

Paul Richard Blum

Giordano Bruno Teaches Aristotle



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Giordano Bruno
Teaches Aristotle

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Cover: Illustration of the coincidence of the maximum with the minimum, the
straight with the curved line, and the circle with the point. From Giordano Bruno: *De
triplici minimo et mensura*. Frankfurt 1591, chapter 4, p. 10.

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Preface to the English Edition

This is a study of a pivotal moment in the history of modern philosophy: Giordano Bruno teaches how to read Aristotle.¹ Bruno's appropriation of Aristotle is a paradigmatic case of philosophy in the making through challenging past philosophy. Bruno was trained in the late scholastic philosophy and theology, as was the rule among the Dominican friars; however, he acquainted himself also with deviant traditions, for instance Platonism and Epicureanism. What is important for our understanding of philosophy in general is this: Bruno deliberately used the philosophers of the past for the sake of developing his very original positions. As will become clear in this study, he was not a historian of philosophy and, yet, he neither claimed to be solving philosophical problems just so; rather, he was aware that every philosophical problem has its history and that without such history the problem would not even exist.² Therefore he attacked Aristotle who was the originator of a clear set of philosophical

¹ Bruno was born in Nola in 1548, entered the order of the Dominicans, but soon after obtaining a doctorate, he started a journey through Europe in search of material and intellectual support. After appearances, among others, in Paris, London, Prague, Wittenberg, and Padua he was arrested and interrogated by the Inquisition in Venice and Rome; in 1600 he was condemned a heretic and burned at the stake in Rome. For details see Blum 2012 (below note 3) and Ingrid D. Rowland, *Giordano Bruno: Philosopher/Heretic*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.

² As Eugenio Canone recently put it: If any paradigm is to count at all then "in making the doctrines of the past live": "Giordano Bruno – Portrait of a Philosopher Opposed to the Authority Principle," in Martin McLaughlin et al. (eds), *Authority, Innovation and Early Modern Epistemology: Essays in Honour of Hilary Gatti*. Cambridge / Leeds: Legenda, 2015, pp. 106-117; 110. Cf. Paul Richard Blum, "How to Think with the Head of Another? The Historical Dimension of Philosophical Problems", *Intellectual History Review* 26 (2016), forthcoming.

problems, as discussed in this book. In waging his anti-Aristotelian campaign Bruno proved that many problems of philosophy, most notably the notions of being and cognition, are latent in Aristotle's method and conclusions. One successful way of solving philosophical problems, as shown paradigmatically by Bruno, consists in uncovering them at their origin, reformulating them and drawing new conclusions. In other words: the thorough study of the history of philosophy generates philosophy.

The opportunity to republish one's book after many years in a new translation is humbling. I am grateful to my colleagues who urged me to make my book available to an English reading audience, especially Marco Sgarbi (Venice). Naturally I was tempted to edit and partially rewrite the book, but then I realized that I could not dedicate as much attention and diligence to it as I had when writing it. Hence its coherence and focus could go lost tampering with it. However, updating the book in details would not be necessary because its main message – the paradigm of philosophy in the making – needs no updates.³ Needless to say that

³ As to my own later publications on Bruno I may mention the following: *Giordano Bruno: An Introduction*. Translated by Peter Hennevelt. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012. *Early Studies of Giordano Bruno* (Series of reprints: Bartholmèss 1846-47; Clemens 1847, Frith 1887; Tocco 1889-1892), 6 vols. with Introductions and Bibliographies, Bristol (Thoemmes Press) 2000. 'Istoriar la figura': Syncretism of Theories as a Model of Philosophy in Frances Yates and Giordano Bruno, in: *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 77 (2003) 189-212. Franz Jacob Clemens e la lettura ultramontanistica di Bruno, in: *Brunus redivivus, Momenti della fortuna di Giordano Bruno nel XIX secolo*, ed. E. Canone, Pisa-Roma 1998, 67-103. Giordano Bruno, Matthias Aquarius und die eklektische Scholastik, in: *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 72 (1990) 275-300. "Heroic Exercises: Giordano Bruno's *De gli eroici furori* as a Response to Ignatius of Loyola's *Exercitia spiritualia*," in *Brunina & Campanelliana* 18 (2012) 359-373. „Giordano Bruno's Changing of Default Positions," in *Turning Traditions Upside Down: Rethinking Giordano Bruno's Enlightenment*. Edited by Henning Hufnagel and Anne Eusterschulte. Budapest / New York: Central European University Press, 2013, pp. 13-18.

