

Lois Eveleth

Salve Regina University
Newport, RI
USA

**THE LURE OF PANTHEISM:
ITS EVANGELICAL FLOWERING AND
WORLD-WIDE DESIGNS**

Though we may not have realized it, Pantheism’s appeal has been nurtured in recent decades. In 1975 the Universal Pantheist Society was established, and in 1999 a break-away group, proudly calling itself the World Pantheist Movement, demonstrated that the number of pantheists was obviously increasing.¹ Arguably, pantheists have existed for most of Western history. But with the existence of the internet and social media, the pantheistically-inclined have been able to organize, communicate, and support each other, and, most importantly, spread the details of their world-view with an evangelical zeal.

If we can think of pantheism as an answer to a question, I find it intriguing to identify the question that it answers; actually, to identify the several questions that could have generated this broadly-understood world-view. Is pantheism an effort to replace theism? To attack it? Or is it more benign, simply an effort to admire nature? Maybe pantheists wish to explore the concept of infinity, or seek to conceptualize an immanent God. Is it connected to environmentalism? Or, is there even enough consensus among pantheists for any of these questions to be answered?

Even though the boundary lines distinguishing one pantheist from another are porous, one tenet is clear for everyone: God is nature, and nature is God. But, why would anyone wish to say this? Clearly those who

¹ The website of the World Pantheist Movement (WPM) is available at: www.pantheism.net, accessed on July 29, 2015. There, WPM reports that there are “tens of thousands of supporters” worldwide who self-identify as pantheists.

are committed to the dominant Western religious systems, systems that believe God transcends His creation, will not identify God as nature; they will not say that God *is* nature. Admittedly there are Christian beliefs that may suggest some sort of identity, e.g., that God is present in His creation by His power or by His continuous creation, that God is present in the souls of the baptized. And one may even quote St. Paul from Acts 17:28: “In Him we live and move and have our being.”² We thus have our first question thrust upon us: What is identity, or, what can the identification of God and nature mean? And a second follows closely: Why should transcendence, in the sense of complete otherness, be rejected? Such rejection is especially curious among Western thinkers, in that transcendence is basic to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In addition, if everything is identified with God-as-nature, how is particularity to be explained?

In my optimistic search to clarify pantheism, I am employing these three basic questions as points of comparison: (1) the question of identity, (2) the question of the rejection of transcendence, (3) and the question of accounting for particularity. To address the genesis of the ideas so widespread online, I have gone back to earlier, weightier expositions of pantheism; specifically, to key expositors like Giordano Bruno (*Concerning the Cause, Principle, and One*), Benedict Spinoza (*Ethics*), John Toland (*Pantheisticon* and *Letters to Serena*), and Ralph Waldo Emerson (selections from various essays). Writings of these individual pantheists, who lived respectively in the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, reveal some seemingly tenuous connections, connections that nonetheless help by revealing what pantheism has considered essential. What I offer here, first, is a highlighting of key ideas of each of these four individuals in order to uncover connections; then, I propose a synthesis of their related ideas.

Giordano Bruno

For Bruno, everything is One—the universe or God (they are used synonymously). The very title of his most representative text is a list of three names assigned, i.e., Cause, Infinity, and One. Everything is also called *Substance*. In short, Substance is. Whatever is is Substance. Bruno frequently employs this Aristotelian term, although he modifies its mean-

² The Latin Vulgate expresses it unequivocally: “in ipso enim vivimus et movemur et sumus.” The Vulgate is available at: www.perseus.tufts.edu/collections, accessed on July 29, 2015.

ing in his various disagreements with the *Physics*. There is only one Substance, an infinite Substance; *finite substance*, for Bruno, is a contradiction in terms. But we find Aristotle's distinction of matter and form here also, yet undergoing some change (almost a transmutation if not a transmutation). His Substance is made up of prime matter, meaning passive potency, and universal form, which means *world-soul* and *universal intellect*; and there is a total correlation between the two. God is the absolute identity of these two principles. Further, because these two principles are also named Substance, God is Substance, and Substance is God. The steps of Bruno's reasoning follow a pathway such as this:

