

Atheist Identity and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century France

by

Lara Marie Apps

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines atheist identity and ideology in eighteenth-century France up to 1776 through an analysis of numerous atheist texts, including several little-known clandestine works and the more familiar books of Jean Meslier, Julien Offray de La Mettrie and the Baron d'Holbach. It departs from most previous historiography on pre-modern atheism by fusing intellectual- and cultural-historical approaches; most importantly, it incorporates gender analysis in the interpretation of atheist texts. This research demonstrates the importance of the eighteenth century to our understanding of the continuities and ruptures in the development of atheism.

For eighteenth-century atheists, writing and sharing their views was a way of resisting repression, practicing atheism within a hostile environment, and changing the social imaginary by intervening in a discourse that dehumanized them. Further, the atheist texts express a sense of identity by defining atheists as different from other members of society in several specific ways, including intellectual and moral superiority. This identity re-humanized atheists but also excluded women and the common people, on the grounds that they were not capable of understanding virtuous atheism. Atheists thus claimed for themselves the positions of wise fathers and leaders. Finally, some atheist writers presented ideological visions of ideal societies, based on the core concepts of the materiality of the world, the necessity of organizing societies rationally in accordance with nature's laws, and the subordination of individuality to the common good and social or moral order. The atheist ideology was essentially optimistic concerning human

progress, but its elitist and patriarchal aspects challenge the view of atheism as necessarily democratic and progressive.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Overview

“I didn’t know atheism had a history.”

About halfway through my doctoral program, I agreed to be interviewed on a Calgary radio talk show about cuts to post-secondary funding. The host asked what I was studying. When I explained that I was researching the history of atheism, he responded with the statement above. There was no time during the program to explore what he meant, but I have thought about his remark often since then. He may have meant that atheism has not existed long enough to have a meaningful history, that it is an unchanging intellectual position, or that it has contributed nothing to history. He may also have meant that the idea of a history of atheism had never occurred to him; I have encountered this view frequently, and not only among lay audiences. Atheism has, however, become a fashionable topic recently, with several new books appearing within the last few years, and the understanding that it has a history appears to be gaining ground. It is still possible, nevertheless, for a very recent and otherwise valuable sociological analysis of

New Atheism to begin its historical background section with the Enlightenment and to treat that period as a kind of false start for atheism, with the real development waiting for Darwin's work on evolution.¹

Atheism's history can in fact be traced back, as a shadowy but persistent presence in Western culture, to the ancient Greeks, who described theoretical atheism and gave us the word *atheos*. Classicist Tim Whitmarsh reminds us that the essential atheist arguments against religion and the existence of God/gods were formulated in the ancient world and that atheism was driven underground by the establishment of Christianity,² suggesting that the story of atheism as an intellectual position may be one of long continuity rather than rupture. Considered as a social phenomenon, however, there are clear moments of discontinuity, such as the emergence of an open, systematic atheism into public view in the eighteenth century. This atheism appeared in several French works, some of which were clandestine manuscripts with a limited circulation,³ while others were published books that became "forbidden best-sellers."⁴ The importance of these works does not lie in the originality of their ideas. Atheists almost certainly existed

¹ Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism: The Politics of a Modern Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 15-25.

² Tim Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World* (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 2015).

³ On clandestine literature in France, see e.g. the classic study by Ira O. Wade, *The Clandestine Organization and Diffusion of Philosophic Ideas in France from 1700 to 1750* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1938); Antony McKenna & Alain Mothu, eds., *La Philosophie clandestine à l'Age classique* (Paris: Voltaire Foundation, 1997); Robert Darnton, *The Corpus of Clandestine Literature in France 1769-1789* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995); and the various issues of *La Lettre Clandestine*, published annually by the University of Paris-Sorbonne.

⁴ Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995). I still find it incomprehensible that Christopher Hitchens' *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever* (Philadelphia: Da Capo, 2007) jumps from Spinoza to Hume, skipping over all of the French atheists and even the *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, which one would have thought would be very much to Hitchens' taste.

in medieval and Renaissance Europe, and many of the ideas contained in eighteenth-century atheist works were syntheses and adaptations from works by Lucretius, René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, Benedict Spinoza, John Toland, Pierre Bayle, and other ancient and early modern thinkers. Atheism could not, however, be expressed openly in medieval and early modern Europe. What makes the eighteenth-century atheist texts so significant in the history of atheism is the fact that they represented atheists taking the risk of discovery and punishment in order to speak for themselves; they provide a window into a subjective dimension of committed atheism⁵ that is hidden or obscure in earlier periods.

Why did these atheists take the risk of writing about their beliefs? This dissertation argues that the eighteenth-century atheists who produced these texts were attempting to change what Cornelius Castoriadis called the “magma of ‘social imaginary significations,’” by which he meant “the immensely complex web of meanings that permeate, orient, and direct the whole life of the society considered, as well as the concrete individuals that bodily constitute society.” These significations include spirits, God, state, money, virtue, sin, and other fundamental concepts.⁶ Charles Taylor’s more recent formulation of the concept of the social imaginary describes it, perhaps more

⁵ I have chosen the expression ‘committed atheism’ because this expresses most clearly the general tone of the atheist corpus and points to what distinguishes these works from the broader eighteenth-century discourse about the existence and nature of God, revealed and natural religion, and so on.

⁶ Cornelius Castoriadis, “The Imaginary: Creation in the Social-Historical Domain,” in *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*, ed. and trans. David Ames Curtis (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 6-7. Castoriadis first expressed the idea of social imaginary significations in 1975 in *L’institution imaginaire de la société* (Editions du Seuil), which was translated by Kathleen Blaney in 1987 as *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge: Polity). Benedict Anderson’s influential *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Spread and Origins of Nationalism* (Verso: London, 1983) also addresses the role of imagination in society.

clearly, as “the ways in which [people] imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations.” The social imaginary is not the same thing as social theory; it is a “largely unstructured and inarticulate [background] understanding of our whole situation” that makes practices possible and is expressed through practices.⁷ The social imaginary significations of early modern European society were primarily (but not exclusively) Christian and hostile to atheism and atheists. That hostility was institutionalized in official intolerance and censorship. Nick Spencer has suggested recently that atheism caught fire in eighteenth-century France in reaction to the Christian authoritarianism that oppressed it;⁸ while this argument does not adequately explain the emergence of atheism into the public eye, it does help us formulate questions about what may have driven some atheists to write about their estrangement or alienation from their society, to attempt to re-humanize themselves as virtuous members of society, and to imagine alternative social orders.

Previous scholarship on the history of atheism has considered it primarily as a species of philosophy, or as an anomaly within a society dominated by religious faith.⁹

⁷ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Belknap: Cambridge MA, 2007), 171-173.

⁸ Nick Spencer, *Atheists: The Origin of the Species* (Bloomsbury: London, 2014), 91-94.

⁹ This dissertation deals only with atheism within the early modern Christian Western European context. That is, the atheists discussed are ‘Christian’ atheists, although it is important to note that they were atheists regarding *all* deities. I have not attempted to address atheism within Judaism, Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, or other religious and social contexts. Several of the essays in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, eds. Stephen Bullivant & Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), do cover many of these other contexts, making it clear that non-Christian contexts present significant challenges to attempts to establish a universal definition of atheism.

Scholars have concentrated, for the most part, either on explaining the intellectual or philosophical roots of atheism or on attempting to demonstrate its importance to the development of modernity. While this approach has, without question, done much to illuminate atheism's obscure history, it has also caused a certain sterility within the field's debates. The aim of this dissertation is to enrich our understanding of atheism by thinking about it differently. In particular, I am interested in what one might call the subjective dimension of atheism, rather than in its causes, impact, or intellectual sources. Given the hostility of early modern European society toward atheism, how did eighteenth-century atheists see themselves and their relationship to that society? How did one practice atheism? Was there a shared atheist identity and worldview? What role might gender have played within such an identity and worldview?

In order to answer these questions, I have examined eighteenth-century French atheist texts as a corpus of work, instead of focusing on one or two individuals or books. While these works were written in French and circulated in France, they were not the products solely of French culture; some were written by authors who were not French, and most of the printed works were published in the Netherlands due to French royal censorship. In addition, as noted above, they were influenced by ideas originating in other periods and other parts of Europe, so that it is most appropriate to see them as the

products of a cosmopolitan Enlightenment rather than a strictly national one.¹⁰ While there are several important atheist works from the end of the eighteenth century, particularly those of the revolutionaries Anacharsis Cloots and Sylvain Maréchal, my research focuses on texts composed from the early part of the eighteenth century up to the mid-1770s. This relatively narrow temporal scope permits consideration of these texts as a reasonably coherent corpus produced under similar cultural conditions, that is, under the *ancien régime* prior to the American and French Revolutions. These events led to such significant political and cultural changes as to make meaningful comparisons between the contexts of earlier and later atheist texts very difficult.¹¹ Some of the texts within the atheist corpus, such as the anonymous *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, the Baron d'Holbach's *Système de la Nature* and Jean Meslier's *Mémoire des Pensées et Sentiments*, are well known; others, including most of the clandestine works, have received little scholarly attention to their contents.

¹⁰ On the issue of what the Enlightenment is/was, I tend toward the view that the Enlightenment was not a unitary phenomenon but “a series of interlocking, and sometimes warring problems and debates” within different political, intellectual, social and cultural milieux. See Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 3. I am also partial to Daniel Roche's interpretation of the Enlightenment as a period of *désenclavement*, or of the breaking down of barriers and overcoming of isolation and obstacles. See *France in the Enlightenment*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Arthur Goldhammer, “Man in the Mirror: Language, the Enlightenment and the Postmodern,” *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 218-219; and Daniel Brewer, “The Enlightenment today?” in *The Cambridge Companion to the French Enlightenment*, ed. Daniel Brewer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 11. My own focus on (non-canonical) philosophical texts is not meant to suggest that the philosophical aspect of the Enlightenment should be privileged over other aspects.

¹¹ The changes wrought by the American and French Revolutions are, I think, too familiar to require further explanation here, but I wish to draw attention to Janet Polasky's recent book *Revolutions Without Borders: The Call to Liberty in the Atlantic World*, which argues persuasively that the revolutionary ideas connected with these two events had a deep impact on peoples and cultures in several other parts of the world, including Africa and the Caribbean, as well as on Europe, Britain and North America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

My research shows that for eighteenth-century atheists, writing and sharing their views was a way of resisting repression and of “practicing” atheism within a hostile environment. Since atheists were not an organized group, and being an atheist was potentially dangerous, there were no requirements around practice. One did not have to blaspheme, refuse to attend church, attend atheist gatherings, or engage in ‘immoral’ behaviour in order to be an atheist; however, the texts are clear that sharing the truth about God and religion was, for several authors, experienced as a moral obligation.¹² Writing treatises was a relatively safe way of fulfilling that obligation.

Further, these texts express a sense of identity by defining atheists as different from others in specific ways, including intellectual and moral superiority.¹³ The atheist corpus re-humanizes atheists, who were regarded almost universally within early modern European culture as dangerous madmen, beasts or fools. Gender had an important but complex role within the re-humanized atheist identity. Systematic atheism was very much

¹² This atheist obligation obviously mirrors the duty of the religious faithful to bear witness to and/or spread *their* truth. The so-called New Atheists also express a sense of moral duty to share their truth. In a fascinating recent development, some atheists have begun attending ‘Sunday Assemblies’ and similar gatherings, which are essentially churches for non-believers.

¹³ I am applying a general approach that treats identities as constructed and negotiated by individuals and groups within specific contexts or social realities. This approach assumes that identity is constructed in response “to something external and different from it (an other),” and is thus dependent on that other. “Identity,” in *Cultural Theory: The Key Concepts*, 2nd ed., eds. Andrew Edgar & Peter Sedgwick (London: Routledge, 2008), 166-170.

an elite male pursuit: this is not to say that there were no female or non-elite atheists,¹⁴ but they did not, it seems, produce accessible statements of systematic atheism.¹⁵ Despite this apparent exclusivity, the primary difference that atheists perceived between themselves and others was not masculinity or elite status *per se*, but maturity. The atheist's true Other was not the priest, the woman, or even the religious fanatic, but the child whose fear of the dark is exacerbated by the lies and superstitions of its elders. The atheist was an independent, clear-thinking man who knew the truth; believers were still dependent, deluded children. This identity therefore reiterated the patriarchal norms of eighteenth-century Europe by privileging the male atheist and placing him in the role of a wise father to the rest of society.

Finally, some atheist writers presented visions of ideal societies, based on the core concepts of the materiality of the world, the necessity of organizing societies rationally in

¹⁴ Modern sociological studies of atheism and gender show consistently that far more atheists (and agnostics) are men. The Pew Research Center's 2012 study "'Nones on the Rise': One-in-five adults have no religious affiliation" showed that in the United States, 64% of self-identified atheists and agnostics are men. They are also white (82%); tend to be college-educated (44% have a college degree); relatively wealthy compared to the general population; and young (42% in the 18-29 age bracket). The report, headed by Cary Funk and Greg Smith, is available at <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2012/10/NonesOnTheRise-full.pdf>. See also Melanie Elyse Brewster, "Atheism, Gender, and Sexuality," in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, eds. Stephen Bullivant & Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). William Sims Bainbridge has suggested that "while sex differences on faith in God are real, they are at least partly a result of education and cultural variables" that may be minimized by different sampling methods. "Atheism," *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Peter B. Clarke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 323. Ryan T. Cragun notes that 73% of New Atheists are male, while "other atheists and the non-religious are closer to a 60%/40% distribution between men and women." See "Who are the 'New Atheists'?" in *Atheist Identities: Spaces and Social Contexts*, eds. Lori G. Beaman & Steven Tomlins (Heidelberg: Springer, 2015), 202.

¹⁵ Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, did publish materialist natural philosophy, but "distanced herself from any charge of atheism": Lisa T. Sarasohn, *The Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 62. In *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* (1666), the creatures of that world explain that God created it, and the Empress builds churches and creates congregations for women. Despite the numerous materialist explanations of phenomena, God is a frequent reference point. Margaret Cavendish, *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World*, in *Paper Bodies: A Margaret Cavendish Reader*, eds. Sylvia Bowerbank & Sara Mendelson (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2000).

accordance with nature's laws, and the subordination of individuality to the common good and social or moral order. These core concepts constitute an ideology: that is, "a socially shared [system] of beliefs about the ideal arrangement of society."¹⁶ The expression of an atheist identity and an ideology constituted together the attempt to change the social imaginary of the eighteenth century: both undermined key significations and made new ones possible.

