

Earlier Philosophy and Theology in Karl Mesterton's *De Aeternitate Dei* (1752)

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Earlier Philosophy and Theology in Karl Mesterton's *De Aeternitate Dei* (1752)

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ABSTRACT

In this study, I examine how Karl (in Swedish: Carl, in Latin: Carolus) Mesterton (1715–1773) discusses and refers to earlier philosophy and theology in a dissertation *De aeternitate Dei*, ‘On the Eternity of God’ (1752). Mesterton was a professor of theology and a professor of logic and metaphysics at the Academy of Turku. He followed Wolffianism, which is based on the thoughts of the German philosopher Christian Wolff (1679–1754). The research question is in what manner does Mesterton discuss and refer to earlier philosophy and theology in his *De aeternitate Dei*. This study is qualitative, and reflects how earlier philosophy and theology were conceived by Mesterton in the dissertation. In a broader context, the study is related to the question of how early modern research about the late antiquity and Middle Ages transpired in the Finnish territory in the eighteenth century. The conclusion of this study is that although Mesterton discusses and frequently refers to medieval theology and philosophy, he does not discuss medieval philosophy and theology in detail, and therefore his method of treatment is shallow. In addition, he shows no criticism; however, this was the usual practice at the academy.

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Introduction

At the beginning of the early modern period, there was a need to disaffiliate from the philosophical and scientific heritage of antiquity and the Middle Ages, especially under the influence of the new natural sciences based on mechanics. New philosophical views and scientific observations revolutionised the picture of the world. Many tense points also appeared between ancient and medieval philosophy and the philosophy and sciences of the early modern period. For example, Aristotelian essentialism was reject-

ed.¹ As a result, early modern thinking includes a variety of tensions concerning, inter alia, the connection between the Christian and scientific world view, differing Christian theological views, proofs for the existence of God and the miracles in the Bible. This is why it is important to study how medieval views were transmitted at the beginning of the early modern period.

Concerning the Finnish territory in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, scientific activity took place at the Royal Academy of Turku (in Swedish: *Kungliga Akademien i Åbo*, in Latin: *Academia regia Aboensis*) but usually shortened to the Academy of Turku. The academy was founded in 1640 by the Kingdom of Sweden during the heyday of Swedish Empire. The academy was established in the premises of Turku Cathedral School and Turku Gymnasium. The first was in operation from the early 14th century to 1630 and the latter from 1630 to 1640—the Trivial school of Turku (1641–1843) continued thereafter in Turku. Thus, the academy had an educational connection to the medieval school system of the town. The Great Fire of Turku in 1827 ended the academy's activity in the city.²

Regarding philosophy, there is a consensus that no original or internationally significant philosophical research was conducted at the Academy of Turku because of a stance that avoided controversial philosophical, political and theological doctrines and theories.³ However, as I have argued elsewhere, philosophical activity at the academy was not insignificant since information, knowledge and new acceptable theories were transmitted to the Finnish territory and traditions were maintained despite the lack of criticism.⁴ Karl (in Swedish: Carl, in Latin: Carolus) Mesterton (1715–1773) was a professor of theology and a professor of logic and metaphysics at the Academy of Turku.⁵ He followed *Wolffianism*, which is based on the thoughts of the German philosopher Christian Wolff (1679–1754) whose philosophy emphasised human reason, but in such a way that experience was also taken into consideration.⁶

The philosophical tradition, in which reason is emphasised, is called *rationalism*. According to *rationalistic epistemology*, everything is explicable, at least in principle, and according to *rationalistic*

¹ It is to be noticed that ancient, medieval and early modern philosophy are very complex and heterogenous wholes. For an overview of the central themes of medieval philosophy see John Marenbon, 'Medieval Philosophy', in Edward Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2024 Edition. (<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2024/entries/medieval-philosophy/>, accessed 20.1.2026). For an overview of the central themes of early modern philosophy, see Markku Roinila, 'Varhaismoderni filosofia', in *Ensyklopedia Logos* 2018. (<https://filosofia.fi/fi/ensyklopedia/varhaismoderni-filosofia>, accessed 15.2.2026).

² For more on the foundation and the history of the Academy of Turku, see Jussi Nuorteva, 'Keskiajan tieteen kulttuurin omaksuminen', in Allan Tiitta & Päiviö Tommila (eds.), *Suomen tieteen historia. 1. Tieteen ja tutkimuksen yleinen historia 1880-luvulle*, WSOY: Helsinki 2001(a), 14–37; Jussi Nuorteva, 'Humanismin kaudelta Turun akatemian perustamiseen', in Tiitta & Tommila (eds.) 2001(b), 40–97; Jussi Nuorteva, 'Suurvaltakauden tiede Suomessa', in Tiitta & Tommila (eds.) 2001(c), 100–67.

