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978-0-521-56223-2 - Henry More: And the Scientific Revolution

A. Rupert Hall

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## *Part I*

# *Platonic and Personal Background*

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## 1

*Introduction*

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OF ALL THE historically distinguished products of Christ's College, Cambridge, Henry More is the most enigmatic. Choosing a first-eleven team of Christ's men, scientists would pick Charles Darwin as Captain, humanists John Milton. Along with William Paley of the *Evidences*, William Lee of the stocking-frame (as near a progenitor of the Industrial Revolution as one can find), More's friend Ralph Cudworth (fourteenth Master of the College) and various public men of the present century, More would certainly deserve his place. He would also be, almost certainly, the only member of such a team to have passed his whole active life in Christ's College.

It would be a mistake, however, to imagine that among the great More is as obscure as he is enigmatic. He figures in every history of philosophy and in most general histories that touch at all on the intellectual life of his time. His writings were of no small interest to greater philosophers such as Locke, Leibniz and Spinoza. He appears in a recent anthology of verse in the manner of Edmund Spenser and four at least of his books have been reprinted in modern facsimiles. Every year fresh articles and books on More are printed, though few seem to throw a clearer light upon his life and mentality. More's thought is far-ranging, obscure, hastily and carelessly expressed in many instances and not a little inconsistent. It reflected a very ancient tradition that More sought ineffectually to modernize, a tradition

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that is intrinsically esoteric and indeed nebulous, one wholly alien to contemporary ways of thinking about the universe, humanity and religion. More was writing in harmony with many themes of his own age, but they are themes that have long ceased to resonate in our own ears.

Henry More is the only metaphysician of importance in the history of Christ's College, arguably the most important in the history of a pragmatic University. The other 'glass-worthy' thinkers (to repeat Peile's allusion to the College Hall) were direct and lucid (1900: 32).<sup>1</sup> Charles Darwin, a man of great psychological complexity, was open, clear, matter-of-fact in thought and expression. The creed of Paley, one of the great natural theologians, was a simple one. Cudworth's *True Intellectual System of the Universe* finds only specialist readers now, but this is rather because of the weight of his learning than because his thought was subtle. John Milton is a greater figure in our literature than either More or Cudworth, and his writings impose their own perplexities. However, I submit that at least as a prose author Milton was plain and hard-hitting to the point of brutality, and I am not sure that even *Paradise Lost* can be said to involve difficult metaphysical notions.

Henry More is that strange and rather sad figure, a major but undisciplined talent in a minor intellectual movement that was destined to be overridden by history. A man of enormous literary energy and output, intellectually curious, widely read, highly esteemed by his contemporaries and since (for his books were continually reprinted for centuries after his death), yet fated to enjoy no time of triumph. There was never a moment when all the world talked of the Cambridge Platonists, as it talked of *Paradise Lost*, the *Origin of Species* or the *Evidences* of Christianity. All these books remain to this day more intelligible than those of Henry More, partly because More wrote in a style that we can follow even less well than that of John Donne and the metaphysical poets, to whom More was intellectually akin. It is an effort for even the devotee to peruse *Divine Dialogues* between characters bearing such names as Hylobares and Bathynous, and More wrote in Latin, as well as English verse and prose. He was not only a metaphysician but above all things a Christian theologian and philosopher, the divine and pious Dr More, the Angel of Christ's. A joyous defence of Christianity by the shield of Platonic philosophy was the centre of his youthful being. More was a poetically religious metaphysician whose ideas of God and Nature were glowing, romantic, mystical and often barely intelligible.

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To characterize More's intellectual attainments one might say that he was above all occupied with the insubstantial world of spirits. In this were three principal constituents: the Spirit of God, everywhere ruling the universe; the Spirit of Nature, akin to what the ancients had called the *anima mundi*, the soul of the world, or Nature personified; and the Spirit or soul of Humanity, equally immortal, and capable of being active for good or ill in this material world (as More believed) even in immaterial form, as a ghost or apparition. Samuel Johnson praised More for his penetration into this mysterious realm, whither no one has trodden with greater assurance. To More the spirit world sanctified by Christianity was the equivalent of the Ideal world of Plato: that is, the Spirit of God is the Idea of God; the Spirit of Nature is the Idea of all that exists in the universe, and the Spirit of Humanity is the Idea of humanity. The material universe and the human body are no more than contingent, existential realizations of the Ideas of Nature and Humanity that result from God's choosing to create material existence and permit it to run its course.

But Henry More was not only a writer whose books are more remarkable for imaginative prolixity than for disciplined thinking of the German type. He was also a Christian theologian, though again of a somewhat impressionistic kind. The first object of his life was to lead his fellow men to Heaven. He felt strongly the truth, power and beauty of his religion; he tried by a variety of methods – metaphysical, ethical, natural-philosophical – to persuade his readers of the same. Again and again he comes back to the Bible as the prime source of human knowledge and the only sure guide to the salvation of the soul, as all the Cambridge Platonists do. Like Isaac Newton (of whose opinions he did not wholly approve) he devoted much labour to unfolding the meaning of its prophecies. Like his fellow Platonists too, More's ideal was a simple religious sincerity; in Cudworth's words, 'he is the best Christian whose heart beats with the truest pulse towards Heaven, not he whose head spinneth out the finest metaphysical cobwebs.'<sup>2</sup> For Christian Platonists from Steuco onwards Christianity was not a tight-rope of theological doctrine that the true believer must walk with perfect poise, but a matter of life, love and conduct. All seventeenth-century philosophers including Spinoza but excepting Thomas Hobbes take the perfection and beneficence of God as the foundation of every branch of human enquiry, without the assumption of which reason itself is vain. So insists More.