1. If man seeks an Infinite, then an Infinite must exist.
2. If an Infinite exists, it must be knowable to some extent.
3. Therefore, if man seeks an Infinite, then an Infinite must be knowable to some extent.
4. Either God is knowable or the universe (God's creation) is knowable.
5. God is not knowable.
6. Therefore, the universe is knowable.
7. Assume: There is nothing outside God and God's creation.
8. If the universe is knowable, then the universe is the Infinite sought by man.
9. (#6)
10. Therefore, the universe is the Infinite sought by man.
11. But God is Infinite, and there can be only one Infinite.
12. Therefore, God is the universe, and the universe is God.

His reason for postulating this Infinite lies in his reading of human nature. Man forever and inexorably seeks knowledge and the good, but these goals can never be fully and satisfactorily achieved in this finite lifetime, and so the dynamism of human life turns out to be a relentless quest for what is infinite. If there were no such infinite, human life would be absurd—its absurdity resting on the non-existence of whatever is the ultimate goal of all human striving. Refusing to recognize any absurdity arising from a human quest for infinite goals, Bruno holds to the existence of the Infinite. The universe is infinite. And, if the universe be infinite, the universe is also God, because there cannot be two Infinities.

Yet, having identified God as the universe, holding that these are not separate, he complicates the equation by maintaining also that they are distinct: "all that we see of diversity and difference are nothing but diverse

and different aspects of the same Substance.”³ The need for making any distinction is explained by the nature of the human mind. Incapable of apprehending infinity, we cannot really grasp this Substance in itself. What we do apprehend is the universe, the parts of which are the accidents of Substance. Bruno’s terminology seeks to clarify this distinction-cum-connection:

. . . everything we see of difference in bodies, in relation to formations, complexions, figures, colors . . . is nothing else than a diversity of appearance of the same substance; a transitory, mobile, corruptible appearance of an immobile, stable and eternal being . . .⁴

Terminology is enhanced to account for the distinction-cum-connection—the connection between infinite Substance (God) and the attributes of Substance (universe), attributes which compose the universe as common-sense experiences it. There are two “kinds” of infinity. The universe has extensive infinity: though the universe is infinite in itself, nevertheless all of its parts are finite; God has intensive infinity, i.e., Infinite in Himself, meaning all of His attributes are also infinite. Employing phraseology dating back to the thirteenth century, Bruno assigns the phrase *natura naturans* to the intensive infinity of God; the phrase *natura naturata* to the extensive infinity of the universe.⁵ This is a distinction aiming at a re-definition of transcendence.

Another such effort is his distinction between *cause* and *principle*. Though in agreement with the traditional understanding that God may be known to some extent through His creation, Bruno sets up a distinction between *cause* and *principle*. A cause is “that which contributes to the production of things from without, and which has its being outside of the composition . . . as efficient, it does not form part of the things composed

³ *Dialogue Concerning the Cause Principle, and One*: “Introductory Epistle,” in Sidney Thomas Greenburg, *The Infinite in Giordano Bruno, with a Translation of his ‘Dialogue Concerning the Cause Principle, and One’* (New York: Octagon Books, 1950), 86.

⁴ *Fifth Dialogue*, in Greenburg, *The Infinite in Giordano Bruno*, 164.

⁵ The best tracing of the legacy of these terms is arguably that of John Deely, who writes: “What has to be stressed in the situation of our present knowledge is that the distinction seems to have been introduced not by Averroes himself, but by the translators into Latin of the Commentary of Averroes on the Physics of Aristotle, which would make the terminology to be of specifically Latin origin dating from the early 1200s” (John Deely, *Four Ages of Understanding: The First Postmodern Survey of Philosophy From Ancient Times to the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 139).

and the things produced.”⁶ He is here recognizing a traditional understanding of transcendence. God, however, is principle, a principle that “intrinsically contributes to the constitution of things and remains in the effect.”⁷ As principle, God is immanent in His creation, not separate from creation. God acts on His creation from within it. He is actually present in His creation but is not exhausted thereby. To understand what he means by this, Bruno’s broken-mirror image helps.