³ See, e.g., Ilkka Niiniluoto, 'Philosophy in Finland – International Currents and National Cultural Debates', in Inkeri Pitkäranta (ed.), *Ajatuksen kulku; Tankens vägar; Trains of thought, Finnish philosophers in the world – the world's philosophers in Finland*, Helsingin yliopiston kirjasto & Suomen kansalliskirjasto: Helsinki 2004, 105–10, 105; Vesa Oittinen, 'Philosophy in Finland 1200–1850', in Inkeri Pitkäranta (ed. 2004), 113–24, 113; Juhani Pietarinen, *Suomalaisen filosofian vaiheita*, Areopagus: Turku 2015, *passim*; Erkki Urpilainen, 'Hyödyn ja uushumanismin aikakausi', in Tiitta & Tommila (eds.) 2001, 170–273, 170. For an overview of the philosophy of the Academy of Turku, see Thiodolf Rein, *Åbo universitets lärdomshistoria. 10. Filosofin: filosofins studium vid Åbo universitet*, Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland: Helsinki 1908.

⁴ Visa Helenius, 'Turun akatemian tieteen toiminta Mestertonin ja Porthanin valossa', *Auraica: Scripta A Societate Porthan Edita* 15 (2024), 3–23.

⁵ For more on Mesterton, see Iiro Kajanto, 'Mesterton, Carl', *Kansallisbiografia-verkojulkaisu*, Studia Biographica 4, SKS:Helsinki 1997–. (<http://urn.fi/urn:nbn:fi:sk:kb-002571>, accessed 19.1.2026).

⁶ See Courtney Fugate & John Hymers, 'Part 1. Introduction to the Translation', in Alexander Baumgarten, *Metaphysics*, translated by Courtney Fugate and John Hymers, Bloomsbury: London, New Delhi, New York & Sydney 2014, 15–20.

metaphysics, the world is thought to be explicable throughout.⁷ Rationalism has a long tradition, and it is linked to ancient and medieval philosophy, such as the philosophies of Plato (around 429–347 BCE), Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) and Francisco Suárez (1548–1617). However, the rationalism at the beginning of the early modern period, which culminates in the philosophies of René Descartes (1596–1650), Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716) and Wolff, is incompatible with ancient and medieval philosophy in many respects. For example, *natural theology* was favoured in the early modern period, according to which the autonomous use of reason is the central philosophical method, without relying on divine revelation and the dogma of the Bible.

Very little research has been conducted on the philosophical position of the Academy of Turku including the dissertations of Mesterton. This is a significant shortcoming as regards an understanding of the development of the early Finnish philosophy and the complex relationship between medieval philosophy and the early modern philosophy in Finland.⁸ In this study, I examine how Mesterton discusses and refers to earlier philosophy and theology in a dissertation *De aeternitate Dei*, ‘On the Eternity of God’ (1752)—I use the original title for the dissertation throughout the study.⁹ The research question is in what manner does Mesterton discuss and refer to earlier philosophy and theology in his dissertation. This study is qualitative, and reflects how earlier philosophy and theology were conceived by Mesterton in *De aeternitate Dei*. In a broader context, the study is related to the question of how early modern research about the late antiquity and Middle Ages transpired in the Finnish territory in the eighteenth century. The methods include contextualising, philological analysis, close reading and interpretation. I have selected Mesterton’s *De aeternitate Dei* since in this dissertation he refers to ancient, medieval and early modern thinkers and their works. The references are used explicitly in relation to theological questions especially those concerning the nature of God.

In the first section, I contextualise the subject: I discuss the history, the working culture and dissertations of the academy, as well as Mesterton’s life and Wolffianism. In the second section, I examine Mesterton’s *De aeternitate Dei* in detail, in which he deals with ancient and medieval philosophy and theology. With regard to references, I focus on ancient and medieval views since ancient and medieval philosophy are intertwined in the Christian and Wolffian contexts. I conclude by giving my interpretation and final remarks. The conclusion of this study is that although Mesterton discusses and frequently refers to medieval theology and philosophy in *De aeternitate Dei*, he does not discuss medieval philosophy and theology in detail, and therefore his method of treatment is shallow. In addition, he shows no criticism; however, this was the usual practice at the academy, as I clarify below.

⁷ For more on rationalism, see Charlie Huenemann, *Understanding Rationalism*, Acumen: Slough 2008 (<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315711829>).

⁸ For more on this shortcoming, see Visa Helenius, ‘Turun akatemian filosofia, *Ajatus* ja suomalaisen varhaisen filosofian tuntemus’, *Ajatus* (forthcoming).

