Psychological characters in Vicente de Beauvais (1190-1264)

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Abstract

Click This paper analyses the hippocratic-galenic theory concerning the complexions, humours, temperaments and psychological characters in medieval scholasticism, particularly as it is manifested in the work of Vincent of Beauvais. The handling of these aspects is discussed in Vincent of Beauvais’s Speculum maius (1244-1257), particularly in two of its most relevant sections: book XXXI of his Speculum naturale and books XII and XIII of his Speculum doctrinale. These books have not been translated into contemporary languages and are practically unknown in our historiographical area, but have a rich bibliographical background which shows how Beauvais’s encyclopaedia approach provided a firm bridge from the naturalist tradition of Greek and Roman antiquity to Renaissance psychology, building on Graeco-Arabic science. This is a subject of extraordinary importance for both psychology and education, and one which has long deserved the attention of historians. The present study endeavours to redress this situation.

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1 The human being as a psychological and physical reality

Vincent of Beauvais (1190-1264) has gone down in the history of western culture as one of the most respected encyclopaedia writers of medieval scholasticism. His Speculum maius (1244-1257), which is divided into three opuscula, Speculum naturale, Speculum doctrinale and Speculum historiale, was intended to gather together all the knowledge that had been acquired from the creation of the world until 1252. Vincent’s purpose was not only a scholarly one. Knowledge, in its intellectual, moral and religious dimension, was presented as the best means to restore the image of God in the human being, which had been obscured by original sin, and this was the ultimate aim of all education and teaching. In parallel, Vincent mapped out a plan to renew the educational psychology of his time: he took a cultural, anthropological view in which the human being was not viewed only as an entity that is individual and social with a transcendent moral nature. He presented the human being above all as a psychological and physical unity of body and soul, in whom the relations between medicine, psychology, biology, environment and education contribute to bring out the potential that lies in human nature, so that the person can achieve his or her ultimate purpose. The Regimina sanitatis of the time, epitomized in works such as those of Peter of Spain (1205-1277), Aldobrandino of Sienna (1234-1256), Arnau de Vilanova (1238-1311), and so on, bear witness to an enriched sense of anthropology, which Vincent faithfully represented in his work.

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In parallel to this, medieval medicine, which encompassed the human being as a whole and was regarded as, in St Isidore’s phrase, a *philosophia secunda*, transcended the limits of pure medical science to take in a whole way of life, which the encyclopaedia writers could scarcely avoid including. This is the case with non-medical authors such as Bartolomé de Glanville in his *De proprietatibus rerum* (1250), Thomas of Cantimpré in his *De naturis rerum* (1240), or Vincent of Beauvais himself in his *Speculum doctrinale* (1246). These works summarize the medical knowledge of the day, in an attempt to invite a new, powerful guest to the banquet of wisdom, namely medical science. This science no longer sought only to achieve physical health. Its final aim was chiefly pedagogical. In addition to preserving biological health, knowledge of medical matters was intended to pursue psychological health, the harmony between bodily and mental health, moderation of the passions or emotions and knowledge of the temperaments. Above all, it was intended to guarantee the person’s growth and development, working in collaboration with other branches of knowledge to help him or her to achieve his or her final end, that is, wisdom or spiritual fulfilment.

This psychological and physical unity, placed at the service of human fulfilment, was the product of a long tradition. It was not new, but after the long somnolence of the Early Middle Ages, it emerged with renewed vigour. In this, two cultural phenomena of enormous transcendence were extremely influential: on the one hand, the arrival of the “New Aristotle”, which meant moving towards a more inductive, experimental medical science; and on the other, the gradual assimilation of natural philosophy and Graeco-Arabic medicine, which entered the western world via two routes, first through Salerno, thanks to the translations and compilations by Constantine the African, particularly the *Liber Pantegni*, originally entitled *Khitaab el Maleki*, by the tenth century Persian doctor Ali ibn al-'Abbas; secondly, via Toledo, especially after 1187, the year in which Gerard of Cremona translated the so-called *Corpus toletanus*, that is: the *Book of science* of Alfarabi (870-950), the *Canon medicinae* by Avicenna (980-1037) and the *Liber ad Almansoren* by Rhazes (860-932).