The universal body is contained as a whole in the whole Universe, but the spiritual substance is contained as a Whole in each part . . . Thus the entire nature of its form and Light is reflected as a whole by all particles of matter just as the universal body is reflected by all of matter. This can clearly be seen in the case of a large mirror, which reflects one image of one thing, but if it has been broken into a thousand pieces, each one of the pieces still reflects the whole image.⁸

Regardless of how many broken pieces of Bruno’s metaphorical mirror there are, they are attributes of Substance/God. Everything that constitutes the universe is an attribute of Substance/God. *Attribute* is a safe word, avoiding the use of the word *part*; for what is Infinite does not have parts. Parts are relevant only to a perceiver, e.g., man, whose apprehension of reality is always finite. The universe is open to the possibility of limitless numbers of particular things, and each particular thing is relevant to human finitude. Human apprehension of reality is finite, analogous to Bruno’s broken mirror. His poem *To My Own Spirit* assigns a special place for man in the universe, a place that seeks to account both for man’s finitude and his longing for far more:

Rootedly rests the mountain, deeply grown into one with
the earth;
But its head rises to the stars.
You are kindred to both, my Spirit,
To Zeus as well as to Hades; and yet separated from both.
To Mind, a kindred mind calls you, from the height of things,

⁶ *Fifth Dialogue*, in Greenburg, *The Infinite in Giordano Bruno*, 164.

⁷ *Opere Italiane*, 175, in Greenburg, *The Infinite in Giordano Bruno*, 21.

⁸ *Dialogue Concerning the Cause Principle, and One*, in Greenburg, *The Infinite in Giordano Bruno*, 88.

That you should be the boundary between things above
and below . . .⁹

Baruch Spinoza

Like Bruno, Spinoza employs the term *Substance* to name everything that exists: "By substance I mean that which is in itself and is conceived through itself; that is, that the conception of which does not require the conception of another thing from which it has to be formed."¹⁰ Also, like Bruno, he argues against the possibility of the existence of finite substances. This means that there is only one Substance, viz. God. "By God I mean an absolutely infinite being, that is, substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence."¹¹ His unique phrase, *Deus sive Natura*, God or Nature, is arguably an indication of his pantheistic stance. Substance is God or Nature: *God* because our intellects perceive the attribute of thought, and *Nature* because our intellects perceive the attribute of extension.

What exists? What is? He begins with a hypothetical entity, Substance, the Infinite, an entity that is posited as more real and more ultimate than anything that we humans experience. While this system is a kind of monism, Substance is not exactly alone; if it were, how would we experience anything at all in that we do not experience this Infinite Substance? There are two realities, Substance and its modes. Humans experience a plethora of realities, in a multi-faceted, finite, and mobile universe, and this reality has to be accounted for. This is an obligation to be satisfied within his system without allowing anything to exist outside of Substance, an obligation satisfied within this substance-monism by creating his concept of *mode*: "By mode I mean the affections of substance, that is, that which is in something else and is conceived through something else."¹² Modes are not effects brought into existence by God, a traditional view clearly rejected by Spinoza; God is not a cause in the sense that He is outside of and distinct from the effects. Spinoza offers readers the example of the triangle: an infinity of things flows from God's eternal nature, "just as from the nature of a triangle it follows . . . that its three angles are equal to two right

⁹ Id.

¹⁰ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, Id6, trans. Samuel Shirley, in *Readings in Modern Philosophy*, vol. I, ed. Roger Ariew and Eric Watkins (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2000), 158.

¹¹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Id5, in *Readings in Modern Philosophy*, 158.

¹² Id.

angles.”¹³ Everything in the universe (man included) is then a mode of God: every object is conceptually contained in God, and every entity is in God, *in*, in the sense that each entity in the universe is caused by God, in an immanentist sense, and can be explained only by God. “Particular things are . . . modes wherein the attributes of God find expression in a definite and determinate way.”¹⁴ Finite substances are not possible; every living thing and everything that we experience is a mode of God, an Infinite being that expresses itself, gives of itself, without being diminished, that possesses infinite qualities, most of which are not apprehended by any human intellect.