⁹ It is to be noticed that since the dissertations of the Royal Academy of Turku are commonly short writings in accordance with the scientific standards of their time, the dissertations cannot be compared to modern academic dissertations.

The Academy of Turku, Mesterton and Wolffianism

The Academy of Turku was in operation between 1640–1827 excluding the break between 1713–1722 caused by the Russian invasion during the so-called Great Wrath. Concerning scientific achievements, the merits of the academy are dichotomous: on the one hand, the scientific contribution of the academy was poor in many respects because it was primarily an educational institution and because its approach was traditionalist and guarded.¹⁰ On the other hand, the Academy of Turku transmitted European scientific ideas into Finland, which was important for Finnish culture. In the eighteenth century, internationally significant research was carried out in fields of natural sciences and humanities at the Academy of Turku. The heyday of the former (the so-called golden age of natural science) occurred in the latter half of the eighteenth century. In relation to the humanities, Henrik Gabriel Porthan (1739–1804) carried out significant humanistic research at the Academy.

Regarding the connection between theology and philosophy at the Academy of Turku, philosophy was the more popular subject.¹¹ However, it was also considered the *ancilla theologiae*, ‘the handmaid of theology’, in that sense that theologians had the most power in the academy. As a result, the theologians used *censorship* and all dissertations were inspected beforehand, so that heretical views were not supported in the dissertations of the Academy. The participants in dissertations were the *praeses* (‘chief’; ‘guardian’; ‘mentor’), who was the supervisor of a dissertation, and the *respondens* (‘respondent’), who was usually a student pursuing an academic degree. Many problems are involved in the dissertations, such as, their authorship is not clear, their referencing practices are vague, they contain plagiarism, and their contents are greatly weakened by a lack of critical evaluation.¹²

Mesterton was born in Gothenburg around 1715. Before arriving at the Academy of Turku, he was educated in Sweden at Lund, and also in Rostock in the Netherlands and Helmstedt in Germany. Mesterton received his *venia docendi*, ‘licence to teach’ (i.e., permission to act as an academic teacher) in 1741 in Helmstedt. He applied for the vacant post of Professor of Logic and Metaphysics at the Academy in 1744. In the following year, Mesterton wrote a dissertation *De principii rationis sufficientis adplicatione ad regnum materiale et immateriale*, ‘On the Application of the Principle of Sufficient Reason in the Material and Immaterial Realms’, by which he finally qualified for the professorship.¹³ He was a professor of Logic and Metaphysics of the Academy of Turku between 1746–1767, and later, a professor of the Third Theology (*Theologia tertius*) from 1767 until he died in 1773.¹⁴ Since Mesterton was a Wolffian beyond doubt, most of his dissertation concerns Wolff’s philosophy.

Although Wolff drew inspiration from the philosophy of Leibniz, he is an original thinker. Leibniz

¹⁰ See, e.g., Pietarinen 2015, 17 and 18.

¹¹ See Nuorteva 2001(b); Nuorteva. 2001(c).

¹² For more on these subjects, see Maija Kallinen, *Change and Stability: Natural Philosophy at the Academy of Turku (1640–1713)*, Finnish Historical Society: Helsinki 1995; Matti Klinge, ‘Opetus ja opiskelu’, in Matti Klinge, Rainer Knapas, Anto Leikola & John Strömberg (eds.), *Helsingin yliopisto 1640–1990: 1. osa, Kuninkaallinen Turun akatemia 1640–1808*, Otava: Helsinki 1987, 355–552; Kauko Kouvalainen, ‘Turun akatemian väitöskirjat’, *Lääketieteellinen Aikakauskirja Duodecim* 124:18 (2008), 2108–17.

¹³ See Carolus Mesterton, *De principii rationis sufficientis adplicatione ad regnum materiale et immateriale*, excud. Joh. Kiaempe, Reg. Ac. Typ.: Aboae 1745; Visa Helenius, ‘Karl Mestertonin väitöskirja rationalistisen filosofian ja eurooppalaisten vaikutteiden välittäjänä 1700-luvun puolivälin Turun akatemiassa’, *Auraica: Scripta A Societate Porthan Edita* 10 (2019), 3–15.