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As a literary scholar, that is, in the basic skills of his trade, More is nowhere near the class of Isaac Casaubon or J.J. Scaliger. He had a sound but unremarkable knowledge of authors in Greek and Latin, especially the neo-Platonists and the Hermeticists made known by Marsilio Ficino, and a working knowledge of Hebrew. He was not concerned about the detailed study of texts and techniques of philology. He was a little of a geometer and knew something of astronomy, which figures a good deal in his philosophical poems; diagrams and technical discussions are to be found here and there in his writings. He was not much interested in the academic world outside Cambridge and the bulk of his extant correspondence – which is mostly with close friends – is relatively small. More liked to think that he had a competent knowledge of natural philosophy (as well as of such other specialist branches as ethics), taking it upon himself to dispute on matters of mechanics, astronomy, hydrostatics and pneumatics with such eminences as Descartes and Robert Boyle, among others. Unlike some critics of Galileo, Descartes and Newton, More did not stand as an apologist for some older natural-philosophical tradition, such as that of Aristotle; on the contrary, More was often (up to a point) in sympathy with the ‘moderns’, particularly in his earlier years. But he was far more warmly devoted to the defence of Christianity from any possible danger that might arise from the speculations of natural philosophers.

As regards his own competence to dispute with them on their own specialist ground, More was simply mistaken. Natural philosophy was becoming increasingly mathematical and experimental in the seventeenth century; More possessed neither mathematical nor experimental abilities. What is more serious, his understanding of the methods and purposes of natural philosophy seems to have diminished during the course of his life, precisely while its fruits were becoming more rich. The endeavour of natural philosophy since the Greeks had been to identify the causes of things within the normal composition of Nature itself (strange as some of these agencies may seem to us) and to avoid the invocation of causes lying outside the composition of Nature. Gods, spirits of grove and stream, were thus ejected as causes of natural phenomena. This endeavour we may label rationalist. The constructive trend of the Scientific Revolution was towards a further narrowing of the definition of what might count as within the ordinary composition of Nature, outside of which a supposed cause would be a miracle. The Spirit of Nature postulated by Henry More could not figure

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within the composition of Nature as natural philosophers now conceived it; nor indeed would it have been admitted within the ancient mathematical tradition of Euclid and Hipparchos, Archimedes and Ptolemy. In fact, though he seems to have been blissfully unaware of the fact, More does not object against Boyle alone in hydrostatics, but Archimedes also.

Thus there was a conservative retrogression in Henry More's life. The poet who helped set the ideas of Copernicus, Galileo and Descartes before the English in the 1640s became, twenty years later, the crabby and obtuse opponent of the new mechanics and pneumatics. Of course, there were good theological motives for More's opposition to what delighted the Royal Society – though, I hasten to add, he had no quarrel with that body of which he was himself an inactive Fellow. But it is important to note that More's opposition was not theologically *argued*. Opponents of evolution in the nineteenth century declared: this notion denies the teaching of Scripture, therefore it is false. More argued in the opposite sense; he said: this notion of the natural philosophers (for example, the notion that air is elastic, possessed of an inherent springiness) can be proved to be false, for it is absurd, therefore its potential danger to religion is nullified. (The danger to religion arose from the attribution to mere brute matter of an intrinsic power of action, such as elasticity, much as Newton later refused to allow to mere brute matter the active power of gravitation.) Though More's objective was the defence of religion, his argument is about true or false in natural philosophy. But because More understood neither the concepts nor the experiments of those whom he criticized, his attempts failed, as Boyle, Hooke and others forcefully pointed out.

Although More had in earlier days praised Descartes as the 'sublime Mechanick' because (as More then believed) Descartes had given the best attainable explanation of the workings of Nature without invoking the power of Spirit (and therefore by its defects showed just how important Spirit must be), in middle life More passed to the extreme view that no ground was to be left for the natural philosopher to occupy with his rationalist explanations. Every kind of activity in Nature was to be attributed to Spirit, just as every human activity was to be attributed to the volition of the soul. More's pupil, friend and patron, Lady Anne Conway, went far beyond More in denying the real existence of matter altogether: matter, she believed, was simply an inspissated manifestation of Spirit. More was reluctant to push to obvious conclusions along the road he had taken. But

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it seems that in the end he was saying that the natural philosophy of Descartes or of his own colleagues in the Royal Society could explain nothing, not even the motions of two billiard balls impacting one upon the other. Its role could only be to describe events in Nature and look for patterns in them – much as the positivists believed centuries later. The deeper truths or theories, the laws and operations of the Spirit of Nature, were not to be found out by mathematics and experiment. There is, of course, good Platonic precedent for this way of thinking.