2. Medicine and psychology in Vincent of Beauvais

How did Vincent interpret these books and their naturalistic approach? First, with an optimistic, liberal view — he was a passionate reader of all the authors who sought the truth, whether they were pagans, Jews, Christians or Muslims — and then with great respect and extreme faithfulness to the biological ideas in the works of Avicenna, Constantine the African, and Rhazes, who alongside Hippocrates, Galen, St Isidore and William of Conches, were the authors who provided him with most of the medical knowledge of the era. Vincent provided a masterly summary of all of this information in book XXXI of his *Speculum naturale* and in books XII, XIII and XIV of his *Speculum doctrinale*. These writings clearly reflect an approach to medicine which, in the pure Graeco-Roman tradition, sees health as bodily integrity and natural balance [*integritas corporis et temperancia naturae*], which is the result of the interaction between four basic fixed categories that are ordered in a hierarchy with respect to each other.

2.1. The elements

First, Vicente discusses the importance of the four cosmological elements of Empedocles (495-425): air, water, fire and earth, which are pure and simple, cannot be subdivided, and are present in all the bodies of nature. “This can be seen when a body decays, because then it is necessary that everything which makes up this body should be converted anew into these four elements. For example, when an animal dies, first the warmth that its body loses returns to fire; its breath, to air; its humours, to water; and its flesh and bones, to earth. Something similar occurs in the case of trees. Thus the elements are never completely destroyed, since once the body is destroyed, those elements that composed it return to their particular principle. Thus they are rightly called elements”.

The elements are defined by their qualities of heat, cold, dryness and wetness.

2.2. The complexions

Secondly, Vincent examines the subject of the qualities or complexions of bodies. Following Constantine the African, he defines the complexion as a mixture of the qualities of the four elements. This gives rise to nine
complexions: one balanced, four simple and four complexes. The balanced type is the temperate complexion, which is proper to those bodies that have the qualities of the four elements in perfect equilibrium and proportion. Then he discusses the four simple complexions: warm when fire predominates, humid when air predominates, watery when water predominates, and dry when earth predominates. Finally, he defines the composite complexions as mixtures of predominant qualities, as follows: the warm, humid complexion when fire and air are dominant; cold, humid complexion when water and air are dominant, cold, dry complexion when water and earth predominate, and warm, dry complexion, when earth and fire predominate. What is important about these complexions is not so much how they are classified, but the anatomical, physiological and temperamental description which follows each one. This leads Vincent to establish models which, regardless of their scientific merit, were not only to serve to help develop his own pedagogical theory, but were to influence educational psychology well into the nineteenth century, since Vincent of Beauvais was one of the many authors who brought together tradition and modernity in this respect.

Vincent follows the tradition by defending the view that each complexion is reflected in a particular anatomical and physiological constitution, as well as a particular character or temperament. When he writes of a body with a warm complexion, that is, one in which the qualities proper to warmth predominate, he explains it to us in the following terms: “a large amount of muscle, little fat, reddish colour, a large quantity of black hair, warm to the touch, good intelligence, great eloquence, a very straight character, courageous, prone to anger, wilful, with large appetites, rapid digestion and a harsh voice”. The opposite to this, the watery complexion, is characterized by the opposite features.

Vincent writes more tersely and offers less description concerning the anatomy and temperament of the other complexions. Regarding the features of a dry body, that is, one in which the earthy element prevails, he states that this is a “thin, hard body and its drier organs tend to be more exposed; if it is moist, it will have more fat and flesh. If it is warm and dry, it will be thin, hairy, with black hair, brown in colour, warm and hard to the touch, with a good intelligence, courageous, with a good appetite and digestion — particularly as far as heavy meals are concerned — and wilful. If it is warm and moist, it will have a large amount of muscle and little fat, lank black hair, be warm and moist to the touch, with a colour between red and white. Concerning the cold complexion, cold, wet bodies are white and obese, with red hair and a dim intellect, are forgetful, with poor appetites and digestion, and are not subject to caprice. Cold, dry bodies are bluish white, thin, red-haired and somewhat sallow, being hard and cold to the touch”.

