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0521596580 - Cause, Principle and Unity: Essays on Magic

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Prefatory Epistle

Addressed to the most illustrious
Monsieur Michel de Castelnau
Seigneur of Mauvissière, Concessault, and Joinville,
Chevalier of the Order of the most Christian King,
Counsellor of his Privy Council,
Captain of fifty men at arms
and Ambassador to the most serene Queen of England.

Most illustrious and honoured Chevalier, if I consider with an appreciative eye the forbearance, perseverance and solicitude with which, adding favour on favour, benefit on benefit, you have bound, obliged, and tied me to you, and with which you are wont to prevail over every hardship, elude all sort of peril, and successfully conclude all your most worthy designs, I cannot but note how very appropriate is that noble device which adorns your terrible crest. On it a liquid humour sweetly strikes, with its constant and continual drip, and, by force of perseverance, softens, hollows, breaks, smooths and conquers a firm, solid, rugged and harsh rock.¹

If, moreover (passing over all your other noble accomplishments), I recall how much you are for me, by divine commandment, by high providence and predestination, a firm and able defender against the unjust injuries that I suffer (and that wanted from me a truly heroic spirit in order not to throw up my hands, surrender to despair and succumb before the swift flood of criminal falsehood with which I have been furiously attacked, by the envy of the ignorant, the presumption of sophists, the deprecation of the malicious, the badmouthing of varlets, the insinuations of mercenaries,

¹ The device is the adage ‘Gutta cavat lapidem’.

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gainsaying of servants, suspicion of fools, slanderers' gossip, hypocrites' zeal, barbarians' hatred, the fury of the mob, frenzy of the populace, the complaints of those I have grazed and the cries of those I have scourged – in which there was not lacking the mean, frenzied and spiteful disdain of a woman, the false tears of whom are frequently more powerful than the stoutest waves and rudest tempests of presumption, envy, deprecation, slander, insinuation, betrayal, outrage, disdain, hate and fury), you appear to me then like a solid, secure and immovable reef which, rising up to show its crest above the swollen sea, is neither eroded, nor rent, nor moved by the seething heavens, nor by the dread of winter, nor by the violent crash of thick waves, nor by the harsh gusts of wind, nor by the wild blowing of the north wind, but rather is increasingly covered with greenery which clothes and adorns its flanks. You who are then endowed with that double virtue, which renders so mighty the mild and liquid drops, and so futile the blustery and rough waves, you through whom the lordly rock is so weakened beneath the rain and the tormented reef rises so powerfully against the flood, you are the one who offers both a secure and calm haven for the true Muses, and a deadly shoal on which the false ammunition and impetuous designs of the enemy sails are shattered. I, then, whom no one has ever succeeded in accusing of ingratitude or taxing with discourtesy, I, against whom no one may rightly complain, I, hated by fools, slighted by the contemptible, profaned by knaves, vituperated by rogues, and persecuted by brutish spirits, I who am loved by the wise, admired by the learned, glorified by the great, cherished by the mighty and favoured by the gods, I who have already gained such indulgence from you as to be received, nourished, defended, freed, placed in surety, sheltered at port, as of one who, thanks to you, has fled a great and dangerous storm, it is to you that I consecrate this anchor, these shrouds, these battered sails, these goods, to me most dear, and to future generations most precious, so that, thanks to your beneficence, they may not be submerged by the iniquitous and tumultuous Ocean which is my foe. Hung in the sacred temple of glory, by their power against the effrontery of ignorance and the voracity of time, they shall render eternal testimony to your invincible magnanimity; so that the world may know that, thanks to you, this bountiful and divine progeny, inspired by lofty intelligence, conceived by a tempered spirit and born of the Nolan Muse, has not passed away in its infancy, and will live as long as the earth, whose surface is so full of life, turns beneath the eternal regard of the other shining stars.

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Here, then, is that sort of philosophy where one discovers, with truth and confidence, that for which we look in vain in diverse or opposing philosophies. First, then, I offer you a summary of five dialogues, which contains all that seems relevant to the effective contemplation of *Cause, principle, and unity*.