¹⁴ The power of theologians was hierarchically dispersed among professors at the academy.

was a rationalist, but his philosophy is a complex system due Leibniz's eclectic philosophical method; he drew his inspiration from various sources.¹⁵ Consequently, Wolff systemised Leibniz's philosophy. Concerning the question about the nature of God, Leibniz presents several arguments for the necessity and eternity of God.¹⁶ Regarding Wolff's theology, he follows Leibniz and uses, according to Lewis Beck, 'ontological, cosmological, and physico-teleological arguments for the existence of God.' Beck concludes that 'Wolff is the best German representative of a general movement of thought toward Deism[.]'¹⁷ According to *deism* (understood as a philosophical method), the use of reason, experience and observation of the world demonstrate the existence of God. Therefore, Wolff did not follow the earlier theological tradition, according to which the Bible is a central source of knowledge about God. With regard to Mesterton, he was a Wolffian, and he thus approaches ancient and medieval philosophy from the Wolffian framework.¹⁸ This means the combination of rationalism and empiricism, which Wolff especially emphasised.¹⁹

Mesterton's *De aeternitate Dei*

In this section, I examine Mesterton's *De aeternitate Dei*.²⁰ I analyse the content of the dissertation and discuss its connections with ancient, medieval and early modern philosophy. The work was published in 1752 and Mesterton is denoted as the *praeses* ('*praesidio*') in the title page. The respondent to *De aeternitate Dei* is Jonas Sundler (1722–1803), who was born in Ulricehamn in Sweden and was later a parson in the Berg Municipality of Sweden. *De aeternitate Dei* is Sundler's *pro exercitio* work ('exercise dissertation'), which was mandatory for students of the Academy of Turku. Even though both Mesterton and Sundler are associated with the dissertation, as the title page shows, I speak of Mesterton as the principal author of the dissertation. This is because he is its *praeses*, that is, its supervisor; profes-

¹⁵ See Lewis Beck, *Early German Philosophy: Kant and His Predecessors*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts 1969, 196–203.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Robert Merrihew Adams, *Leibniz – Determinist, Theist, Idealist*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 1994 (<https://doi.org/10.1093/0195126491.003.0001>), *passim*; Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, translated by Roger Ariew & Daniel Garber, Hackett Publishing Company: Indianapolis 1989, 218–19. For or on the connection between God and time in Leibniz, see Leibniz 1989, 325 and 340.

¹⁷ Beck 1969, 273–74. For more on Wolff's theological views, see Christian Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedancken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt: den Liebhabern der Wahrheit mitgetheilet*, Renger: Halle 1720. For more on Wolff's view of natural theology, see Christian Wolff, *Theologia naturalis scientifica pertractata*, Lipsiae: Francofurti 1737 and Christian Wolff, *Philosophia prima sive ontologia methodo scientifica pertractata qua omnis cognitionis humanae principia continentur*, edited by Johannes Cole, reprint, Georg Olms: Hildesheim & Zürich & New York 2001. For more on Wolff's ontology, see Wolff 2001. For more on Wolff's philosophy in general, see Beck 1969, 256–75; Matt Hettche & Corey Dyck, 'Christian Wolff', in Edward Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2024 Edition. (<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/wolff-christian/>, accessed 18.1.2026).

¹⁸ See Oittinen 2004, 114–16; Pietarinen 2015, 42–46.

¹⁹ See Fugate and Hymers 2014, 15–20.

²⁰ Interestingly, Mesterton also has supervised two dissertations, *De aeternitate poenarum*, 'On the Eternity of Punishments' (1752, the actual content is twelve pages long), and *Contra aeternitatem mundi*, 'Against the Eternity of the World' (1759, the actual content is seven pages long). Regarding the first, Mesterton discusses the divine punishment, and regarding the latter, he explains why the world is not eternal. These dissertations are inverse to *De aeternitate Dei*. However, they do not include many references to medieval philosophy and theology. See Carolus Mesterton, *De aeternitate poenarum*, impressit direct. & typogr. reg. magn. duc. Finland. Jacob. Merckell: Aboae 1752; Carolus Mesterton, *Contra aeternitatem mundi*, impressit direct. & typogr. reg. magn. duc. Finland. Jacob. Merckell: Aboae 1759.

sors supervised the dissertations and in many cases wrote them, whereas students usually paid for the printing, and they had to defend the dissertation in order to learn academic disputation culture.²¹ The dissertation was published in the faculty of philosophy.

De aeternitate Dei is eight pages long and includes eleven sections. It is written in Latin, but it has a Greek expression, which is the length of two words. Interestingly, the dissertation contains some footnotes abbreviated by the Greek alphabet. The footnotes include references to ancient, medieval and early modern authors, which are a key part of this study along with the direct quotations.

In the first section, Mesterton gives a brief general introduction: he says that the subject of the eternity of God is difficult but still worth studying and that the eternity of God has not been understood correctly by earlier thinkers.²² Unfortunately, Mesterton does not give any names here. The first section also does not include references or allusions to works.

