

Emily Thomas. *Absolute Time: Rifts in Early Modern British Metaphysics.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. xvi + 236 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-880793-3.

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This is an excellent and provocative book, one that invites its reader to many further pathways of investigation and discussion. Its topic—the different versions of the notions of time and, sometimes at least, space from roughly the mid-seventeenth century to the mid-eighteenth—is too little discussed, but here is Emily Thomas offering us a full-scale look at the variety of views on absolute time in early modern British thought, highlighting the distinctions that many of us, at least, had failed to notice. Thomas's arguments are clear, though the same cannot always be said for the arguments she discusses; the writing is straightforward—sometimes pleasantly, wryly humorous—and the scholarship is exemplary without being heavy-handed. The space allotted to this review is far too little to do justice to the range, interest, and importance of Thomas's work.

Thomas considers carefully the views of a wide range of characters, with most attention being paid to Henry More, Isaac Barrow, Isaac Newton, John Locke, and Samuel Clarke. In the seventeenth century we expect metaphysical views to be identical with, or at least to walk hand in hand with, any given author's theological views, and unsurprisingly, this proves to be true of these major thinkers.

Thomas begins with "a Cook's tour of the history of time" (p. 13), which is certainly worth-

while since some of the most important approaches to the discussion were well established in the Middle Ages and would have informed the schooling of seventeenth-century thinkers. It was a revealed truth that the world was past finite in time, but there were two questions to be answered. What was the relation of the world's creation to time (in it? or with it?), and given that the world was past finite, was this a necessary truth, or was a past infinite world a possibility? St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, held that "By faith alone do we hold, and by no demonstration can it be proved, that the world did not always exist." He held, also, that time, the material universe, the empyrean heaven, and the angels were co-created, and notes that this means that both the angels and the world of corporeal creatures "have always been ... because whenever time was," they were.[1] That time and the world were co-created was commonly accepted. As Ibn Rushd (Averroës) remarked in the previous century, "Most people who accept a temporal creation of the world believe time to have been created with it." [2] His contemporary Maimonides agreed: "In the beginning God alone existed, and nothing else; neither angels, nor spheres, nor the things that are contained within the spheres existed. He then produced from nothing all existing things.... Even

time itself is among the things created; for time depends on motion."[3]

Such views require the existence of material objects whose movements generate or underlie time. But some realized that once you had time generated by material objects, you could then extrapolate and get something very like absolute time. Thus Aquinas wrote: "God does indeed precede the world by duration, not of time but of eternity, since God's existence is not measured by time. Nor was there real time before the world, but only imaginary time; thus now we can imagine an infinite space of time running with eternity and preceding the beginning of time."[4]

Newton's mentor and predecessor in the Lucasian Chair, Isaac Barrow, held "that there was time before the creation of the world," on what seem to be similar grounds (p. 84). Seventeenth-century thinkers were interested in the relation of space and time to God. Did they exist independently of God (which Thomas adroitly labels "polytheistic blasphemy," for that is indeed how such views would have been seen), or were space and time, in some sense, to be equated with God, with the corresponding danger of (Spinoza-like) pantheistic blasphemy (pp. 55, 169)?

After her brisk look at the medievals, Thomas looks in detail at More's writings (including the *Philosophical Poems*) and fastens on the notion of holenmerism (More's coinage for a medieval notion) to solve the problem of God's relation to space (and by extension, time) without sliding into heresy. As Thomas points out, the notion and its development is discussed at length in Robert Pasnau's *Metaphysical Themes 1274-1671* (2011, see especially chs. 14 and 16). Thomas is fond of, but clear-sighted about, More's writings, noting More's "passionate hyperbole" and his "relentless use of the double negative" (pp. 33, 37).

Holenmerism involves the notion of something existing as a whole in a multiplicity of distinct parts of some other thing. The medieval central case for this possibility was the Aristotelian

soul. "An animal is said to be living because it has a soul," said Aquinas, assuming without comment the more plausible converse, "An animal is said to have a soul because it is living," but the animal's soul, its anima, animates every part of it.[5] So there is a sense in which something immaterial exists holenmerically.

