

Article

Plato's and Aristotle's Language Critique in Francisco Sanchez's *That Nothing Is Known*

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Abstract: In *That Nothing Is Known*, Francisco Sanchez created a very interesting reflection on the analysis of language and on the epistemic consequences of the importance of language. He did so in a way that allowed some scholars to consider him a predecessor of analytic philosophy. The Spanish physician believed that language had a leading role within science, but he also thought that language was a weak foundation upon which to build any attempt of knowledge.

Key words: skepticism; epistemology; philosophy of language; Sanchez

Francisco Sanchez (1551–1623) was a Spanish physician who wrote a sceptical book, *Quod Nihil Scitur* (*That Nothing Is Known*, from now on *TNK*), which in some senses was a predecessor of Descartes's *Discourse on the Method*. This work is, to some extent, the strongest use of skepticism of the late Renaissance and it is probably the result of the recovery of certain sceptical books such as Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Diogenes Laertius's *The Life and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, and Cicero's *Academica* [1–4].¹ This sceptical arsenal was recovered during 1420s when some Italian humanists brought Diogenes Laertius's works from Constantinople as well as the edition of Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* in 1562 ([6], p. 55 and ff.). A few years later, in

¹ One of the best studies on Renaissance skepticism is still R. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*, New York, 2003. This expanded and revised edition is the continuation of Popkin's *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes*, written in 1960 and the real threshold of the studies on the history of Renaissance skepticism. There is also the influential paper of Charles B. Schmitt, "The Recovery and Assimilation of Ancient Scepticism in the Renaissance" [5]. There are also important new contributions to the field of skepticism on the Renaissance, see [3,4].

1581, we find Sanchez's work with its heavy weight of skepticism and Montaigne's 1588 *Essais*, with its peculiar use of sceptical tools. These works are the first evidence of the impact that the sceptical tradition would eventually have in the philosophical panorama from the sixteenth century to the sceptical revolution of the eighteenth century.

The goal of this paper is to acknowledge that *TNK* provides a very interesting reflection on the analysis of language from the very first page. In fact, the epistemic consequences of the importance of language are going to be a leitmotif throughout the work and in the philosophical position of Francisco Sanchez. Sanchez was a man of his time and discussions on language were very important in this period, which played a prime role not only in the scholastic debate, one of the main focuses of controversy for this author, but also in the rest of the intellectual panorama.

Sanchez shows full awareness of the importance of names in the epistemic field and conceives every reflection on these as an introduction to real and proper science. If knowledge is based on words, once the basic structure on which these words lean on has been demolished, the foundations of every philosophical system will consequently have been debilitated, since they were built upon the alleged scientific character of language. Sanchez's goal was proving that language is not reliable if we conceive of it as a scientific instrument.

"Let us deduce the thing from the name; for as far as I am concerned every definition, and almost every enquiry, is about names ([7], p. 174)."²

This self-conscious nominalist stance that Sanchez takes here fits into the intellectual panorama that dominated the philosophical debate at the end of the sixteenth century. Language and, therefore, words, as Sanchez liked to say, exerted a prime role in the debate between scholasticism, nominalism, and the new lines of thought that arose in the Renaissance.

Sanchez is totally aware of the omnipresence and scientific possibilities of language. Language is present in every field of our life and our knowledge leans on its capacity to express reality. This is clearly expressed when we are involved in the activity of defining, but it is also implicitly present in any kind of reflection: a definition is clearly a matter of words, but the idea that virtually every problem has something to do with names is remarkable. This philosophical position may seem quite modern and, in some senses, we can agree with Popkin when he says that Sanchez is a precursor of Descartes and Bacon ([7], p. 158).³ We can even understand why Popkin thought that the Spanish

² In order to settle any question regarding the meaning and translation of the texts that we offer we will give the original words in Latin and the page of the mentioned edition: "A nomine rem ducamus. Mihi enim omnis nominalis definitio est, et fere omnis quaestio" ([7], p. 95).