many a study of Bruno – and of Renaissance philosophy in general – has come out since this book appeared in public. However, the main reason why this book merits translation and republishing is the surprising fact that there is little later research on the key topic of this book.⁴ This is one more reason to leave the book basically unaltered. The original bibliography contained only those works that had influence the book in the process of writing. Therefore, further additions are not needed, while, on the other hand, modern bibliographies are easily accessible.⁵ Bruno's works are cited

⁴ Recently was published Lucia Girelli, *Bruno, Aristotele e la materia* (Bologna: Archetipo Libri, 2013). Our book is not cited there. For further studies related to Bruno and Aristotle see, for instance, the editions: Giordano Bruno, *Acrotismo Cameracense. Le spiegazioni degli articoli di Fisica contro i peripatetici*, ed. Barbara Amato, Pisa-Roma: Serra 2009; *Centoventi articoli sulla natura e sull'universo contro i peripatetici – Centum et viginti articuli de natura et mundo adversus Peripateticos*, ed. Eugenio Canone, Pisa-Roma: Serra 2007. Cf. also Leen Spruit, *Natural Science and Human Knowledge in Giordano Bruno's Comments on Aristotelian Physics*, in *The Dynamics of Aristotelian Natural Philosophy from Antiquity to the Seventeenth Century*, ed. by Cees Leijenhorst et al. Leiden-Boston: Brill 2002, pp. 349-373; Leen Spruit, "Motivi peripatetici nella gnoseologia bruniana dei *Dialoghi italiani*," *Verifiche*, 18 (1989), 4, pp. 367-399; Rita Sturlese, "Averroes quantumque arabo et ignorante di lingua greca: Note sull'averroismo di Giordano Bruno," *Giornale critico della filologia italiana*, 71 (1992), 2, pp. 248-275; Maurizio Cambi, "Bruno commentatore di Aristotele: il 'De progressu et lampade venatoria logicorum,'" in *Autobiografia e filosofia: l'esperienza di Giordano Bruno: atti del Convegno Trento, 18-20 maggio 2000*, ed. Nestore Pirillo (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2003), 287–319; Eugenio Canone, *Il dorso e il grembo dell'eterno. Percorsi della Filosofia di Giordano Bruno*, Pisa-Roma: IEPI 2003, chapters III and IV on Averroes and on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Eugenio Canone, Germana Ernst (eds.), *Enciclopedia bruniana e campanelliana*, 2 vols., Pisa-Roma: IEPI 2006-2010.

⁵ The periodical *Bruniana & Campanelliana* publishes new studies and reviews. Additions to the bibliography of Salvestrini are available in Maria Cristina Figorilli and Alain Philippe Segonds, *Per una bibliografia di Giordano Bruno: 1800-1999*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2003; Maria Elena Severini, *Bibliografia*

according to the editions available when the book was written. Several new editions of the collected and of individual works have been published since. For the purpose of this book there seems to be no need to prefer one or other modern text. The originals as quoted here are easily readable online at “La biblioteca ideale di Giordano Bruno”: <http://bibliotecaideale.filosofia.sns.it>.