God is the cause of this universe but is not separate from it; God is an immanent cause, a cause from within. God cannot be transcendent: there is only one Substance, and *Substance* has been defined in such a way that only one substance exists and nothing can exist outside of this Substance. Substance has priority over its modes, though, because a mode is conceptually contained in Substance. What is barely a hint of transcendence exists in this primacy of Substance over its many modes, or, in the primacy of a constitutive whole over its many parts. What I’m calling a *hint of transcendence* would have to be the case with the triangle as well: the triangle is prior in some conceptual way to the concept of *three angles being equal to two right angles*. If the notion of transcendence has any meaning here, it would connote a situation of self-causing and self-explaining; Substance would be transcendent because it is not explained in terms of modes. Unlike the traditional understanding of transcendence, this connotation of *transcendence* does not mean *outside* or *without* the universe, since Spinoza intends a strict identity of God and nature. Nothing exists apart from or outside of Substance; once we accept this point of departure, transcendence is impossible. Moreover, as Bruno had done before him, he revives the medieval expressions *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata*. By the former he means “that which is in itself and is conceived through itself; that is, (through) the attributes of substance that express eternal and infinite essence.”¹⁵ By the latter he means this: “all that follows from the necessity of God’s nature, that is, from the necessity of each one of God’s attributes; or all the modes of God’s attributes insofar as they are considered as things

¹³ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Ip17, in *Readings in Modern Philosophy*, 166.

¹⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Ip25c, in *Readings in Modern Philosophy*, 169.

¹⁵ Id.

which are in God and can neither be nor be conceived without God.”¹⁶ Particularity is accounted for in his special term, modes. *Natura naturata* reinforces his notion that every particular item in common-sense experience is but a mode of God, that is, that God is the totality of *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata*. Clearly, the more items in the universe there are, the more facets of the divine Substance there are that reveal something about this Substance, which is the dynamic source and free cause of everything that exists. “The more we understand particular things, the more we understand God.”¹⁷ Every particular item in common-sense experience of the universe is explained solely in terms of his special term, modes; and these are either general/infinite or particular/finite. The former, because they are infinite, are not generally apprehended by humans; thought and extension, the exceptions, are apprehended by humans. The latter, the finite modes, are all the particular things that we experience, i.e., the many mutable, contingent, temporal things in our experience. These we experience either through imagination or through reason, and our apprehension of things is finite and inadequate: “We can have only a very inadequate knowledge of the duration of particular things external to us.”¹⁸

John Toland

The word *pantheist* is credited as having been coined by John Toland (1670–1722); the word *pantheism* is credited to Jacobus Fayus (Jacques de la Faye), a Dutch theologian who responded in 1709 to Toland’s work with a 250-page attack. A maverick opposed to all types of authority, both political and religious, Toland helped to establish and continued to foster freethinking sentiment in clandestine Whig groups known collectively as Socratic Sodalities or the Socratic Brethren. An insistence on such features as open communication, toleration of disparate views, and reasonableness in religion moved him out of the Catholicism of his Irish youth into Anglicanism, and eventually out of Anglicanism into deism, and finally out of deism into pantheism.

To the earlier Toland-the-deist, Isaac Newton and Spinoza mattered most: Newton because this great scientist identified laws of nature that liberated Toland from religions whose fables and superstitions—as he thought of them—cut off their believers from others and fostered intoler-

¹⁶ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Ip29, in *Readings in Modern Philosophy*, 171.

¹⁷ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Vp24, in *Readings in Modern Philosophy*, 202.

¹⁸ Spinoza, *Ethics*, IIp31, in *Readings in Modern Philosophy*, 191.

ance; Spinoza because this great rationalist philosopher presented a unitary, comprehensive view of the world. Still, Toland did not remain content with these. His *Letters to Serena*, published in 1704, is permeated with his criticism of Spinoza on the question of motion, an insight he gathered from his readings in Newton's *Principia Mathematica*.