Argument of the first dialogue

In the first dialogue, you have something that you may call an apology, or what you will, concerning the five dialogues that make up *The Ash Wednesday Supper*, etc.²

Argument of the second dialogue

In the second dialogue you have, *first*, the cause of the difficulty of such knowledge, in order to know how far removed the knowable object is from the cognitive power. *Second*, in what manner and to what extent the cause and the principle may be explained by the thing caused or principled. *Third*, what the knowledge of the substance of the universe contributes to the conception of that on which the substance depends. *Fourth*, by what specific means we try to know the first principle. *Fifth*, the difference and accord, the identity and diversity existing between the meanings of the terms 'cause' and 'principle'. *Sixth*, the nature of that cause which we divide into efficient, formal and final; the different ways of defining the efficient cause, and from how many points of view it may be conceived. How this efficient cause is, in a sense, intrinsic to natural things, since it is nature itself; and how, in a sense, it is extrinsic to them; how the formal cause is joined to the efficient cause, and is that through which the efficient cause operates, and how the formal cause, itself, is brought forth from the womb of matter by the efficient cause; how the efficient and formal causes coincide in an elementary substratum, and how the one cause is distinct from the other. *Seventh*, the difference between, on one hand, the universal formal cause, which is a soul through which the infinite universe (insofar as it is infinite) is animated, not positively but negatively, and, on the other hand, the particular formal cause, multipliable and multiplied to infinity, which is more perfect insofar as it is found in a more general and superior substratum,

² Bruno's celebrated dialogue *The Ash Wednesday Supper*, written, like *Cause, Principle and Unity*, during his Oxford sojourn, 1583–5.

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so that the great animals such as the stars must be fully considered as being more divine, that is endowed with an infallible intelligence and an activity without defect. *Eighth*, that the first and principal natural form, the formal principle and efficient nature, is the soul of the universe, which is a vital, vegetative and sensitive principle in all things which live, vegetate and feel. And by way of conclusion, that it is, moreover, unworthy of a rational subject to believe that the universe and its principal bodies are inanimate, seeing that from the parturitions and excrements of those bodies derive the animals that we call most perfect. *Ninth*, that there is nothing so defective, unfinished, abortive and imperfect that, since it has a formal principle, it does not likewise have a soul, even if it does not possess the act of substance which we describe as animal. And we may demonstrate, with Pythagoras and others who have not opened their eyes in vain, how an immense spirit, under different relations and according to different degrees, fills and contains the whole. *Tenth*, it is shown that, since this spirit exists unalterably together with matter (called 'shadow' by the Babylonians and Persians), and since both are indissoluble, it is impossible that, in terms of substance, anything can know corruption, or finish by dying; although, in terms of particular accidents, everything changes aspect and is transformed into now one composition, now another, abandoning and then taking up again now this being, now that. *Eleventh*, that the Aristotelians, the Platonists, and other sophists have not recognized the substance of things; and it is clearly shown that in natural things, all that they call substance, apart from matter, is nothing but the purist accident. And that from the knowledge of true form derives the true comprehension of what life is and what death is; and that, once the vain and puerile fear of death is quelled, we may know a part of the felicity that our contemplation affords, in keeping with the fundamentals of our philosophy, which withdraws the sombre veil of the insane belief in Orcus and in grasping Charon, a belief which poisons and detracts from all that is sweetest about our life. *Twelfth*, form is distinguished, not from the point of view of its substantiality, which forms its unity, but from that of the acts and the operations of its faculties, and from the point of view of the specific degrees of being that it produces. *Thirteenth*, we derive the genuine, definitive nature of the formal principle; how form is a perfect species, which is differentiated in matter according to the accidental dispositions that depend on the material form, inasmuch as this consists of diverse degrees and diverse dispositions of the active and passive qualities. We see how form is variable, and how it is invariable; how it defines and

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determines matter, and how it is defined and determined by matter. *Finally*, we show, through a certain comparison adapted for vulgar comprehension, how this form, this soul, can exist in its entirety in the whole and in any part whatsoever of the whole.

Argument of the third dialogue

In the third dialogue (after having, in the second, spoken of form, which has the nature of a cause more than that of a principle), we proceed to the examination of matter, which is thought to be more a principle or element than a cause. *First*, we show (not counting the prelude at the start of the dialogue) that David of Dinant was not led astray by taking matter to be an absolutely excellent and divine thing. *Second*, how, by different philosophical methods, we can give different definitions of matter, although there is, in reality, only one primary and absolute matter. Since it is manifested in different degrees, and is differently hidden under various species, different philosophers can understand it differently according to the definitions that suit them. It is no different for number, which is understood purely and simply by the arithmetician, harmonically by the musician, symbolically by the cabalist, and in still other ways by various wise men and fools. *Third*, the meaning of the word ‘matter’ is explained by means of the difference and the likeness that exists between the natural substratum and the artificial substratum. *Fourth*, we point out how the stubborn can be dispatched and to what extent we are obliged to meet their questions and argue with them. *Fifth*, from the true definition of matter it is inferred that no substantial form loses its being; and we forcefully prove that the Peripatetics and other vulgar philosophers have known no other substance than matter, even if they speak of the substantial form. *Sixth*, as a constant material principle is recognized, we demonstrate a constant formal principle; and we demonstrate that, from the fact of the diversity of dispositions that are in matter, the formal principle proceeds to the multiform configuration of different species and different individuals; and we show why it has come about that some, brought up in the Peripatetic school, have not wanted to recognize any other substance than matter. *Seventh*, why reason must distinguish matter from form, and potency from act; and we repeat what was stated in the second part concerning how we can, without laying ourselves open to criticism, grasp the substratum and the principle of natural things in diverse ways, according to different philosophical systems; more usefully,