³ Popkin was not the first one to talk about Sanchez as a precursor of Descartes's *Discourse on the Method*. The Spanish scholar J. Iriarte wrote about it in his article, see ([8], p. 158). In this article, Iriarte showed how the prologue of Sanchez's *Quod nihil scitur* has many ideas in common with the prologue of Descartes's *Discourse on the Method* and was, probably, in the mind of the French thinker when he was writing it. These are Sanchez's words which may have influenced Descartes: "From my earliest years I was devoted to the contemplation of Nature so that I looked into everything in great detail. At first my mind, hungry for knowledge, would be indiscriminately satisfied with any diet that was proffered to it; but a little later it was overtaken by indigestion, and began to spew it all forth again. Even at that period I was seeking to find some sustenance for my mind, such that my mind could grasp it completely and also enjoy it without reservations; but no one could appease my longing. I pored over the utterances of past generations of men, and picked the brains of my contemporaries. All of them gave the same answer, yet they brought me no satisfaction at all. Yes, I admit that some of them reflected a kind of shadow-image of the truth, but I found not one who

physician ([8], p. 12; [9], p. vii; [6], pp. 140–142)⁴ can be read as a precedent of analytic philosophy. ([1], p. 41)⁵ But we should also consider that the *TNK* have very important anti-Aristotelian features that render it an important piece of the anti-Aristotelian and anti-scholasticism stance in the late Renaissance. When we talk about this book as a precedent of Cartesian philosophy, we risk losing the true perspective of its importance in its time: *TNK* belongs to a very influential philosophical position during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—the anti-Aristotelian position. [10,11]

Sanchez points out that we do not realize the absurdity of the pretension of imposing names on things, since we cannot succeed in achieving an understanding when we do not even know the things themselves:

“How are we to assign names to something we do not understand?” ([7], p. 174)⁶

Thus, the only way to continue is to admit:

“Hence there is endless uncertainty concerning names, and a great deal of confusion and deceitfulness in the matter of words ([7], p. 174).”⁷

gave an honest and full report of the judgments one ought to form concerning facts. Subsequently I withdrew into myself; I began to question everything, and to examine the facts themselves as though no one had ever said anything about them, which is the proper method of acquiring knowledge. I broke everything down into its ultimate first principles. Beginning, as I did, my reflection at this point, the more I reflected the more I doubted. I was incapable of grasping anything in its whole nature. I was in despair, but still I persisted. I went further; I approached the doctors, in the eager expectation that I might gain the truth from them. But what do they do? Each of them maps out a scheme of knowledge, partly from someone else’s speculations and partly from his own. From these they deduce other propositions, and others again from these latter, judging nothing in terms of (observed) facts until they have constructed a maze of words, without any foundation of truth; the result is that in the end one does not possess an understanding of natural phenomena, but merely learns a system of fresh notions and inventions which no intellect would be capable of understanding; for who could understand non-existent things? From this source come Democritus’s Atoms, Plato’s Ideas, Pythagora’s Numbers, and Aristotle’s Universals, Active Intellect, and Intelligence. With these (claiming to have discovered unknown truths and the secrets of Nature) they entrap the unwary” ([7], pp. 167–168).

⁴ We are referring to Sanchez as Spanish for some reasons. Modern research has already established that Francisco Sanchez was born in the Spanish city of Tuy, in Galicia, but he was baptized under the rule of the Portuguese diocese of Braga, because Tuy belonged to that diocese. His early years went by in Tuy. A document has been found which solves all questions, written by his own hand. It is the registration in the University of Montpellier where Sanchez wrote: “Ego, Franciscus Sanctius, hispanus, natus in civitate tudensi,” see ([9], p. 12). The beginning of all this controversy may have emerged from some Portuguese scholars, Joaquim de Carvalho among them, who tried to defend the Portuguese origin of this philosopher. They used two main arguments: the first one was the baptismal documents, and it is true that Sanchez was baptized in the diocese of Braga but that does not mean he was not born in Tuy, because Tuy was a Spanish city belonging to this Portuguese diocese. The second argument was a portrait in the University of Toulouse, in which Sanchez’ colleagues wrote “Franciscus Sanctius Lusitanus,” but this portrait does not prove anything, since it was ordered not by Sanchez, but by his colleagues, who might have considered him wrongly Portuguese. We believe that it is more important what Sanchez thought of his origin when he described himself as “hispanus, natus in civitate tudensi.” For details on the Portuguese stance, see ([10], p. vii, n. 1). For the latest critical work, see ([6], pp. 140–142).

⁵ Popkin writes: “Sanchez’s *Quod nihil scitur* almost reads like a twentieth century text of analytic philosophy.”

⁶ “Rei quam no cognoscimus quomodo nomina imponemus?” ([7], p. 95).

⁷ “Hinc circa nomina dubitatio perpetua, et multa in verbis confusio et fallacia” ([7], p. 95).

With these passages, Sanchez, in practice, tries to offer an example with which he can expose one of the many deceptions carried out by words. One of the targets of his criticism is the Aristotelian definition of man as a “rational animal.” This definition is broken up in parts and driven to a regressive *ad infinitum*, and, in doing so, Sanchez prevents any kind of understandable explanation.

