesius (c. 400 AD) who inspired him, Sabuco's ideas have certain similarities with the school of Italian philosophers of nature, from a generation of medical authors who were highly critical of Galen, such as Agostino Doni (*De natura hominis libri duo*, Basel, 1581), pupil of Bernardino Telesio (*De rerum natura iuxta propria principia*, Naples, Iosephus Cachius, 1570). Sabuco concurred with them in discussing the naturalist and materialist components of the contemporary reading of Galen, in order to show the erosion of Scholasticism. This medico-philosophical turn affirmed the corporeality of the body based on a knowledge of anatomy as the basis for understanding the nature of the soul, and of humanity. Fabrizio Bigotti (2019, 145) has described the various approaches employed by authors to achieve this end:

The study of human nature within a naturalistic frame, the rejection of the universal species, the deconstruction of the Aristotelian theory of essence [. . .] the replacement of *mens* with *ingenium* and the thesis that it is impossible to demonstrate the immortality of the soul on the basis of natural philosophy alone.

In Sabuco's case, this line of thought was defined by the reduction of physical functions to the corporeal dimension of the human body. There might be a direct

⁸ The case of Sabuco is different from the practices discussed in Ray 2015.

link here with the Italian naturalism of the Paduan school, like that of Doni and Telesio, and there certainly is one with the Spanish medical thinker Huarte de San Juan. For all of those authors, the study of anatomy became the point of departure for a renewed critique of Galen that led to a “naturalization of the soul and somatization of the mind,” as Bigotti asserts (2019, 52–53). In situating the soul within the brain, “Prince of this house” according to the translation by Gianna Pomata (Sabuco 2010, 4), and not in the heart, Oliva Sabuco established a link with the “encephalocentric” tradition developed by the Italian naturalism of Renaissance philosophy, which, by the second half of the sixteenth century, was already departing from the influence of Galen’s texts. Although she is not mentioned in the scholarship on the subject, Sabuco nevertheless participated in this evolution whereby psychic functions were conceived as bodily functions.

The originality of her proposal is affirmed in the way the brain is treated, and the emphasis on materiality is further affirmed by the powerful organic and vital role played by the *chilo*, chyle. This substance, also referred to by the author as *jugo blanco*, white juice, participates in the vital energy of the organism, *sangre blanca*, white blood, with its nutritive function, which concerns human or animal species, man or woman, without distinction. Its importance in Sabuco’s text reveals a major difference with Galen, since the power of the blood is minimized by this new conception of inner nutrition. Defined in terms of a plant metaphor, the *chilo*, also named “the white chyle of nutrition,” is used to describe a system of circulation that “increases and nourishes the species”:

Avicena dijo que, fuera de los cuatro humores, había otras cuatro que llamó segundas humedades: a las cuales nombró por restos cuatro nombres; *Ros, cambium, gluten, humor in extremitatibus* [. . .] Veis aquí (señor Doctor) el jugo blanco o quilo o licor o sangre blanca que yo digo hallo que envía el cerebro y hace el nutrimento de todas las partes del cuerpo (Sabuco 2009, 320).

Avicenna said that besides the four humors, there are four others, which he called second moistures, and to which he gave the following names: *ros, cambium, gluten, humor in extremitatibus*. [. . .] These moistures, Mr. Doctor, are no other than the substance I discovered and speak of, namely, the white juice, or chyle or liquor or white blood, sent by the brain to nourish all the parts of the body. (Sabuco 2010, 206)

Sabuco therefore argues that the two fundamental “roots” are the brain and the stomach. In her subsequent considerations on the health and dietetic health of kings, she declares:

Y así digo que los reyes tienen más necesidad de esta Filosofía, que por esta razón tienen más enfermedades, porque la causa de ellas es aquí en esta raíz donde pasa esto mediante el ánima y las especies aborrecidas y desechadas, y no en el hígado ni humor ni cor-

azón incapaces de especies. [. . .] Los médicos sienten que la raíz que alimenta el cuerpo es el estómago, y así le llamó Platón: pesebre de todo el cuerpo, lo cual es así, porque la raíz principal que alimenta y vegeta todo el cuerpo, es el cerebro; y el estómago es una segunda raíz, o seno, que produce la otra para depositar y meter dentro de ella el alimento, como los simios, esfingidos y sátiros lo meten primero en las mejillas, para comer después, y el ave onocrótalo en su seno (como está dicho). (Sabuco 2009, 329).