Vincent leaves the temperate or moderate complexion to the end of his description. This is the archetype of the ideal anatomy, because in it, the characteristics of all four elements are balanced in perfect proportion. Its features are depicted as follows: “this is a body which is neither very thin nor fat, half way between white and brown in colour, born with red hair, although this turns black during childhood and youth; the skin is midway between warm and cool, hard and soft, as are the palms of the hand; the intelligence and memory are good, and the person is prudent, courageous, neither lazy nor subject to stress, and is not a glutton; moreover, all the actions of the body are perfect: this is the moderate complexion”.

Are these qualities fixed? The answer is quite clear: they are not. The anatomy of a body, its features and characteristics, are dynamic qualities, shaped by very different factors which can be modified by circumstances, education, place of residence, age and way of life. “A custom which is repeated day after day, through regular practice will become a natural part of the person, just as a person who is slim by nature, if he or she leads an idle life, will soon grow fat, while a more obese person who makes an effort, fasts and mortifies him or herself, will grow thinner and drier. One’s trade may also change one’s complexion, depending on whether it is carried out in hot, dry places — like a smith or a goldsmith —, hot, damp places — a bath attendant —, or cold, dry places — a farmer or hunter —”.

With all these ideas, which were also supported by the regimina sanitatis of the day, Vincent not only consolidated hippocratic medicine within the scholastic encyclopaedia, but also examined in greater depth the two-way interaction between the human being and nature as the indispensable prerequisite for optimizing and consolidating the process of achieving perfection.
2.3. The four humours

To understand fully this process of becoming whole on the psycho-physical level, a third element also has to be discussed: the theory of the humours. Vincent, true to Hippocrates (406-336 B.C.) and Galen (130-200 A.D.), held that all bodies are made up of four liquids or basic humours: blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm, which are generated by the ingestion of food and drink, and by our own natural constitution. If these are in perfect proportion, the result will be good health; any imbalance or lack of proportion will result in illness. Quoting St Isidore, he states:

“Just as there are four elements, there are also four humours, each one of which imitates its element. The blood receives this name from a Greek word, because it gains strength, nourishes itself and is alive. The Greeks gave choler its name because it comes to an end after one day, since choler— that is, “small bile”— receives this name because it is an effusion of bile— the Greeks called bile χολή. Melancholy owes its name to its origins in the black residue of the blood, mixed with bile— in Greek, black is μέλας and bile is χολή. In Latin, the name of blood refers to its sweetness, which is why men whose organism is dominated by blood are pleasant and kind. Phlegm is so called because it is cold. These four humours regulate the bodies of the healthy, and damage those of the sick, since diseases occur as a result of a disproportionate increase in one or other of them.”

This text summarizes most of the key concepts concerning health and the psychological and physical dimension of scholastic culture. A good proportion of humours associated with their elements produces health, while an imbalance leads to disease. As a result, knowing how to maintain the balance of the humours is not only the basis of medical knowledge, but forms the foundations for psychological and pedagogical wisdom as well. In awareness of this, Vincent expatiates at length on the bases of the theory of humours. First, he strives to identify the physical location of the humours and their qualities. Following Hippocrates, he says:

“Every body is made up of four humours, as it always has blood, choler, melancholy and phlegm, four humours which reside in specific places: the blood, in the left side of the liver, which is also home to choler; melancholy is found in the spleen, while phlegm is in the head and the bladder; another part of the blood is found in the heart. Their characteristics are as follows: the blood is hot, wet and sweet; choler is bitter, hot and dry; melancholy is acidic, cold and dry; phlegm is cold, wet and salty.”