However, the problems pointed out briefly in these first pages of the *TNK* are not the only ones. Together with the fallacy of terms, and to worsen this epistemic situation, we have the fact that between the Greeks and Romans “there is no agreement among them, no fixity or stability or set of guidelines. Each of them mutilates words as he pleases, and distorts their meaning in this way or that, adapting them to his own purpose ([7], p. 176).”⁸ Therefore we do not need to be surprised by this “grammatical anarchy,” which every day creates new rules, figures and tropes that emerge constantly, being all of these elements that make up the grammar.

Sanchez nevertheless points out that not everybody trusts in the authority of the orators and the grammarians, at least concerning the linguistic issue. In fact, some people seem trust only in the authority of the common people: “The meanings of words appear to depend, for the most part or wholly, on popular usage ([7], p. 176).”⁹

However, Sanchez, instead of explicitly refuting the authority of the grammarians alone, does not even trust in the common people, who seem to him fickle, lacking in perseverance, changeable and blind due to preconceived dogmas. He categorically denies that there is any stability or security in the common people or in the masses.

The only possibility to obtain absolute certainty with regard to the meaning of a word would be to ask the person who invented it. Sanchez argues, however, that it is not possible to find such a mythical “word-creating” figure.

The first philosophical text which deals with the reflection on language is probably Plato’s *Cratylus* [12].¹⁰ It is necessary to first note that this dialogue does not contain a proper “philosophy of language.” Nonetheless, a linguistic argument is analyzed and instrumentally operated by Plato, who uses the results of this discussion about words to refute the Heraclitean and Protagorean positions in order to corroborate his own doctrine of Ideas or Forms. Secondly, it is important to emphasize that in Greek terminology, the word “language” as we understand it today does not exist ([13], p. 92). Based on that, we can infer that this line of argument of the dialogue is more about “if names/words are by convention or by nature” rather than about “language” as we understand this term today ([14], p. 76).

Both alternatives are respectively embodied by Hermogenes, defender of the Protagorean relativism, and by Cratylus, a “dark” Heraclitean. Hermogenes, who, after having cast a series of doubts about his adversary’s doctrine, exposes his own conviction on the nature of language:

I cannot convince myself that there is any principle of correctness in names other than convention and agreement; any name which you give, in my opinion, is the right one, and if you change that and give

⁸ “Nulla inter eos concordia, nulla certitudo, nulla stabilitas, nulli limites. Quisque ad libitum verba dilacerat, hinc inde distorquet, et proposito suo accommodat” ([7], p. 96).

⁹ “Verborum significationes magis aut omnino a vulgo pendere videntur” ([7], p. 96).

¹⁰ As will happen with Aristotle, there is some controversy about if Sanchez was aiming Plato’s philosophy in his *TNK* or whether he was really dealing with the Neoplatonic philosophy. We agree here with Esteban Torre that the first answer is a bit more plausible. It is true that we should not dismiss the importance of Neoplatonism in Sanchez’s time, but as we will see in the following pages, Sanchez is directly taking Plato’s stance to talk about his own theory.

another, the new name is as correct as the old—we frequently change the names of our slaves, and the newly-imposed name is as good as the old: for there is no name given to anything by nature; all is convention and habit of the users such is my view ([15], 384 cd).

This is the traditional position of the conventional origin of language, ([16], p. 107 and ff.) according to which names/words are the result of an agreement, of a custom that guarantees the ability of interpersonal communication. Socrates managed to destroy the ontological relativism hidden behind this conventionalism through some arguments that lead him closer to Cratylus's thesis. In fact, Socrates says "a name is an instrument of teaching and of distinguishing natures, as the shuttle is of distinguishing the threads of the web" ([15], 388c) and "we have discovered that names have by nature a truth, and that not every man knows how to give a thing a name ([15], 391 ab)." Therefore, names/words are a way to gain knowledge of the nature of things, to arrive to the heart of being itself: "Then a name is a vocal imitation of that which the vocal imitator names or imitates ([15], 423b)." The imitation of the word is substantially different from the imitation of music and painting, since these imitate phenomena, while the name/word is not only trivially onomatopoeic. "The namer has grasped the nature of them [names] in letters and syllables in such a manner as to imitate the essence or not ([15], 424 ab)," and "the name is an imitation of the thing ([15], 430a)," an imitation of the essence of the thing.