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however, according to natural and magical methods, and more ineffectively according to rational and mathematical methods, especially if they submit so closely to the criterion and working of reason, that nothing worthwhile is produced in the end, nor any practical fruit gathered, without which all contemplation is to be reckoned futile.

Eighth, we present two points of view from which matter is generally considered: either as potency, or as substratum. And beginning with the first point of view, we differentiate matter in active potency and in passive potency, and in a certain way we guide it back to unity. *Ninth*, from the eighth proposition we deduce how what is supreme and divine is all that it can be, how the universe is all it can be, and how other things are not all that they can be. *Tenth*, as a result of what was said in section nine, we show in an estimable, clear and brief manner why there are vices, monsters, corruption and death in nature.

Eleventh, in what sense the universe is in none and in all of its parts – which occasions an excellent contemplation of divinity.

Twelfth, whence it happens that the intellect cannot grasp this absolute act and this absolute potency. *Thirteenth*, we conclude with the excellence of matter, which coincides with form as potency coincides with act. *Last*, from the fact that potency coincides with act, and that the universe is all that it can be, as well as for other reasons, we conclude that all is one.

Argument of the fourth dialogue

In the fourth dialogue (after having considered, in the third, matter insofar as it is a potency), matter is considered in so far as it is a substratum. We begin with Poliinnian distractions in order to present the definition of matter according to the vulgar principles of certain Platonists as well as of all the Peripatetics. *Second*, reasoning *iuxta* [according to] our own principles, we show that the matter of corporeal and incorporeal things is one, for several reasons, the first of which is drawn from the potency of one and the same genus. The second is drawn from a certain proportional analogy between the corporeal and the incorporeal, between the absolute and the contracted. The third is drawn from the hierarchy or ladder of nature, which goes up to a first embracing or comprehending principle. The fourth is taken from the fact that there must be something indistinct before matter is distinguished into corporeal and incorporeal: it is that indistinct which is represented by the supreme genus of the category. The fifth is

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taken from the fact that, since there is a common nature shared by the intelligible and the sensible, it must be the same for the substratum of sensibility. The sixth is drawn from the fact that the being of matter is independent of corporeal being, so that it is no less appropriate to incorporeal than to corporeal things. The seventh is derived from the hierarchy of the superior and inferior that is established between the substances; for where this hierarchy exists, we presuppose and understand a certain commonness in terms of matter, which is always signified by the genus, as the form is signified by the specific difference. The eighth derives from a principle alien to our philosophy but held by many, the ninth from the plurality of species that we attribute to the intelligible world. The tenth comes from the relation of similarity and imitation between the three worlds: metaphysical, physical and logical. The eleventh is drawn from the fact that all number, diversity, order, beauty and ornament are related to matter.

Third, we present briefly four opposing arguments and respond to them. *Fourth*, we show how this matter and that matter differ, how differently we convey this and that, and how matter coincides with act in incorporeal things, and how all the species of dimensions are in matter, all the qualities being comprised in form. *Fifth*, that no wise man has ever said that forms are received by matter as from outside, but that it is matter which, expelling them, so to speak, from its womb, produces them from within. It is therefore not a *prope nihil*, an almost nothing, a pure and naked potency, since all forms are contained in it, produced by it, and brought forth by virtue of the efficient cause (which, from the point of view of being, can even be indistinguishable from matter); they have no mode of actual existence in sensible and intelligible being other than through accidental existence, granted that all that which appears and is made manifest through the accidents founded on dimensions is pure accident, even if substance is always indivisible and always coincides with undivided matter. Hence, we see clearly that from explication we cannot get anything but accidents, and so the substantial differences are hidden, as Aristotle, checked by the truth, said. So that, pondering the subject well, we may conclude that the uniform substance is one, and that truth and being are one, which manifests itself through innumerable particularities and individuals, showing itself in countless, concrete, individual substances.

