

# Henry More | Encyclopedia.com

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[Henry More](#), the philosopher, poet, and Cambridge Platonist, was born at Grantham, Lincolnshire. His father, "a gentleman of fair estate and fortune," was a strict Calvinist but supported church and king against the Puritans. He introduced his son to [Edmund Spenser's](#) *Faerie Queene*, and Spenser's Platonism, allegorizing, and moral attitudes persist in More's own writings. At Eton, where More was educated, the religious atmosphere was latitudinarian; More abandoned the Calvinist doctrine of predestination without losing what he called "an inward sense of the divine presence." In December 1631 he entered Christ's College, Cambridge, where he was elected to a fellowship in 1639. He remained at Cambridge until his death, refusing preferments, except those he could pass on to such fellow Platonists as Edward Fowler and John Worthington. Unlike most of the Platonists he took no part in public affairs or in university administration. In *An Explanation of the Grand Mystery of Godliness* (1660) he defended what he called a "neutrality and cold indifference in public affairs."

When More entered Christ's College, it was split into three factions—the [high church](#) party, the Calvinistic Puritans, and the Medians, so called because they stood for a moderate church and had as their leader Joseph Mede, or Mead (1586–1638), author of *Clavis Apocalyptica* (1627), an allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures. More's tutor Robert Gell, whose *Remaines* were published in 1676, was a member of Mede's party; he emphasized even more strongly than Mede that salvation depended upon "good works," not on blind faith, and he shared Mede's fascination with demonology and Scriptural interpretation. More himself described Mede as an "incomparable interpreter of Prophecies," and in *The Grand Mystery of Godliness* defends his biblical interpretations against the criticisms of [Hugo Grotius](#).

## Neoplatonism

Developing a passion for philosophy, More read widely in Aristotle and the Scholastics. However, he became impatient with their failure, as he thought, to provide a satisfactory account of the relation between God and the individual self. He therefore turned to the Neoplatonists and to mystical writings, especially the *Theologia Germanica*, an anonymous fourteenth-century mystical handbook that [Martin Luther](#) republished in 1516. From the mystics and Neoplatonists More derived his belief that to acquire knowledge, one must first seek moral perfection and his definition of perfection as the process of becoming godlike by subduing egoism. More did not refer to Benjamin Whichcote, none of whose writings was published until just before More's death, but he told his biographer that 1637 was the date of his conversion to his "new way of thinking"; this was the year of Whichcote's appointment as Sunday lecturer at Trinity Church. More shared certain fundamental epistemological and metaphysical ideas with [Ralph Cudworth](#). These were ultimately derived from Platonism, and how far Cudworth's formulation of them influenced More or vice versa is impossible to determine.

More's first philosophical writings were allegories in Spenser's manner, collected in 1647 as *Philosophical Poems*. They present a complicated world view in which the basic concepts of Neoplatonism are interpreted in Trinitarian terms. Christ is presented as a living demonstration that a human being can be wholly possessed by God, rather than as a Calvinistic redeemer. More's poems preach the lesson common to Cambridge Platonism that the life we live, not the creed we preach, is our path to salvation, but their obscure allegorical manner is quite remote from Whichcote's direct, epigrammatic style.

## Metaphysics

In atmosphere the *Philosophical Poems* carry us back to the Renaissance. More saw Plato through the eyes of Plotinus and Plotinus through the eyes of Renaissance humanists such as [Marsilio Ficino](#), who set out with the help of allegory to Christianize Neoplatonic metaphysics. Yet on December 11, 1648, More wrote the first of four Latin letters to René Descartes, in which he not only expressed the highest admiration for Descartes's work but added that Descartes's views "appear indeed to be my own—so entirely have my own thoughts run along the channels in which your fertile mind has anticipated me." Nor was this a merely transient enthusiasm. In the general preface to his *A Collection of Several Philosophical Writings* (1662), he still spoke with admiration of Descartes. Yet in the *Divine Dialogues* (1668) and even more severely in *Enchiridion Metaphysicum* (1671) More criticized "the superstitious admiration" for Descartes and alleged that his views led to atheism, a charge against which he had previously defended Descartes.

Not surprisingly, More's French critics accuse him of irresponsible fickleness. But if *Enchiridion Metaphysicum* is the first of More's writings to be officially an anti-Cartesian tract, the fact remains, as Descartes realized from the beginning but More only slowly, that More's leading ideas had always been in complete opposition to Cartesianism. The central point in More's metaphysics as it is developed in *The Immortality of the Soul* (1659) and the metaphysical sections of *Divine Dialogues* and *Enchiridion Metaphysicum* is that extension is a characteristic of all substances and not, as Descartes had argued, a peculiarity of matter. Substances fall into two classes—spirits and material objects. Spirits are physically indivisible, can penetrate both other spirits and material objects, and can initiate motion; material objects are physically divisible, impenetrable, and capable of motion only when it has been communicated to them. But both spirits and material objects are extended. There are familiar objections to such an ontology; these concern, particularly, the compatibility of the two properties of being extended and being spiritual. In meeting these objections, More began by making two logical points. The first is that since we are never acquainted with essences but only with attributes, it is no objection to the extendedness of thinking beings that we "cannot see why" a being which thinks should also be extended. The second is that the intellectual separability of the properties of being extended and being spiritual is no proof of their incompatibility.