In the rest of this introductory chapter, I shall address methodological and historiographical issues, first explaining some specific problems and then situating my own research in relation to the existing recent histories of atheism. The second chapter explains that the institutions and significations of the early modern European social imaginary created a hostile environment for atheism that eighteenth-century atheists consciously responded to. In the third chapter, I analyse the ways in which several atheist clandestine and published texts resist that hostile environment or social imaginary and attempt to alter it by expressing an identity built on estrangement, claimed superiority, and a sense of duty to tell the truth. The fourth chapter focuses on the ideology and imagined societies described in the works of four atheist writers: the physician Julian Offray de La Mettrie, the priest Jean Meslier, the Baron d'Holbach, and the Benedictine monk Dom Deschamps. A fifth and concluding chapter summarizes the main points of

¹⁶ J. Christopher Cohrs, "Ideological Bases of Violent Conflict," *The Oxford Handbook of Intergroup Conflict*, ed. Linda R. Tropp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 56. There are numerous definitions of ideology; Cohrs' is useful due to its neutrality and focus on ideal social arrangements. For a helpful survey of the concept of ideology see Michael Freeden, *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). François Berriot claimed, in 1976, to have uncovered an atheist "ideology" for sixteenth-century France, but his reconstruction of this "catechism" was based on what hostile sources said about atheists, not on atheist statements. See *Athéismes et athéistes au XVIIe siècle en France*, 2 vols. (Lille: Thèses CERF, 1976).

the dissertation and considers the implications of atheist attempts to change the social imaginary significations of their world.

Ideology, Belief and Unbelief

In this section, I shall clarify my use of certain terms and concepts that might be seen as problematic. Beginning with ideology, this term has acquired negative connotations since its introduction by the French philosopher Antoine Destutt de Tracy in *Éléments d'idéologie* (1801-1815), who coined the term to refer to the science of ideas “based in analysis of human perception.” As employed within Marxism, ideology came to mean “a distorted way of viewing the world” in the interests of the dominant class, and was thus “set against true knowledge.” Later theorists such as Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser offered revisions of this Marxist view, and the sociologist Karl Mannheim argued that ideologies are worldviews, each of which “will have its own standards of truth and accuracy, dependent upon the social circumstances within which it is produced.”¹⁷ The Marxist view of ideology as false belief has, however, come to dominate informal discourse about ideology: as Teun A. van Dijk explains, “in much of our everyday discourse [ideology] is used in a derogatory way when characterizing the ideas or policies of *others*: whereas *we* have the truth, *they* have an ideology [original emphasis].”¹⁸

¹⁷ “Ideology,” *Cultural Theory: The Key Concepts*, 2nd ed., eds. Andrew Edgar & Peter Sedgwick (London: Routledge, 2008), 171-173. See also Freedman, *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction*, 1-30.

¹⁸ Teun A. van Dijk, “Discourse and Ideology,” in *Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction*, 2nd ed., ed. Teun A. van Dijk (Los Angeles: Sage, 2011), 379-380.

This derogatory view is evident in many modern atheists' objections to characterizing atheism as an ideology. Some regard ideologies as rigid, dogmatic, and based on 'mere' beliefs rather than on reason; for them, 'ideology' is synonymous with 'bias'. They also point to the varied political views of modern atheists as evidence that atheism is not an ideology, or argue that atheism *per se* is not political. The internal controversy over whether atheism is an ideology is part of a wider debate over whether atheists should organize to pursue goals of political justice.¹⁹ Hostility toward the label 'ideology' is also, in part, a response to the views of figures such as Reza Aslan, who has argued that New Atheism is not "really" atheism but is instead a reactionary, fundamentalist anti-theism and that its leading representatives — Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris — are ideologues.²⁰

Despite the widespread, informal use of the term ideology as a negative evaluation of others' beliefs, it remains a useful concept for analyzing both domination and resistance:

¹⁹ For examples of various viewpoints, see e.g. Adam Lee, "It's time for atheists to stop debating God's existence and decide what to do about it," *Guardian* 15 March 2015, and the online comments, at <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/15/atheists-god-existence-social-justice>, accessed 11 September 2015; Adam Lee, "You got your ideology in my atheism! [blog]", and the online comments, at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/daylightatheism/2015/03/you-got-your-ideology-in-my-atheism/>, accessed 11 September 2015. At least some atheists are willing to sign on to a shared set of beliefs: the First Church of Atheism offers free online ordination to anyone who wishes to become an atheist minister, provided the individual believes in "science, reason and reality." As of the date of access, the First Church of Atheism claims it has ordained nearly 12,000 atheist ministers. *First Church of Atheism Minister's Site*, accessed 28 October 2015, <http://firstchurchofatheism.com>.

²⁰ See e.g. Reza Aslan, "Sam Harris and 'New Atheists' aren't new, aren't even atheists," *Salon* 21 November 2014, accessed 11 September 2015, http://www.salon.com/2014/11/21/reza_aslan_sam_harris_and_new_atheists_arent_new_arent_even_atheists/, and a blogger's response, Heather Hastie, "Reza Aslan pontificates: Atheism is an ideology and atheists are violent [blog]," accessed 11 September 2015, <http://www.heatherhastie.com/reza-aslan-pontificates-atheism-is-an-ideology-and-new-atheists-are-violent/>. For a cogent and critical analysis of New Atheism as an ideology, see LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism*.

Under specific social, political, economic and historical conditions any group may develop its own ideology in order to defend its interests and to guarantee the loyalty, cohesion, interaction and cooperation of its members, especially in relation to other social groups or classes. This may mean that ideologies ... may be used not only to dominate or to oppress others, but also in order to resist and struggle against such domination, as we know of racist vs. anti-racist or of sexist vs. feminist ideologies.²¹

My approach to ideology in this dissertation is based on the fundamental concept that ideologies are shared belief systems that manifest in various practices, including (but not limited to) discourse.²² To be more specific, I am using a definition of ideology, cited in the previous section, as “a socially shared [system] of beliefs about the ideal arrangement of society.”²³ I regard some aspects of eighteenth-century atheist ideology as problematic; however, describing that shared belief system as an ideology is not in itself a negative evaluation.

It may seem counter-intuitive to treat eighteenth-century atheism as an ideology or socially shared system of beliefs, given that atheists were not an organized group or even identifiable, for the most part, by their own society, due to the need to conceal their views. Some of the atheists discussed in this dissertation did interact with each other. For example, Jacques-André Naigeon and the Baron d’Holbach were friends and collaborators. Nicolas Fréret and César Chesneau Du Marsais were members of the *Entresol*, a *coterie* “ensconced at the heart of French intellectual and cultural life” that was established in 1707 and led by the radical deist the Comte Henri de Boulainvilliers

²¹ Van Dijk, “Discourse and Ideology,” 380.

²² *Ibid.*, 382.

²³ Cohrs, “Ideological Bases of Violent Conflict,” 56.

(1658-1722), who was himself an author of clandestine philosophical works.²⁴ For the most part, however, atheists shared their ideas by circulating their writings, whether as clandestine manuscripts or as printed works, not in person; those texts created what Tim Whitmarsh has described in the ancient world as a virtual network.²⁵

Furthermore, notwithstanding the real differences in status within this group, which ranged from the poor, rural curé Jean Meslier to the wealthy nobleman d’Holbach, the atheist writers shared the social status of educated men. Laurence Brockliss’s work on higher education in eighteenth-century France suggests that most, if not all, of these writers would have received a very similar grounding in the humanities prior to any specialized training, thus making them members of a broad social class.²⁶

Atheist ideas were shared socially *through* the texts analyzed in this dissertation and shared *by* certain educated men who occupied positions of status: although separated by time, location, and social networks, the authors of atheist texts, as far as they can be identified, nevertheless were members of a social class (educated men of status), were influenced by each other’s ideas as the century progressed, and shared the same core concepts. Jacques Berlinerblau’s definition of an “atheist cohort” is useful for describing this group: a collection “of individuals who self-consciously espouse atheism and acknowledge sharing that trait with others. Such groups criticize religion ... and tend to

²⁴ Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 573-574. See also Ann Thomson, “Informal Networks,” in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy* vol. 1, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 124-125.

²⁵ Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods*, 205-214.

²⁶ Laurence W.B. Brockliss, *French Higher Education in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

unite their members in common cause against dogma, clergy, a theocratic state, and so forth.”²⁷ Eighteenth-century atheists were not united in the sense of being organized politically, but they were certainly united in a common cause that they expressed through their writings.

I shall conclude this section with some brief remarks about the terms ‘belief’ and ‘unbelief,’ both of which are important but problematic. Besides their vagueness, the central difficulty in using these terms is the danger of thinking in terms of an asymmetrical opposition between belief and knowledge. This issue is connected closely to the problem of treating ideology as false belief. As Gilbert Lewis explains, “The very word ‘belief’ often implies, in its use, a judgement about the uncertain truth or reliability of that which has been asserted; ‘knowledge’ does not convey the same doubt.

‘Knowledge’ is legitimate; ‘belief’ only questionably so.”²⁸ Further, neither ‘belief’ nor ‘unbelief’ takes account of variations in commitment levels; it is too easy to assume that these terms always describe absolute states of mind rather than “a complex of ideas, attitudes and feelings.”²⁹ Finally, scholars of religion have problematized modern models of religion as belief. Webb Keane, for example, argues that the narrow focus on religious belief within the modern discourse on religious freedom leads to complex discursive and

²⁷ Berlinerblau suggests that the Radical Enlightenment produced “atheist aggregates” who developed just before the French Revolution into a cohort, but he is vague about who was part of which group and seems to regard the ‘radical’ Enlightenment and atheism as phenomena of the late eighteenth century. See “Jewish Atheism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, eds. Stephen Bullivant & Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 329.

²⁸ Gilbert Lewis, “Magic, religion and the rationality of belief,” in *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology: Humanity, Culture and Social Life*, ed. Tim Ingold (London: Routledge, 1994), 567. See also Yvonne Sherwood, “On the Freedom of the Concepts of Religion and Belief,” *Politics of Religious Freedom*, eds. Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Saba Mahmood, & Peter G. Danchin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 568.

legal consequences for religious practices;³⁰ while Elizabeth Shakman Hurd argues that the legal equation of religion with belief “shuts out dissenters, doubters, and those on the margins or just outside those ‘faith communities’ celebrated by religious freedom advocates, whose voices are subsumed or submerged by the institutions and authorities presumed to speak in their name.”³¹

Despite these issues, I have used ‘belief’ and ‘unbelief’ throughout this dissertation, with some reservations, as the terms best able to convey the subjective aspects of religious and atheist ideas, attitudes and feelings that I am interested in. My use of these terms is not intended as a statement about the validity of either religious or atheist beliefs, nor is it meant to suggest that either religions or atheism(s) should be defined solely as sets of beliefs.

Sources

Identifying appropriate primary sources to analyze is a significant challenge in the study of atheism. Close reading of systematic atheist texts is the most effective approach to analyzing the subjective dimension of committed atheism in the eighteenth century, because there is, essentially, no other unmediated, documentary evidence of what committed atheists thought. Several biographers have bemoaned the lack of personal

³⁰ Webb Keane, “What is religious freedom supposed to free?” in *Politics of Religious Freedom*, eds. Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Saba Mahmood, & Peter G. Danchin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

³¹ Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, “Believing in Religious Freedom,” in *Politics of Religious Freedom*, eds. Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Saba Mahmood, & Peter G. Danchin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 51.

records such as diaries and letters that might shed light on, for example, when and why an individual became an atheist.³² As noted above, behaviour is an unreliable guide to belief. We are left, then, with atheist texts, which present their own difficulties.

Nearly any heterodox theological or philosophical position could be labeled as atheist in early modern Europe, making reliance on such accusations an untenable approach to identifying atheists or atheist works. Defining atheism in any historical period is a complex task because the meaning of ‘atheism’ has shifted over time; even (or perhaps especially) today, one will find several different definitions of ‘atheism’ and different approaches to formulating definitions. As Stephen Bullivant explains, “atheism simply possesses no single objective definition: it can be used correctly in a number of related, sometimes overlapping, and often mutually exclusive ways.”³³ This helps explain why modern atheists “put significant work into discussing, defining, and negotiating just what it means to be an atheist.”³⁴ When dealing with atheism in the past, the immediate problem one faces is the widespread use of the terms ‘atheism’ and ‘atheist’ to attack religious and philosophical opponents. Another problem is that a number of heterodox positions regarding the immortality of the soul and the nature of God were considered

³² See e.g. Philipp Blom, *A Wicked Company: The Forgotten Radicalism of the European Enlightenment* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2010); Max P. Cushing, *Baron d’Holbach: A Study of Eighteenth Century Radicalism in France* (New York, n.p., 1914); Virgil W. Topazio, *D’Holbach’s Moral Philosophy: Its Background and Development* (Geneva: Institut et musée Voltaire, 1956); Kathleen Wellman, *La Mettrie: Medicine, Philosophy, and Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992); W.H. Wickwar, *Baron d’Holbach: A Prelude to the French Revolution* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1935).

³³ Stephen Bullivant, “Defining ‘Atheism,’” in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, eds. Stephen Bullivant & Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 12.

³⁴ Jesse M. Smith, “Creating a Godless Community: The Collective Identity Work of Contemporary American Atheists,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52, no. 1 (2013), 87.

atheistic, so that one did not have to deny the existence of God in order to be regarded as an atheist; such denial could be, and often was, inferred by the reader.

The closer one moves toward the present, however, the more congruent understandings of atheism appear to become. Alan C. Kors' analysis of atheism in early modern France suggests that by the eighteenth century, the definition of atheism was not so different from the modern understanding of the term. He states "the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries' use of *atheist* as a term of general abuse was increasingly out of fashion or, at the least, under attack in a learned world that was coming to pride itself on its precision."³⁵ According to Kors, several writers in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century defined atheism as a failure to recognize any God, divinity, or power on high, and distinguished this from mere irreligion. Nevertheless, identification is complicated by the existence of several varieties of heterodoxy and unbelief, including deism and pantheism,³⁶ and by a tendency among eighteenth-century writers to equate materialism with atheism. Most, if not all atheists were indeed materialists, but not all materialists were atheists. Claude-Adrien Helvétius (1715-1771), for example, whose books were condemned, was clearly a materialist; however, both of his banned works refer to God and Christianity in terms which suggest he was not an atheist. In *De L'Esprit* (1758), for instance, Helvétius remarks that all religions are human inventions, except for

³⁵ Alan C. Kors, *Atheism in France, 1650-1729 vol. 1: The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 49.

