1. Introduction

Thinking about time in the early modern scholastic and Aristotelian traditions was an activity often undertaken in a cautious, even tentative, frame of mind. Time, it was commonly agreed, was a particularly spiny philosophical problem, and even one whose very nature was built on uncertainty. It was frequently suggested that we cannot be sure what time is, or how we should best investigate it. For the English Aristotelian John Case, writing in 1599, the ‘existence of time’ was ‘a very uncertain thing indeed’. This formula was echoed across a range of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century philosophical textbooks and commentaries. Thus the late sixteenth-century Lutheran philosopher Johannes Magirus argued that the problem of ‘how we in some way perceive the nature of time, requires profound meditation, since it is a profound thing’. Similarly, the French Minim friar Jean Lalemandet noted pessimistically in his 1656 Cursus philosophicus that ‘although nothing is more common and familiar to us than time, nevertheless nothing is more unknown’. Such concerns had a long and impeccable intellectual pedigree. They were first, and most famously, articulated in Book XI of Augustine’s Confessions. ‘What is time?’ Augustine had asked. ‘If no-one asks me, I know; if I wish to explain to an enquirer, I know not.’ The concerns of early modern scholastic authors consciously echoed those of Augustine, and in doing so they acknowledged that a rhetorical voice of uncertainty was a traditional and necessary part of discussing time. In a sense, time was a topic perennially conjugated in the subjunctive mood, the mood of uncertainty and possibility.

2 J. Magirus, Physiologiae peripateticae libri sex, Wittenberg 1609, 102: ‘Ut autem temporis naturam aliquo modo percipiamus, profunda opus est meditatione, sicuti profunda res est.’
3 J. Lalemandet, Cursus philosophicus, Lyon 1656, 766: ‘Quamvis nihil ita sit nobis familiare & commune, quam tempus, nihil tamen est nobis magis ignotum.’
Amongst all this uncertainty, one topic was singled out as the source of particular anxiety: the connection between time and the soul. The German metaphysician and theologian Bartholomaeus Keckermann summed up the feelings of many early modern commentators when he ruefully stated in his *Systema physicum* (1610) that considering the relationship between time and the soul ‘produces the most complex questions of all on this subject.’ The claim that time and the soul were connected was a very familiar one in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century commentaries and textbooks. It was derived ultimately from Aristotle’s foundational definition of time in *Physics* IV as the ‘number of former and latter in motion’: since time is a number, Aristotle argued, the rational part of the soul, which is alone capable of numbering, must be central to its existence. *Physics* IV.14 emphasized the relationship between time and the intellect or the faculty of reason; it stated not simply that understanding time required ingenuity and, as Magirus put it, ‘profound meditation’, but that the human rational soul was both a prerequisite for apprehending or perceiving time and a key part of time’s very existence. In *Physics* IV.14, Aristotle speculated:

> Whether if soul did not exist time would exist or not, is a question that may fairly be asked; for if there cannot be some one to count there cannot be anything that can be counted either, so that evidently there cannot be number; for number is either what has been, or what can be, counted. But if nothing but soul, or in soul reason, is qualified to count, it is impossible for there to be time unless there is soul, but only that of which time is an attribute, i.e. if movement can exist without soul.\(^4\)

This enigmatic passage, which was the immediate cause of Keckermann’s bemusement, provoked much debate amongst later commentators, since Aristotle seemed to argue both that time cannot exist without the soul, and that at least one aspect of time might exist separately.

In many respects, the connection between time and the human soul was the paradigm case of the mood of anxiety and difficulty that often surrounded time in early modern Aristotelianism. The uncertainty expressed by many early modern authors also reflected a broader problem with dis-

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\(^4\) B. Keckermann, *Operum omnium quae extant tomus primus*, Genève 1614, 1379: ‘Necque vero omittamus istam adhuc difficultatem, quae est in textu Aristotelis, & quae intricatissimam omnium circa hanc materiam quæstiones genuit, cum nempe Philosophus text. 131 dicit, quia nihil aptum est numerare quam anima rationalis: idcirco impossibile est tempus esse, si non sit anima ...’