Conscious of the dynamic nature of the humours, he then goes on to explain how they thrive or decline according to the season of the year or the hours of the day, and how they are expelled by certain organs in the body. On the authority of Hippocrates, he tells us:

“Each of these humours increases at a given moment during the year: blood grows in spring, choler in summer, melancholy in autumn, and phlegm in winter. This pattern is also present in the hours of the day: the blood has six hours, from the ninth hour of the night to the third of the day; from then to the ninth hour belongs to choler; from then to the third hour of the night, to melancholy; and from this moment to the ninth hour of the night, to phlegm. Each humour has its own way of being evacuated from the body: blood through the nose, choler through the ears, melancholy through the eyes and phlegm through the mouth.”

Similarly, the theory of the humours also covers the different stages or ages of a person’s life. As with the complexions, each stage has its characteristic humour and specific features. Vincent writes as follows on this point:

“Each age has its humour. These are also distributed across the four ages: phlegm predominates in children, from birth until the age of 14; from this time, throughout youth (until the age of 28), choler; during the next age, up to 60 years, blood, and finally, in the old, melancholy; when someone dies, the humours revert to the elements of which they are made.”

Another aspect which Vincent discusses is the cause of the humours. This is a complex issue for the naturalism of the era, which is closely bound up with what the scholastics called the six non-natural things [sex res non naturales]. This expression was used to designate six things which, in the judgement of the scholastic naturalists, were necessary for life and external from the human being, namely: 1) light, air, earth and water; 2) food and drink; 3) work and rest; 4) sleep and wakefulness; 5) excretions and secretions, which encompass everything to do with the toilet, sexual relations, phlebotomy, physical exercise, and so on, and 6) the dispositions, or states of the spirit: joy, anger, sadness, etc. These sex res non naturales were understood to be part of the person’s life, to condition
his/her health to an extreme degree, and therefore to affect the theory of humours to the extent of becoming the primary object of medicine. Vincent examines these in depth, and provides us with interesting information about the causes of the humours. In a long text in which he applies the Aristotelian system of causes, he states:

“Causes of the blood. The efficient cause of the blood is temperate heat; the material cause lies in what is moderate in food and good drink; the formal cause, in good digestion; the final cause, feeding the body. Of choler. The efficient cause of choler is an excess of heat, in concrete, in the liver; the material cause lies in what is light, hot, sweet, thick or peppy in food; the formal cause, an excess of digestion; the final cause, the need and use which we have already mentioned. Of phlegm. The efficient cause of phlegm is a lack of heat; the material cause lies in what is thick, wet, sticky and cold in food; the formal cause, in incomplete digestion; the final cause, in the need and use mentioned. Of melancholy. The underlying efficient cause of melancholy is temperate heat, although it is a heat which has exceeded its limits; the material cause lies in what is thick and dry in food, and what could be hotter; the formal cause, the remains which remain in the body for two reasons, either because they do not dissolve or because they cannot be expelled; the final cause, the need to maintain the body. A large proportion of melancholy is formed either by the heat of the liver, or by various complex diseases, because they can reduce the humours to ashes. When melancholy grows and settles between the stomach and the liver, the production of blood and good humours is lessened.”

Apart from these causes, Vincent also mentions some others which also have an effect on the humours. Heat and cold, for example, are the two driving forces of the theory of humours. “None the less, balanced heat produces blood; if heat occurs in excess, it produces choler, and if it is even more extreme, melancholy, since it dries up the fluids. Cold, on the other hand, generates phlegm and, in excess, gives rise to melancholy, since it freezes the liquids.” Other driving forces are movement and rest: “movement and hot things stimulate blood and choler; they may even stimulate melancholy and make it stronger. In contract, tranquillity reinforces phlegm and some types of melancholy.”