Therefore, I say that kings stand more in need of my philosophy, because for this reason they have more diseases, whose cause is in the brain, where the soul reacts to the “species” of repulsive and loathed objects. The cause is neither in the liver, nor in the humor, nor in the heart, none which is able to perceive the species. [. . .] The physicians think that the root that feeds the body is the stomach, and Plato called it “the manager of the whole body” but such is not the case. The principal root that feeds the whole body and makes it grow is the brain. The stomach is only a second root and cavity, made by the brain in order to store the food, just as some apes, the dog-headed apes and the orangutangs, store food first in the recesses of their jaws in order to eat later, and the pelican stores its pouch, as has been said. (Sabuco 2010, 220)

The primacy of the brain and the absence of references to the soul or spirit could easily justify the censorship of certain parts of the text of the 1587 and 1588 editions in the *Index of Prohibited Books* of 1632. At any rate, the *Nueva filosofía* made a relevant contribution to the reintroduction of Epicureanism in studies on Natural Philosophy, and to a naturalization of Christian morality. The naturalization of spiritual and moral goals is based on this materialistic and functional conception of the brain.

Furthermore, the *Nueva filosofía* is ambivalent with respect to the tradition of ancient Stoicism. It was impossible for Sabuco to exclude the passions from her reflections on health, or the world, as shown in the first dialogue, “Knowledge of One’s Self,” or in the “Dialogue on the True Medicine”:

Tercera [*proposición*]. Los afectos del alma causan principalmente la vida, la muerte o la enfermedad al hombre, en los cuales es hombre.

Cuarta. La causa y oficina de los humores de toda enfermedad es el cerebro. Allí están los afectos, pasiones y movimientos del ánima, allí el sentir o sensación, allí la raíz y la naturaleza que hace la vegetación, allí la vida y anhelación. (Sabuco 2009, 253)

[Third] the feelings of the soul – wherein is the humanity of man – are the primary cause of man’s life, death, and sickness.

Four, the brain is the cause and workshop of all diseases and humors. There, in the brain, reside the feelings, passion, and motions of the soul; there is the seat of sense perception; there is the root and the natural faculty or part of the soul which is the agent of growth; there are life and breathing. (Sabuco 2010, 101)

The search for happiness cannot be exclusively intellectual, and must take into account our knowledge of nature. By focusing on interiority and subjectivity Sab-

uco entered into a discussion with Stoicism. If Stoicism was a philosophy of man and the search for control and dominion, she adapted it to her naturalism by examining the vices and virtues as elements of natural philosophy. The culmination of this process became radical when she declared “el entendimiento potencia orgánica” [the mind an organic faculty]. The soul is considered a part of the body, anchored in the body as its root.

Epicureanism through the Animal, and Death

But what was Sabuco’s objective in pursuing this naturalization of morals? This question leads us to an explanation of the exact nature of her empiricism. The importance of the animal in Sabuco’s work invites a comparison with how the subject was developed, before her, by the physician-philosopher Antonio Gómez Pereira, author of *Antoniana Margarita* (Medina del Campo, 1554) and *Nova veraque medicina* (1558)⁹ – a comparison all the more illuminating because the positions of the two natural philosophers are so antithetical. The history of the reception of *Antoniana Margarita* has been the subject of controversy since its publication, as shown by the edition of García Valverde (2019). The “Objections of Licenciado Miguel de Palacios, Professor of Sacred Theology in the University of Salamanca, to Several of the Many Paradoxes in *Antoniana Margarita* and in Their *Defense*” (Gómez Pereira 2019, 1157) concerns the “Proof that brute beasts lack sensory perception” (Gómez Pereira 2019, 197). His argument on animals, that “they have proved that they have no sensory perception” (Gómez Pereira 2019, 209), was probably influenced by the work of anatomist Andreas Vesalius (1514–1564).¹⁰ Taking an opposite approach, Sabuco seems to rely on the example of Pliny to contradict Gómez Pereira’s claim. The reference to the ingenuity of aquatic creatures (shellfish) in Pliny’s book 9, and of elephants and snakes, book 8, allows Sabuco to summon animals, in all their forms, at any moment in her

9 Lynn Thorndike commented on the use of novelty in the titles of scientific works on the threshold of the seventeenth century: “Such titles became [. . .] more repetitious and even stereotyped [. . .] fomented by growing opposition to Aristotle and scholasticism and the tendency toward a modern philosophy, by the Paracelsian revival of the later sixteenth century with its three principles instead of four elements [. . .] and by the increasing interest in the experimental method” (Thorndike 1951, 584–585).