Spinosa (*sic*) has nowhere in his system attempted to define motion or rest, which is unpardonable in a philosopher . . .¹⁹

Refining his remarks, he wrote the following:

having given no account of how matter came to be moved or motion comes to be continued, not allowing God as first mover, neither proving nor supposing motion to be an attribute nor indeed explaining what motion is, he could not possibly show how the diversity of particular bodies is reconcilable to the unity of substance . . . his system is entirely precarious and without any sort of ground . . .²⁰

Toland's criticism is directed not at locomotion, which Spinoza does address, but to the ability of matter to change its forms in a law-like, predictable way; God, he maintains, has imbued matter with its own motion. Moreover, all sensible qualities of matter would be missing, if motion were not understood as an identifying quality of matter and thus admitted to the same status as extension; all qualities "depend immediately on motion . . . their generation, succession, and corruption, by the numberless mixtures, transpositions, and other arrangements of their parts . . ."²¹

By the year of the publication of his *Pantheisticon* sixteen years later, in 1720, Toland-the-pantheist had emerged. The universe alone exists, eternal and infinite, and the world of our experience is only a portion of the universe. As our earth moves around the sun, so there are other earths moving around their suns. A mantra recited at each meeting of the Socratic Brethren summed it up thus: "The whole is from all things, and all

¹⁹ "Letter IV," in John Toland, *Letters to Serena*, anonymous translation of Toland's Latin original (London: Bernard Lintot, 1704), 144. Available at <https://archive.org/details/letters-toserena01tolagoog>, accessed on July 29, 2015.

²⁰ "Letter IV," in Toland, *Letters to Serena*, 147.

²¹ "Letter V," in Toland, *Letters to Serena*, 168.

things are from the whole.”²² In Toland’s deist phase, God had been conceived of as a creator transcendent of his creation, but a creator who had imbued the material universe with its own power of motion or change. As a pantheist, Toland re-assigned and re-named his God.

The universe is made up of multiple associations and composites of first bodies, elements that are akin to the first bodies of the ancient atomists, such as Lucretius. Toland even repeats the vocabulary of Lucretius, calling the first bodies *seeds*. Even while the composites that they form come and go in a rough-and-tumble manner throughout time, the first bodies (or seeds) out of which they are formed are themselves eternal: they had no beginning and will have no end. Nothing comes from nothing, and so the first bodies must have had no beginning. God is not separate from the material universe; but, completely coterminous with it, God is an explanation for whatever animates, forms, nourishes, and increases the universe. This God, though, is not a God that organized religions would recognize: God is a metaphysical necessity to explain the vitality of matter, a necessity that defines Toland’s universe as hylozoist. Matter is alive, containing within itself all that it requires for the constant motion and change in the universe. This is not a personal God worthy of worship but a metaphysical requirement in an atomistic universe.

All the things in the world of our experience as well as the total universe are “comprised in an intelligent nature, endowed with perfect reason, and same, eternal; for there’s nothing stronger to bring it to destruction: this force they call the soul of the world, as also a mind, and perfect wisdom, and consequently God.”²³ No longer conceived as a person, even if remote and mostly disengaged, God is now only reason, soul (not in a personal sense), mind (again, not in a personal sense), and wisdom. Even more significantly, God/reason/soul/mind/wisdom is *in* the universe as its source of motion/change. God is the explanation of how a material universe constantly changes without running to chaos—how things die, others emerge, and the universe goes on. As a deist, Toland had to envision divine causality achieved from outside; as a pantheist, he places divine causality within. Causality is immanent, not transitive.

²² John Toland, *Pantheisticon, or, The Form of Celebrating the Socratic Society*, anonymous translation of Toland’s Latin original (London: Sam. Paterson, 1751), 14. Available at <https://archive.org/details/cu31924029188393>, accessed on July 29, 2015.

²³ *Id.*, 77.

For that a God, diffused thro' all the mass,
Pervades the earth, the sea, and deep of air . . .²⁴

This familiar geographic metaphor—God being *in* the universe—guarantees that the universe is infinite and eternal, the traditional qualities assigned to God having now been transferred to the physical universe. Toland's obvious concern with explaining motion/change has also been addressed and preserved: motion/change or causality does not originate from outside the universe in the intentions of a transcendent God; rather, its explanation or locus lies fully within the physical universe.