In the next four sections (the sections from two to five) of *De aeternitate Dei*, Mesterton introduces and clarifies key terms and basic distinctions, which are mainly of Wolffian origin.²³ He clarifies in the second section the distinction between *a being from itself* ('ens a se') and *a being from another being* ('ens ab alio"): the first is an independent being and the latter a relative being, whose existence is dependent on the existence of some other being.²⁴ Mesterton specifies in the third section that *God is a being from itself* and, thus, an *independent being*. Namely, the reason (*ratio*) for the existence of God is not in any other thing or being. God would also exist, Mesterton explains, even if nothing else existed.²⁵ He concludes in the fourth section that God is a *necessary* and *absolute being* ('ens necessarium et absolute') and that God encompasses the reason for his existence in his own essence.²⁶ Mesterton adds in the fifth section that an absolutely necessary being exists in such a way that its opposite involves a contradiction, and that an absolutely necessary being, therefore, does not have an origin or an end. It follows that God is an eternal (*aeternus*) being. Mesterton refers here to the view of Origen (c. 185–253; a Christian scholar and theologian) in his work *On the First Principles* (the first half of the third century), in which Origen describes God's eternity as follows: that which is everlasting (*sempiternum*) or eternal does not have an origin or an end. The quotation is about two full lines long.²⁷

In the sixth section, Mesterton briefly mentions some ancient, medieval and early modern views, which are related to the eternity of God. First, he begins by quoting Plotinus' (c. 205–270) view of eternity (*Enneads*, the third century), according to which infinite life is a complete whole since in infinite

²¹ See Kouvalainen 2008.

²² Carolus Mesterton, *De aeternitate Dei*, impressit direct. & typogr. reg. mag. duc. Jacob Merckell: Aboae 1752, 1.

²³ For more on the Wolff's terms and distinctions, see Wolff 2001, *passim*.

²⁴ Mesterton 1752, 1 and 2. See Alexander Baumgarten, *Metaphysics*, translated by Courtney D. Fugate & John Hymers, Bloomsbury: London, New Delhi, New York & Sydney 2014, 156.

²⁵ Mesterton 1752, 2.

²⁶ Mesterton 1752, 2.

²⁷ Mesterton 1752, 2. Concerning Origen's view, see: "The term everlasting or eternal properly denotes that which had no beginning of existence and can never cease to be what it is." Origen, *On First Principles*, translated by G. W. Butterworth, Christian Classics: Notre Dame, Indiana 2013, 34–35.

life nothing has occurred or will occur in the future; otherwise, infinite life would no longer be a whole.²⁸ This quotation is about four lines long. Second, Mesterton gives the following description by Plutarch (c. 45–120) about God’s eternal nature (*Moralia*, at the turn of the first and second centuries): God does not exist in time but in an immovable and unchanging eternity. It follows that there is nothing before and nothing after God, neither future nor past.²⁹ The quotation from Plutarch is about three lines long.³⁰

Third, Mesterton refers to the general theological account of Denis Petau (1583–1652) (*Dogmata theologica*, 1643–1650). According to Petau’s account a number of scholars have likewise thought that God is an eternal being including: Numenius of Apamea (the latter half of the second century BC), Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BCE–50), Herrenius (lived the third century BC), Calcidus (lived the fourth century BC) and Proclus (412–485). It should be mentioned that these points are given indirectly by Mesterton since they are originally from *Dogmata theologica* by Petau.³¹ Fourth, Mesterton continues by propounding the following view of Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (c. 475–526) (*The Consolation of Philosophy*, 524): the eternity of God is the whole, simultaneous and perfect possession of a boundless life. This quotation is just a short sentence. Mesterton explains that the Scholastics followed Boethius’ definition by agreeing that eternity is an interminable, indivisible and independent duration (*‘durationem interminabilem, indivisibilem & independentem’*).³² However, Mesterton does not give any references here.³³

Fifth, Mesterton states that Fausto Sozzini (1539–1604) has argued that time is an eternal thing, and that time has always both been and will be, so that any past (*praeteritum aliquid*) is always both in the present and in the future. However, in the sixth point, Mesterton concludes that Conrad Vorstius (1569–1622) and Johannes Crellius (1590–1633, Mesterton refers to Crellius’ *De Deo et eius attributis* (1630)) were against Sozzini’s view, and seventh, that Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) was against Boethius’ definition (i.e., eternity is an interminable, indivisible and independent duration). In the eighth and last

²⁸ See the following passage: “But the primary and blessed Beings do not even have a desire for what is to come; for they are already the whole and possess all the life which is, in a way, owed to them. And so they are not in search of anything because the future means nothing to them and, therefore, neither does that in which the future lies. The complete and whole Substance, then, is not only that which is in the parts but also that which consists in not ever lacking anything in the future or in having no non-being ever attaching itself to it – for not only must all Beings be present to the whole universe, but there must not be anything that is ever non-being. This disposition and nature would be eternity; for ‘eternity’ [aion] is derived from ‘always being’ [aei on].” Plotinus, *Enneads*, translated by George Boys Stone et al., Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2018, 338.

