Henry More has been one of the hardest philosophers to classify. For want of a better term, he is ranked as leading ‘Cambridge Platonist’, a classification that itself is pretty vague. More, on the one hand, has been seen to have one of the most incisive critics of Descartes, Hobbes and Spinoza. He was also one of the sharpest opponents of various kinds of religious enthusiasm and unlike most of his religious contemporaries, found nothing of interest in the mystical writings of Jacob Boehme that were engulfing the English intellectual world of his time. On the other hand, More was one of the leading exponents of Cabbalism, and of research into witchcraft, spirits, ghosts, demons and angels. He developed a spiritualistic metaphysics out of Cabbalistic, Neoplatonic and other ingredients, a metaphysics that may have played an important role in the cosmology of Isaac Newton. More and Newton worked assiduously on trying to interpret the secrets and symbols in the books of Daniel and Revelation. The table of contents of almost any of the many works of More moves from the sublime to the ridiculous. As a result, More has usually been interpreted by taking some strands of his thought as central and dismissing the rest as the result of personal idiosyncracies. His critique of Descartes has received more interest recently, and this has been counterpoised with the apparently contradictory fact that he was the first and most enthusiastic English Cartesian.\(^1\)

Recently, I have tried to show that More was a major figure in what I have called ‘the Third Force’s in 17th century thought’, a movement that grew out of the attempt to overcome the sceptical crisis of the time through religious activity and the inspired readings of the prophecies in Scripture. More, like his teacher, Joseph Mede, the founder of an ongoing school of Millenarian thinkers, found himself confronted with all-encompassing doubts, that made him question whether anything outside of his mind really existed. He found no answer in the philosophers he studied, and finally found hope in the mystical *Theologica Germanica* that Luther had discovered. Through mystical contemplation and spiritual purification, More found his footing, and went on to become one of the foremost metaphysicians of his day.\(^2\)

In this paper I want to try to show that More’s various views more or less form a coherent pattern, expressing an important modern cosmology. He and his pupil and collaborator, Lady Anne Conway, 1631–1679,\(^3\) happily

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\(^1\) Hutton (ed.). Henry More (1614–1687). 97–114
\(^2\) S. Hutton (ed.). Henry More (1614–1687), 97–114
\(^3\) 1990, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht
and enthusiastically accepted the new science, but violently rejected the proposed metaphysics to buttress it offered first by Descartes, then Hobbes, and finally Spinoza, that is, various forms of materialistic mechanism. They insisted that this unholy trio described the natural world, but gave no means of understanding it. Only by seeing all causal explanations as the result of spiritual activity could the new science explain anything. And this spiritual explanation would lead one to see nature within a theosophic context, in which the ultimate understanding would be found in the Cabbala and in the Book of Revelation. Because of this emphasis on Cabbala and Millenarian prophecies, More and Lady Anne Conway have been seen as part of the Hermetic-magical currents, part of the irrational side of seventeenth century thought that disappeared into the theosophy of Swedenborg, of Madame Blavatsky, and others.

I will try to show that More and Anne Conway offered a genuine important alternative to modern mechanistic thought. They showed the limitations of mechanistic thought, and offered a spiritualistic cosmology incorporating the major findings of the new science. Newton apparently took over much of their outlook, and mathematized their picture of the world. For better or worse, Newton’s spiritualism and theology were mainly hidden in the enormous mass of still unpublished papers, and a mechanistic interpretation of Newton, shorn of any spiritual metaphysics, became the modern scientific outlook. One can only speculate about what would have happened if Newton’s *Principia* had appeared in print linked to his religious cosmology and with More and Anne Conway’s metaphysics, and that this presentation of the new science had prevailed from 1687 until Einstein’s statement of the theory of relativity.

It seems to me that one important way of understanding what More was advocating is to follow him from his initial sceptical crisis, to his formulation of an ‘incurable scepticism’ to counter Descartes and the other modern forms of materialism, to his formulation of a probabilistic basis for his spiritology, to his development of an empirical science of spirits. With this accomplished, he and Anne Conway could show the bankruptcy of the theories of Descartes, Hobbes and Spinoza, their ‘nullibism’, as they termed it, and show that a vitalistic spiritualism (with spirits having extension) could explain the world of Copernicus, Galileo and Harvey, and also lead to understanding the nature and destiny of man.

More, after almost thirty-five years of attacking modern materialism and atheism, ended his philosophical career, and turned to theological writings, including his all-important commentary on the Book of Revelation that Newton found so exciting and illuminating. This change may have been the result of both Anne Conway’s becoming a Quaker (for More one of the worst forms of enthusiasm), and then in 1679 her death. In the theological works, dedicated to Jesus Christ, the Crucified Son of God, More used as the epigram for one of the works a passage from Sextus Empiricus on why nothing can be proven.