Socrates strengthens this theory by showing how the first elements of the word were not created by chance, but were established on purpose by the creators of the words in their precise positions to imitate the thing/object to which they refer with the letters of the word/name. Cratylus says that for every being there is a correct definition and that there exists by nature a correct definition of words/names, which is the same for all, be it for Greeks or for foreigners. In this conception, the conviction is implicit that whoever knows the words/names knows also the thing/object behind them; only who owns the real names/words can, through these names/words themselves, know the thing itself ([15], 383a, 435d). Socrates has in fact succeeded in showing that names/words are not conventional, but they refer to the thing/object itself by nature.

Sanchez violently criticizes this thesis about the name/word being created by nature, thus demonstrating that he accepted some of the strong points of the dominant Aristotelianism of his time [17].¹¹ In fact, the Spanish philosopher defines Cratylus's theory as "the worthless opinion of some others, who would attribute some kind of special efficacy to words in themselves, claiming as the consequence that names were assigned to things in accordance with the nature of the things. ([7], p. 217)¹²" Led by this conviction, many pseudo-wise men use any subtlety they can think of. This

¹¹ It is important to emphasize this situation since Sanchez has been considered one of the main representatives of anti-Aristotelianism of the late Renaissance. Most of the pages of *That Nothing is Known* contain hard critiques of Aristotelianism, but we can see now that this critique was not universal and that, in some fields, there was a measure of agreement.

¹² "Huic adde frivolum aliorum sententiam verbis nescio quam vim propriam assignantium, ut inde dicant nomina rebus imposita fuisse secundum earum naturam." It is true that we do not have concrete evidence that Sanchez read the Cratylus, but the stance that the Spanish philosopher is criticizing here is Plato's and, by extension, the position defended by the Greek philosopher in his dialogue. The scholastic discussion that was the philosophical background in which Sanchez evolved had the problems of language at its center. Sanchez's discussion on language was aimed to try to demonstrate that there were no universals, since a word does not represent the natural essence of a thing of the real world. This is what we are trying to show in the following pages. Sanchez pays Plato a great deal of attention in some of

subtlety allows them to derive the meanings of all words from something, even the most ludicrous and contradictory meanings. As a result of this process, we get absurd etymologies which are very close to nonsense. All these operations are possible due to the corruption of knowledge, which proves to be more meticulous than truth or even utility in these etymological inquiries [7].¹³ Thus, artful devices and tricks of this kind are allowed to proliferate and “who could fail to see the foolish and ignorant character of this procedure ([7], p. 218)?”¹⁴ Anyone who tries to derive the nature of the corresponding object/thing from the name/word falls into an infinite regression. This question corroborates the extreme futility of such an investigation. Sanchez comes to the conclusion that a term cannot evocate the nature of the thing/object, so, it cannot be demonstrated that that name/word expresses exactly the essence of the thing/object which it designs. Consequently, there is no such a thing as a unique language that had been imposed following the nature of things/objects. If it were so, why did not the other languages follow in the same way ([7], p. 220)?¹⁵ Given that Greek and Latin, the philosophical languages *par excellence*, have proven inadequate when it comes to offering a proper and precise account of the essence of things, we have good reason for supposing that words have not come up by nature. This lack of means of gaining access to reality, since language structures our mind and we have seen that it is very imprecise and changeable, leads to a very skeptical conclusion. This is the case of the onomatopoeic terms, which apparently can seem an evidence to support the theory of the natural origin of names/words, but this case loses any linguistic–ontological validity from the moment in which the onomatopoeias change according to the language we are using.¹⁶ While Sanchez makes the principle of the conventional origin of words/names his own, this principle was expressed by Sextus Empiricus in his work *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*:

Given that it is by convention and not by nature that names have a meaning—on the contrary everybody, the same Greeks than barbarians, would understand everything signified by words; besides, apart from that we have the power to denotate and point out the things signified with whatever other name we wish—how would it be possible a science to put in order the names in meanings? Or, how could the Dialectic really be, as some people think, the science of signifiers and meanings ([18], II, 214)?

However, according to Sanchez, “there are other words too which by resemblance of sound imitate the voices of the creatures they refer to and hence are called onomatopoeic ([7], p. 220).”¹⁷ Among these onomatopoeic terms, we have, apart from the words corresponding with the sounds that animals emit, the musical instruments and many other objects.

“As for example ‘to crow’ of cocks, ‘to caw’ of rooks, ‘to roar’ of lions, ‘to bleat’ of sheep, ‘to bark’ of dogs, ‘to neigh’ of horses, ‘to low’ of oxen, ‘to grunt’ of pigs, ‘to snore’ of sleepers; also

his theories and definitions of science and knowledge; I therefore believe it is right to think that Sanchez, in a matter as important for him as language, would have known Plato’s dialogue on this topic.

