



The Folly of Giordano Bruno

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“The folly of mistaking a paradox for a discovery, a metaphor for a proof, a torrent of verbiage for a spring of capital truths, and oneself for an oracle, is inborn in us.”

(Paul Valery, 1895)

Fillipo Bruno (1548-1600) was born in Nola near Naples. Taking the name Giordano upon becoming a member of the Dominican order, he was educated in the Aristotelian and Thomist traditions and eventually came to espouse a mystical Neoplatonism mixed with ideas imbibed from a resurgent interest of that time in the works of the apocryphal Hermes Trismegistus. His heterodox beliefs soon attracted the attention of the Inquisition, first in Naples and then in Rome. To avoid prosecution, he renounced his Dominican vows and fled from Italy in 1576. Between 1576 and 1591, he traveled widely about Europe, writing and teaching under the sponsorship of various patrons. In 1591, he was invited to Venice to be tutor to a prospective patron who shortly thereafter denounced him to the Inquisition. He was sent to Rome in 1592 where he was put on trial and then imprisoned and interrogated intermittently for eight years. Unrepentant, he was convicted of heresy by the Inquisition and executed by burning at the stake in the Piazza Campo di Fiore in Rome in 1600. Among his writings, which cover a wide range of topics of only academic interest to us today (chiefly, Neoplatonism, Hermetical philosophy, and pantheism in a decidedly mystical blend), was an espousal of Copernicanism and an assertion that the stars were an infinity of suns like our own, each circled by worlds inhabited by intelligent beings like ourselves.

In popular accounts of the life of Bruno, it is often said that he was condemned for his Copernicanism and his belief in life on other worlds. He is portrayed as a martyr to free thought, and an early, prosecuted proponent of the modern view of the universe, hounded across Europe by the Inquisition for his beliefs and finally paying the ultimate price for them in a fiery public death. He has become a symbol of the intolerance of authority in the face of new ideas. These accounts, however, often leave out two fundamental aspects of the case of Giordano Bruno that cast matters in a somewhat different light. The first calls into doubt how closely we should link Bruno with the history of astronomy and what came to be called the “Scientific Revolution”, and the second offers a perspective on the undeniable tragedy of his life that make him less of a symbol, but in the balance makes him more human.

The one key fact of the study of Bruno’s life is that we do not actually know the exact grounds of his conviction on charges of heresy. The simple reason is that the relevant records have been lost. This is quite unlike the state of affairs in the later trial of Galileo,

where we have extensive documentation including the key (some would claim forged) documents that played a role in the case against him. In the case of Bruno, we must seek clues in contemporary accounts and in an examination of his writings.

Except for certain particular passages that excite our interest today, much of his work had little to do with astronomy. Indeed, Bruno was not an astronomer and demonstrated a very poor grasp of the subject in what he did write. The theme of his *On the Infinite Universe and Worlds* (*De l'Infinito Universo et Mondi*) is not Copernicanism but pantheism, a theme also developed in his *On Shadows of Ideas* and *The Ash Wednesday Supper* (*La Cena de le Ceneri*). It appears, at least to this modern reader, that his personal cosmology informed his espousal of Copernicus, not the other way around. Much of his work was theological in nature, and constituted a passionate frontal assault on the philosophical basis of the Church's spiritual teachings, especially on the nature of human salvation and on the primacy of the soul (or in modern terms, he opposed the Church's emphasis on spirituality with an unapologetic and all-encompassing materialism). Copernicanism, where it enters his arguments at all, is more supporting material than central thesis. Only in his *Ash Wednesday Supper* does Bruno fully explore Copernicus, and that exploration reveals that much of what he knew appears to be second hand, and is incorrect or at least confused in particular astronomical details. His supposed geometric demonstrations are hard to follow by the modern reader not because of stylistic differences between then and now, but because, in the end, they make no geometric sense. Bruno already knows his conclusions and uses Copernicus primarily, in the words of his translators Gosselin and Lerner, "as a grand metaphor" to prop them up. The Church's complaints with Bruno were less about astronomy than theology. It was not Copernicus' ideas that were obnoxious, but where Bruno tried to take them.

Bruno is often credited with recognizing that the Copernican system allowed an infinite Universe. In truth, the idea that the Copernican system allowed (or at least did not rule out) an infinite Universe was first proposed by Thomas Digges in 1576 in his *A Perfit Description of the Caelestial Orbes*, in which Digges both presents and extends the Copernican system, suggesting that the Universe was infinite. Nor is the idea of an infinite heavens original to Digges, as there are numerous historical antecedents, specifically Nicholas of Cusa in the 15th Century and atomist Lucretius in the 1st century BC (both of whom Bruno reference, if not always consistently). Bruno's two works most fully expounding his views of the universe, *The Ash Wednesday Supper* and *On the Infinite Universe and Worlds*, were both published in 1584, 8 years after Digges, and during the period of Bruno's exile in England. While we have no record of Digges and Bruno having met, Digges' work was widely discussed and Bruno would likely have come into contact with the ideas if not the man himself as he spent time within the intellectual circle of Elizabethan England. To be sure, Bruno went far beyond Digges in exploring some of the implications of an infinite universe, but to say that Bruno was responsible for introducing the idea is incorrect.