²⁹ See the following passage: “But God is (if there be need to say so), and He exists for no fixed time, but for the everlasting ages which are immovable, timeless, and undeviating, in which there is no earlier nor later, no future nor past, no older nor younger” Plutarch, *Volume V: Isis and Osiris. The E at Delphi. The Oracles at Delphi No Longer Given in Verse. The Obsolescence of Oracles*, translated by Frank Cole Babbitt, Loeb Classical Library 306, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA 1936, 245.

³⁰ Mesterton 1752, 2–4. Plotinus was a Greek philosopher and the founder of Late Antique Platonism and Plutarch a Greek Platonist.

³¹ See Denis Petau, *Dogmata theologica*, apud Ludovicum Vives, Bibliopolam editorem: Parisiis 1865–1867, *passim*.

³² See the following passage: “Now that God is eternal is the common judgement of all who live by reason. Therefore let us consider, what is eternity; for this makes plain to us both the divine nature and the divine knowledge. Eternity, then, is the whole, simultaneous and perfect possession of boundless life, which becomes clearer by comparison with temporal things.” Boethius, *Theological Tractates. The Consolation of Philosophy*, translated by H. F. Stewart, E. K. Rand & S. J. Tester, Loeb Classical Library 74, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA 1973, 423.

³³ Mesterton 1752, 3 and 4. Petau was a French Jesuit theologian, Numenius of Apamea a Greek philosopher, Philo of Alexandria (a.k.a. Philo Judaeus) a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher, Herrenius a Neoplatonic philosopher, Calcidus a philosopher and translator of Plato’s *Timaeus*, Proclus a Greek Neoplatonist, and Boethius a Roman philosopher and a precursor to Scholasticism.

point, he states that ‘Holmannus’ has argued in a certain dissertation (*‘quod Cel. Holmannus, Gottingae 1739, distertationem publici juris sacere’*) that he could not experience the eternity of God’s succession. Mesterton most likely refers here to Samuel Christian Hollmann (1696–1787) and his work *Dissertatio Philosophica, De Definiendis Justis Scientiarum Philosophicarum Limitibus* (1736).³⁴

Mesterton discusses temporality and timelessness in the seventh section of *De aeternitate Dei*. He begins by maintaining that duration (*duratio*) has been attributed falsely to God’s properties by ‘learned men’ (*viris doctistimis*) who have argued that God’s eternity could be refuted since God has duration. With regard to eternity (*aeternitas*), it is simultaneous in existence with many things that are successive, but it cannot be used to describe the existence of God. Mesterton argues that duration cannot be connected to the existence of God because the successive events would be either internal or external in relation to God: they cannot be internal since God’s properties must be necessary and thus eternal, and they also cannot be external since God would exist even if nothing else existed—in other words, God would exist regardless of the existence of successive existences. Therefore, duration cannot be attributed to God at all.³⁵

Mesterton continues that time (*tempus*) and duration are accidents (*accidentia*), that is, properties or qualities, such as colour, of a substance (i.e., the most fundamental being), which are not essential to its identity; in other words, durational things are contingent properties or qualities—a contingent thing is not necessary and could have been otherwise.³⁶ Mesterton therefore concludes, that God does not exist successively, and that duration can be predicated of God, but it is not a quality of God: duration is related to God only insofar as it concern the relationship between God and contingent beings, but it cannot bring about any change or succession in God. This problem has arisen because it has not been possible to distinguish between the properties of God and relations with God.³⁷

In the eighth section, Mesterton further clarifies how the existence of God can be distinguished from the existence of finite (i.e., successive) things. Mesterton begins by quoting, for a second time, Boethius, who has argued (*The Consolation of Philosophy*, 524) that God is not to be thought of as older than created things by an amount of time, but rather by God’s own simplicity of nature (*‘simplicis potius proprietate naturae’*).³⁸ This quotation is a less than three lines long.³⁹

Mesterton continues with the view of Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274) about the same subject (*Summa theologiae*, 1267–1273). Aquinas argues that the difference between eternity and time persists since the first is a whole, as Boethius thinks, and that eternity is the measure of permanent or enduring

³⁴ Mesterton 1752, 3 and 4. Sozzini (a.k.a. Faustus Socinus) was an Italian humanist, theologian and a founder of Socinianism, Vorstius a German-Dutch Remonstrant theologian, Crellius a Polish and German theologian, Bayle a French philosopher, and Hollmann a German philosopher.