Re-reading one’s own German and observing the translator struggling with it was an embarrassment at times. My language and style was that of a young man trying to establish himself as a scholar – and a German at that. German prose permits long-winded sentences with complex subordinate clauses, without becoming fuzzy. In the course of translation this virtue turns into a curse. Moreover, German philosophical style allows for subtleties that can be teased out of words with distinct derivatives and nearly synonyms. In interpreting the writings of Bruno – himself a hallmark of linguistic versatility – I did my best to exploit the richness of German philosophical style. It was a pleasure to work with the translator Peter Henneveld who unfailingly detected the linguistic problems, single handedly partitioned impossible sentences, reestablished transitions and coherence, and pointed out ambiguities in the German, finding elegant solutions in English. (It should be noted that all translations from the sources are ours, unless cited otherwise.) If the reader still thinks that this book is not an easy reading, I can only ask for patience and diligence. Philosophy dumbed down dies. The theme of this book is the appropriation of one thinker’s philosophy by another philosopher. That is not easy but it is what philosophers do.

Olomouc/Baltimore, Spring 2016
Paul Richard Blum

di Giordano Bruno: 1951-2000, Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2002. I am indebted to Eugenio Canone for bibliographical information.

Foreword to the German Edition

When one presents a study on Giordano Bruno's polemics directed against Aristotle, and furthermore, when one presents such a study as part of a series which is dedicated to methodical problems of intellectual history, then the reader should also be provided with a preliminary note that points out the methodology applied – even at the risk of anticipating some points contained in the introduction. It would be presumptuous if the author interpreted his method as being exemplary; nonetheless it seems to have produced results which point beyond the immediate scope of the study.

As is well known, Bruno's works are inundated with fruits of all kinds of provenance in such a way that almost any one of Bruno's phrases which are of some philosophical pertinence has already been said by some other author. Reading Bruno's works critically therefore runs the risk of reducing Bruno's intellectual work to spheres of influence or of atomizing through in identifying the sources. And it would only be the lesser evil that, in doing so, Bruno's own work would be obscured; even more fatal would be the fact that a methodological legitimization of comparisons between Bruno and the respective influences would be missing completely inasmuch as any kind of comparison requires a secured instrument with respect to content or methodology.

However, as we will see in the introduction below, the author himself – Bruno – offers such an instrument in claiming that any philosophical critique has to present and justify the opponent until the starting points of the critique are disclosed. Consequently, a new approach has to result from the aporetic contradictions of the philosophy that is being revisited. Without addressing the philosophical problem of eclecticism, we are called to relate Bruno's way of thinking to the originals and models used by him. Now the perspective is reversed: We are not interested in

pursuing some particular source; rather, we will focus on Bruno's critical intention. In order to avoid being overwhelmed by an abundance of influences, the reader has every right to select a specific source as a research object according to personal preferences.

The main focus of this study was Aristotle. We intend to demonstrate that Bruno has indeed a very precise knowledge of Aristotle's works, and he quotes them in an equally precise and knowledgeable way. Furthermore, we want to demonstrate that Bruno sees through the philosophical intention of the authority and that he demonstrably and consistently revitalizes it in a fruitful way towards his own philosophical questions. In this way, Bruno's philosophy can be presented as an attempt to overcome Aristotelian aporetic solutions. We anticipate much in saying that Bruno understands the problem of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* as an epistemological problem which he intends to solve by means of abolishing the differentiation between subject and object in the reflection of the understanding intellect. The priority of reflecting subjectivity, however, yet again confirms Bruno's philosophical reception as well as the specific kind of researching the sources as pursued in this study.

The interpretation of how significant Aristotle was for Bruno led to a specific understanding of Bruno's philosophical intention. This may show the potential of looking for other sources used by Bruno which appear in a very peculiar assimilation. For example, his position regarding the Plotinian or Florentine nuances of Neoplatonism, Thomas Aquinas, or the problem of universals might provide further information regarding Bruno's philosophical method.

I am grateful to Prof. Dr. Stephan Otto for his encouragement, guidance, and supervision of this study and for accepting it as part of the series of publications. Prof. Otto is the Director of the "Institut für Geistesgeschichte des Humanismus" (Institute of Intellectual History of Humanism) which provided the

organizational and personal framework which allowed for this study to be written. I am grateful to all the members of the Institute for making this possible.

Munich, October 1978

Paul Richard Blum