¹³ Ibidem, “curiose magis, quam vere aut utiliter.”

¹⁴ “Quod quam vanum ignarumque sit quis non videt.”

¹⁵ “Si unam solum dicas linguam pro rerum natura impositam esse, cur non item aliae?”

¹⁶ Every language has different onomatopoeias; this is an old topic. We can offer here just some examples. The sound of a bird: in English tweet, in Spanish p ó, in German piep piep, in French cui cui. The sound of a dog: in English woof, in Spanish gauau, in German wau wau, in French ouah ouah.

¹⁷ “Sunt et alia quae similitudine sonus, voces imitantur eorum quae significant, proinde Onomatopoeica dicta.”

the ‘murmuring’ of waters, and ‘whistling’ and ‘ringing’; ‘drum-beats’ and ‘clangorous noises’ ([7], p. 220).”¹⁸

However, as we anticipated before, we cannot assert with absolute certainty that this proximity between the sound of the word and the sound of the designated object is really the irrefutable evidence of an indissoluble ontological tie that join together the word and the corresponding thing/object. Sanchez satirizes those who think in this way, saying that “even in these, there is no revelation of the nature of the things they signify, but merely a resemblance in the sound (...) Much less should we look in all words for their derivation; for did we not avoid doing this we should enter infinite regress ([7], p. 220).”¹⁹

For Sanchez, onomatopoeias do not constitute an exception to the rule about the conventional origin of names/words. The onomatopoeias rather represent a series of linguistic curiosities, appreciable in their uselessness, but that do not contribute in a serious epistemic discussion. Names/words do not have any other power further than the one that they receive from the free will of the individual who uses them. For this reason, onomatopoeic terms prove themselves to be simple imitations of the sound of the objects/things they design, and certainly not as expressions of the essence of these objects.

In Plato’s text, the alleged superiority of Cratylus’s thesis over the thesis of the conventional origin of terms is also immediately refuted: Plato, after having used the former in order to bring down the latter, prepares to throw out the first one. Once Cratylus has admitted that the name/word is an imitation of the thing/object, he is exposing his theory to Socrates’s attack, and Socrates immediately emphasizes it:

“SOCRATES: The image, if expressing in every point the entire reality, would no longer be an image. Let us suppose the existence of two objects: one of them shall be Cratylus, and the other the image of Cratylus; and we will suppose, further, that some God makes not only a representation such as a painter would make of your outward form and colour, but also creates an inward organization like yours, having the same warmth and softness; and into this infuses motion, and soul, and mind, such as you have, and in a word copies all your qualities, and places them by you in another form; would you say that this was Cratylus and the image of Cratylus, or that there were two Cratyluses?

CRATYLUS: I should say that there were two Cratyluses.

SOCRATES: Then you see, my friend, that we must find some other principle of truth in images, and also in names; and not insist that an image is no longer an image when something is added or subtracted. Do you not perceive that images are very far from having qualities which are the exact counterpart of the realities which they represent ([15], 432 bd)?”

The image cannot have the same properties of the imitated thing but should only look like it. The image must have something different from the original thing. In fact, if the thing/object and the image (name/word) were alike, we would not be able to distinguish the real thing from the image: “How ridiculous would be the effect of names on things, if they were exactly the same with them! For they would be the doubles of them, and no one would be able to determine which were the names and

¹⁸ “Ut cucurire gallinarum, crocitare corvorum, rugire leonum, balare ovium, latrare canum, hinnire equorum, mugire boum, frendere porcorum, stertere dormientium, susurrus aquarum, sibilus, tinnitus, timpanum / clangor, et ille.”

¹⁹ “Neque in his quoque aliqua naturae demonstratio eorum quae significant, sed similitudo sonorum (...) iretur in infinitum.”

which were the realities.” ([15], 432d) Therefore, the word/name must be different from the thing/object:

“Let us suppose that to any extent you please you can learn things through the medium of names, and suppose also that you can learn them from the things themselves—which is likely to be the nobler and clearer way; to learn of the image, whether the image and the truth of which the image is the expression have been rightly conceived, or to learn of the truth whether the truth and the image of it have been duly executed?” ([15], 439 ab)

Cratylus has no other option than to agree with Socrates and admit that knowledge of things is not to be derived from names/words, but must be studied and investigated in themselves.