³⁵ Mesterton 1752, 4 and 5.

³⁶ For more on the relative view of time and space, see Leibniz 1989, *passim*.

³⁷ Mesterton 1752, 4 and 5.

³⁸ See the following passage: “Nor should God seem to be more ancient than created things by some amount of time, but rather by his own simplicity of nature. For this present nature of unmoving life that infinite movement of temporal things imitates, and since it cannot fully represent and equal it, it fails from immobility into motion, it shrinks from the simplicity of that present into the infinite quantity of the future and the past and, since it cannot possess at once the whole fullness of its life, in this very respect, that it in some way never ceases to be, it seems to emulate to some degree which it cannot fully express, by binding itself to the sort of present of this brief and fleeting moment, a present which since it wears a kind of likeness of that permanent present, grants to whatsoever things it touches that they should seem to be.” Boethius 1973, 425.

³⁹ Mesterton 1752, 5 and 6.

(*permanens*) existence, whereas time is the measure of motion (*‘aeternitas est mensura esse permanentis, tempus vero est mensura motus’*).⁴⁰ The quotation from Aquinas is about six lines long. Mesterton concludes by quoting the views of Petau and Pierre Poiret (1646–1719). Petau has explained in *Dogmata theologica* that finite beings do not understand God’s eternal nature.⁴¹ Poiret has argued (*Cogitationes rationales de Deo, anima, et malo*, 1677) for the basic medieval view that the world was created out of nothing (i.e., *creatio ex nihilo*), and that the world is not eternal, as Plato and Aristotle thought.⁴² The quotation from Petau is about five lines long and the quotation from Poiret about eleven lines long.⁴³

The ninth section of *De aeternitate Dei* is short: Mesterton states that eternity is no different from the existence of God, but alternatively time is different since it is an order (*ordo*), in which beings succeed each other in a continuous series (*continua serie*).⁴⁴

In the tenth section, Mesterton presents various points about Christian theology and morals and the philosophy of time. He begins by asserting that although there is at least some kind of relation between a thousand years and one day, there is no connection between a thousand years and eternity. Second, he continues by stating that time intervals progress as a flowing series in such a way that the past has already occurred, and the future has not yet begun. Because of this, only the present moment is real. Third, due to the flowing of time, temporal and earthly things, such as riches, honours and pleasures, are perishable and thus useless. Fourth, the eternity of God offers, Mesterton concludes, a solid comfort to the soul, and death offers us the way to eternal life by God, the most just and severe judge and avenger for sinners. Therefore, we should reflect deeply on the eternal nature of God every day.⁴⁵ The tenth section does not include references or allusions.

In the eleventh short section, which concludes *De aeternitate Dei*, Mesterton mentions that the eternal goodness of God is the ultimate purpose of our faith and hope.⁴⁶

Interpretation

Mesterton’s *De aeternitate Dei* is a short dissertation: it is only eight pages long and not philosophically original. However, it includes various subjects and relevant information about the connection between Mesterton’s philosophy and ancient and medieval philosophy. The content of *De aeternitate Dei* helps

⁴⁰ See the following passage: “For even if time has always existed and always will exist—the position of those who posit a sempiternal movement of the heavens—there will still be a difference between eternity and time, just as Boethius explains in *De Consolatione Philosophiae*. The reason is that eternity is a simultaneous whole—something that does not benefit time—because eternity is a measure of permanent esse, whereas time is the measure of movement.” Thomas Aquinas, *New English Translation of St. Thomas Aquinas’s Summa Theologiae* (*Summa Theologica*), translated by Alfred Freddoso, 61 and 62. (<https://freddoso.com/summa-translation/TOC.htm>, accessed 15.2.2026)

⁴¹ The original source is as follows: “Quocirca uti Scripturae ac Patres immortalitatem soli adscribunt Deo, tametsi pleraque alianunquam interitura sciant, quod iste ipse finis expers status aliena ex voluntate pendet, a quo interim extinguique possunt (ideo mortales absolute ab nonnullis angeli animaeque dicuntur) sic quodcumque tandem erit illud quod ex aeterno procreavit Deus, nequaquam aeternum optimo illo et absoluto jure censebitur.” Denis Petau, *Dogmata theologica. Tomus primus*, apud Ludovicum Vives, Bibliopolam editorem: Parisiis 1865, 277.

⁴² Pierre Poiret, *Cogitationes rationales de Deo, anima, et malo*, apud Danielem Elsevirium: Amsterdami 1677, 194.