We perceive many particular things within the universe, things which are parts only:

Hence men, and cattle, herds, and savage beasts,
All at their births receive ethereal life;
Hither again, dissolved, they back return;
Nor death takes place; but, all immortal, fly to
Heaven, and in their proper stars reside.²⁵

And here we see the same even more clearly:

All things in the world are one,
And one is all in all things.
What's all in all things is God,
Eternal and immense,
Neither begotten, nor ever to perish,
In him we live, we move, and exist.²⁶

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Emerson's intellectual and spiritual journey into pantheism began with his dissatisfaction with both his ordained ministry in the Unitarian faith and with mainstream Christianity. A Christian denomination that rested on a unitary concept of God, Unitarianism rejected the traditional doctrine of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ, and, to this extent, offered what was, possibly, a less dramatic move out of organized religion than the analogous journeys of Bruno and Toland. Emerson's central complaint against all forms of Christianity was the notion of a transcendent God and

²⁴ Id., 79.

²⁵ Id.

²⁶ Id., 71.

the limited understanding of revelation that it provided. Traditional Christianity taught that divine revelation was granted to some but not to all; that it was treated as something accomplished and finished. Revelation, he insisted, has to be seen as on-going; every person is open to the spirit of God, and God's revelation must come to every person in every age. No one should be shut out. It was a claim that would later ground his famous doctrine of self-reliance.

The very notion of revelation is tied to transcendence, revelation being necessary to the extent that God, being outside of human experience, chooses to reveal to mankind truths which they could not know in any other way. Divine transcendence necessitates revelation, and so a denial of revelation, traditionally defined, achieves a denial of transcendence. Accordingly, his effort in reconstruction is twofold: (1) to re-define revelation and (2) to argue for immanence.

Revelation issues from within a person, a phenomenon that he names the *moral sentiment*. "Revelation is the disclosure of the soul."²⁷ Authorization for such spiritual and moral self-reliance, however, is needed. At this point, Emerson approaches pantheism: the only entity that exists is the Over-Soul, the only existing thing, a spiritual being, a cosmic psyche in which everything is contained. Persons, things, the universe itself: everything is the self-embodiment of the Over-Soul. Noteworthy is his departure from the traditional Christian understanding that God's grace is in the soul of the baptized; the Over-Soul is not *in* persons and things; rather, persons and things are *in* the Over-Soul. Not having individual souls, persons participate in the Over-Soul, a participation that bespeaks an idiosyncratic view of relationship that authorizes his new definition of revelation. "I am part or parcel of the Over-Soul," he writes in *Nature*, as long as the words *part* and *parcel* are not understood as material.²⁸ The Over-Soul is not God, is not worthy of worship, and is not a religious concept; it replaces the traditional God in Emerson's philosophy as the ultimate moral authority, and he often uses the word *God* to refer to the Over-Soul.

Spinoza clearly was an influence on him; passages in both his essays and journals consistently praise the famous rationalist. They do so, though, only after the departure from the ministry and organized religion; it is ap-

²⁷ "The Over-Soul," in Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays, First and Second Series* (New York: Vintage Books), 163.

²⁸ "Nature," in Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature Addresses and Lectures*, vol. I (New York: Wm. H. Wise & Co., 1929), 10.

parent that he changed his mind about Spinoza. In a journal entry for 1868, he writes, "In my youth, Spinoza was a hobgoblin: now he is a saint."²⁹ And he approvingly quotes Novalis's famous observation that "Spinoza was a God-intoxicated man (*Gott-trunkener Mensch*)."³⁰

Inspired by Spinoza, he also adopted the distinction between *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata*, re-defining these terms to suit his commitment to Idealism rather than the Materialism of most pantheists. *Natura naturata* is the world of human experience, e.g., objects, nature, other persons, even one's own body. We experience only what is material, but what is matter? Lest we worry that the connection may not be sound—the connection between material stuff and the Over-Soul—he re-defines the idea of matter:

What is matter . . . Idealism saith, matter is a
phenomenon, not a substance . . .³¹

Natura naturans refers to Nature as creative, active, and productive; it is "the quick cause before which all forms flee as the driven snow . . . it publishes itself in creatures."³² Nature is what humans are meant to know about—the Over-Soul. There are not two parts to Nature, *parts* referring more correctly to material things. This conceptual-verbal distinction highlights the difference between the Over-Soul and its self-publishing as Nature, a publishing which provides a reminder that the extent of human experience of Nature is always finite experience. Further, the distinction, old though it is, reinforces Emerson's purpose: the participle *naturata* is a perfect passive participle, reminding us that the world of our experience is a kind of product, a published product, a self-revelation of the Over-Soul. The word *naturans* is a present, active participle, making the point of the active and on-going creativity of this cosmic psyche.

This re-definition of revelation requires the immanence of the Over-Soul, though it be an immanence with a twist: everything that we experience and all of Nature are *in* the Over-Soul. Pantheists before Emerson typically began with a materialistic premise and made the move to incorpo-

²⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, vol. XVI, ed. Ronald Bosco and Glen Johnson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1982), 99.

³⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, vol. XIV, ed. Susan Sutton Smith and Harrison Hayford (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1978), 277.

³¹ "Nature," in Emerson, *Nature Addresses and Lectures*, 62.

³² "Nature," in Emerson, *Essays, First and Second Series*, 172.

rate the divine element to account for the reasonableness of Nature. Ever the Idealist, Emerson begins with a non-material entity—a hypostasis modeled after the One in the *Enneads* of Plotinus—and moves to incorporate matter to account for the fact of human experience. He uses the preposition “in” as Spinoza used it, viz. B is *in* A if and only if B requires A for its existence or its understanding. Thus, Nature is *in* the Over-Soul.

What is the basis of individualism then? The key is a theory of perception emerging in *Nature* (1836), his first published effort to explain individualism. Perception is integration of impressions: “all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence.”³³ His impressions are not solid, defined and ready-made, like those of empiricism, but are shaped by the observer integrating such impressions. However it is that “natural objects make a kindred impression.”³⁴ Emerson does not explain here how impressions are made; the observer is a creative element in his perception of objects in Nature and we are presented with a non-empirical understanding of perception.

While different individuals may look at one-and-the-same object, each one sees or apprehends what he is prepared to see or apprehend. Differences among individuals, or even in the same individual in different circumstances, makes each one an individual interpretant of each experience in Nature. All such differences are a function of two dimensions of each person: first, there is the obvious dimension made up of features such as background, education, and vocabulary; second, there is the spiritual dimension, the workings of the Over-Soul as it works toward increasingly more differentiation and particularity. Accordingly, as with Spinoza, Emerson claims that to know Nature is to know the Over-Soul. This perception, this unique and creative integration of impressions, is an achievement, and, being an achievement, is the criterion with which to assess how well one is doing in understanding nature. One indicator of achievement is joy: “In the presence of nature a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows.”³⁵ The scene in which he describes himself standing in puddles on a bare common, at twilight, under a clouded sky would not seem especially auspicious, yet he enjoys “a perfect exhilaration” and is “glad to the brink

³³ “Nature,” in Emerson, *Nature Addresses and Lectures*, 7.

³⁴ Id.

³⁵ Id.

of fear.”³⁶ The often-quoted transparent eyeball passage follows, raising the joy of the lover of nature to an experience that approaches the mystical:

Standing on the bare ground—my head
bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into
infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes.
I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing;
I see all; the currents of the Universal Being
circulate through me; I am part or parcel
of God.³⁷

Conclusion

What *is*, then? What exists? How shall we characterize it? Or, more to the point, how did these iconic pantheists characterize everything-that-is? The physical universe is undeniably here; we are part of it and are immersed in it. Once we acknowledge that much, assumptions, elaborations, distinctions, vocabulary, and conclusions abound, showing clearly that the boundaries distinguishing the four are not clear and tidy—that while there are differences, there are some connections and similarities.