10 Vesalius’ works began to be disseminated in Spain during the reign of Philip II, particularly with the examination of animals based on dissection and the renewal of anatomical knowledge. The work of José López Piñero on “The Vesalian Movement in Sixteenth-Century Spain” is essential on this topic (Piñero 1979). See also Catani and Sandrone 2015, 208, and Antonio Martín Ara-

discourse, and provides an excellent opportunity to bring in a familiar image which, of course, recalls the *exempla* of the tales specific to the medieval corpus. The familiarity of the images and references thus reinforces the task of didactic popularization of the discourse, further facilitated by its vernacular articulation of the scientific questions addressed. Reading Pliny's *Natural History* was a pleasant and popular pastime in the sixteenth century, especially in European court circles.

In Sabuco, as in Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo in the same period, Pliny is a common source for upholding the primacy of experience, for questioning the knowledge of authorities. But Sabuco's *Nueva filosofía* does not present any practical cases that would justify the idea of a medical empiricism. Pliny is the mediator of this more familiar kind of empiricism, which is related to a literature of *exempla* whose function is didactic as well as illustrative. The *exempla* take the place of the images that frequently illustrated medical texts.

In addition, given the considerable importance of Pliny, cited almost a hundred times in the texts that form the *Nueva filosofía*, a probable knowledge of the writings of Conrad Gessner (1516–1565) should be considered in the conception of the work. The Zurich physician published the first volume of his encyclopaedic *Historiae animalium* in Zurich in 1551, and further volumes appeared until 1558. The works of the Zurich polymath circulated in Spain, both the *Historiae animalium* and the *Thesaurus de remediis secretis* (1554), which was widely distributed in sixteenth-century Europe. Repeatedly republished in Europe from Lyon to Venice, there were nearly 27 editions before 1600 and translations into Italian, French and English. The curiosity and erudition of Oliva Sabuco may justify the hypothesis of Gessner's influence on the new way of thinking about medicine that Sabuco developed in her work. Conrad Gessner was known in Spain, but references to him were not always explicit for religious reasons.

At any rate, the recurrent sympathy created by the mirror that the animal provides for the human mind places the passions and emotions in a naturalistic perspective:

Odio natural se dice por la contrariedad y diferencia que tiene un hombre a otro en complexion, condiciones, virtudes y vicios y por la contrariedad de las estrellas y signos en que nacieron. Este odio natural es de la sensitiva. Tiénelo muchos animales unos con otros. (Sabuco 2009, 108)

Natural hatred is related to the discrepancies and differences that one man has toward another due to race, social status, and virtues and vices and by the fate of the stars or signs

guz: "Antoniana Margarita (1554) is the first attempt to explain brain functioning by excluding the Galenic concepts of 'soul' and 'spirit'" (2022, 10).

under which they were born. This natural hatred comes from the sensitive soul and is borne by many animals against one another. (Sabuco 2007, 59).

The *Nueva filosofía* is ambiguous regarding classical Stoicism. On the one hand, Sabuco considered it impossible to exclude the influence of passion when reflecting on physical health, which, in turn, underlined the importance of knowledge about physical nature. On the other hand, her debate with Stoicism was centred on subjectivity, and the interiorization of knowledge. If Stoicism was a philosophy based on the quest for self-control, Sabuco linked it with her naturalism in examining vice and virtue as the main elements of her natural philosophy. For example, concerning mercy:

Título XV. Afecto de misericordia, que hace este daño. Como la misericordia sea pena y dolor de la miseria ajena, también derriba jugo del cerebro y lo hace viciosos a más y menos, y así mueve lágrimas y se amortecen y vienen síncoas y grandes daños, como de ver curar un herido, ver matar a otro y aun de ver matar un animal viene grande daño en la manera dicha a mozos y mozas tiernas. Siéntese en los muslos porque lo que cae del cerebro va por aquel lugar. Esta misericordia podrían aprender los hombres de algunos animales y aves que mantienen y regalan a sus padres en la vejez, como de las cigüeñas y de un género de ratones que cuenta Plinio [Lib.8.c.57]. (Sabuco 2009, 111)

15. *Excessive Compassion.* Compassion causes me sorrow and pain from others' miseries. But humans should learn how to be compassionate from certain animals. According to Pliny, animals such as storks and a type of mouse maintain and cajole their parents at old age. But compassion can also draw down brain fluid and make it more or less vicious, depending upon the extent of the compassion, bringing tears, or even making people faint and even comatose. (Sabuco 2007, 61)

These moral notions are questioned in the light of the body, the brain and the passions. Her conclusions on this matter are radical indeed, for she declared the mind an organic faculty, “el entendimiento potencia orgánica,” and considered that the health of the soul is inextricably linked to the health of the body. Thus, passions are at the root of all illness and malady. In consequence, Sabuco eluded and rejected any idea of a conflict and opposition (*discordia*) between the soul and the body by making the passions the keystone of their union. The search for concord is significantly marked by the presence of two balanced positions (by Antonio and Veronio) expressed in the form of the fictional dialogue, a genre that provides a vehicle for the expression of the author's philosophical ideas:

Antonio. El principal y general remedio de la *vera medicina* es componer el ánima con el cuerpo y quitar la discordia y descontento con las razones del segundo remedio, y confortar el cerebro con las tres columnas o empressas que dijimos: las dos espirituales, alegría, contento y placer (que todo es uno), y esperanza de bien, las cuales dos columnas, porque son

espirituales del alma no se pueden poner ni aplicar con otra cosa principalmente si no es con palabras, aunque también se pueden poner con obras exteriores aunque sean fingidas y no de veras. De manera que os doy la primera regla general, que es ésta. El mejor medicamento o remedio es palabras y obras que en los adultos engendran alegría y esperanza de bien. Luego confortaréis el cerebro con la tercera columna, que es confortación y buen concierto de la segunda armonía del estómago con las cosas confortativas el estómago y medicamentos que lo conciertan, como adelante se dirá. Confortase también la raíz principal del cerebro con sus confortativos, y especial con buen olor y música. (Sabuco 2009, 227)

Antonio. The most important and basic remedy of *Proper Medicine* is to harmonize the soul [el *ánima*] with the body, to remove discord and discontent by using the reasoning of the second remedy, and to comfort the brain through the three pillars of health [. . .] we have mentioned. There are the two [pillars]: joy [*alegría*], contentment [*contento*] or pleasure [*placer*] (which are one and the same), and optimism [*esperanza de bien*]. Because both pillars are spiritual, [coming] from the soul, they cannot [usually] be expressed nor exercised through any means other than through words. However, it is also possible to exercise them through other external actions, even when those actions are not real, but only fake. Therefore, I give you the first rule, which is as follows: The best prescription or cure is words and actions, which in adults bring joy and optimism [*alegría y esperanza de bien*]. Right after this, you should comfort the brain using the third pillar of health, which is the soothing and internal concord of the second, i.e., the digestive system, by using things that give comfort to the stomach and [using] medicines that provide internal concord to it, as we will discuss later. You should also comfort the primary “root” or the brain with what comforts it, especially with good scent and music. First Basic Rule to Conserve Health: The Three Pillars of Health. (Sabuco 2007, 158)

Sabuco considered sadness the most damaging of all passions. In contrast, happiness (“*placer, alegría, contento*”) appeared as the source of physical health and well-being, leading to a redefinition of the very concept of health. It is worth mentioning that this relationship was expressed in very similar terms by the naturalist Luigi Luisini (*De compescendis animi affectibus*, Basel, 1562), who commented on the remedies of consolation to avoid excessive passion:

[. . .] keeping a safe distance from the wrathful subject, removing from his grasp any tools he may be brandishing [. . .] while sadness is prevented by inviting the patient to ponder the question of the *non hoc tibi soli*, coupling this contemplation with activities such as strolling in parks and sunny places, gratifying the five senses, engaging in pleasing conversation and taking tonics specific to each of main organs. (Bigotti 2019, 100)