Sanchez also admits only the alternative naturalism–conventionalism and, since he has already ruled out the first one by asserting “in this way I believe no wholly regular and uncorrupted language remains to us today ([7], p. 219),”²⁰ the Spanish philosopher has no other option than to hold Hermogenes’s theory, according to which names/words are conventionally imposed: “Therefore, there lies in words no power to explain the nature of things, except that which they derive from the arbitrary decision of him who applies them ([7], p. 219).”²¹

Thus, each one could designate at ease, following his will, any object with any term. This broad freedom in the field of names, that Sanchez seems to leave to the discretion of each individual, generates a deep distance with the classic conventional theory expressed by Aristotle.

Sanchez accuses Aristotle of having filled his works almost exclusively with names and definitions, so every problem contained in Aristotle’s texts could be reduced to questions *de nomine*: questions of names. Aristotle, in *De interpretatione*, states: “By a noun we mean a sound significant by convention, which has no reference to time, and of which no part is significant apart from the rest (...). The limitation ‘by convention’ was introduced because nothing is by nature a noun or name—it is only so when it becomes a symbol; inarticulate sounds, such as those which brutes produce, are significant, yet none of these constitutes a noun ([19], 2, 16a 20–28).” If the word/name is assumed in a conventional manner, “spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words. Just as all men have not the same writing, so all men have not the same speech sounds, but the mental experiences, which these directly symbolize, are the same for all, as also are those things of which our experiences are the images ([19], 1, 16a, 5–6).” The conventional character of the name/word means that no word/name is by nature a name, but becomes a name whenever it turns into the symbol of something ([20], p. 37). Aristotle, by professing the conventional meaning of the enunciation’s structural elements, gets close, apparently, to Hermogenes’s position and distances himself from Cratylus’s idea: “Every sentence has meaning, not as being the natural means by which a physical faculty is realized, but, as we have said, by convention ([19], 4, 17a, 1–3).”

Notwithstanding, Aristotle’s doctrine of language is incompatible with the ontological relativism defended by Hermogenes. It is true that both theories coincide in the fact that names/words, exclusively considered in their conventional semantic character, do not express a value of truth or falseness ([20], p. 35), as Cratylus expected, but are fundamentally different. Aristotle adds that names/words have a symbolic and semantic validity, due to the reference to the states of the soul and,

²⁰ “Sicque puto nullam legitimam synceramque nobis superesse linguam.”

²¹ “Nulla ergo vocibus rerum naturas explicandi facultas, praeter eam, quam ab arbitrio imponentis habent.”

therefore, due to the things/objects of which they are images ([20], p. 35). This accurate precision clearly draws the outlines of the Aristotelian linguistic speculation and allows its separation from the sophist's conventional theory. In fact, Aristotle says that sounds and letters are the same for everybody and constitute the images of objects/things which are identical for everybody ([19], 1, 6–7, 16a.). Language is a conventional expression of thought and, therefore, different for each person, but, at the same time, it is the non-conventional expression of reality and, therefore, is identical for every person ([21], p. 128). For Aristotle, the conventional character of names/words is only formal, because its foundation and the signified object are identical, because the objects which provoke these states of the soul are identical for every man ([22], p. 35). The word/name, in its fundamental conventionality, is determined by an essential reference to an ontological foundation. For this reason, Aristotle's language doctrine is deeply rooted in his ontology ([20], p. 41), which certainly cannot be labeled as relativism.

Aristotle's position moves away from Hermogenes's theory mainly in the reflection about enunciation. If, in fact, names/words singularly taken are neither true nor false, "*for truth and falsity imply combination and separation* ([19], 1, 16a, 13)," an enunciation, characterized by the union of names and verbs, will necessarily be true or false. The truth of an enunciation consists in the adequacy to reality of the information signified by it ([20], p. 54).²² So, below the patina of conventionalism, we find in Aristotle's doctrine the conviction of an exact correspondence between language and reality. The two poles of this relationship are reciprocally reflected, and that is also despite the conventionality of the former (language), without leaving any space to a broad margin of error. It is clear that from this conviction was born the idea that the study of reality can be based on language, not allowing that the latter lead to error, since it acts as a simple mirror. Thus, language assumes an enormous importance inside the Aristotelian system.