More's opponents have to show, he argued, that it is logically impossible for anything to be extended and yet to think. Most of the arguments that are supposed to establish this impossibility depend, according to More, upon the tacit identification of extension and materiality; the rest can be met by distinguishing between two forms of extension—metaphysical and physical. Metaphysical extension—pure space—is eternal, infinite, physically indivisible; physical extensions are finite, physically divisible, mutable. We can break up a particular cylinder, and we can easily imagine it not to exist, but we cannot take a piece out of space or imagine it not to exist. These properties it shares with God; indeed, space is an "obscure representation of the essence or essential presence of the divine being."

More came to see in Descartes the leader of what he calls the nullibists, who deny extension to spirits. And although Descartes had set out to defend God and immortality—this was one main reason why More approved of him—More finally concluded that nullibism is atheistic in tendency. For More the essential feature of the soul is that it initiates movement. To do this, however, it must be where body is. This is possible because unlike material objects spirits can penetrate both other spirits and material objects, contracting or expanding like Isaac Newton's "aether," as the occasion makes necessary. Thus, God, an individual mind, and a material object can all be present in the one place without losing their independence as substances. Spirit can be regarded, More argued, as a sort of fourth dimension; a body that contains a spirit has a certain "spissitude," or density of substances.

More's criticism of mechanical explanation is along the same general lines. At first, he had welcomed Descartes's mechanical explanations; by carrying ingenuity, so More thought, as far as it could be carried, they made it clear just what the limits of mechanical explanation were. But his conclusion is that mechanical explanation is never possible and that to suppose otherwise leads to atheism. (The emergence of Benedict de Spinoza from the Cartesian school encouraged More in this belief.)

A material object, he said, is nothing but a "congeries of physical monads"—that is, a collection of atomic particles. To explain how these particles are held together in solid objects, we have to introduce a nonmaterial, although spatial, spiritual agent. Equally, he argued, gravity is inexplicable in mechanical terms; mechanics—he meant, of course, Cartesian mechanics—cannot explain why a bullet once fired from a gun should ever return to Earth's surface. Even more obviously, the behavior of living organisms cannot be derived from a collection of particles.

Indeed, in order to explain any natural process, we have to refer to spirit as something additional to material particles; spirits are the true cause of all activity. This does not mean that all activity is the work of conscious rational beings. Spirit exists at various levels; "seminal forms," which are neither sensitive nor rational but are still capable of initiating motion, are responsible for actions at a level lower than animal feeling.

## Religion and Ethics

More's metaphysical theories are not worked out in detail. His main interests, indeed, were religious rather than metaphysical: to defend Christianity against its three main enemies—namely, atheists, Roman Catholics, and "enthusiasts." *An Antidote against Atheism* (1653) reformulates the [Ontological Argument](#) but mainly relies upon anecdotes about animals to establish an Argument from Design and upon anecdotes about witches and apparitions to establish that spiritual forces are at work in the world. *Conjectura Cabbalistica* (1653), with the aid of the Jewish kabbalah, discerns Platonism and Cartesianism in Genesis; indeed, More expressed his regret that he had ever wasted his time on philosophy seeing that all fundamental truths are contained in the Bible. *A Brief Discourse of the Nature, Causes, Kinds and Cure of Enthusiasm* (1656) is directed against "enthusiasm," defined as "a full but false persuasion in a man that he is inspired." More found the origin of enthusiasm in "melancholy"—that is, in a manic-depressive constitution. *The Grand Mystery of Godliness* defends the Cambridge Platonist concept of religion against Calvinists, atheists, and Roman Catholics alike; *An Antidote against Idolatry* (1674) attacks Roman Catholics. More had a special

animosity against Quakers that increased in intensity when his disciple and admirer Anne Finch, Lady Conway, at whose home in Ragley, Warwickshire, he had been a frequent guest, became a convert to Quakerism.

More's *Enchiridion Ethicum* (1667), translated into English by Edward Southwell in 1690 with the appropriate title *An Account of Virtue*, was the most popular of More's writings in his own time but has since been neglected. It can be most succinctly described as a Christian version of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, although the detail is influenced by Descartes's account of the passions and by mathematical ideals. (More set out a number of "moral axioms," which incorporate an ethical calculus.) Virtue, More argued, consists in pursuing what seems to be in accordance with right reason, but both our capacity to discover what actions accord with reason and our inclination toward those actions flow from a special "boniform" faculty. Reason itself cannot incite action; virtuous action can be instigated only by the passionate side of our nature. The ultimate ground of all virtue is intellectual love. Thus, More hoped to weld the Christian doctrine of love and the Aristotelian doctrine of intellectual activity into a single ethical system.

## Influence

More devoted the last seven years of his life to translating his English works into Latin in the hope of attracting wider interest on the Continent. They caught the attention of [Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz](#), but although he took an occasional phrase from More, he was interested in him mainly as a representative of the sort of view he particularly wished to avoid. In fact, More, the only one of the [Cambridge Platonists](#) to publish at all extensively, quite failed in what he conceived as his main task—to halt the advance of the mechanical worldview. More's metaphysics, however, had a considerable influence on Newton even if mathematicians, not metaphysicians, were Newton's principal masters. Newton did not refer explicitly to More—the Cambridge group almost never referred to one another—but the resemblances are conspicuous. Newton was taught mathematics at Grantham, More's birthplace, by a former pupil of More's; Newton's correspondence reveals that he and More stood close to one another.

*See also* [Cambridge Platonists](#).

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