³⁶ Both deists and pantheists were opposed to organized, 'revealed' religion; they sought a rational, 'natural religion'. The essential difference between these positions is that deists believed in a supreme divine being who had created the world, while pantheists believed that the divine being *was* the world, i.e. was part of everything in nature. There was a fine line between pantheism and atheism in the eighteenth century due to the pervasive veneration of nature; however, for all their fixation on nature as the source of happiness, atheists did not regard nature as a divine being. Atheists, deists and pantheists could find much to agree on with respect to religion, but non-belief in the existence of a divine being of any kind sets the atheist apart.

Christianity.³⁷ In the posthumously-published *De L'Homme* (1772), he refers to God's wishes for mankind.³⁸ It is possible that Helvétius's comments on Christianity and God were disingenuous, but that kind of interpretation is precisely what I am attempting to avoid.

Since I am interested in the subjective dimension of committed atheism, rather than in analyzing the discourse of heterodoxy or unbelief in general, I have taken a narrow approach to selecting sources. I have classified any work which refers to the existence or worship of a Supreme Being or divine creator as most likely deist rather than atheist, and have therefore not included it. This means that works by several anti-clerical or anti-Christian figures of the Enlightenment, such as Voltaire, Diderot³⁹ and Rousseau, have been set aside. Most of the clandestine works that circulated in the eighteenth century were deist in nature rather than atheist, so they, too, have been excluded. It is, of course, possible that references to God or to a Supreme Being within an anti-clerical or anti-Christian work represent an internal conflict on the part of the author, who may really be an atheist but cannot or will not commit themselves to that position. Attempting to untangle such potential conflicts and 'real' beliefs would require esoteric reading, which, as I discuss in the historiographical section of this chapter, is deeply problematic; moreover, it would not help answer questions about what committed atheists thought.

³⁷ Claude-Adrien Helvétius, *De L'Esprit*, Discours II, ch. XVII (Paris: Chez Durand, 1758), 170.

³⁸ Claude-Adrien Helvétius, *De L'Homme, de ses Facultés Intellectuelles et de son Éducation* v. 1 (London, 1773), section 1, ch. 13, pp. 93-94.

³⁹ Denis Diderot was the most difficult figure to categorize. He is often described as an atheist, but his beliefs seem to have changed over time and are thus rather slippery. None of his works seemed to me to articulate clearly a committed atheist position, so, despite some misgivings, he was not included.

These rules have led to the necessary exclusion of some fascinating sources, such as the works collected as *Minora Clandestina* and Jacques-Louis Ménétra's *Journal of My Life*,⁴⁰ but it has had the benefit of providing a relatively clear dividing line between categories of texts. Deists and other anti-clerical or anti-Christian writers shared many views with atheists, and contributed to their arguments, but there is, I believe, a fundamental difference in world views between someone who thinks there is or may be a God, no matter how remote that God may be from daily human concerns, and someone who thinks there is not. Thus, while recognizing that atheism is only one position on a spectrum of unbelief, I have strived to avoid inappropriate proliferation of 'atheist' sources by maintaining a fairly strict definition of what qualifies as an atheist text.

Having said that, it is easier to exclude works than to decide what to include. These eighteenth-century texts rarely come out and say "I am an atheist" or "There is no God" in the direct fashion we are accustomed to from modern atheists. They express those ideas, but at times the expression is indirect. For my purposes, atheist texts are those which state that there is no God; that God, a Supreme Being, or divine creator is impossible; or imply that God does not exist, by asserting that the natural processes of matter and motion⁴¹ can account for the creation of everything in the universe. I have also included texts which refer to religion as a lie, illusion or madness, unless they fall into the deist category by also referring to natural religion or to the existence of God.

⁴⁰ Alain Mothu & Alain Sandrier, eds. *Minora Clandestina: Le Philosophe antichrétien et autres écrits iconoclastes de l'âge classique* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2003); Jacques-Louis Ménétra, *Journal of My Life*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

⁴¹ I.e., without requiring the initial intervention of a divine being of some kind.

Despite the limitations I have placed on my source base, I have selected sixteen works for analysis, ranging from the anonymous *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, first published in 1719, to the Baron d'Holbach's *La Morale Universelle*, published in 1776. The table included at the end of this section lists the texts, authors when known, and dates of composition or first publication when known. Chapters 3 and 4 introduce each text and author in more detail. Several texts are anonymous, or else their authorship is in dispute: this group of works consists of the *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, *Dissertation sur la Formation du Monde*, *Dissertation sur la Resurrection de la Chair*, and *Réflexions sur l'existence de l'âme et sur l'existence de Dieu*. Most of the texts' authors are known, and most were published in some form during the eighteenth century.

The corpus can be divided roughly into two halves: those written before 1747 circulated first as clandestine manuscripts before publication, or were never published. Most of the rest, beginning with Julien Offray de La Mettrie's *L'Homme Machine*, were written for publication. Two late texts — Dom Deschamps' *Le Mot et L'Énigme* and *Le Vrai Système* — were not published until the twentieth century. Of the seven known authors, two were members of the clergy: Jean Meslier was a rural priest and Dom Léger-Marie Deschamps was a Benedictine monk. Regarding the rest, César Chesneau Du Marsais, author of *Le Philosophe*, was a grammarian; Nicolas Fréret, author of *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*, was a historian and perpetual secretary of the Académie des Inscriptions; Julien Offray de La Mettrie, author of three works analyzed in this dissertation, was a physician. The Baron d'Holbach was a German nobleman who lived in Paris, hosted a famous salon, and wrote and translated numerous scientific works as

well as anti-religious treatises. His friend and collaborator, Jacques-André Naigeon, edited both d'Holbach's and Diderot's works, and wrote the *Discours Préliminaire* to d'Holbach's *Système de la Nature*. Known primarily as a man of letters, Naigeon contributed to the *Encyclopédie* and had a fruitful career during and after the French Revolution.

I have not attempted an exhaustive survey of all atheist texts. Some works, such as *Essais sur la recherche de la vérité*, an anonymous clandestine manuscript composed before 1728, or *Jordanus Brunus Redivivus*, published anonymously in 1771,⁴² do not address the subjective dimensions of identity and ideology that I am interested in, being focused instead on presenting arguments against the existence of God and/or an immortal soul. No doubt some texts have been missed, and other scholars may dispute the classification of certain texts as atheist or not atheist. There is an unavoidable subjective aspect to the classification of such works, and there will always be room for debate over this corpus of texts. I have attempted to avoid privileging the well-known works over more obscure texts, although major treatises have, necessarily, received more attention where they have more to say on a relevant topic. Finally, as I discuss below, the classification of individuals in the past as atheists is a treacherous endeavour, and absolute certainty regarding what an individual believed is not possible. We should not assume that someone who writes an atheist work at one point in their life has always been an atheist or will remain one, although it must be said that none of these texts indicate the presence of doubts about the validity of atheism.

⁴² See the critical editions and introductory remarks in *Philosophes sans Dieu: Textes Athées Clandestins du XVIIIe Siècle*, eds. Alain Mothu & Gianluca Mori (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2010).

Eighteenth-Century Atheist Texts

Date	Text	Author
1716-1720	Possible composition period of <i>Le Philosophe</i>	César Chesnau Du Marsais (1676-1756)
1719	First edition of <i>Traité des Trois Imposteurs</i>	Disputed: possibly Jan Vroesen or Knights of Jubilation
1720-1725	Possible composition period of <i>Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe</i>	Nicholas Fréret (1688-1749)
1729	Discovery of secret manuscript <i>Mémoire des Pensées et Sentiments</i>	Jean Meslier (1664-1729)
1738	Date usually attributed to <i>Dissertation sur la Formation du Monde</i>	Unknown
1743	Date usually attributed to <i>Dissertation sur la Resurrection de la Chair</i>	Unknown
1743	Publication of <i>Réflexions sur l'existence de l'âme et sur l'existence de Dieu</i> in <i>Nouvelles libertés de penser</i>	Unknown
1747	Publication of <i>L'Homme Machine</i>	Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709-1751)
1748	Publication of <i>Anti-Senèque</i>	Julien Offray de La Mettrie
1750	Publication of <i>Discours Préliminaire</i> in collection of La Mettrie's philosophical works	Julien Offray de La Mettrie
1768	Publication of <i>Lettres à Eugénie</i>	Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789)
1770	Publication of <i>Système de la Nature</i> with <i>Discours Préliminaire</i> by Jacques-André Naigeon	Baron d'Holbach; <i>Discours Préliminaire</i> by Jacques-André Naigeon (1738-1810)
1770-1774	Possible composition period of <i>Le Mot et L'Énigme</i> and <i>Le Vrai Système</i>	Dom Deschamps (1716-1774)
1773	Publication of <i>Système Social</i>	Baron d'Holbach
1776	Publication of <i>La Morale Universelle</i>	Baron d'Holbach

I have consulted either original editions or critical published editions of the atheist texts. When citing original editions, I have retained their spelling and punctuation. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

Historiography

The potential number of scholarly sources for a study of atheism is vast — effectively infinite, as Alan C. Kors put it in 1990, in the preface to his groundbreaking book *Atheism in France, 1650-1729*. Kors was reflecting on his awareness of “how many areas of scholarly specialization in intellectual, religious, and institutional history this book intersects, and, thus, of the countless monographs and studies that should inform it.”⁴³ The scholarly literature on atheism has, of course, only expanded since Kors made this comment, due in part to the surge of interest in atheism sparked by the post-9/11 New Atheist movement. As the editors of a new essay collection on atheism and deism note, “atheism is suddenly hyper-fashionable.”⁴⁴ Scholarship on atheism ranges across many fields of study, including philosophy, theology, history, and sociology; its chronological and geographical scope encompasses everything from ancient Greece to modern China. Much of the scholarship on eighteenth-century and early modern European atheism is found in book chapters, essay collections, conference proceedings, and journal articles.

⁴³ Kors, *Atheism in France*, x.

⁴⁴ Wayne Hudson, Diego Lucci & Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth, “Introduction: Atheism and Deism Revived,” in *Atheism and Deism Revalued: Heterodox Religious Identities in Britain, 1650-1800*, eds. *idem* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 1.

There is a growing number of popular histories of atheism, but there are few scholarly monographs devoted to the subject, and fewer to early modern atheism, with eighteenth-century atheism comprising a further subset.

One must seek out scholarship on early modern atheism within a complex and seemingly boundless body of work that includes studies of individual thinkers; theology; philosophy; literature; science; the Reformation; the Renaissance; toleration; witchcraft; pornography; censorship; clandestine literature; the Enlightenment; the French Revolution; secularization; and so on. Surveying the fragmented scholarship on atheism comprehensively in a single chapter is not possible; this chapter will therefore provide an overview of key issues within the historiography of atheism, with reference primarily to recently published books.

As I have suggested already, the major debates about atheism's history have become sterile, focused too narrowly on questions of identification, 'causes,' sources and impact. One reason for this narrow focus is that, despite the wide range of intersecting fields of study, the history of early modern atheism remains, for the most part, the domain of intellectual history and the history of ideas. The work of Robert Darnton on publishing and the book trade in Enlightenment France, and Carlo Ginzburg's microhistory *The Cheese and the Worms*,⁴⁵ have both had significant impacts on histories of atheism, but the field is still otherwise nearly untouched by the insights of cultural history, and any

⁴⁵ E.g. Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*. Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John & Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

deployments of theoretical approaches are left implicit, if present at all. Gender is almost entirely absent as a subject of inquiry or mode of analysis.

There are, of course, many legitimate kinds of historical enquiry, and many legitimate approaches. The adoption of, say, feminist Foucauldian discursive analysis, or of Derridean deconstructionism, is hardly mandatory, and the patient archival work of historians such as Silvia Berti on untangling the complex manuscript and publication histories of the *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*,⁴⁶ or rational reconstructions of particular thinkers' ideas, should not be dismissed simply because they lack fashionable theoretical frameworks. Nevertheless, the lack of engagement with a wider range of approaches has led to an over-emphasis on a limited set of questions that intersects in problematic ways with larger narratives of the Enlightenment, modernity and secularism.

One reason for the absence of theoretical frameworks in histories of atheism is that the scholars who do use such approaches have not yet taken much interest in atheism despite its obviously transgressive nature. I can only speculate that one factor is that atheist authors were elite men and thus have been of little interest to, for instance, feminist scholars. Jean-Pierre Cavaillé's recent scathing criticism of the field for its focus on elite irreligion suggests that there are indeed political considerations at work.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ In addition to analysing the *Traité*'s content and intellectual context, Berti has done impressive work on establishing its authorship. See e.g. "The First Edition of the *Traité des trois imposteurs* and its Debt to Spinoza's Ethics," in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, eds. Michael Hunter & David Wootton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); "Scepticism and the 'Traité des trois imposteurs'," in *Scepticism and Irreligion in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, eds. Richard H. Popkin & Arjo Vanderjagt (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), 216-229; and "*L'Esprit de Spinoza* : ses origines et sa première édition dans leur contexte spinozien," in *Heterodoxy, spinozism, and free thought in early-eighteenth-century Europe: Studies on the Traité des trois imposteurs*, eds. Silvia Berti, Françoise Charles-Daubert, & Richard H. Popkin (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1996).

⁴⁷ Jean-Pierre Cavaillé, Foreword to Federico Barbierato's *The Inquisitor in the Hat Shop: Inquisition, Forbidden Books and Unbelief in Early Modern Venice* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), xiii-xix.

Another possible reason for the apparent lack of interest in atheism outside intellectual history circles is the frequent (and unfair) characterization of atheist texts as unoriginal and poorly written — hardly a recommendation to those looking for interesting research topics.

Other factors have also had an impact on the field. In his classic essay “New Histories of Atheism,” David Wootton wrote that narrower standards regarding historical evidence, and changing conceptions of the historian’s role, had made the study of unbelief “intellectually disreputable,” so it had withered away.⁴⁸ Very recently, Wayne Hudson *et al.* have issued a new call for revisionist histories of atheism (and deism) in terms which suggest that not much progress has been made since Wootton’s survey of the field in 1992.⁴⁹ Finally, judging from the absence of gender analysis, cultural theory and allied approaches, it appears that intellectual historians have not, on the whole, seen these other fields as relevant to the history of atheism. This dissertation’s focus on ideology, identity and gender within statements of committed atheism blends cultural and intellectual history without claiming one discipline is more important than the other. Although informed by the historiography of atheism, my research, which attempts to answer very different questions, tends to run in parallel to it rather than engage directly with its debates.