Sanchez cannot accept the basic axiom which is at the foundation of Aristotle's system. This axiom was the reflection that Aristotle led about terms and was based upon the conviction of the existence of an objective substratum below the mere linguistic conventionality; this objective substratum and the adequacy of the speech with it would determine the quality of truth. Sanchez assumes the line of argument of the unresolved difference that the same object creates inside different individuals who perceive it and, therefore, he is obliged to reject the postulate of the identity of the object, postulate upon which Aristotle's speculation leans on. Hence, Sanchez holds that, once established that nobody can know with certainty what a word means, it cannot be any science of things or of words ([7], p. 183).²³ By being against the possibility of a scientific speech on language, or driven throughout language, Sanchez is inflicting a hard blow to the predominant philosophical systems of XVI century. All the Aristotelian philosophy has one of its most important foundations just in language and, once shown the weakness of this, Aristotle's construction, assumed as an epistemic statute by Sanchez's contemporaries, starts to crumble.²⁴ Among the questions which are at the core of Sanchez's criticism

²² This is the old Aristotle's criterion of truth as *adequatio* of the information with reality, even though this concept of reality is not further developed.

²³ "Nec rerum nec verborum scientia aliqua est."

²⁴ On the importance of Aristotle in the Renaissance, we still strongly recommend Charles B. Schmitt, *see* [11]. One of the main discussions that has been held among scholars is on whether Sanchez took the Aristotelian stance from Aristotle himself or from the Arabic philosophy. This is a difficult question to address here. We think that we can dismiss the idea that, being Spanish, Sanchez must have been acquainted with the Arabic philosophy, because Sanchez left Spain very

is the fact that the different languages cannot share a common mental language and this stance situates him strongly against the general background of his time of Aristotelian positions. Sanchez's critique on this topic is hard: "But let us return to knowledge. Later, when we come to the method of knowing, I shall explain what impelled Aristotle to indulge in so many lengthy discussions of the arrangement of words and to invent his celebrated 'universals'; and also, whether we can know anything without the help of all these. For the present, we can gain no knowledge from this source. Consider this statement: 'knowledge is gained by demonstration'. What is demonstration? (...) It does not exist at all, or in any place. Aristotle himself certainly described it, and at very great length; but never did he give a single demonstration, nor did any of his successors; or if he did, then you must give it yourself: send it to me! But I know you have none to give ([7], p. 185)."²⁵

The necessary presence of universals in order to gain knowledge is also strongly criticized, to despise particular things because they are not valid objects of knowledge since they are not universals is seen like a big mistake: "You will maintain that you are not considering particular things, which as such are not objects of knowledge, but universals such as 'man', 'horse', and so on. But, in fact, as I said before, your 'knowledge' is knowledge not of the real man but of the 'man' whom you invent for yourself; accordingly, you know nothing ([7], p. 196)."

Among the questions which make impossible the continuous human attempt to determine the true nature of things/objects with words ([7], p. 205),²⁶ the fact that we would have to define these words with other words which will lead us to an infinite regression (because in the process of defining words more words are needed), it also contributes, to a large extent, the work of the "dialecticians," who divert the words from their own meaning and corrupt them ([7], p. 223).²⁷ These "dialecticians" are, for Sanchez, the scholastic professors who dominated the intellectual panorama of his time, but, even though Sanchez seems to be against the Aristotelian stance, it is not so; the Spanish philosopher is rather interested in arguing with the Aristotelians of his time, overall with the science that he was taught since his childhood in the *Collège de Guyenne* in Bordeaux and which was dominated by this Aristotelians ([7], pp. 7–10).²⁸ This work of modifying the original meaning of terms also becomes

young and studied in schools which were far from the Arabic positions. In this sense, we agree with Esteban Torre who supposes that Sanchez did a direct reading of Aristotle, see E. Torre, "Three Physicians of the Spanish Renaissance on Language" [23].

²⁵ "Sed redeamus ad scientiam. Quid moverit Aristotelem tot tantaque de verborum contexture disserere: quid Universalia illa fingere: et an sine his omnibus scire aliquid possimus, ostendam inferius ubi de modo sciendi. Interim ex eodem nulla scientia est. Vide: scientia per demonstrationem habetur. Quid haec? (...) Nulla, nullibi. Depinxit quidem ille sat prolixo sermone: at nullam unquam dedit, nec post eum aliquis; sin minus, da tu, mitte mihi. Non habes, scio".

²⁶ "Rerum Naturas demonstrare verbis, rursus haec / aliis."

²⁷ "Sic verba a propria significatione detorquent et corrumpunt."

