

THE PHILOSOPHICAL SPECULATIONS OF GIORDANO BRUNO

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OF all the writers of the transition period between medieval and modern philosophy, probably no one represents its general characteristics better than Giordano Bruno, for in his numerous works, poetical, scientific, philosophical, are reflected all the distinctive features of that period, the revolt against authority, the demolition of the artificial division that existed between things sacred and secular, human and divine, the exultation of intellectual freedom and the consequent intellectual unsettlement and unrest, the revival of ancient philosophy, as well as the predilection for the occult sciences and arts and the despairing tendency to blend the dreams and vagaries of the imagination with the results of rational investigation.

Although there is no systematic unity to his multifarious writings, expressive of an intellectual enthusiasm and of a mind seeking after truth yet undisciplined and erratic, full of speculations, theories, conjectures, propounded on the impulse of the moment or under the varying influence of the circumstances of the atmosphere in which he moved, his mind seems to have been dominated by one central idea, that of the divinity of nature and man, an idea which he constantly sought to explain and defend by means partly of Aristotelian categories and partly of Neo-Platonic emanation theories, for above all else he was profoundly sympathetic with the revolt against the medieval notion of a transcendent God, and a sphere of divine things absolutely separated from nature and the secular life of mankind. During the scholastic period, the course of religious thought had not only tended to greater obscure the Christian idea of the unity of the divine and human but the ecclesiastical conception of God as well had gradually become that

of a Being above the world, to whom thought can be related only as the passive recipient of mysterious dogmas authoritatively revealed, and not of a Being who reveals Himself in and to the human spirit. Such a false exaltation of the idea of God could lead to nothing but the degradation of nature, and the individual and social life of man. Obviously, then, for minds in which the divine was identified with the supernatural, the observation of nature lost all religious interest, for to them divine presence was not revealed in the course of nature but rather in interferences with its laws. For the same reason, religious life became one of abstraction from the world, and the secular life of man, its domestic, social, political relations, gradually came to be recognized as outside the sphere of spiritual things.

The reaction to this false separation of the natural and spiritual, the human and the divine, not only reawakened interest in nature, as indicated by the scientific revival of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but gave rise as well to the pantheistic tendency in philosophy, so distinctively characteristic of Bruno's speculative writings for Bruno was decidedly opposed to the conception of a supramundane God, and a world in whose life and thought no divine element could be discerned. Instead, he seemed to intuitively discern in the phenomena of the external world in which science had begun to perceive an intelligible order and law, and in the inner world of mind, to whose boundless wealth of thought the consciousness of the time was becoming awakened, the immediate expression of a divine presence and life and not the mere production of a distant omnipotence. "The true philosopher," he says, "differs from the theologian in this, that the former seeks the infinite Being, not outside the world, but within it. We must begin, in other words, by recognizing the universal agent in creation, before attempting to rise to that elevated region in which theology finds the archetype of created beings."¹

The means Bruno employed to give a philosophic justification to the idea of an immanent relation of God to the world consisted partly of a recurrence to Neo-Platonic figures and analogies, partly in a manipulation of the Aristotelian categories of matter and form, and of potentiality and actuality, the former point of view serving as the basis for his studied exposition of the notion of a "soul of the world," by which the universe is considered as an infinite, living

¹ *De la causa*, Wagner's edit., i. p. 175.

organism, not created by any outward cause, but having within itself the principle of all its existences and activities, in other words, being that beyond which nothing exists and in which all things live, move, and have their being; and which principle he furthermore compared to the principle of life in the root or seed, "which sends forth from itself shoots, branches, twigs, etc., which disposes and fashions the delicate tissue of leaves, flowers, fruit, and again, by the same interior energy, recalls the sap to the root." To natural things, it is, in one sense, external for it cannot be regarded as itself a part of the thing it creates, and, in another, internal for it does not act on matter or outside of matter, but wholly from within, in the very heart of matter. And again it is represented as an "inner artist" of infinite productiveness, differing from a human artist in that the latter works on matter which is already living or instinct with form, whereas no such presupposition is involved in the case of the former. To him, although we may recoil from viewing the universe as a living thing, we can no more conceive any form which is not already, directly or indirectly, the expression of a soul, than we can conceive a thing which has absolutely no form. And though it would be absurd to regard the productions of human art as living forms, yet my table, such, though not animate consists not only of matter taken from nature but is composed as well of materials already living. Consequently there is nothing, however, minute or worthless; that does not contain life or soul.²