⁴⁸ David Wootton, “New Histories of Atheism,” in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, eds. Michael Hunter & David Wootton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 18-21.

⁴⁹ Hudson *et al.*, “Introduction.” For another critical survey of atheism historiography, see Dorothea Weltecke, “*Derr Narr Spricht: Es Ist Kein Gott*”: *Atheismus, Unglauben und Glaubenszweifel vom 12. Jahrhundert bis zur Neuzeit* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2010).

Turning now to some of those debates and challenges within atheism historiography, one longstanding problem is whether atheism has a history prior to the appearance of documentary statements of unbelief in the eighteenth century. Did it exist in earlier periods of European history, and if so, how many atheists were there? Who was an atheist? If atheism did exist, was it the same as modern atheism? How did it arise? These are extremely difficult questions due to a lack of clear documentary evidence to support empirically based conclusions.

The historical essays in the recently-published *Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, which provide up-to-date research syntheses, tell us that although atheism existed as a concept in the past, that concept meant different things in different contexts; they also tell us that while atheists probably existed, there is little direct evidence of them prior to the turn of the eighteenth century. David Sedley writes that “In the four centuries down to the beginning of the Roman empire in 31 BCE, disbelief in the existence of gods was a recognizable if rare stance. Yet we know of virtually no public intellectual during that period who displayed it with complete openness.”⁵⁰ Mark Edwards, dealing with the first millennium of the Common Era, remarks that

In all disputations the true, or literal, atheist is an unseen but ineradicable presence like a ticklish cough in the audience that, although it is never located, is so persistent that it almost comes to be heard as part of the music. The voices that make up the choir, however, may be sceptical, cynical, or Christian in both

⁵⁰ David Sedley, “From the Pre-Socratic to the Hellenistic Age,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, eds. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 150. See also A.B. Drachmann, *Atheism in Pagan Antiquity* (London: Gylendahl, 1922); Glenn W. Most, “Philosophy and religion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Philosophy*, ed. David Sedley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Jan Bremmer, “Atheism in antiquity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Tim Whitmarsh’s argument in *Battling the Gods* that atheism in ancient Greece and Rome was a robust, if marginalized, part of those cultures is based on re-interpretation, not new evidence.

ancient and modern senses of these terms, without ever hitting the note of unequivocal disbelief.⁵¹

Medievalist Dorothea Weltecke suggests that “modern atheism developed within a specific discourse, which rests on medieval roots but which started with a radical reshuffle of medieval arguments. There are good sources to argue, however, that there were people who did not believe in the existence of a God or gods.”⁵² Finally, Denis J.-J. Robichaud states that “there are no clear records for self-professed atheists at the twilight of the Renaissance and the Reformation,”⁵³ and Alan C. Kors remarks that the atheist was “most often a foil rather than an encountered mind until the turn of the eighteenth century.”⁵⁴

One consequence of this lack of clear evidence for the existence of atheists⁵⁵ prior to the later early modern era is that systematic, committed atheism *appears* to have

⁵¹ Mark Edwards, “The First Millennium,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, eds. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 152.

⁵² Dorothea Weltecke, “The Medieval Period,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, eds. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 176. Although beyond the scope of this dissertation, there is some intriguing research on medieval unbelief, including studies of unbelief in the Islamic world. The volume *Atheismus im Mittelalter und in der Renaissance*, eds. Friedrich Niewöhner & Olaf Pluta (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999), contains essays on Jewish philosophy, Islamic freethinkers, Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, Pietro Pomponazzi, and atheism and witchcraft, to give some indication of the range of medieval research topics. Weltecke has criticized elsewhere the ideological reading of sources and the tendency to impose anachronistic meanings on the past in order to find atheism where it might not in fact exist: see “Beyond religion: on the lack of belief during the central and late Middle Ages,” in *Religion and its Other: Secular and Sacral Concepts and Practices in Interaction*, Heike Bock et al., eds. (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2008).

⁵³ Denis J.-J. Robichaud, “Renaissance and Reformation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, eds. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 179.

⁵⁴ Alan C. Kors, “The Age of Enlightenment,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, eds. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 195.

⁵⁵ The issue over whether there were atheists before the eighteenth century echoes, in rather amusing ways, the question of the existence of God. My own view regarding the problem is that atheists have probably always existed, but I doubt that there were many of them. If one takes a very long view, it seems likely that at some point in human pre-history, we were all ‘atheists’.

emerged quite suddenly during the Enlightenment and at the brink of modernity. It also appears, then, to fit into a narrative that links modernity with secularization and argues that religion has (for good or ill) lost its hold on modern societies. The problem is that neither the existence nor non-existence of meaningful numbers of pre-Enlightenment atheists can be proven, which both complicates the narrative that suggests atheism is a modern phenomenon (and a marker of modernity) and provides considerable room for historians to atheize (or de-atheize) figures of the past. My decision to work on a corpus of explicitly atheist texts from the eighteenth century was made in order to avoid the pitfalls of dealing with uncertain sources: texts whose atheism must be read between the lines or against the grain are not, it seems to me, reliable sources of knowledge about what atheists believed.

Lucien Febvre's argument that atheism was not thinkable prior to the seventeenth century provides a useful entry point to further discussion of the problems of narrative and methodology in atheism historiography. Febvre, stimulated by Abel Lefranc's suggestion in his introduction to a 1922 edition of *Pantagruel* that Rabelais was a militant atheist,⁵⁶ embarked on an analysis of sixteenth-century literary texts and concluded that Christianity was such a dominant force in sixteenth-century lives that to deny it would require

a veritable cluster of coherent reasons lending each other support ... To speak of rationalism and free thought when we are dealing with an age when the most intelligent of men, the most learned, and the most daring were truly incapable of

⁵⁶ Lucien Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*, trans. Beatrice Gottlieb (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 14.

finding any support either in philosophy or science against a religion whose domination was universal is to speak of an illusion.⁵⁷

According to Febvre, atheism as anything more than a convenient term of abuse for one's rivals would not be thinkable until the development of experimental and critical method.⁵⁸

In response, Alan C. Kors' study of the sources of French atheism argued that it was not the scientific method that created the conditions of 'thinkability' for atheism, but orthodox theology itself. While there is more to Kors' analysis than this single argument, it is his suggestion that philosophical atheism arose out of the "theological fratricide" between Aristotelians and Cartesians that has had the most impact on the historiography. The debate between these two philosophical camps, which, unlike earlier scholastic debates, took place as "a very public brawl fought *extra muros*," articulated arguments against the existence of God in the course of attacking each other's arguments *for* the existence of God. In Kors' words, "the great debate educed, in certain minds, the *évidence* for disbelief."⁵⁹ David Leech's recent study of Henry More builds on Kors' argument, focusing on how More's attempts to construct an anti-Cartesian defence of the immortality of the soul inadvertently undermined the concept of the soul's immortality

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 352-353.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 462.

⁵⁹ Kors, *Atheism in France*, 268. Kors has apparently completed two new volumes, *Naturalism and Disbelief in France, 1650-1729* and *Epicureans and Atheists in France, 1650-1729*, which are to be published by Cambridge University Press at some future date.

and thus contributed to the development of atheism.⁶⁰ Winfried Schröder, however, has challenged the idea that atheism was an accidental by-product of theistic debate, arguing instead that the foundations of eighteenth-century atheism are to be found in the arguments developed in the clandestine literature of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.⁶¹

Recent studies of the influence of Lucretius and Epicureanism on Renaissance culture suggest another source of atheist ideas, although it is clear that reading or even translating Lucretius did not necessarily lead to atheism. Ada Palmer's examination of Renaissance readers' notes on Lucretius's Epicurean poem *De rerum natura*, which was rediscovered in 1417, indicates that readers approached the work with a variety of purposes and focused on different parts of it depending on those purposes; thus, we cannot assume that the fact of having read Lucretius meant that an individual was interested in atheism.⁶² All these varied interpretations and possibilities suggest that there was no single 'cause,' necessary condition, or source of atheism.

⁶⁰ David Leech, *The Hammer of the Cartesians: Henry More's Philosophy of Spirit and the Origins of Modern Atheism* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013). Leech's stated purpose is not only to test Kors' theory, but also to provide "conceptual resources" for contemporary theistic philosophers against atheist philosophers of religion. See pp. 229-239.

⁶¹ Winfried Schröder, *Ursprünge des Atheismus: Untersuchungen zur Metaphysik- und Religionskritik des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 2012). Federico Barbierato criticizes Kors' argument on similar grounds in *The Inquisitor in the Hat Shop: Inquisition, Forbidden Books and Unbelief in Early Modern Venice* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 84-86.

⁶² Ada Palmer, *Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2014). See also Alison Brown, *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2010) and Catherine Wilson, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Stephen Greenblatt's Pulitzer-Prize-winning *The Swerve: How The World Became Modern* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2012) is a straightforward narrative of how the rediscovery of *De rerum natura* made modernity possible. For Lucy Hutchinson's translation of *De rerum natura* and valuable commentary on her work and its context, see *The Works of Lucy Hutchinson vol. 1: The Translation of Lucretius*, eds. Reid Barbour & David Norbrook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

The view that atheism, or unbelief more broadly, was unthinkable until the (early) modern period has been echoed recently by the philosopher Charles Taylor. In his monumental and influential book *A Secular Age*, Taylor argues that (Christian) belief was “axiomatic” prior to about 1500, when the Protestant Reformation introduced religious plurality; this, combined with other developments such as the Scientific Revolution, created the conditions for unbelief.⁶³ Gavin Hyman, explicitly adapting Taylor’s position, has argued recently that “atheism is itself a distinctively modern phenomenon ... constituted by modern philosophical presuppositions and ... made intelligible by a modern epistemology.”⁶⁴ Both Taylor and Hyman are concerned with correcting “the notion that the emergence of the secular was somehow the result of a process of teleological necessity.”⁶⁵ Charles Taylor has lucidly criticized what he calls “subtraction stories,” which explain modernity and secularity

by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge. What emerges from this process—modernity or secularity—is to be understood in terms of underlying features of human nature which were there all along, but had been impeded by what is now set aside.⁶⁶

Taylor’s and Hyman’s critiques highlight the intersection between histories of atheism and of secularity and quite rightly point to a problem. As Hudson *et al.* have also noted, “the existence and spread of atheism and deism came to be taken for granted by

⁶³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 2007).

⁶⁴ Gavin Hyman, *A Short History of Atheism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 155.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 22.

historians, who saw the growth of critical attitudes toward established religion as a crucial step on the road toward modernity.”⁶⁷ Further, “in recent historiography ‘atheism’ is often used as an alternative label for thinkers who had heterodox, deistic or sceptical views instead of a category of its own. What is more, some historians with secularist sympathies deploy ‘atheism’ as a term of approval to characterize the thought of a mind that has awakened to the delusions of religion.”⁶⁸ Silvia Berti suggests that, perhaps because of a scarcity of documents, the history of atheism and unbelief more generally “has often been written in a distinctly ideological manner,” as secular ideology has sought its own origins.⁶⁹ The obvious danger in looking to the history of atheism to explain modernity and secularity — assuming, that is, a positive view of modernity and secularity⁷⁰ — is the risk of entrapment in triumphalist teleology and a concomitant desire to identify atheist heroes and make atheism a more significant phenomenon in the past than it actually was.

For example, Mitchell Stephens’ narrative history of atheism, *Imagine There’s No Heaven: How Atheism Helped Create the Modern World*, argues straightforwardly that atheists have been responsible for revolutionary advances in science, politics, philosophy,

⁶⁷ Hudson *et al.*, “Introduction,” 2.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁹ Silvia Berti, “At the Roots of Unbelief,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56, no. 4 (Oct., 1995): 555.

⁷⁰ Not everyone is enamoured of modern secularity. For example, Brad S. Gregory’s *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 2012) presents a tragic narrative in which the fracturing of Christianity leads to the problems of secular modernity. Gregory, clearly, would like to be able to turn back the clock and restore Roman Catholicity. Charles Taylor, too, devotes much of his work on secularity and modernity to diagnosis of what he perceives to be their problems. In addition to *A Secular Age*, see *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) and *The Malaise of Modernity* (Concord ON: Anansi, 1991).

art, and psychology from ancient to modern times.⁷¹ It is a “subtraction story” of martyrs and heroes that, while acknowledging varieties of disbelief, tends strongly to assimilate those varieties under the term ‘atheism.’ An uncritical reading would give one the impression that any kind of progress ever made by humans should be credited to an atheist. This is an extreme example, but it illustrates the necessity of a critical approach to sources, sensitivity to the shifting meanings of atheism, and greater (or indeed any) reflexivity on the part of the historian. Readers, too, must be reflexive and critical, alert to the ways in which conceptual assumptions and ideological commitments shape research on atheism and our reception of that research, as these assumptions and commitments are not always stated explicitly.

Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini explain some of the issues that are at stake and highlight a second historiographical intersection point:

secularism is central to the Enlightenment narrative in which reason progressively frees itself from the bonds of religion and in so doing liberates humanity. This narrative poses religion as a regressive force in the world, one that in its dogmatism is not amenable to change, dialogue, or nonviolent conflict resolution. This Enlightenment narrative separates secularism from religion and through this separation claims that secularism, like reason, is universal (in contrast to the particularism of religion). However, this narrative also places secularism in a particular tradition, one that is located in Europe and grows out of Christianity.⁷²

⁷¹ Mitchell Stephens, *Imagine There's No Heaven: How Atheism Helped Create the Modern World* (Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

⁷² Janet R. Jakobsen & Ann Pellegrini, “Introduction: Times Like These,” in *Secularisms*, eds. *idem* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2008), 2.

Jonathan Israel's massive, multi-volume opus on the Enlightenment⁷³ presents one version of this narrative. Israel argues forcefully for the existence of a radical Enlightenment driven by atheistic Spinozism that led directly, despite conservative resistance, to the positive aspects of modernity, such as democracy, religious tolerance, secularism and sexual egalitarianism. Israel's work is valuable for its explanation of the intellectual, institutional, and political contexts in which radical ideas were debated, but it is also controversial and deeply problematic in several ways,⁷⁴ not least because of his preoccupation with tracing the origins of all that is good in modernity to the philosophy of Spinoza, which he asserts bluntly to have been undeniably atheist, despite Spinoza's own denial of atheism.⁷⁵

Israel makes it clear in *Democratic Enlightenment*, the third and most strident of the three volumes, that he believes the radical philosophy of Spinoza *et al.* (including Bayle, Diderot, d'Holbach, and many others) is the only "coherent" and valid basis for society, and that our modern secular society is under threat from anti-secularism and

⁷³ The three volumes of Israel's huge Enlightenment 'trilogy,' all published by Oxford University Press, are: *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (2001); *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (2006); and *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750-1790* (2011).