Sixth, how very far from all reason is what Aristotle and his like mean when they consider matter as being in potency, given that such a being is assuredly a nullity, since, according to them, matter is so absolutely

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permanent that it never varies or changes its being, all variation and modification being related to it, and since, still according to them, that which is, after having been able to be, is always composite. *Seventh*, we show how meaningless the characterization of matter as appetite is, using the self same logic derived from the principles and hypotheses of those very people who so strongly proclaim matter to be the daughter of privation and its appetite to be similar to the insatiable craving of an impassioned female.

Argument of the fifth dialogue

In the fifth dialogue, which deals chiefly with unity, the foundation of the edifice of all natural and divine cognition is laid. Here, *first*, we present the theme of the coincidence of matter and form, potency and act, so that being, logically divided into what it is and what it can be, is physically undivided, indistinct and one, and at the same time infinite, immobile and indivisible, with no difference between part and whole or principle and principled. *Second*, that in this one, there is no difference between a century and a year, a year and an instant, a palm and a stadium³, a stadium and a parasang⁴, and that in its essence this and that other specific being are not distinguished one from the other, because there is no number in the universe, and hence the universe is one. *Third*, that in the infinite, the point does not differ from the body, because there is no difference between potency and act; hence, if the point can extend in length, the line in breadth and the surface in depth, the point is long, the line broad and the surface deep; and all things are long, broad and deep, and therefore one and the same; and the universe is all centre and all circumference. *Fourth*, how Jove (as he is called), being found even more intimately in everything that the form of everything can be imagined to be (because he is the essence through which all that exists possesses being, and since he is in everything, each thing possesses the whole even more intimately than it does its own form), we may infer that all things are in each thing, and that, consequently, all is one. *Fifth*, we answer the sceptic who wishes to know why all particular things change, and why the particular matters, in order to receive this or that being, strive towards this or that form. We show how there is unity in the multiplicity, and multiplicity in the unity, how being is multimodal and multi-unitary, and how it is, finally, one in substance and in truth. *Sixth*, we deduce

³ A unit of length, usually equal to 600 Greek or Roman feet, or one-eighth of a Roman mile.

⁴ An Iranian unit of length, usually reckoned as equal to between 3 and 3½ miles (5 to 5½ km).

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whence proceed that number and difference, as well as the fact that they are not being but of being and relative to being. *Seventh*, we show that whoever has discovered this one – I mean the essence of this unity – has uncovered the key without which one cannot enter into the true contemplation of nature. *Eighth*, by means of a new analysis, we reaffirm that the one, the infinite – that being, that which is in all – is everywhere, or better still, is itself the *ubique* [everywhere], and that, therefore, the infinite dimension, since it is not magnitude, coincides with the undivided individual, as the infinite multitude, since it is not number, coincides with unity. *Ninth*, how in the infinite there are no parts, however particularized the things of the universe are; where, consequently, all that we see of diversity and difference is nothing but diverse aspects of one and the same substance. *Tenth*, how in the two extremes that are assigned to the extremities of nature's ladder, we must see not two principles, but one only, not two beings, but one, not two contraries and opposites, but one and the same congruence. There height is depth, the abyss is inaccessible light, gloom is clarity, great is small, the confused is distinct, discord is amity, the divisible is indivisible, the atom is immensity – and all inversely. *Eleventh*, in what way certain geometrical terms such as point and unity may serve to lead us towards the contemplation of being and unity, although they are insufficient to express them. Whence Pythagoras, Parmenides and Plato should not be so foolishly interpreted according to Aristotle's pedantic criticism. *Twelfth*, from the fact that the substance or being is distinct from quantity, measure and number, we infer that it is one and undivided in all and in any thing whatsoever.

Thirteenth, we introduce the marks and the proofs that contraries indeed coincide, derive from the same principle, and form, in reality, but one substance: this is seen first mathematically, and then demonstrated physically.

Here, then, most illustrious Sir, you see where we must begin in order to venture towards a more specific and rightful cognition of things. It is there that (as within its exclusive seed) the host of natural science's conclusions is contained. Thence derive the structure, disposition and order of the speculative sciences. Without this introduction⁵, all attempt, all exploration and all initiative are in vain. Pray accept, with a benevolent spirit, this principle, this one, this fountain, this wellhead, so that its descendants, its progeny, may be sparked to emerge, and so that its rivers and floods may flow forth more abundantly, and its numbers may continually multiply and members flourish; so that the night with its drowsy veil

⁵ *Cause, Principle and Unity* was intended as an introduction to Bruno's *De l'infinito universo e mondi*.