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Newton's Metaphysics of Space: A "Tertium Quid" Betwixt Substantivalism and relationism, or merely a "God of the (Rational Mechanical) Gaps"?

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Abstract

This paper investigates the question of, and the degree to which, Newton's theory of space constitutes a third-way between the traditional substantivalist and relationist ontologies, i.e., that Newton judged that space is neither a type of substance/entity nor purely a relation among such substances. A non-substantivalist reading of Newton has been famously defended by Howard Stein, among others; but, as will be demonstrated, these claims are problematic on various grounds, especially as regards Newton's alleged rejection of the traditional substance/accident dichotomy concerning space. Nevertheless, our analysis of the metaphysical foundations of Newton's spatial theory will strive to uncover its unique and innovative characteristics, most notably, the distinctive role that Newton's "immaterialist" spatial ontology plays in his dynamics.

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