⁷⁴ Israel has been criticized strongly for, among other things, his sweeping dismissal of social and cultural history. See e.g. Anthony J. La Vopa, "A New Intellectual History? Jonathan Israel's Enlightenment," *The Historical Journal* 52, 3 (September 2009); Antoine Lilti, "Comment écrit-on l'histoire intellectuelle des Lumières? Spinozisme, radicalisme et philosophie," *Annales ESC* 64 (2009). For a recent discussion, see Vincenzo Ferrone, "Afterword," *The Enlightenment: History of an Idea*, trans. Elisabetta Tarantino (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁷⁵ *Contra* Israel, not all scholars agree that Spinoza was an atheist. For Spinoza's denial of the charge, and for a clear and concise explication of Spinoza's context and arguments, see Steven Nadler, *A Book Forged In Hell: Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011). As is clear from the title, Nadler's primary interest in this book is, like Israel's, in linking Spinoza to the origins of secular modernity.

postmodernism/moral relativism. His trilogy presents a grand narrative intended to instruct today's secular, democratic egalitarians in the history and importance of their ideas as a means of bolstering their ability to withstand attacks.

Secularism and atheism are not the same thing,⁷⁶ and the strictly anti-religious conception of the Enlightenment has been challenged by historians positing the existence of religious Enlightenments⁷⁷ or arguing for the emergence of a “middle ground between religious culture and Enlightenment thought,”⁷⁸ but the three terms — atheism, secularism and Enlightenment — remain tightly intertwined. For example, Mark Curran's book *Atheism, Religion and Enlightenment in Pre-Revolutionary Europe* focuses on the atheist Baron d'Holbach and the reception to his works in eighteenth-century France, arguing that d'Holbach's anti-religious publications generated a considerable conservative response that shows the eighteenth-century public sphere was “as much a

⁷⁶ See discussion below for the issue of defining atheism. The meanings of secularism and secularization, and the validity of the secularization thesis, are subjects of extensive contemporary debate. For various recent perspectives on these topics, see, e.g., in addition to Charles Taylor's numerous works, Janet R. Jakobsen & Ann Pellegrini, eds., *Secularisms* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2008); Michael Warner et al., eds., *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994); Karel Dobbelaar, “The Meaning and Scope of Secularization,” *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Peter B. Clarke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Jürgen Habermas et al., *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2010); Eduardo Mendieta & Jonathan VanAntwerpen, eds., *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2011); and Hans Joas, *Faith as an Option: Possible Futures for Christianity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

⁷⁷ See e.g. David Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton University Press, 2008). Vincenzo Ferrone expresses deep reservations regarding modern Catholic attempts to Christianize the Enlightenment, and the idea of a Catholic Enlightenment, in “Postmodern Anti-Enlightenment Positions” and “Afterword,” *The Enlightenment: History of an Idea, op. cit.*

⁷⁸ Charly Coleman, “Religion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the French Enlightenment*, ed. Daniel Brewer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 105.

breeding ground for modernising Christian and conservative thought as a space that incubated oppositional and secular ideologies.”⁷⁹ While Curran’s research provides a great deal of interesting and useful information about the place of d’Holbach’s works in the eighteenth-century public sphere, his main purpose is to rehabilitate conservative authors, question the idea that print was secularized, and suggest that there was a Christian Enlightenment:⁸⁰ the anti-religious attacks of d’Holbach led to the modernization of Christian discourse, making the baron’s endeavour seemingly self-defeating if modernization is taken to have helped Christianity survive.

In effect, Curran uses a study of an atheist author to downplay the role of atheism and secularism in the Enlightenment, illustrating Hudson *et al.*’s point that

the nature of atheism ... goes to the heart of contemporary attempts to reinterpret the Enlightenment. If it is relatively simple to determine who were atheists ... in this period and *if atheism, broadly conceived, was the future of humanity preappearing in repressive societies*, then those who see the Enlightenment as an historical *telos* gain considerable support. If, however, atheism [is] rather difficult to study in this period because the issues at the time were not the issues now nor even the issues which the modern historian might initially assume, then this goes to how the case for the global significance of the Enlightenment should be made [my emphasis].⁸¹

They go on to reassure the reader that they “support the view that the Enlightenment was of enormous significance for humanity and a turning point in global history,” but “are also conscious that detailed historical scholarship in this area requires considerable

⁷⁹ Mark Curran, *Atheism, Religion and Enlightenment in Pre-Revolutionary Europe* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Royal Historical Society, 2012), 6-7.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁸¹ Hudson *et al.*, “Introduction,” 3.

historical sensitivity, not least because actual contexts are often different from those many historians tend to assume.”⁸² It is apparent that the main issues for Hudson *et al.* are methodological. They are not challenging the grand narrative itself, only how it is told; they agree with Israel’s “outstanding reassertion of the importance of the Enlightenment and its role in making the modern world possible,” and with his insistence on the “danger of losing the main narrative as if endless refinements of one thinker’s views or arguments were all that mattered.”⁸³ Neither Israel nor Hudson *et al.* reflect on the *a priori* commitments involved in constructing and revisioning historical narratives,⁸⁴ nor on the construction of religion as a threat to modernity.

I shall return at this point to the methodological challenges faced by historians of atheism, which I have introduced in the previous chapter sections but not yet explored in detail. Early modern atheism is, in fact, “rather difficult to study”; Michael Hunter and David Wootton go so far as to describe it as “a particularly treacherous area of study.”⁸⁵ As the historical essays in the *Oxford Handbook of Atheism* take pains to point out, there is a lack of clear, documentary evidence for atheism prior to the eighteenth century, and even then, there are few avowedly atheist texts. The historian who wishes to identify atheists and atheist ideas outside of those few texts has a problematic source base to work

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸⁴ See esp. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) and *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

⁸⁵ Michael Hunter & David Wootton, “Introduction,” in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, eds. *idem* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 3.

with: philosophical, political or theological texts containing what *may* be atheist ideas; denunciations of atheism and atheists, found in a variety of sources; anecdotal references to encounters with atheists; and trial records. There is no doubt that expressing atheist and other heterodox ideas in early modern Europe was dangerous. It is reasonable to assume, then, that most unbelievers concealed their true beliefs to at least some degree. The historian of atheism must necessarily uncover those true beliefs somehow, and the more important one believes atheism to have been in relation to the narratives of secularism, modernity and the Enlightenment, the more atheism one must uncover; conversely, the more atheism that is uncovered, the more important it appears to be.

This logic effectively forces the historian to produce atheism, if only to justify the time and effort spent researching it (the historian who does *not* wish to find early modern atheism and atheists, or is sceptical of the possibility of doing so, is bound to a rather different logic), and can lead to uncritical readings of sources as well as to what Nigel Smith has described as double vision. In his essay on atheism and radical religion in seventeenth-century England, Smith notes that

historians of mid-seventeenth-century English radicalism (political and religious) are fond of repeating an accusation often made at that time — that those whose opinions and behaviour put them at an unacceptably anti-establishment, anti-orthodox, or democratic extreme were atheists, even if they claimed to believe in a (Christian) God ... there is a double viewpoint at work here: some historians accept an affirmation and a language of faith in radicalism, but they cannot help but agree that the hostile contemporary view was, to a greater or lesser extent, true — that some radicals were atheists.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Nigel Smith, “The Charge of Atheism and the Language of Radical Speculation, 1640-1660,” in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, eds. Michael Hunter & David Wootton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 131-132.

Smith points out that “whatever the expressions and ritualized practices of the Ranters actually were, most people understood them in large part through the hostile and immoral depiction of the libertine atheist”; historians with double vision are thus conflating the stereotype with reality. Further, the persecutory context led radicals to stress their orthodoxy, which means that “sometimes we have no means of knowing what the religious radical ‘really thought.’”⁸⁷

The problem of not knowing what someone in the past ‘really thought’ is not limited to radicals or putative atheists. It is a persistent issue in any study of belief or unbelief, and in studies of other aspects of experience. Scholars of sexuality, for instance, encounter similar difficulties, especially regarding homosexuality (more properly, sodomy), which was also dangerous. How should one interpret the sexuality and sexual behaviour of a group or individual in the past, when exposure as a sodomite could lead to execution, and therefore expressions of ‘homosexuality’ had to be veiled?⁸⁸ The historian of sexuality can at least look for evidence of behaviour, but there is no necessary relationship between atheism and any particular behaviour,⁸⁹ despite what early modern

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 132-133.

⁸⁸ On early modern homosexuality, see e.g. John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Robert MacCubbin, ed., *'Tis Nature's Fault: Unauthorized Sexuality during the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); Jonathan Goldberg, ed., *Queering the Renaissance* (Duke University Press, 1994); Thomas Betteridge, *Sodomy in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2002); Kenneth Borris and G.S. Rousseau, eds., *The Sciences of Homosexuality in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2008); Jeffrey Merrick, ed., *Homosexuality in Early Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), and of course Michel Foucault's three-volume *History of Sexuality*.

⁸⁹ Strictly speaking, there is also no necessary relationship between sexual behaviour and what we would call sexuality in the sense of sexual identity.

sources say about the monstrosity of atheists. Even trial records may not reveal genuine (un)belief: as scholars of early modern witchcraft are well aware, interrogations, especially under torture, tended to produce ‘witches’ through processes that have been extensively analyzed from a variety of theoretical perspectives.⁹⁰ Only an extremely incautious historian would take early modern witchcraft confessions, demonological treatises, or narrative accounts of trials, at face value. It has been easier, perhaps, for witchcraft scholars to embrace critical perspectives on their sources because they are, for the most part, sceptical regarding the reality of witchcraft. No one would argue today that the men and women accused of witchcraft in early modern Europe were actually flying to the Sabbath and engaging in orgies with the Devil.⁹¹

Historians of atheism are not so sceptical regarding the reality of their subject; atheism is always already ‘real’, even when it may be different from the modern variety and when it may not be ‘thinkable’ by everyone. This may explain a certain readiness to

⁹⁰ This does not mean that witchcraft scholars are paragons of interpretative virtue, or that all of the perspectives are equally valuable; scholars in this field do, however, at least think about issues related to their sources. As a very brief sample of relevant literature on these issues, see: Lara Apps & Andrew Gow, *Male Witches in Early Modern Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); Stuart Clark, *Thinking With Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); *idem*, ed., *Languages of Witchcraft: Narrative, Ideology and Meaning in Early Modern Culture* (Houndmills: MacMillan, 2001); Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (London: Routledge, 1996); Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus & the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 1994); Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Marion Gibson, *Reading Witchcraft: Stories of Early English Witches* (London: Routledge, 1999); Marko Nenonen & Raisa Maria Toivo, eds., *Writing Witch-Hunt Histories: Challenging the Paradigm* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

⁹¹ But note the considerable scholarship on popular magic from the ancient to the modern world, which shows conclusively that magic use was widespread, and suggests that at least some of the ‘witches’ were not entirely innocent. As a very brief sample, see e.g. Owen Davies, *Popular Magic: Cunning-folk in English History* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2007); Richard Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer’s Manual of the Fifteenth Century* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998 [Sutton, 1997]); Guido Ruggiero, *Binding Passions: Tales of Magic, Marriage, and Power at the End of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Marvin W. Meyer & Richard Smith, eds., *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Matthew W. Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 2001).

accept denunciations, depositions and confessions as transparent records of atheism.

Nicholas Davidson, for example, writes that “inquisitors regularly uncovered individuals — not always well-educated — who admitted their inability to believe in immortality or the afterlife.” He cites several denunciations to the Inquisitions, some of which resulted in executions, for such crimes as stating that heaven, hell and purgatory were merely fantasies of friars and priests. Davidson accepts these denunciations as evidence of a “convergence of learned and non-academic thought ... among attitudes to immortality.”⁹²

They may very well be evidence of such a convergence; however, it is not clear from Davidson’s presentation whether the convergence has taken place in the minds of the denouncers or in the minds of the accused. He does not question whether the accused actually made the statements contained in the denunciation, where the denunciations came from, what might have motivated them, or how the inquisitorial process might have turned denunciations into death sentences.

Georges Minois, in his short study of the *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, argues from the proliferating reports of blasphemy and atheism to their real existence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, stating that “the renewed outbreak of blasphemy is attested by too many sources for us to doubt it.”⁹³ Ironically, this ‘where there’s smoke there’s fire’ argument parallels neatly the argument in the *Malleus maleficarum*, the notorious

⁹² Nicholas Davidson, “Atheism in Italy, 1500-1700,” in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, eds. Michael Hunter & David Wootton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 64-65.

⁹³ Georges Minois, *The Atheist’s Bible: The Most Dangerous Book That Never Existed*, trans. Lys Ann Weiss (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012), 44. His approach to evidence of atheism is similarly loose in *Histoire de l’Athéisme: les incroyants dans le monde occidental des origines à nos jours* (Paris: Fayard, 1998).

fifteenth-century witch-hunting manual, that the existence of witches cannot be doubted because it is so widely attested. What makes Minois' acceptance of the sources attesting to the spread of blasphemy so striking is that he refers throughout the book to the Christian fascination with the myth of a book on the three impostors (Jesus, Moses and Mohammed) as a psychosis.⁹⁴ Minois does not explain why historians should trust sources written by people in the grip of a psychosis.

In *The Inquisitor in the Hat Shop*, Federico Barbierato presents a much more convincing case for the widespread presence of unbelief in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Venice, based on deep immersion in the records of the Venetian Holy Office. The mass of evidence for popular engagement with heterodox ideas and attitudes, including atheism, is impressive; however, Barbierato, though aware that Inquisition records are not 'objective,' does not address the potential problems of those sources beyond a footnote reference to other scholars' discussions of them.⁹⁵ Until the final chapter of his otherwise excellent book, he reads the trial records as if they were a transparent window onto the past. In this final chapter, which deals with the trial of Bortolo Zorzi, a hatter, Barbierato at last gives the reader some glimpses into the ways in which the depositions were produced, and the defence strategies employed,⁹⁶ but he ignores the role of the interrogators, so that one cannot see how the questions might have shaped the testimonies of the accused and the witnesses. Closer analysis of what questions were asked, in what

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, e.g. p. 138.