Sabuco further explained how to dispel the turmoil with arguments that recall the views of Luisini:

Título VI. De la ira y su remedio la insinuación retórica. Sí hay [remedios], como es luego gargarizar con agua fría y vinagre blanco aguado, comer el jugo de cosas agras y no beber vino ni comer hasta ser pasada la alteración, tomar buen olor, la eutrapelia de un buen

amigo (que es buena conversación) y con él salirse al campo donde el movimiento de los árboles y el suave ruido del agua se oiga. La música también es eficazísimo remedio que quita el daño que el enojo está haciendo, como los mordidos de las tarántulas sanan bailando a buena música y no con otra cosa y, si falta la música, mueren luego. (Sabuco 2009, 100)

6. *Rage and Its Remedy, Rhetorical Insinuation.* [Remedies] Yes there are, such as gargling right away diluted white vinegar, drinking tart juices, avoiding wine, not eating until the commotion is over, using scents, enjoying the intimacy of a good friend's conversation [*la eutrapelia de un buen amigo*] and going with him to the countryside where the rustling of the trees and the murmur of the water can be heard. Music is also a very effective remedy against the harm that anger is producing. (Sabuco 2007, 54)

The connection between *Temperamenta* and *mores*, inspired by Galen, justified this approach. But for Sabuco, above all, it was the longing for the hope of good, *la esperanza de bien*, that constituted the most important component of physical health (Sabuco 2007, 140). The *Título XXV* insists on this point:

Título XXV. Afecto de esperanza de bien. Avisa que esperanza de bien es una columna que sustenta la salud del hombre y hace todas las obras humanas. La esperanza de bien es la que sustenta (como una columna) la salud y vida humana y gobierna el mundo, la que hace todas las cosas de este mundo. Ninguna cosa mueve al hombre sino la esperanza de bien. Todas las acciones y obras exteriores e interiores las hace esperanza de bien. Ésta da salud, como la quita su contraria. Con ésta vive el hombre y sin ella no quiere la vida. Ésta da alegría, contento, fuerzas y aliento para cualquier trabajo. (Sabuco 2009, 122)

25. *Optimism, a Pillar of Health.* Like a pillar, optimism sustains health and human life. It guides everyone and makes anything possible. Nothing else motivates humans like optimism. All external and internal acts and functions are based on it. Optimism produces health just as its opposite takes it away. With optimism, humans live; without it, they do not want life. It brings happiness and merriment, strength and courage for any task. (Sabuco 2007, 68)

Thus, hope was presented by Sabuco as a virtue capable of directly affecting the body, even capable of overcoming all discord and imbalance between body and soul:

Veronio. Decís, señor Antonio, que el hombre él mismo se mata con sus afectos y deleites. Dadme algún remedio cómo me escaparé yo de ese mal tan común y ladrón de casa.

Antonio. Usando de todos los avisos que por todo el libro están sembrados, y lleva éstos en la memoria.

Las armas de la muerte y de la fortuna adversa son tristezas y pesares que el hombre se toma; éstas conoce para que te sepas guardar de ellas.

No entristecerse con el mal es vencer a la fortuna adversa y quitarle sus armas y poder.

El temor es mayor mal que la cosa temida cuando llega; por tanto en el miedo o esperanza dudosa de gran aventura usa de razones del ánimo: lo que es ya es y ya no puede dejar de ser y lo que ha de ser no lo puedo yo deshacer; de balde me fatigo y añado otro mal mayor; y usa de la prevención esperando siempre lo peor.

El mal futuro inminente desasosiega y da fatiga al prudente, el hecho ya y pasado, al imprudente.

Ni amarás ni desearás ni estimarás en mucho ninguna cosa porque los deseos y sus fines, los deleites humanos, más prometen en la imaginación que dan en el acto porque ninguna consistencia tienen, por tanto júzgalos sabiamente por pasados. (Sabuco 2009, 242)

Veronio. You argue, Antonio, that humans kill themselves because of their emotions and excesses in pleasures. Tell me some remedy for escaping this general threat and house-thief.