Whereas the human artist works on materials taken from nature, and which as part of nature already have a life and being of their own, the divine, or inner artist, has no pre-existing materials on which to operate; His art is therefore creative, of the materials as well as of the infinitely diversified forms into which they have been fashioned. In Him creative and formative energy are the same; and if lower forms should be changed by Him into higher forms of existence they are not taken from a province foreign to Him but are already innate with His own life, while the latter are merely a new expression of its inexhaustible energy. This thought finds further utterance, in a slightly varied form however, in Bruno's view that the ideas of efficient and final cause are inseparable in the divine artist in contrast with the human, for in nature, he contended, the efficient cause cannot be separated from the final as every reasonable act presupposes an end or design, that design being "nothing else

² *De la causa*, i. p. 241.

than the form of the thing to be produced. From which it follows that an intelligence capable of producing all, and of raising them by a marvellous art from potentiality into actuality, should contain in itself the forms and essences of all things."³ As it is intelligence, or the soul of the world, that creates natural things, it is not possible for the formal to be distinct from the efficient cause for they must unite in the inner principle of things.

In his conception of the world as a living organism, Bruno carried this latter thought still further. Whereas the conception lies outside the materials on which he works in the case of the human artist, it is the contrary with the design at work in the creation of an organized structure, for then the ideal principle, or formative power, accompanies the matter and constitutes its essence, such a principle being considered as having been present from the beginning, inspiring the first minutest atom with the power of the eventual perfect whole. The inner principle, the life within, is first cause as well as last; and when applied to the universe deduces a universe containing within itself the principle of its own being, a vast organism, as it were, in which the least and most insignificant of finite existences presupposes and manifests the end to be realized, and in which the first principle is at once the beginning and end of all. Unfortunately, Bruno failed to realize all that is contained in this conception, yet when we trace the course of his procedure from his fundamental thought to an explanation of God, and His relation to the world, it is easy to see how, under the limiting influence of the scholastic categories, the inherent wealth of his own idea escaped him.

In an effort to determine the nature of the first principle of all things, Bruno employed the Aristotelian distinction of "form" and "matter" saying in part: "Democritus and the Epicureans hold that there is no real existence which is not corporeal; they regard matter as the sole substance of things, and assert that it is itself the divine nature. These, with the Stoics and others, hold also that forms are simply the accidental dispositions of matter. . . . A closer examination, however, forces us to recognize in nature two kinds of substances, form and matter. If, therefore, there is an active principle which is the constitutive principle of all, there is also a subject or passive principle corresponding to it, a something that is capable of

³ *De la causa*, i. p. 237.

being acted on as well as a something that is capable of acting. Human art cannot operate except on the surface of things already formed by nature; . . . but nature operates, so to speak, from the center of its subject-matter, which is altogether unformed. Therefore the subject-matter of the arts is manifold, but the subject-matter of nature is one, seeing that all diversity proceeds from form."⁴ What Bruno sought to prove by this passage and similar others is that the conceptions of matter and form are correlative, in other words, that neither is apprehensible in abstraction from the other, and that we are compelled by the necessities of thought to conceive of a primal substance which is neither matter nor form alone but rather a unity of the two. And again we arrive at the same result in considering the distinction of substances corporeal and incorporeal. "It is necessary that of all things that subsist there should be one principle of subsistence. . . . But all distinguishable things presuppose something indistinguishable. That indistinguishable something is a common reason to which the difference and distinctive form are added." Furthermore "it is necessary that there be one thing which corresponds to the common reason of both subjects. . . . a first essence which contains in itself the principle of its being. If body, as is generally agreed, presupposes a matter which is not body, and which therefore naturally precedes that which we designate as properly corporeal, we cannot admit any absolute incompatibility between matter and the substances which we name immaterial. . . . If we discern something formal and divine in corporeal substances, on the same principle we must say that there is something material in divine substances. As Plotinus says, if the intelligible world contains an infinite variety of existences, there must be in them, along with their characteristic differences, something which they all have in common, and that common element takes the place of matter as the distinctive element takes that of form. . . . This common basis of things material and immaterial, in so far as it includes a multiplicity of forms, is multiple and any-formed, but in itself it is absolutely simple and indivisible; and because it is all, it cannot be itself any one particular being."⁵ Such considerations are, however, not suggestive of the idea of an extramundane God but rather "of the soul of the world as the