2.4. The four temperaments

The last of the key elements in Vincent of Beauvais’s naturalism is the subject of the temperaments. This aspect, which is crucial for the development of educational psychology, is not addressed specifically within Vincent’s naturalistic schema, nor does it appear as a distinct chapter on its own. He handles it as a part, feature or quality of the complexions and humours, since the temperament is strictly speaking a dynamic mixture which makes a specific way of being and acting possible. This is the result of mixing the different fluids or humours.

Vincent goes into some detail when describing the qualities of specific complexions and humours. He talks of four features—in his terminology—or temperaments: sanguine, phlegmatic, bilious and melancholy, which, as we have seen, influence people’s psycho-biological characteristics and way of behaving, but which are not fixed or determining, since they can vary according to the stage of life, season of the year, hour of the day, sex, interaction with the sex res non naturales, etc.

Concerning psychology, there are two texts which clearly express Vincent of Beauvais’s analysis of the characteristics of the four temperaments:

“blood makes us good, modest, flaccid, cheerful and very affectionate; choler makes us perspicacious, swift, skilful, thin, of good appetite and quick digestion; phlegm makes us prone to causon—a fever which caused salty phlegm in those who suffered it—attentive, prematurely grey-haired, pensative and less daring; melancholy makes us astute and overly avaricious, fearful, sad, severe and sleepy.”

“There are some verses which are often recited to explain the characteristics of the humours or complexions. Characteristics of sanguine people; of the sanguine it is said: generous, kind, cheerful, smiling, and red in colour, given to singing, fleshy, quite brave, and good-natured. Of the choleric, it is said: hairy, deceitful, prone to anger, wasteful, daring, astute, witty, dry, and of a yellowish colour. Of the phlegmatic, it is said: he is sleepy, idle, spits a lot, with dull senses, a fatty appearance, and a white colour. Of the melancholy: envious, sad, wilful, mean, not deceitful, fearful and pale in colour.”

On the biological level, the predominance of one humour leads to symptoms which allow us to diagnose the excess of this fluid in the body. Taking Rhazes’s medical writings as his basis, Vincent tells us the following:
“Symptoms of excess of blood. Excess of blood can be detected by the reddish colour of the body, by heat which spreads through the whole body, sometimes by somnolence and yawning, or sometimes in the veins, in which the pulse is noticeable and there is a sensation of burning in the place where the blood tends to be reduced. Another clear symptom of this excess is the ease with which slight contact may cause a haemorrhage in the nose or the gums, as well as the sensation of heaviness in the head, eyes and temples, or perturbations of the mind and senses, a strong pulse and more than usual sweetness in the mouth. This excess also gives rise to the formation of carbuncles at the mouth of the small bladder, and on the body, and to thick, red urine”.

“On choler. These are the typical characteristics of an excess of choler: sallow skin colour, bitterness and dryness in the mouth, intense thirst and little hunger, or even rejection of food, and clear or orange-coloured urine.”

“An abundance of melancholy is indicated by burning in the stomach, an appetite worthy of a dog, dark colouring, thick, black blood, black or red urine — but always tending to be dark or, occasionally, greenish. While a body that produces melancholy is usually dark and thin, a fat, white, hairless body rarely, if ever, produces melancholy.”

“Phlegm. The predominance of phlegm is clear thanks to the abundance of viscous saliva, lack of thirst, white urine, sloth, dimness of the mind, problems with sleep, a slippery body, and slow digestion”.

3. Psychobiological retractions

In view of what we have seen, it is evident that a specific type of pedagogical psycho-biology was cultivated in the Late Middle Ages, which Vincent reliably represents. His contribution has been ignored by the historiographers of educational psychology for many different reasons, among others, the fact that Vincent himself abandoned and retracted this area of research towards the end of his life. The reasons why he did so have not received an adequate explanation, although his actions should be seen in the context of moves concerning the secular sciences that were under way within rigourist sectors of the Dominican order, and which surfaced at various general chapter meetings. These movements even led to banning research on the sciences because this was felt to be unedifying and unhelpful for acquiring better knowledge and understanding of Sacred Scripture.