Antonio. By using all the recommendations that are explained throughout this entire book and carrying them in your memory. The weapons of death and adverse fortune are the sorrows and worries that humans inflict upon themselves. Learn about them in order to protect yourself against them.

Not becoming affected by sadness caused by vice is a way of conquering adverse fortune and disarming its power. Dread is an evil worse than the arrival of what is dreaded. So, when in dread and doubtful, hope for the great to happen: use the reasoning of the soul. Say to yourself: *What is already is and cannot be changed, and I cannot change what happens, so, there is no point in worrying about it and adding to it another, greater harm.* So it is good as a preventive measure to always anticipate the worst. The imminent future harm disturbs and exhausts the prudent person; the harm already past is disturbing only to the imprudent.

You should not love, desire, or long too much for anything because humans' desires, goals, and pleasures promise more to the imagination than they really grant, since they are unfounded. So it is better to consider them past. (Sabuco 2007, 172).

This passage introduces the conclusion of her work. It also marks a narrative turn towards a more aphoristic style, in the manner of Hippocrates' aphorisms, and presents an invitation to escape: to escape the pleasure of the flesh, and of idleness, in order to allow the body and soul to engage in a permanent transformation towards virtue as an improving principle. These passages demonstrate Sabuco's faith in a universal, cosmic order, that might allow mankind to be cured of all illness and suffering without medicine, through the practice of virtue and the hope of good (*esperanza del bien*). She reaffirmed the power of wisdom to interact with the physical body, and the capacity of an autonomous mind to act as a guide in all matters regarding the conduct of life:

En toda disminución, que es la enfermedad, espera el aumento, que es la salud, pues estar quedo no puede, porque siempre imita y sigue a la naturaleza de sol y luna, padre y madre, los cuales nunca en aumento ni disminución paran, ni pueden estar quedos: el uno se pasa y el otro se sigue. Espéralo con las reglas, remedios y dietas dichas, que así lo hace la gente chínica y sarracénica sin médico. (Sabuco 2009, 244)

During every decrement (*decremento*), i.e., the times of illness, wait for the increment (*incremento*) that is health. Do this because your body cannot remain static. It imitates the nature of the sun and moon, father and mother, which never stop during increment or decrement. Nor can they stay still; one passes over and the other one follows. While waiting, use the guidelines, remedies, and diets mentioned here: this is the way practiced by the Chinese and the Saracens, who did not have physicians. (Sabuco 2007, 173)

In Sabuco's thought, the role of imagination is decisive in the process of physical deterioration and degradation created by passion. The Word, employed in an original way as the power of rhetorical insinuation to subdue rage and anger, is presented as a remedy against moral evil, and physical sickness.¹¹ Thus, philosophy is presented as the best of doctors, which, in turn, takes us back to the influence of Galen, in particular his treatise *The Best Doctor Is also a Philosopher*, written at the end of his life. The autonomy achieved through the subject's self-knowledge leads to postponing death by defining the terms and conditions of one's own health. This explains the notable absence of any metaphysical consideration of the immortality of the soul. Death is seen only as a matter of sudden passing away, fought against by the search for the conditions that make longevity possible. Contrary to the theories of the time, the notion of self-care is presented as a direct cause of longevity and the anatomy of the passions is the key to this way of counteracting death.

The Pursuit of Harmony

The relationship between the macrocosm and the microcosm is present throughout all of Sabuco's work, and I would now like to suggest a social and political interpretation of this crucial aspect of her writing, derived from the fact that the book was dedicated to King Philip II.

The pursuit of the *esperanza del bien* represents the foundation of the legitimacy of natural philosophy in all political matters. If Sabuco's text approximates the style of utopia in its consideration of the causes that make possible the improvement of things in this world, "las cosas que mejorarán este Mundo y sus repúblicas," the *esperanza del bien* extends the subject to a reflection that goes beyond doctrinal affinities and leads to the consideration of a social dimension that contains within it the notion of good. In this sense, the author is particularly

¹¹ The *Nueva filosofía* refers to the rhetoric of *insinuatio*, "a dissimulatory mode of *captatio benevolentiae*, [. . .] defined by Cicero in *De Inventione* 1.20 as 'an address which by dissimulation and indirection unobtrusively steals into the mind of the auditor'" (Sinclair 2020, 432).