⁹⁵ Federico Barbierato, *The Inquisitor in the Hat Shop: Inquisition, Forbidden Books and Unbelief in Early Modern Venice* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 12.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 304 & 327.

order, and how people did and did not resist the label of heterodoxy would refine Barbierato's arguments concerning the transmission of heterodox ideas and their importance in Venetian culture.

Alan C. Kors, one of the foremost historians of early modern atheism, has also criticized the tendency to accept sources uncritically, noting in his discussion of François Berriot's two-volume study *Athéismes et athéistes au XVIe siècle en France* that Berriot's evidence, drawn from anathematizations of atheism, revealed a "behavioral and normative, not conceptual and cognitive" portrait of the atheist, despite his claim to have identified an atheistic 'catechism' in the sixteenth century. Kors suggests that the historian should not be as "precipitous" as early moderns were in inferring belief from behaviour:

the atheist is portrayed, above all, as a libertine, as someone seeking a rationale for pursuing the pleasures of the earth. This is surely a window into the minds of the accusers and, perhaps, taking account of polemical exaggerations, onto the worldly behavior of the accused; it is certainly not evident that it is a window into the minds of the accused.⁹⁷

Does this mean that 'anathematizing' sources such as trial records must be abandoned? Malcom Gaskill's thoughts on writing the history of mentalities from records of crime are useful, especially regarding depositions. He notes concerns about the failure of texts to faithfully record speech, tone, and gesture, and about the distortion of

⁹⁷ Kors, *Atheism in France*, 10-11. Ros Barber's remarkable book *The Marlowe Papers: A Novel in Verse* illustrates poignantly why historians should be wary of taking accusations and denunciations at face value (London: Sceptre, 2012). In this novel, Marlowe is not dead, but has fled England and is living in disguise after being condemned for atheism on the basis of a denunciation made by an enemy. Marlowe protests that the atheist statements attributed to him are taken from his plays or are jokes made while he was a young man at university, but to no avail.

testimony through the interface of language and power,⁹⁸ but points out that these problems are not unique to records of crime: “Not even the most objective text corresponds directly to the reality it describes, because inevitably it is embedded in a unique layer of meaning ... Between what is known for certain and what is not lies interpretation.” When engaged in interpretation, especially of texts involving exchanges between different social orders, “it may be ... appropriate to think of social signals passing in both directions within shared cultural contexts, inequalities of power notwithstanding. ... perhaps ... we should make a virtue of apparent ‘distortions’ present in the recorded words of our forebears as the very means by which to recover the true nature of their experiences.”⁹⁹ The records may not be transparent, but that does not necessarily mean they are opaque. Historians of atheism must do more, however, than read *The Cheese and the Worms* in order to develop more satisfactory interpretative practices.

Historians of atheism have paid more attention to methodological issues related to reading elite texts. As mentioned above, there are very few published avowals of unequivocal atheism, and they appear late in the eighteenth century: d’Holbach’s *Système de la Nature*, published anonymously in 1770, is accepted as having been the first such publication. Earlier statements of atheist ideas are found in clandestine manuscript works, mostly French, which are not necessarily completely atheist. Aside from the curate Jean

⁹⁸ Malcolm Gaskill, “Introduction: Mentalities from Crime,” in *Crime and Mentalities in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 24-25.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

Meslier's *Mémoire*, which he kept hidden until his death in 1729, the clandestine works could best be characterized as including some ideas that were regarded at the time as atheistic, rather than as presenting systematically atheist views. These clandestine and published atheist or atheistic texts are *relatively* unproblematic, methodologically speaking, compared with the corpus of philosophical and theological texts that some historians have suggested can be read as covert works of atheism.

David Wootton is the main proponent of the view that reading “between the lines” of works that claim to be religiously orthodox can expose a deeper penetration of unbelief in early modern thought than is apparent from the limited number of overtly atheist texts. With Michael Hunter, he argues

it is neither helpful nor even feasible to attempt to concentrate exclusively on figures who were overtly atheistic according to a modern definition of that term. In part, this is because orthodox contemporaries were prone to conflate with ‘atheism’ a range of positions that appeared to them to militate towards it, particularly deistic formulations of religious belief that played down the role of revelation and an active personal deity. In addition, the dangers associated with open expression of irreligious sentiments encouraged many to temper their sceptical opinions, at least in public.¹⁰⁰

This sense that atheists tempered, or disguised, their true opinions, leads Wootton, in particular, to suggest esoteric readings of early modern works. Esoteric reading as a historical method is grounded in Leo Strauss's argument for “reading between the lines” when a work was produced in a time of persecution:

Persecution ... gives rise to a peculiar technique of writing ... in which the truth about all crucial things is presented exclusively between the lines. That literature is addressed, not to all readers, but to trustworthy and intelligent readers only ...

¹⁰⁰ Michael Hunter and David Wootton, eds., “Introduction,” in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 2-3.

thoughtless men are careless readers, and only thoughtful men are careful readers. Therefore an author who wishes to address only thoughtful men has but to write in such a way that only a very careful reader can detect the meaning of his book.¹⁰¹

Strauss acknowledged that there is a “problem of criteria for distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate reading between the lines,”¹⁰² a point raised by Quentin Skinner also,¹⁰³ but fails to establish criteria other than to suggest that one must read between the lines when an “able writer” with a “clear mind” and thorough knowledge of the orthodox position on his subject appears to contradict himself “surreptitiously.”¹⁰⁴

Wootton does propose several criteria for determining what evidence “might justify an unshakeable ‘reading between the lines,’” such as “a text in which conventional sentiments seem to be at odds with unconventional ones”; “contemporary readings of the text that see it as suspect”; and “independent contemporary evidence that the author was believed to be irreligious or at least moved in irreligious circles.”¹⁰⁵ Two of his criteria depend on external contemporary evidence that may not be reliable, while another two depend on the scholar’s subjective interpretation of the text.

¹⁰¹ Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe IL: The Free Press, 1952), 25.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁰³ Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 3-53.

¹⁰⁴ Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 32.

¹⁰⁵ David Wootton, “New Histories of Atheism,” in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, eds. Michael Hunter & David Wootton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 36-37. Wootton’s recent biography *Galileo: Watcher of the Skies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) illustrates this approach and its pitfalls: as he admits, the “evidence” for Galileo’s unbelief is not conclusive (and it is not shown to the reader, so that one must frequently take Wootton’s word for it about what a particular document says), but this does not prevent him from arguing that Galileo was a deist (249) and that his greatest achievement “was to recognise that the universe was not made for the sake of human beings ... (258).” The use of the words ‘achievement’ and ‘recognise’ reveal a clear bias in favour of unbelief.

Assuming that one has satisfied all of these criteria, one should find, according to Wootton, that ostensibly anti-atheist works are, in fact, works of covert atheism. This was the charge made against several early modern writers by their contemporary readers, a fact which ought to make scholars pause before adopting this method of reading. As Silvia Berti notes, “There is no doubt that secrecy, caution, and Nicodemite practices, were *de rigueur* during the age of the Inquisition, and that the method of ‘reading between the lines’ can always be used in some way to analyze situations in which there is no freedom of expression.” She goes on to suggest, however, that “this basic notion does not authorize us to read a century of the history of ideas through what the authors *leave unsaid* or only say half of the time.” She points out two dangers in adopting the Straussian method:

First, it is dangerous because it reinvigorates that hermeneutic mentality that, more than twenty years ago, Quentin Skinner stigmatized as a "mythology of coherence," constructed completely *a posteriori* by the historian. Second, it is dangerous because the historian will use only those pieces of "evidence" capable of satisfying a reading which was formed previous to and independently of an examination of all the evidence at his disposal. As we can see, the problem of proof is always at the heart of interpretation. In fact the more importance we attach to a broad concept of historical possibility, the more we must value a strict notion of proof. Otherwise, the ever-present risk is that of falling into the trap of either invention or wishful thinking.¹⁰⁶

Margaret Osler also criticizes the esoteric approach. In her essay “When did Pierre Gassendi become a libertine?” Osler argues that Gassendi was not a sceptic, materialist, or libertine: “all claims to the contrary rest on the assumption that the various

¹⁰⁶ Berti, “At the Roots of Unbelief,” 559-560.

contradictions in his writings are evidence of subterfuge.”¹⁰⁷ Osler notes the difficulty of distinguishing genuine from false belief, concluding that “in the absence of evidence to the contrary, we must take historical actors and their documents at face value,” and must avoid projecting our own intellectual baggage back onto historical figures.¹⁰⁸

It is important to note that certain authors virtually demand to be read esoterically, including John Toland and the Earl of Shaftesbury; both argued for circumspection and, indeed, esotericism in one’s speech and writing.¹⁰⁹ Pierre Bayle is another author whose complex works invite reading between the lines. As a way out of the methodological impasse, Roger D. Lund suggests that historians attempting “to separate real atheistical arguments from the rhetorical draperies in which they were so often disguised” need to “acclimate ourselves to a process of defining intellectual positions that owes less to the

¹⁰⁷ Margaret J. Osler, “When did Pierre Gassendi become a libertine?” in *Heterodoxy in early modern science and religion*, eds. John Hedley Brooke and Ian MacLean (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 174.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 191. See also Hudson et al., “Introduction.”

¹⁰⁹ David Berman, “Disclaimers as Offence Mechanisms in Charles Blount and John Toland,” in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, 255-272; Roger D. Lund, “Guilty by Association: The Atheist Cabal and the Rise of the Public Sphere in Augustan England,” *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 34, no. 3 (Autumn 2002). One of Lund’s objectives in this article is to challenge Jürgen Habermas’s view that “clubs and coffee houses became primary vehicles of democratization and social mobility.” Lund argues that there was strong resistance to clubs and coffee houses, which were perceived by High Church opponents as hotbeds of atheism and subversive republicanism. He observes, again as part of his challenge to Habermas, that clubs adopted “esoteric dialect[s]” which were “specifically designed to frustrate detection” of, say, deism or atheism, and quotes Shaftesbury as saying that the freedom of speech possible within the confines of a club was not appropriate in public discourse. Brian Cowan also challenges Habermas’s conception of the public sphere, in *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2005).

rational analysis of clear propositional statements (although these are sometimes present) than to interpretations of behavior and readings of rhetorical gesture.”¹¹⁰

Despite the difficulties of ascertaining what an individual believed, revisionist interpretations can be illuminating and important. Michael Bryson’s recent study of John Milton, for example, argues not only that Milton was an atheist but also that previous scholars have misrepresented the poet’s beliefs in order to claim him for Christianity.¹¹¹ In a more philosophical and less polemical vein, Thomas Holden offers a nuanced analysis of Hume’s arguments, arguing that he was a “moral atheist” who rejected the idea that a divine being with moral attributes could exist, but remained a sceptic with respect to the question of whether a divine being existed.¹¹² Both of these studies are based on close readings of their subjects’ works, and both suggest that beliefs are complex and changeable; Bryson’s Milton does not begin as a full-fledged atheist, but becomes one over time, while Holden’s Hume expresses a subtle and limited atheism. Whether Bryson and Holden are correct or not, such analyses remind us that the explicit, committed atheism addressed in this dissertation was only one possibility along a spectrum of unbelief.

I shall turn now to the apparent lack of interest in gender as a category of analysis within histories of early modern atheism. I have come across only one study that links

¹¹⁰ Roger D. Lund, “Introduction,” *The Margins of Orthodoxy: Heterodox Writing and Cultural Response 1660-1750*, ed. *idem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 8.

¹¹¹ Michael Bryson, *The Atheist Milton* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

¹¹² Thomas Holden, *Spectres of False Divinity: Hume’s Moral Atheism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

gender and early modern atheism in a sustained way: Giovanni Tarantino's article on manhood and unbelief, which begins with a discussion of the concept of hegemonic masculinity and suggests that it excluded several categories of men, including radical thinkers and atheists. Tarantino concludes his study of three figures – Martin Clifford, William Pople, and Count Alberto Radicati -- with the intriguing argument that “In the face of a ‘growing polarization of sexual difference,’ being ‘masculine atheists’ could represent for many, but not of course for all, a reassuring way to assert and define their virility, in the belief that there was a degrading connection between femininity and religious piety.”¹¹³ The article tends to conflate freethinking with atheism, but it makes some important connections. The absence of gender analysis in other studies is striking considering the overlap between atheism and sodomy within anti-atheist polemics,¹¹⁴ as well as the obvious fact, noted above, that the major figures within the traditional narrative are all male. It must be noted that the literature on libertinism, which intersects with atheism, does engage with gender theory extensively, being more focused on

¹¹³ Giovanni Tarantino, “Alternative Hierarchies: Manhood and Unbelief in Early Modern Europe,” in *Governing Masculinities in the Early Modern Period: Regulating Selves and Others*, eds. Susan Broomhall & Jacqueline van Gent (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 224.

¹¹⁴ Minois asserts that “the amalgamated notion of unbelief and homosexuality was almost systematic” in *The Atheist's Bible*, 59. This is an exaggeration — most anti-atheist tracts do not refer to sodomy — but Minois is right to point to the conceptual link.

behaviour than on belief;¹¹⁵ insights from this literature, however, do not appear to have made their way in any significant fashion into the atheism historiography. There are very many studies of gender and sexuality within Enlightenment historiography,¹¹⁶ but these, too, are effectively ignored.

I have suggested already that one reason for the neglect of gender in atheist studies may be that atheist texts were written by elite men and have therefore not attracted scholars working in gender studies. Another reason may be that these texts do not appear, on the surface, to have much to say about masculinity, femininity, or gender roles. They do, however, devote considerable space to analyses of power and society.

Feminist scholars have taught us over the past several decades that beliefs and attitudes

¹¹⁵ See e.g. Jason M. Kelly, "Riots, Revelries, and Rumor: Libertinism and Masculine Association in Enlightenment London," *Journal of British Studies* 45, no. 4 (October 2006); Peter Cryle & Lisa O'Connell, eds., *Libertine Enlightenment: Sex, Liberty and License in the Eighteenth-Century* (Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004); James Turner, *Libertines and Radicals in Early Modern London: Sexuality, Politics, and Early Modern Culture, 1630-1685* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). A substantial amount of scholarship on libertinism is to be found within studies on homosexuality; see note *supra*. Margaret C. Jacob's "The Materialist World of Pornography" contains several interesting insights regarding the intersection between materialist philosophy and pornography, including the use of female narrators: in *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800*, ed. Lynn Hunt (New York: Zone, 1993).