Since God is everywhere, does God have distinct spatial parts? Impossible, since God is simple. But then, how is God's omnipresence to be described? Using the notion of soul as a model, it can be seen why holenmerism can be tempting. For if the soul is what makes a living thing alive, we need only to ask of an individual, "Is it alive?" to see if a soul is present. But, equally, we need only ask of its parts, "Are they living parts?" to see the temptation to claim that the soul—that which makes them living parts—is wholly there as well. The soul as a whole animates every part of a living being. As William of Ockham put it, "the intellectual soul exists as a whole in the whole body and as a whole in each part of the body."[6]

Applying this to God, and God's creation, the universe is kept in being only on God's sufferance, and requires God's continual, conserving, creation of individuals at all times and all places. But this requirement, which makes holenmerism tempting, was treated as obvious throughout the medieval period and by early moderns such as Descartes and Robert Boyle.

Although More was at one time impatient with "that Scholastic Riddle ... That the Soule of man is *tota in toto and tota in qualibet parte corporis*"—a "mad Jingle" verging "too near to profound Nonsense" (quoted, p. 41)—he seized on holenmerism as a way of ensuring God's omnitemporal presence. More consistently held "that God is holenmerically present in time" (p. 44). And others?

No doubt the most important is Newton, though "Newton's remarks on time and space range from the gently enigmatic to the obtusely cryptic" (p. 107). God, thought Newton, besides be-

ing "very well skilled in Mechanicks & Geometry" was clearly "a Being incorporeal, living, intelligent, omnipresent, who in infinite Space, as it were in his Sensory, sees the things themselves intimately, and ... comprehends them wholly by their immediate presence to himself." [7] But this strongly suggests that "Newton's God is holenmerically present in time and space" (p. 105).

Locke is almost automatically considered to be an absolutist, one who situates God *in* time. It seemed natural to many early modern thinkers to consider God as being *in* time, and later scholars quite naturally have assumed that this default position was also Locke's. Thomas, however, makes a strong case for neutrality about Locke's absolutism in the *Essay*: "I hold that—unlike *Draft C*—the *Essay* remains neutral throughout on the nature of space and time" (p. 140). She has certainly made me wonder whether my hitherto unthinking assumption of absolutism in the *Essay* needs rethinking—even though I also bear in mind Peter Geach's acute observation that "Locke's *Essay* is like a mail-order catalogue, and you buy what suits you". [8]

Samuel Clarke, Thomas argues, refreshingly and astutely, had interesting and original views on space and time that, while often agreeing with Newton's, are equally often significantly different (p. 156). She considers, as well as the correspondence with Leibniz, Clarke's many remarks on the topic in his voluminous other writings, including (p. 180) the interesting two sermons on God's eternity and omnipresence (based, nominally, on Revelation 1.8 and I Kings 8.27). Her conclusion?—"that Clarke share[d] two key theses with the mature More: our ideas of infinite space and duration are inadequate ideas of God's immensity and eternity, and infinite space and duration are God's immensity and eternity." Leibniz called it "a strange Imagination that Space is a Property of God," and, as Thomas points out (p. 181) he considered Clarke's view to amount to a "revival of the odd Imaginations of ... Henry More (otherwise

a learned and well-intentioned man)."[9] Nonetheless, "More identifies space and duration with the substance of God and Clarke steadfastly refuses to" (p. 167). In fact, Thomas argues, "Clarke is a holenmerist about God's presence in space and time," and notes that Clarke may have "reinvented these Morean theses independently" (p. 181).

In sum, this is a fascinating book. Whether you agree or disagree with any particular thesis in it, it will make you rethink, look afresh at familiar writings, and with interest at unfamiliar ones.

Notes

[1]. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a 46.2 c; 1a 50.3 c; *De Potentia Dei*, 3.18 c; online at <https://dhspriority.org/thomas/>.

[2]. Ibn Rushd, *Tāhāfut al-tāhāfut (The Incoherence of the "Incoherence")*, trans. Simon Van Den Bergh, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), vol. 1, 17.

[3]. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedländer (New York: Dover, 1956), §2.13, 171.

[4]. Aquinas, *De Potentia Dei*, 3.17 ad 20.

[5]. Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.98.2.

[6]. William Ockham, *Quodlibetal Questions*, trans. Alfred J. Freddoso and Francis E. Kelley (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), 4.13, 299.

[7]. Isaac Newton, *Correspondence*, ed. H. W. Turnbull, 7 vols. (Cambridge: Published for the Royal Society at the University Press, 1959-77), vol. 3, 235.

[8]. Peter Geach, "Identity," *Review of Metaphysics*, 21 (1967-8): 12.

[9]. LLeibniz Clarke Correspondence in Clarke, Samuel, *The Works of Samuel Clarke, D.D.*, 4 vols. (London: printed for John and Paul Knapton, 1738), V 42, 48; pp. 4:643, 647.

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