Two interesting biographical questions therefore present themselves. How did More become a Platonist? We know that his devotion to Plato was born during his early years at Christ's College out of a revulsion from the religion of Calvin and the philosophy of the Schools – the second-hand philosophy of Aristotle – but how it was nourished, where the books came from, we do not know. One can speculatively link More's intellectual development with Joseph Mede and other Christ's men of an older generation, but we have few solid facts other than that there was an interest in Plato and the neo-Platonists at Christ's, like that better documented for the sister College, Emmanuel. Then one may again ask, how was More introduced to mathematics and the reading of Galileo, followed (after 1644) by that of Descartes? This question is made more cogent by the pessimism of Christopher Hill and others about the state of learning in the English universities. However, the fact seems to be that Hill's utter gloom is needless. Christ's men senior to More, like William Perkins and Samuel Ward (later Master of Sidney Sussex), Robert Gell (Fellow, 1623–38) and Nathaniel Tovey (Fellow, 1621–45), demonstrably were active in mathematical and physical subjects. There is evidence that Mede in particular encouraged undergraduates to pursue them eagerly, and that undergraduates did indeed attend lectures on mathematics and philosophy, as they were supposed to do (Feingold 1984: 60; 62; 81; 96; 110). All this, however, though informative in a general way, still leaves us in the dark concerning Henry More, the individual. The only other consideration I can offer here is that Henry Burrell (d. 1627) left money to Christ's College for the purchase of mathematical books; many that were bought from this fund, among them books by Galileo and Kepler, still remain in the Library (Peile 1910: 267).<sup>3</sup> It may be that these were accessible to More.

At all events, we cannot simply isolate More from the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century and resign him to the historians of

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letters, ethics, cabalism, metaphysics and theology. He not only possessed (as he supposed) overwhelming theological reasons for speaking out against the predominant scientific trend of his day, which we now call the mechanical philosophy of Nature, but strong natural-philosophical reasons also, founded upon the experimental evidence, for so doing. It was his purpose to turn natural philosophy away from the direction it had taken ever since the late sixteenth century, and to redirect it towards older, sounder, Platonic modes of thought. In this he did not succeed. But the intellectual difficulties in the mechanical philosophy as More knew it from Descartes, and even from the Royal Society, did not go unmarked by others also, and it may be that More had some effect in modifying the mechanical philosophy, and in consequence the concepts of physics, in ways not foreseen by him. To this point we shall return.

To leave an introduction to the thought of Henry More at this point would perhaps be unfair to him, for More's writings against the English philosophers of mechanistic Nature constitute only a tiny fraction of his entire output, and the destruction of the mechanical philosophy was not his chief objective, not even his chief negative objective. The mechanical philosophy was only one element in the atheistic materialism that was More's principal target. Moreover, it would be unjust also to dwell only on the negative, critical side of More's writings. His positive proclamations of the existence of God and the immortality of human souls, his lengthy expositions of the role of spirits in the Universe, both beneficent and devilish, his exaltations of the long and divinely inspired idealist stream in the evolution of human wisdom of which true Christianity was the supreme expression, such elements as these form the major part of his vast output. To evaluate More the philosopher 'in the round' would require a book of great scope far exceeding the confines of my more limited investigation. It seems appropriate, then, to conclude this introduction with the independent opinion of an American scholar whose perspective on More is wider than my own:

the Cambridge Platonists, and particularly More and Cudworth, were extremely influential in their generation and beyond it. Their place in the history of English philosophy, in particular of English idealism, is an established one; the more we know of English latitudinarianism, of English



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Cartesianism, of English materialism in the seventeenth century, the more we realize how deeply involved the Cambridge Platonists were in the fabric of seventeenth-century social and intellectual life. (Colie 1957: 6)

I do not believe that many historians of philosophy would say less.

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## 2

*Platonism*


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THERE ARE hundreds of books on Platonism, and as many definitions of it. There are at least as many more on neo-Platonism, the mystical philosophy created centuries after the Greek philosopher's death by a process of selection and re-creation. For some, Platonism is the power of mind to understand and indeed control the universe of matter and, as the philosophy that inspired the mathematical interpretation of Nature, Platonism, on this view, has furnished the plan for the creation of modern science. The philosopher and historian Alexandre Koyré taught that it was the Platonism of Galileo that enabled him to reform physics (1968: 16–43). To others Platonism, with its emphasis on the intuitive and the *a priori*, has seemed the antithesis of true science which can rise only from painstaking investigation of the natural world: numbers must derive from measurements, not imagination. The historian George Sarton found 'hot air' in Platonism, too often purveying 'magic and nonsense'. To him, the 'history of Platonism is the history of a long series of ambiguities, misunderstandings, and prevarications' (1953: 426; 436n; 451).

In the most obvious sense, a Platonist might be defined as one who delights in the writings of the Master; there have been many such through the ages, though with little enough agreement between them on the meanings and marvels of the Platonic dialogues. The great editors and textual students of Plato have not all been Platonists in the accepted sense