¹¹⁶ See e.g. Sarah Apetrei, *Women, Feminism and Religion in Early Enlightenment England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Brian Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee* and "What Was Masculine about the Public Sphere? Gender and the Coffeehouse Milieu in Post-Restoration England," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 51 (Spring, 2001); Faramerz Dabhoiwala, *The Origins of Sex: A History of the First Sexual Revolution* (London: Allen Lane, 2012); Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex & Subordination in England 1500-1800* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1995); Karen Harvey, "The Century of Sex? Gender, Bodies, and Sexuality in the Long Eighteenth Century," *The Historical Journal* 45, no. 4 (Dec., 2002); Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor, eds., *Women, Gender and Enlightenment* (Houndmills, Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005); Carol Pal, *Republic of Women: Rethinking the Republic of Letters in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); G.S. Rousseau and Roy Porter, eds., *Sexual Underworlds of the Enlightenment* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987); Lieselotte Steinbrügge, *The Moral Sex: Women's Nature in the French Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Siep Stuurman, *Poulain de la Barre and the Invention of Modern Equality* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Randolph Trumbach, *Sex and the Gender Revolution, Volume 1: Heterosexuality and the Third Gender in Enlightenment London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

about masculinity, femininity, sexuality and the body are inseparable from social and political structures and from relationships of power at every level of society. If this is the case — if, as Joan Wallach Scott put it, “gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power”¹¹⁷ — then we ought to be paying much closer attention to how gender shaped atheist understandings of themselves and their society.

The failure to engage with gender theory or gender analysis is all the more glaring when one considers that at least some studies of atheism describe what are very clearly gendered spaces, activities and behaviours. Alan C. Kors, for instance, contrasted the masculine, irreligious *coterie* of the atheist Baron d’Holbach with the feminine *salons* of Paris,¹¹⁸ in an analysis which Dena Goodman has criticized for its attack on the integrity of the *salonnières* and for the way it reproduces Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s similar attack while defending the masculinity of the *coterie*.¹¹⁹ Considering that Kors’ book was published in 1976, it would be expecting rather a lot to look for incorporation of feminist analysis. My point regarding Kors and the *coterie* is merely that his study suggests an avenue for further exploration within atheism studies: how did the masculinity of the *coterie*’s participants influence the ideas they shared and the ways in which they shared them?

¹¹⁷ Joan Wallach Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” in *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 42.

¹¹⁸ Alan C. Kors, *D’Holbach’s Coterie: An Enlightenment in Paris* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

¹¹⁹ Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 56-61.

Federico Barbierato's *The Inquisitor in the Hat Shop* raises even more intriguing possibilities for further research, but without engaging in any meaningful analysis using gender as a category. Barbierato's research reveals the use of heterodox ideas, especially by clerics, to obtain sex from women by presenting arguments that, for instance, sex between unmarried men and unmarried women is not a sin;¹²⁰ he also uncovers cases of unbelief among nuns.¹²¹ Barbierato notes that in general, matters of sex were one of a "range of opportunities for transmitting potentially dangerous messages," and that "any public manifestation of free sexuality devoid of moral suppressants could therefore constitute a kind of indirect attack on orthodox positions."¹²²

These extremely interesting cases and observations could be illuminated even further by gender theory, which would encourage thinking about gendered power and how men and women might have engaged differently with unbelief and with heterodox ideas. For example, Brian Cowan's study of British coffee houses, which were seen at the time as breeding grounds for atheism, as gendered spaces suggests one way in which men's and women's opportunities for exposure to heterodox ideas, including atheism, differed. Coffee houses were masculine spaces barred, normally, to 'respectable' women, while other women took part in the milieu as owners, servers, news vendors and

¹²⁰ Barbierato, *The Inquisitor in the Hat Shop*, 205-214.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 236-249.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 29.

prostitutes; this also suggests that class ought to be taken into account as a category of analysis.¹²³

As the previous paragraphs indicate, there is room for more work on the intersections of gender and atheism than this dissertation attempts to cover. It is my hope that bringing gender analysis to bear on the corpus of eighteenth-century French atheist texts will demonstrate the relevance of gender to the study of atheism — and the relevance of atheism to the study of gender. Making connections between these fields seems particularly important in light of the apparent recent increase in the number of self-identified atheists and the development of atheist social and political activist groups. Over the last few years, atheist women have complained of sexism and sexual harassment within such groups or at atheist events, which suggests that parts of the atheist community may be struggling to include women on equal terms.¹²⁴ Understanding how gendered concepts of nature, reason, morality, power and authority were embedded

¹²³ Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee* and “What was masculine about the public sphere?”.

¹²⁴ New Atheist celebrity Sam Harris’s self-defense against accusations of sexism revealed that he thinks men are more attracted to “active atheism” than women are because they are biologically more inclined to favour an “angry” style of critical thinking and discussion, and that women atheists probably prefer a more nurturing style. Harris is most famous for suggesting in *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004) that America should drop nuclear weapons on the Islamic world as a pre-emptive strike in the clash of civilizations, so the chances of him adopting said nurturing style are not very good. For his self-defense regarding sexism, which is both alarming and unintentionally hilarious, see “I’m not the sexist pig you’re looking for [blog],” , accessed 25 September 2015, <http://www.samharris.org/blog/item/im-not-the-sexist-pig-youre-looking-for>. For other comments on sexism within the atheist movement, see e.g. Amanda Marcotte, “Atheism’s shocking woman problem,” *Salon* 3 October 2014, , accessed 25 September 2015, http://www.salon.com/2014/10/03/new_atheisms_troubling_misogyny_the_pompous_sexism_of_richard_dawkins_and_sam_harris_partner/; Katha Pollitt, “Atheists show their sexist side,” accessed 25 September 2015, <http://www.thenation.com/article/atheists-show-their-sexist-side/>; Matthew Facciani, “Atheism has a sexism problem [blog],” accessed 25 September 2015, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/accordingtomatthew/2015/08/atheism-has-a-sexism-problem-and-we-all-need-to-help-fix-it/>.

within the earliest explicit statements of committed atheism may help us make sense of the gendered dynamics of modern atheism.

To conclude this historiographical discussion, my work has affinities with a few other studies that also take different approaches to the history of atheism. For example, Alain Sandrier's study of d'Holbach interprets the Baron's proselytizing works in terms of their style and the conditions under which they were produced, providing an unusual and valuable perspective on how the context shaped the way d'Holbach expressed his ideas.¹²⁵ In her study of debates within the early Enlightenment discourse on materialism, Ann Thomson moves away from labeling individual thinkers or groups as atheist, radical, and so on, focusing instead on what her eighteenth-century subjects "were trying to do and the implications of the issues they raised."¹²⁶ Thomson describes her work as a theoretical *bricolage* that stretches the disciplinary boundaries of intellectual history in order to provide "a different map of the period."¹²⁷ Although I have attempted to answer very different questions about a different set of individuals and sources, Thomson's example has encouraged my efforts to take a fresh approach to my own subject.

Some of my conclusions regarding the construction of an atheist identity hint at parallels with Victoria Frede's findings about atheism and the nineteenth-century Russian intelligentsia. Frede argues that the articulation of atheism among educated Russians was a response to the authoritarian state's increasingly aggressive attempts to pressure

¹²⁵ Alain Sandrier, *Le style philosophique du baron d'Holbach: Conditions et contraintes du prosélytisme athée en France dans la seconde moitié du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2004).

¹²⁶ Ann Thomson, *Bodies of Thought: Science, Religion, and the Soul in the Early Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

intellectuals and the nobility into conforming to a conservative, Orthodox faith. As this pressure conflicted with the intellectuals' sense of duty to pursue knowledge and truth, young intellectuals in particular embraced disbelief. Frede links the social identity of educated Russians to atheism by suggesting that "social identity helped shape the way in which individuals formulated disbelief. Social circumstances did not produce atheism, but social resentments facilitated its expression."¹²⁸ Although eighteenth-century France and nineteenth-century Russia are obviously very different contexts, it is possible to see a common theme of resistance to official power through a commitment to and expression of atheism.

Finally, Stephen LeDrew's book *The Evolution of Atheism: The Politics of a Modern Movement*, which was published when this dissertation was in the late stages of composition, overlaps significantly with my work in terms of its interest in atheism as an ideology and identity. LeDrew focuses on New Atheism, offering both sociological analysis and critique of the movement; he has little to say about atheism's history, but provides a valuable perspective on the ways in which New Atheists, like the atheists of the eighteenth century, attempt to change the social imaginary.

Conclusion

This dissertation contributes to existing scholarship on atheism in general, and on eighteenth-century French atheism in particular, by focusing on the ways in which atheist

¹²⁸ Victoria Frede, *Doubt, Atheism, and the Nineteenth-Century Russian Intelligentsia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 16.

texts attempt to alter, in Cornelius Castoriadis's terms, the social imaginary significations of their period. While indebted to earlier scholarship on atheism, it charts a different course for its subject: it brings intellectual and cultural history together through an analysis of eighteenth-century French atheist texts as expressions of identity and ideology that are infused with gendered concepts of nature, reason, morality, power and authority. This analysis shows that the atheist texts that appeared in the eighteenth century challenged the prevailing discourse that dehumanized atheists as monsters, madmen or fools and re-humanized them as virtuous, even superior members of civil society. These texts created spaces for the articulation of an atheist ideology focused on 'natural' bases for the ideal arrangement of society, as well as for the assertion of an identity that defined atheists not only as the possessors of the truth about the world, but also as the only truly sane, rational, moral, and mature men of their society. Both ideology and identity reveal tensions between the idea that the atheist truth is available to all who are willing to see it, and a sense that only certain kinds of people — elite men — are capable of seeing and understanding that truth and conforming to the requirements of the atheist social imaginary. Comprehension of these tensions is essential to a more complete understanding of eighteenth-century atheism and its modern analogues.

This introduction has also addressed the methodological issues inherent to a study of atheism in the pre-modern period. The primary issue is the identification of atheists and atheist texts; as the historiographical section explains, some scholars have argued in favour of esoteric reading of apparently orthodox texts in order to find atheism 'between the lines.' I believe this approach is deeply problematic and have therefore selected texts

that do not require it. This makes the process of source selection and interpretation sound simpler than it was: there is no easy resolution to the problem of attempting to understand beliefs, especially those of the past. My own approach was intended to help me answer certain questions; other research questions might require a different methodology.

A second issue in atheism historiography is the relationship between the history of atheism and the histories of the Enlightenment, secularism and modernity. Prior commitment to the idea that atheism was an integral element of the Enlightenment, secularism and modernity can lead to exaggeration of atheism's extent and importance or to simplification of the messages that atheist texts convey. Speaking very generally, not enough attention has been paid to what atheist texts say about anything other than God and religion.

I began this research with no particular commitments to narratives about the Enlightenment, the development of modern secularity, or atheism's role in these phenomena. Like the radio talk show host, I knew too little about the history of atheism to have many pre-conceived notions. I did assume that anyone who was an atheist in pre-modern Europe was probably strongly non-conformist in other ways; I expected, frankly, to find that atheists were also individualists, democrats and feminists. As the rest of this dissertation will show, what I found was not so straightforward. Atheism in the eighteenth century did not map neatly onto 'modern' or 'progressive' positions, and more work needs to be done before the relationship of atheists and atheism to the Enlightenment, secularism or modernity will be clear. What is clear, I think, is that eighteenth-century atheists were conformists in many ways, even while they constructed an identity based on

estrangement and an ideology that challenged the structures and *mores* of their society. Atheism was, and is, a complex and contradictory phenomenon that needs to be better understood as such before general conclusions about its role in European, western or global history can be made.

CHAPTER 2

OF MONSTERS AND MADMEN: A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

Overview

Until relatively recently, the Enlightenment has been understood primarily as an anti-religious movement, with that anti-religiosity being seen as a marker of progress. While this view of the Enlightenment has not disappeared,¹ it has been challenged by scholarship that argues for a more nuanced understanding. As Dorinda Outram states, the image of the Enlightenment as essentially anti-religious was based on scholars' concentration on a small group of writers; "looking beyond that group reveals a more complex picture," in which we can see that "the Enlightenment produced a wide variety of responses to organised religion ... The century can also be seen as one of great religious creativity, even creating the characteristic and new religious idea, that of

¹ Historians who adopted this interpretation include Peter Gay, Keith Thomas, and Michel Vovelle. The most serious recent statement of the position is that of Jonathan Israel, in his multi-volume history of the Enlightenment.

toleration.”² Nigel Aston also sees the Enlightenment as a complex phenomenon, and suggests that “postulating any necessary conflict between Christianity and the intellectually progressive becomes an unpersuasive exercise, even for France.”³ This perspective enables a deeper appreciation of the complexity of religious developments in this period that can help avoid the binarism of the Enlightenment/Counter-Enlightenment paradigm.⁴ Within this more complex image, committed atheism was just one position among many others.

It was not, however, quite the same as those other positions. The Reformation of the sixteenth century had fractured Christendom into several confessions, which led, among other outcomes, to the presence of religious minorities within European states and to several destructive and destabilizing wars in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁵ The need to address these problems led to the establishment of several religious compromises, including the Peace of Augsburg (1555), the Edict of Nantes (1598) and the Peace of Westphalia (1648), each of which granted limited toleration in the interests of peace. Recognition of the need to compromise on matters of religion in order to

² Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 117. See also Joachim Whaley, “Religion,” in *A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Peter H. Wilson (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 176-180; and Charly Coleman, “Religion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the French Enlightenment*, ed. Daniel Brewer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

³ Nigel Aston, *Christianity and Revolutionary Europe c. 1750-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 93.

⁴ On the history and problematic nature of the Enlightenment/Counter-Enlightenment concept, see e.g. Jeremy L. Caradonna, “There was no Counter-Enlightenment,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 49, no. 1 (Fall 2015).

⁵ For a recent account which emphasises the collapse of Christendom, see e.g. Mark Greengrass, *Christendom Destroyed: Europe 1517-1648* (London: Allen Lane, 2014).

prevent a repetition of the devastating Thirty Years War⁶ did not, however, lead to religious freedom: in the eighteenth century, all European states “designated or maintained official or established churches and strictly regulated the terms under which those who subscribed to other churches or faiths might be permitted to live and work.”⁷ In these confessional states, in which religious conformity was equated with political loyalty,⁸ a belief that challenged the fundamental bases of Christianity (and other religions) necessarily also threatened the foundations of the political state and social order. Religious heterodoxy, especially in the form of other sects of Christianity, was also regarded as threatening to the political and social order, and was therefore persecuted. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, most states granted some degree of toleration to at least some religious minorities.