Further support for the idea that Copernicanism played only a minor role in Bruno's conviction for heresy comes from the contemporary record of the discussion of Copernicanism. What many popular accounts seem to miss is that the Church did not formally condemn Copernicanism until well *after* Bruno's death (and, indeed, until well after Galileo's death). While Copernicanism was indeed a topic of discussion and controversy in Bruno's time, few astronomers openly supported it in 1600, and the Church itself was not to express an official opinion on the matter until 1616. By that time, Galileo's

telescopic observations (from 1610 on) had completely changed the intellectual landscape, and the Church only then felt compelled to respond to the rapidly growing controversy. The issue was brought to the fore by the publication of a book by Paolo Antonio Foscarini (1565-1616) that defended Copernicanism against charges made by itinerant preachers that it was in conflict with Scripture. Foscarini cast the issue in theological terms that the Church could no longer ignore. If Copernicanism were really the grounds upon which Bruno was condemned as a heretic in 1600, it would have been explicitly proscribed at that time. It is interesting to note further that the lead inquisitor in the Bruno case was the theologian Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621), the “Hammer of the Heretics”, who as head of the Collegium Romanum in 1616 was charged by Pope Paul V with examining Copernicanism in the Foscarini case, and who in that same year would admonish Galileo in a private audience not hold or defend the idea (the particulars of what was or was not said in that audience would form the basis of Galileo’s trial on charges of heresy in 1633). In none of Bellarmine’s writings on the subject in 1616 is mention made of Bruno’s earlier case.

Further, Copernicanism was not specifically proscribed as heretical in 1616. After Bellarmine’s examination, Copernicus’ *De Revolutionibus* and Foscarini’s book (among others) were placed on the *Index of Forbidden Books*, the former to remain on the Index until specific, minor revisions were made (a few words deleted and some passages excised, but on the whole leaving the basic ideas intact). An official response to be sure, but still a long way from a definitive ban on Copernicanism in general. The idea was deemed “false and contrary to Holy Scripture” in the announcement by the Congregation of the Index of March 5, 1616, but not an “error or heresy”. As such, edited copies of *De Revolutionibus* were published in Italy after 1616 with the prescribed revisions, and the situation was sufficiently ambiguous that Galileo felt free to proceed with his work until his trial in 1633. Had Bruno been executed for heresy in 1600 on the grounds of Copernicanism, there would have been no room for doubt as to where the Church stood on the matter, nor would the Church have needed a formal review of the matter in 1616. Final formal condemnation did not come until 1664 when Pope Alexander VII prefixed a papal bull to the *Index* specifically condemning the idea of heliocentrism *in general* by explicitly banning “all books which affirm the motion of the earth.” The final condemnation, but not the final word. That the intellectual world beyond the Church had moved on is illustrated by the fact that the two years following the promulgation of edict of condemnation, 1665 and 1666, were the Plague Years in England during which Isaac Newton, on leave from Cambridge, carried out his seminal work on calculus, optics, mechanics, and gravity that was to finally sweep away the Aristotelian world view.

The second, often overlooked fact of Bruno’s life concerns his period of exile between 1576 and 1591. Most brief popular accounts state the bare facts of his peregrinations around Europe, but what is left unsaid is that his wanderings appear to have had less to do with his being hounded by the Inquisition as it did with his own rather difficult personality. While Bruno was fairly successful for a time at finding sympathetic patrons to support him, he invariably did something to alienate and anger them, usually fairly quickly after entering their service. The Inquisition had little to do with it, as once he left Italy, he was effectively beyond their reach. This was especially true of his time spent under the protection of the French Ambassador to protestant England (1583-85) during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, and his travels in protestant Germany.

The story of his period of exile is one of a succession of misfortunes, many of his own making, during which he succeeded in antagonizing all of those persons who might have been best able to protect him from the even greater tribulations ahead. In his speaking and writing he used his considerable expressive skills to indulge in bitter invective, dismissing those who disagreed with him as “jackasses”, “pigs”, “beasts”, “idiots”, “blockheads”, etc., while referring to himself and his ideas in the most lofty of terms (Bruno’s inflated self-estimation is uncomfortable to read at times). His activities during this period bear the unmistakable stamp of folly, namely his repeated failure to act in his own best interests even when reasonable alternatives were available. His eventual return to Italy (which resulted in his arrest in Venice a year later) can be seen as being motivated in part by the fact that by 1591 he had effectively burned most of his bridges behind him. He returned because he appears to have had little choice, and so accepted the invitation that was to prove to be an Inquisition trap. In some ways Bruno thrust himself into the flames that rose into the winter skies of the Campo di Fiore on the 17th day of February 1600.

Bruno was brilliant, contentious, and ultimately self-destructive. There is nothing in his writings that contributed to our knowledge of astronomy in any substantial way, and indeed his astronomical writings reveal a poor grasp of the subject on several important points. We pay attention to him today in large measure because among other things he vocally espoused (but apparently did not really understand) Copernicanism, an idea which was to become the key insight that led to our present view of the world. In addition, his *On the Infinite Universe and Worlds* appeals to many today because of its apparent resonance with the deeply held conviction that life exists elsewhere in the Universe, despite the fact that proponents of extraterrestrial life would find little else of interest within its difficult pages. This idea is not original to Bruno, but he did put it forward vividly, with arguments resonant with a barely understood Copernicanism. It also does not hurt his mystique that he came to a rather spectacular and violent ending, ostensibly as punishment for his beliefs by the reigning authorities of his day. In the end, Bruno bet on the right horse (if perhaps for questionable reasons), and thus has become a kind of culture hero instead of a footnote in books on Renaissance philosophy.

History is funny that way.

SOURCES

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