⁴³ Mesterton 1752, 5 and 6. Aquinas was a Dominican theologian, medieval Scholastic and one of the most important intellectuals of the thirteenth-century Europe and Poiret a French Christian philosopher.

⁴⁴ Mesterton 1752, 6 and 7.

⁴⁵ Mesterton 1752, 7 and 8.

⁴⁶ Mesterton 1752, 8.

to clarify how ancient and medieval philosophy and theology were approached from a Wolffian framework at the Academy of Turku in the middle of the eighteenth century.

Mesterton begins by elucidating on Wolffian concepts and views. He argues that God is a being from itself, that God is a necessary and absolute being, and that God is an eternal being. In the fifth section of *De aeternitate Dei* Mesterton gives a short quotation (about two lines long) from Origen, according to which God does not have an origin or an end. Although the quotation is short, it shows that Mesterton was aware of Origen's thoughts and considered him an important early Christian scholar.

In the sixth section, Mesterton describes the eternity of God. Concerning ancient and medieval views, Mesterton quotes Plotinus (the founder of Neoplatonism), Plutarch (a Platonist notable philosopher) and Boethius (a pioneer of early Scholasticism) who are notable authors of Western philosophy. Plotinus' quotation (about four lines long) concerns the nature of eternity and infinite life, Plutarch's quotation (about three lines long) the view that God exists in an immovable and unchanging eternity. The short quotation (one sentence) by Boethius expresses the view that the eternity of God is the certain whole, simultaneous and perfect possession of a boundless divine life. Mesterton also refers in the section indirectly to Numenius of Apamea, Philo of Alexandria, Herrenius, Calcidus and Proclus through the *Dogmata theologica*, a work of Petau. According to Petau, all of these scholars have agreed that God is an eternal being. However, this is not very informative because Mesterton does not discuss the views one by one individually. Lastly, Mesterton refers in this section to early modern views expressed by Sozzini, Vorstius, Crellius and Bayle.

In the seventh section, Mesterton explains why duration cannot be combined to God's properties or qualities. He does not give any references here.

In the eighth section, where Mesterton clarifies the differences between God and finite beings, he refers to Boethius's view according to which God is not more ancient than created things by an amount of time since God is a unitary being. Mesterton continues with the view of Thomas Aquinas, according to which eternity is the measure of permanent or enduring existence and time the measure of motion. Since Aquinas is one of the most important authors of scholasticism, it is significant that Mesterton refers to him. In this section, Mesterton also presents the early modern views of Petau and Poiret.

In the ninth and tenth sections, and in the last the eleventh section, Mesterton offers various remarks on the eternity of God and the contingent world. For example, he argues that eternity and time differ from each other and the eternal good of God is the ultimate purpose of our faith and hope. Mesterton does not give here any references in these sections.

Concerning my interpretation, I claim that in *De aeternitate Dei*, Mesterton presents various relevant points about late antiquity and medieval philosophy in both Christian and Wolffian contexts. Importantly, Mesterton discusses the views of Origen, Plotinus, Plutarch, Boethius and Thomas Aquinas and mentions by name Numenius of Apamea, Philo of Alexandria, Herrenius, Calcidus and Proclus. However, Mesterton does not discuss any of these philosophers in detail, not even in a general way and therefore his method of treatment is shallow; he also offers no criticism. It should be noted that this was the usual practice at the Academy of Turku, as I have clarified earlier. It should also be noted that *De aeternitate Dei* is a *pro exercitio* dissertation, whose content was not very ambitious or diverse in anyway. Thus, the main aim was that Mesterton and the respondent of the dissertation, Sundler, were familiar with the works and views of the thinkers in question, at least on a general level.

Concluding Remarks

In his dissertation *De aeternitate Dei*, Mesterton discusses a variety of topics and often refers to medieval theology and philosophy. He considers the views of Origen, Plotinus, Plutarch, Boethius (two times) and Aquinas and mentions by name Numenius of Apamea, Philo of Alexandria, Herrenius, Calcidus and Proclus in connection with the eternity of God and Christian and Wolffian contexts. Since only Boethius and Aquinas represent medieval philosophy, the role of medieval philosophy is relatively small in *De aeternitate Dei*. It is unfortunate that Mesterton does not provide more discussion on the views of Boethius and Aquinas or further address medieval philosophy in the dissertation.

Overall, Mesterton's *De aeternitate Dei* clearly shows that several late antique and medieval authors were the focus of attention on a general level at the Academy of Turku. However, it is surprising and unfortunate that Mesterton does not deal further with medieval philosophy given the subject of the dissertation.