²⁸ Limbrick analyzes the main methods of this college of forming its students: Latin, rhetoric, mathematics and elementary Greek. First year students were called *dialecti*. Sanchez wrote an interesting passage of his early days as a student: "I remember that when, scarcely past boyhood, I was being initiated into dialectics, I was often challenged to debate by my seniors in age and in study, so that they might test my ability. From time to time they confronted me with fallacious syllogisms; and I, not seeing that they were fallacious, used sometimes to be crushed by their weight and admitted false—but not *obviously* false—propositions; but when obviously false conclusions followed from these, I suffered extreme torments in cases where I had not at once pointed to the logical defect, and I could not rest until I had discovered this. Would it not have been better to spend the time I wasted in looking for the defect in a syllogism, in

necessary since the moment in which the semantic field of the names which already exist expands and changes. Thus, the wise men, in order to constrain the names to designate the new reality invented by them, contribute in this modification of the meaning of words. A clear example, as Sanchez says, is the verb “to be,” the simplest and the clearest term in everyday life and upon which a huge controversy has run wild ([7], pp. 7–10).²⁹ For the Spanish philosopher, it becomes necessary to conclude that, in their naivety, children are wiser than the sage men ([7], pp. 7–10),³⁰ because if they are asked, they answer easily and frankly, without entrenching themselves in vague sophistic formulas or building dialectic traps, as the alleged wise men do.

However, the line of argument which reduces most language to an epistemic tool in which it is impossible to trust is most likely the one based on the natural corruption of words/terms, and is also the less studied by Sanchez, or, at least, the one at which the Spanish physician dedicates fewer pages. Sanchez asserts that words are unstable, not only because there are human beings who intervene on them modifying them continuously, but also because, throughout a process partly free from the human will, the words/terms suffer a continuous degeneration ([7], p. 222).³¹ Together with the twisting and distortion of language carried out willingly by the “dialectics,” there is visible erosion in words/terms which cannot be attributed to anyone, but on the other hand is undeniable. The continuous use of words, with its inherent gradual change of the semantic field, makes them day by day always new and unrecognizable. It happens very often, says Sanchez, that leafing through some books we find terms we do not know and we have no idea of their meaning. The Latin language itself presents such a fast evolution that, on the one hand, many words used until recently become obsolete and, on the other hand, every day new words appear ([7], p. 222).³² From this situation it derives that the ancient Latin language turns out to be totally dead, the same thing that happened with Greek ([7], p. 222).³³ This line of argument tries to emphasize not only the yearning for the old purity of language, but also the distortion, the idiosyncrasies, the peculiarities and the darkness that distinguish the modern late-scholastic vocabulary (elements of which Sanchez himself becomes a victim): “And such books as preserve and keep alive both Greek and Latin are so different from the glorious language of Antiquity that if Demosthenes or Cicero were to be present while we spoke their language they would perhaps laugh us to scorn ([7], p. 219).”³⁴ This “Heracliteanism,” also present in other fields of knowledge, constitutes one of the main elements to support the impossibility of knowledge defended in *TNK*. It also works, this Heracliteanism, upon terms, at least as much as to make impossible any knowledge of the relation name-object. The concept of Heracliteanism, that fits in perfectly with the characteristics of Sanchez’s thought, would consist in the constant change and corruption to which everything is

gaining an understanding of some natural cause or other? In short, among those dealers in syllogisms, the better a person chatters, the more learned he is” ([7], pp. 273–274). I think that these “dealers in syllogisms” are going to be, for Sanchez, the Aristotelians of his time that he wanted to argue with.

²⁹ “De eo tamen quanta disputatio?”

³⁰ “Pueri Philosophis doctiores sunt”

³¹ “Perpetuo voces corrumpuntur”.

³² “De novo alia finguntur”.

³³ “Antiquus sermo Latinus (...): Graecus eodem modo”

³⁴ “Si nobis sua lingua loquentibus adessent Demosthenes, aut Cicero, forsan deriderent.”

subdued, the objects of physics as much as the elements of the epistemic field ([6], pp. 288–295).³⁵ The Heracliteanism precludes us from creating a solid base upon which to lean anything, even less such a complex question as knowledge or science. This idea could be represented by a metaphorical image of a sphere in motion above which any balance or equilibrium becomes precarious and unstable, practically impossible.

Therefore, taking into account the necessity of this incessant change, what kind of community can exist among the word/term and the thing/object if change becomes so big that language degenerates completely and turns into another one totally different ([7], p. 219)?³⁶

The answer seems evident: none.

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³⁵ Sanchez tried to demonstrate the Heracliteanism of language, this characteristic would mean the condemn to an incessant evolution and without a moment of rest to every field upon which it exerts its command. As a consequence, Heracliteanism does not allow us to establish upon language anything which might be stable. The author of *That nothing is known* carries out his research on two different spheres, in the abstract level of linguistic reflection and also in the much more specific of the analysis of the word “science”.

³⁶ “Tanta mutatio contingit, ut omnino degeneret et diversus.”

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