attentive to the work on the land as a solution to poverty, so as to valorize the peasants, *labradores*, who feed humanity. Thus, Sabuco's text may echo contemporary issues raised by the so-called *arbitristas* – a group of reformist thinkers – in this period.¹² In that case, one should also consider the proximity of her reform ideas to the influence of agrarian *arbitrismo* (Gómez Cornejo Aguado 2018). The term *remedio*, so frequently used by Sabuco, may justify this connection with the spirit of *arbitrismo* summarized in the expression “suplir necesidades y remediar faltas” [providing for needs and remedying deficiencies].¹³ Conversely, the analogy with the medical body and the medical metaphor are deeply embedded in the political and empirical vocabulary of the diagnosis made by *arbitristas*.¹⁴

A clearly social orientation of the *Nueva filosofía* thus puts forward, at the end of the author's reflection and in the subsequent dialogues, the notion of public health, *salud pública*. From this perspective, Sabuco distinguished herself from other Renaissance writers, especially the Italian naturalists, in the sense that she sought to insinuate a civic humanism that could be used to influence worldly politics. The idea of reforming the republics of the world, “reformat las Repúblicas del mundo,” is present throughout her work as a potential application of her philosophical thought, in close connection with the tradition of Spanish *arbitrismo*. Here her objective becomes to limit corruption, to protect the work of the peasants who sustain the world (los *labradores* “que sustentan el mundo”), in order to combat misery and social degradation through a just distribution of resources, as well as importing novel species from the Indies (“traer algunas plantas de Indias”).¹⁵

12 “The late 1580s and the 1590s seem in retrospect the critical years: the years of reverses in Spain's north European policies, of another ‘bankruptcy,’ in 1597, of the death of the old king himself in 1598 and of the famine and plague which swept through Castile and Andalusia at the end of the century” (Elliott 1977, 46).

13 A sentence by Diego de Covarrubias, *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española*, 1611.

14 “Your Majesty is the doctor of this republic, and your vassals are sick,” wrote Jerónimo de Ceballos in 1623, quoted in Elliott 1977, 49.

15 In this respect, the pharmaceutical and empirical experience of the author of the *Nueva filosofía* should not be forgotten. As James Shaw and Evelyn Welch (2011) noted for Italy, some of the most diverse commodities were sold in apothecaries: “local perfumeries, distilleries, wine-shops, pigment factories.” The preparation of spice mixtures was very profitable for Renaissance pharmacists. See Clouse 2011, chap. 4: “The Apothecary's Profession: Cooperation and Professionalization,” about apothecaries and market activities.

Conclusion

For Oliva Sabuco, natural philosophy represented an essential step towards individual self-knowledge, but also an instrument for a new way of thinking about the relationship between body and mind, which, in turn, had potential social and political implications. This constituted the essential message of her *Nueva filosofía*, based on the possibility of balancing the teachings of ancient authorities with Christian doctrine. In her work, Epicureanism and Stoicism are not considered as potential opponents. Thus, in Sabuco's work, natural philosophy represents the possibility of creating a discourse full of potential for the critique of ancient doctrines and dogma, but also capable of integrating the tradition of natural philosophy with Christian faith.¹⁶

Sabuco's Epicureanism can thus be situated within an idea of natural philosophy that could have a positive effect on the relation between body and soul, cosmos and politics, derived from intellectual reflection and the conduct of life, according to a definition of virtue that emphasizes the connections between ancient authorities and Christian thought, significantly enriched by the concepts of happiness and joy. For Sabuco, the liberating effect of happiness could be extended to social life, through its political application, especially in her "Tratado de las cosas que mejorarán este Mundo y sus Repúblicas" [Treatise on things that will improve this world and its republics]. Without any doubt, this last aspect of Oliva Sabuco's philosophy surpassed by far its own Epicurean foundations, inspired by an ethic of balance of the passions and a conception of the body that other natural philosophers were envisaging in the same period.

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¹⁶ The same attitude was already present in Galen: "He refuses to take sides in many contemporary philosophical debates, on the eternity of the world, the nature of the soul, or the nature of the divine, because he can see no way in which one can reach a secure conclusion" (Nutton 2020, 79).

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