⁴ *De la causa*, p. 251.

⁵ *De la causa*, i. pp. 269, 270, 272.

actuality of all, the potentiality of all, and everything is one.”⁶ “There is one form or soul, one matter or body, which is the fulfillment of all and the perfection of all, which cannot be limited or determined, and is therefore unchangeable.”⁷

Though Bruno's aim was to attain to a first principle which should be the living source and explanation of all finite existences, material and spiritual, the result of his reasoning was far different to that which he supposed himself to have reached, for the false method by which he proceeded led him to a unity which excludes, rather than comprehends, all determinations—an empty abstraction, and not a being which embraces in its concrete unity the whole inexhaustible wealth of the finite world. Upon finding that the ideas of matter and form, as well as of corporeal and spiritual, cannot be separately retained, he failed to rise to a higher unity which transcends yet comprehends both; instead he sought to find his higher unity in that which matter and form, mind and body, have in common when their differences are eliminated. He erred in thinking, like so many others, that he could explain the differences and contrarities of existence by simply eliminating or ignoring them. And therefore his first or highest principle (which he identified with God), in which he thought he had reached the origin and end of all things, became nothing more than the abstraction of “Being.”

If Bruno's idea of God were thus depleted of all reality, his idea of the finite world fared no better for the same reason. In seeking a first principle, or “soul of the world,” in which all finite existences should find their being and reality, he could arrive only to a solution which necessarily implied at once the nihility of all finite beings apart from God, and their reality in God, for his fundamental notion of an organic unity made it necessary for him to explain the universe as an organism in which the parts are simply dead, meaningless fragments in separation from the life or vital principle of the whole, as well as showing that through their relation to that principle they cease to be such unreal abstractions. “In its externality,” he says, “nature is nothing more than a shadow, an empty image of the first principle in which potentiality and actuality are one. . . . Thou art not nearer to the infinite by being man rather than insect, by being star rather than sun. And what I say of these I understand of all

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

things whose subsistence is particular. Now, if all these particular things are not different in the infinite, they are not really different. Therefore the universe is still one, and immovable. It comprehends all and admits of no difference of being, nor of any change with itself or in itself. It is all that can be, and in it is no difference of potentiality and actuality.⁸ . . . Individuals which continually change do not take a new existence, but only a new manner of being. It is in this sense that Solomon has said, 'There is nothing new under the sun, but that which is was before.' As all things are in the universe and the universe is in all things, as we are in it and it is in us, so all concur to one perfect unity, which is sole, stable and ever remaining. It is one and eternal. Every form of existence, every other thing is vanity, every thing outside of that one is nothing."⁹ While his method enabled him to prove the unreality of all finite existences apart from the first principle, what he could not prove was that even in their relation to this "soul of the world" any reality was left to them, for viewed as that which is reached by abstraction from the limits of finite existences, the first principle annuls rather than explains them. Their finitude is their distinction from God; and though the withdrawal of their finitude makes them one with God equally as well makes them lost in God.

In summation, Bruno sought not only to justify for thought the idea of the absolute unity of all things but to explain the universe from itself, and in the idea of God endeavored to find the immanent cause or principle of the world. In him, the first principle is the union of potentiality and actuality; and whether considered as a principle realizing itself in the actual (God), or as all actuality in relation to its principle (Nature), it is the same only differently contemplated. And finally, he failed to reach the result to which he aimed—a concrete unity, simply because he employed a method that can yield only an abstract one.

⁸ *De la causa*, i. p. 281.

⁹ *De la causa*, i. p. 283.