It was not easy to maintain a favourable stance and openly defend natural philosophy in the mid-thirteenth century, especially for a Dominican. On the one hand, there were the Aristotelian Libri naturales, which presented positions that were hard to reconcile with the truths of Christianity; on the other, papal prohibitions and censorship meant that it was sensible to be prudent as far as the new sciences were concerned, or even to shy away from them. Even among the Dominicans themselves, there were spiritualist sectors which abhorred pursuit of secular science. Their attitude became so extreme that the General Chapter of 1228 actually banned the study of natural sciences.

This prohibition was renewed in the General Chapter of 1244, in which it was decreed that all the brothers who were cultivating the new sciences or who possessed profane texts should submit them to the Prior for consideration. One important exception was contemplated in this Chapter: the superiors of the Order and provincial chapters had authority to permit individual members to study and cultivate the profane sciences.

It is within this area of special permission that the naturalism of Vincent of Beauvais should be situated. Far from rejecting natural philosophy, he promoted it as a further branch of knowledge and learning. But as his life drew to a close, he had to retract from this commitment and desideratum. In the last edition of his Speculum maius (1256/59), in chapter XVIII of the introduction, better known as the Libellus apologeticus, he posed the question as to whether it had really been worthwhile to discuss the profane sciences at such length and in such depth, particularly as far as the area of natural philosophy was concerned. He expresses the doubt as to whether this knowledge could really contribute to a better understanding of Sacred Scripture — which was the primary and final purpose of his entire oeuvre —, or whether it was merely an expression of simple intellectual curiosity.

“Now that this work, which is so long and has cost me so much labour, has come to an end, thank God, I would also like to lead to the haven of repose my own mind, which has so long wandered through the wide seas of the Scriptures and has wounded itself with this distraction. As I do so, now that my strength is waning, seeing this work with eyes that are both serene and free, in some sense, from reason, and weighing it in the balance of discretion, I find that in one sense I have acted negligently, and in another I have exceeded the proper limits. Thus acknowledging that I have previously said many things in my own defence, so that when vainly seeking glory...
among men, I should not be a benevolent judge of my own vices or an impassioned counsel for my own defence, but rather a just inspector and a harsh critic of my own wrongs, I shall not blush to confess my own guilt at the beginning of this work, because as the philosopher says: there is nothing completely perfect to be found in human work (...). Then, investigating nature (...) I confess that in good measure, in my opinion, I went beyond the limits of my profession, above all when investigating and describing those things whose name I did not find in the divine books. Thus in an attempt to satisfy the curious, I myself fell into the vice of curiosity. What doctors do should be done by doctors, and the workman labours at his own work. So I, a poor creature of such a sublime profession, whose work and entire dedication should be to attend to the health of souls, must insist first and foremost in this work on the matters which have to do with my profession, and must pass over all other things quickly (...), particularly those related to the health of the body, if they should perchance be mentioned here” 27.

This reluctance is strange and all the more striking when we consider that this is an author who has immersed himself in philosophers and poets, who has read the “new Aristotle”, who has profound knowledge of the Apocrypha, and who has made no rejections in any of the earlier editions of the Libellus. Why should such an issue be raised at this point? The answer should be sought in the internal rules of the Dominican order itself. In 1259, the General Chapter again pronounced grave warnings against the profane sciences, which could have put an end to the study of disciplines that friars of the stature of Albert the Great, Thomas of Cantimpré and Vincent of Beauvais had cultivated with such depth and brilliance. Although these warnings did not explicitly adjure what had already been written, they certainly deterred any future attempts at writing on psychological or biological subjects. However, despite these circumstances, it is fair to consider Vincent of Beauvais to be one of the forerunners of medieval pedagogical psychobiology, and to suggest that historians might do well to revisit this neglected figure.

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2. Speculum doctrinale, Lib. XII, cap. VI: De elementis, col. 1173.
7. Speculum naturale, Lib. XXXI, cap. LXVIII: De signis complexionis totius corporis, col. 2344.