The most important similarity, I believe, is that each one offers some accounting for God, knowing full well that he is departing from the conceptualizations and beliefs that were contained in the tradition that he was rejecting. Bruno’s new God is both transcendent and immanent, but this transcendence rests on two distinctions that lack foundation, viz. the two meanings of the word *infinity* and the distinction between principle and cause. Because these two distinctions are not plausible, this God is not transcendent, despite Bruno’s best efforts. I suspect that these efforts were shaped by his attachment to Hermetism/Hermeticism, a type of Gnosticism originating in Graeco-Egyptian cults which exalted magic and was popular in the sixteenth century.³⁸ It asserts that the Divine is both transcendent and immanent; and Bruno follows suit, importing his two telling distinctions. The massive research of Frances Yates on this question convincingly documents Bruno’s preoccupation with magic.³⁹

³⁶ Id.

³⁷ Id., 10.

³⁸ Information is available at: www.hermetic.com, accessed on July 29, 2015.

³⁹ Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

Spinoza's God is both transcendent and immanent, but with a difference. He begins with a metaphysical position that by reasonable deduction allows him to claim this distinction. Everything in his system owes whatever it has and its understanding to a postulated, infinite Substance: it is a Substance that is "in itself and is conceived through itself." Anything else owes its existence and its explanation to this infinite Substance. Humans, however, do not apprehend this infinite Substance; what we do grasp are two of its attributes, thought and extension, and only these two. God, then, is a human apprehension of one attribute of Substance, that of thought; Nature is a human apprehension of the other attribute of Substance, that of extension. Substance remains transcendent, outside of human apprehension. God or Nature is immanent, in that each is an attribute that humans can apprehend. If this is so, it would be consistent with this view of God as a humanly-apprehended attribute of a transcendent Substance, and thus serve to confirm it. The Rev. Frederick Copleston, known for his classic history of philosophy, offered a generous view of Spinoza. The concept *Substance* may be closer to the traditional understanding of God than the referent of his word *God* is. He writes this: "there is discernible in his thought and attitude a reaching out beyond the transitory phenomena of experience to the Infinite Being of which they are the manifestation."⁴⁰

God does not fare well with Toland and Emerson. For Toland, God is an explanatory convenience: matter is not inert stuff, obviously; there is constant change that is not chaotic. There must be a source of reason within matter; the Socratic Brethren have decided to call this source of reason *God*. Emerson sometimes refers to his cosmic psyche, the Over-Soul, as God, but the traditional meaning of the word has changed. Emerson's God is not a person, is not sacred, is not worthy of worship. Influenced greatly by Hinduism, Emerson writes about God or the Over-Soul in a way that suggests a strong connection with the Brahman of Hinduism.

These four classic pantheists matter, because contemporary pantheists acknowledge them as their predecessors; and, like their predecessors, they too differ significantly from each other. Overall, contemporary pantheists mirror Toland most closely, Toland with a dose of environmentalism. Lacking the Hermetism of Bruno, the metaphysical complexity of Spinoza, and the Idealism of Emerson, they nonetheless remain eager to be labeled as a theism. A concept of God still matters, even while the notion

⁴⁰ Frederick C. Copleston, "Pantheism in Spinoza and the German Idealists," *Philosophy* 21:78 (April 1946): 43.

of divine transcendence does not. Whatever may turn out to be the accounting for this perspective, contemporary pantheism deserves more attention and study. Tending these ideas may curb the lure of confused thinking.

**THE LURE OF PANTHEISM:
ITS EVANGELICAL FLOWERING AND WORLD-WIDE DESIGNS**

SUMMARY

Identifying key elements in the writings of four classic pantheists (Bruno, Spinoza, Toland, Emerson) provides some conceptual access to contemporary pantheism. While pantheists seek to minimize or even avoid an accounting of transcendence, this metaphysical lack reduces the explanatory power of pantheism.

KEYWORDS: nature, God, pantheism, Bruno, Spinoza, Toland, Emerson, transcendence.