None of the *ancien régime* edicts of toleration extended to atheists, who were regarded in early modern European discourse as monsters, beasts, madmen or fools. In the confessional states of this period, atheism was necessarily illegal, and it was dangerous to express atheist ideas (or any ideas that challenged the authority of the state, whether on religious or other grounds). Individuals wishing to explore or share atheist ideas had to do so discreetly, either by circulating clandestine manuscripts or by publishing works anonymously or under pseudonyms. Not until the French Revolution could atheism be expressed openly, and even then there was a backlash. The anti-atheist

⁶ On the Thirty Years War and its aftermath, see e.g. Peter H. Wilson, *Europe's Tragedy: A History of the Thirty Years War* (London: Allen Lane, 2009).

⁷ Whaley, “Religion,” 178.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 188. René Rémond describes the confessional state of the *ancien régime* as one that, like individuals, had a religion: “it was inconceivable that it could *not* have one, as that would be to profess atheism.” *Religion and Society in Modern Europe*, trans. Antonia Nevill (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 30-31.

discourse was consistent throughout early modern Europe, with similar imagery reiterated over and over, thus reinforcing the alterity of the atheist in the minds of both believers and unbelievers. In terms of orthodox, official and public discourse, atheists were always others — and more than that, they were dehumanized enemies of humanity.⁹

This chapter examines that dehumanizing discourse, as well as the intolerability of atheism and practices of censorship, in order to contextualize the production of texts of committed atheism and the ideology and identity that they express. The metaphors used to describe atheism and atheists, especially the imagery of infection, animals and monsters, indicate how deep the anxiety about atheism ran within the social imaginary of the early modern period, even among those who argued the most strongly for toleration of religious dissent. Despite some degree of informal toleration, and despite a brief period during the French Revolution in which atheists could act openly, repression of atheism was a constant feature of early modern Europe that, ironically, contributed to the formation of an atheist identity constructed against the hostile image of the monstrous atheist.¹⁰ The committed atheists of the eighteenth century perceived that they lived within a hostile environment that sought to silence them, and they felt a sense of duty to resist that repression by sharing the truth and asserting their virtue and worth against a

⁹ Matthew Stewart's recent book *Nature's God: The Heretical Origins of the American Republic* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014) shows that anti-atheist discourse was no different in America. An important exception to this general picture is the court of Frederick II of Prussia, which provided a safe haven for the exiled Julien Offray de La Mettrie as well as other heterodox individuals. Frederick II was reputed to be an atheist himself; however, in 1770 he published critiques of two radical philosophical works, one of which was d'Holbach's *Système de la Nature*. The monarch argued in these critiques that "a God of some sort must exist," which suggests strongly that he was not an atheist. Derek Beale, *Enlightenment and Reform in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 37-38.

¹⁰ Or, in the case of the Marquis de Sade, constructed by appropriating that image. See, for example, Le Chevalier's approving description of Dolmancé as the most celebrated atheist and most immoral man in *La Philosophie dans la Boudoir* (London, 1795), 5.

widespread discourse that dehumanized them. From their perspective, they were at war against a much more powerful enemy: the combined forces of church and state.¹¹

Allowing for the fact that we know very little about how many early modern Europeans might have been atheists, it must be acknowledged that the atheist experience of actual persecution pales in comparison to that of other groups.¹² There were no massacres of atheists, no mass burnings at the stake, no expulsions or diasporas.¹³ There are no atheist equivalents to the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre of Huguenots in 1572, pogroms against Jews, or other atrocities of the early modern period. The few prosecutions against individuals for atheism may or may not have involved actual atheists; we cannot assume that anyone convicted of atheism, even in such a famous case as that of Lucilio (Giulio Cesare) Vanini, who was executed at Toulouse in 1619 for the crimes of *lèse-majesté* and atheism,¹⁴ was in fact an atheist.

¹¹ As John McManners has argued, there may not have been "a formal battle between the Church and the Enlightenment." *Church and Society in Eighteenth-Century France vol. 2: The Religion of the People and the Politics of Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 320. There were, however, many cultural and intellectual 'wars' in the eighteenth century, including but by no means limited to numerous disagreements between *philosophes*; style wars, such as that between the Ancients and Moderns; the 'Newton wars'; debates around gender; and the debate over the plurality of worlds. See e.g. Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation, vol. 1: The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995 [1966]), esp. 3-8; Darrin M. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Jonathan I. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Elena Russo, *Styles of Enlightenment: Taste, Politics and Authorship in Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); J.B. Shank, *The Newton Wars & the Beginning of the French Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); and Michael J. Crowe, *The Extraterrestrial Life Debate, 1750-1900* (Mineola NY: Dover, 1999). Dorinda Outram summarizes the Enlightenment debates about gender in *The Enlightenment*, 84-98; see also the numerous works cited in chapter 1, n. 100.

¹² This is a very large topic; on the repression of various religious groups specifically in France, I have found McManners, *Church and Society in Eighteenth Century France* and Dale K. Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560-1791* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) especially helpful.

¹³ To be clear, it is possible that atheists experienced these events, but as members of other groups.

¹⁴ Denis J.-J. Robichaud, "Renaissance and Reformation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, eds. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 179 & 191-192.

On the other hand, there were convictions for atheism and blasphemy; publications were censored; and, as Federico Barbierato has shown, the Inquisition remained keen on identifying and extirpating heterodoxy.¹⁵ This raises the question of why committed atheists began to write down and share their beliefs in eighteenth-century France. In a hostile environment, why put oneself at risk? There are two general possibilities: first, atheist writers may have felt safer than in previous centuries, and thus were willing to circulate their ideas; second, they may have felt their repression more keenly, and desired to resist it. The issue of whether it was in fact safer to publish atheist works in eighteenth century France than in previous periods is complex. The degree of official censorship of all works, not just atheist texts, in France varied through the century; we do not know with certainty when most of the atheist works were composed; some remain anonymous; and, as I shall show in the next chapter, most of the texts themselves emphasize the need for secrecy in order to avoid persecution. The texts do not reference particular political or religious events that would help us establish reasons for their composition and publication at specific moments. To complicate matters further, some of the atheist texts were never published, and circulated only as clandestine manuscripts. One must, therefore, be cautious about generalizing regarding the motivations of atheist writers. The critical and relatively tolerant environment of the Enlightenment *might* have encouraged atheists to share their ideas; what atheist texts *express*, however, is a sense of danger in doing so.

¹⁵ Federico Barbierato, *The Inquisitor in the Hat Shop: Inquisition, Forbidden Books and Unbelief in Early Modern Venice* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

This chapter focuses not on atheist texts, but on the hostile social imaginary that they were attempting to change. This context is essential for understanding the ways in which committed atheists constructed their identity, as well as the form of that identity and of atheist ideology. As I have pointed out, atheists were not unique simply by virtue of being repressed, nor were they persecuted with anything like the persistent violence which other groups experienced. My analysis in this chapter is not intended to privilege atheists above other early modern victims of repression. The main purpose of this chapter is to show why atheists felt estranged from their society, even while the arguments for religious toleration gained force. I have begun with an overview of anti-atheist discourse in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, primarily in England and France, in order to demonstrate the breadth of that discourse as well as some of its specific elements. I follow this with a discussion of toleration and censorship that focuses more closely on eighteenth-century France.

To conclude this chapter overview, I shall provide a brief sketch of the political and religious situation in eighteenth-century France, which will help contextualize the issues surrounding toleration and censorship in that state. One might cite any number of crises, conflicts and debates that formed the background for the emergence of committed atheism in eighteenth-century France, for, as James B. Collins explains, the country experienced so many changes that “France in 1787 bore only superficial resemblance to the France of 1685.”¹⁶ I have concentrated here on only a few aspects of the power struggles that I believe are most essential to note.

¹⁶ James B. Collins, *The State in Early Modern France*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 292.

Until the French Revolution abolished the monarchy, France was ruled through the eighteenth century by three kings of the Bourbon dynasty: Louis XIV (r. 1643-1715), Louis XV (r. 1715-1774) and Louis XVI (r. 1774-1792).¹⁷ Louis XIV, the famous Sun King who moved the royal court from Paris to the palace of Versailles, inherited a rebellion along with the throne: the Fronde uprisings of the nobles and venal bureaucrats, motivated by resistance to the policies of Louis XIII's chief minister, Cardinal Jules Mazarin, lasted from 1648 to 1653. Louis XIV began a long period of personal rule in 1661, governing without a chief minister and without calling the Estates General. In order to limit the power of the *parlements* to resist royal authority, in 1673 he required that they register new laws before exercising their traditional right to criticize them through a process called remonstrances. He controlled the nobility through various means, including reformation of the army and an inquiry of 1666-1674 into the legitimacy of claims to noble status. Numerous wars required new taxes, such as the capitation levied on everyone except the clergy, and the *dixième*, a revenue tax.¹⁸

One of the most important controversies in eighteenth-century France was the dispute between the Jansenists and Jesuits, which “began as a Reformation-vintage doctrinal controversy” over free will, salvation and predestination.¹⁹ The details of this

¹⁷ Both Louis XIV and Louis XV were minors when they became king, so France was ruled by regents from 1610-1614 and 1715-1723.

¹⁸ Collins, *The State in Early Modern France*, xxx-xxxii; Tim Blanning, *The Pursuit of Glory: Europe 1648-1815* (London: Penguin, 2007), 207-217. See also John J. Hurt, *Louis XIV and the Parlements: The Assertion of Royal Authority* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2004).

¹⁹ Dale K. Van Kley, “Jansenism and the international suppression of the Jesuits,” *The Cambridge History of Christianity: Enlightenment, Awakening and Revolution 1660-1815*, vol. 7, eds. Stewart J. Brown & Timothy Tackett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 305. For Van Kley's detailed analysis of the controversy, see *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560-1791*.

theological dispute are outside the scope of this dissertation, but it is important to know that each side accused the other of heresy and of plotting secretly against the Catholic Church. The controversy intersected with French politics most directly via the relationship between the monarchy and the papacy. Louis XIV “perceived the papacy as an indispensable ally ... against the ‘republican’ threat supposedly posed by a Jansenism that, like Protestantism, he readily associated with civil war.”²⁰ Louis XIV, who was counselled by Jesuits, obtained several papal condemnations of Jansenism, the last one being the bull *Unigenitus* of 1713. Persecution of Jansenists included, but was not limited to, the destruction of the convent Port-Royal in 1709 and “a systematic purge of their presence from the clergy, religious orders and congregations, and sundry seminaries, colleges and universities beginning with the Sorbonne.” Jansenists also maintained the principle that the French General Assembly of the Clergy had the right to decide doctrine, even against the authority of the pope. This made Jansenism an ally of the *parlements*, which claimed to defend French liberties and constitutionalism against papal and royal domination.²¹

The Jansenists would have the last laugh, despite decades of persecution. Their enemy, the Jesuit order, was dissolved by Louis XV in 1759, expelled in 1764, and eventually dissolved entirely by Pope Clement XIV in 1773 after also having been expelled from Portugal and Spain.²² A contributing factor was the Jansenists’ success in

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 308.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 308-310.

²² *Ibid.*, 302. Mark Molesky’s recent book on the Great Earthquake of Lisbon in 1755 places the first expulsion of Jesuits in the context of that event’s aftermath. *This Gulf of Fire: The Destruction of Lisbon, or Apocalypse in the Age of Science and Reason* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), 346-352.

portraying the Jesuits as “the simultaneously slavish and domineering embodiment of ‘despotism’” in numerous clandestine publications meant to sway public opinion. The attempt by Peter Damiens to assassinate Louis XV in 1757 also influenced the decision to dissolve the Jesuits, as Damiens was portrayed as their agent.²³ Dale Van Kley argues that the dissolution was the result of pressure by the *parlements*, whose approval of royal fiscal declarations was required due to the disastrous French involvement in the Seven Years’ War; Louis XV was in no position to resist even if he had wanted to do so.²⁴

With the Jesuits out of the way, the controversy over Jansenism subsided and the focus of the power struggles shifted to the *parlements*. A dispute involving the Estates and Parlement of Brittany escalated to a broader political crisis that culminated in the exile of the Parlement of Paris after it refused to return to work, the purging of the provincial *parlements*, and the establishment of new ‘Maupeou’ reformed *parlements*. The effort to reform and control the *parlements* ended when Louis XV died in 1774 and Louis XVI dismissed its leaders, René de Maupeou and the Abbé Terray.²⁵

To reiterate a point made earlier, the atheist texts analyzed in this dissertation do not engage directly with the specific power struggles and events of their own times, which makes it difficult to connect them with any particular controversy or event. These struggles for power did, however, shape the French state’s approach to toleration and censorship and are thus a necessary part of the context for the emergence of committed atheism.

²³ *Ibid.*, 311.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 311-314.

²⁵ Collins, *The State in Early Modern France*, 333-341.

Although, as noted in the introductory chapter, anti-atheist statements do not necessarily tell us anything reliable about early modern *atheists*, they do show clearly that early modern Europe was, at least in its public discourse and official actions, hostile to atheism. This was not, as noted above, unique to atheism. Beliefs, opinions and behaviour that did not conform to the requirements of church and state were risky in general, to varying degrees depending on specific contexts. What is striking about atheism as a category in early modern Europe is its capaciousness: it could assimilate almost anything a writer opposed, and all manner of ideas and behaviour could be labeled as outright atheist or as leading to atheism. Especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Protestants and Catholics accused each other of being atheists, and the term was also associated with Jews, Turks, Muhammedans, Machiavellians, Anabaptists, Sadducees, Epicureans, heretics, drunks, libertines, hypocrites, and sceptics who did not believe in witches.

Given these varied uses of the term ‘atheism,’ it may appear that early modern atheism was, like sodomy, an “utterly confused category,”²⁷ at least for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the eighteenth century, atheism could be defined more

²⁶The following discussion is necessarily synthetic and deals with general tendencies; the anti-atheism discourse of early modern Europe is too vast to attempt a detailed analysis in one chapter. For a recent examination in detail of anti-atheism in a single context, see Kenneth Sheppard, “Anti-Atheism in Early Modern England 1580-1720,” (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2012).

²⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990 [1978]), 101.

straightforwardly as the opinion of those who denied the existence of God, the creator of the world. Formey's entry on atheism in Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* of 1751 argues that atheism is not merely the *distortion* of the idea of God as creator of the world; it entirely *destroys* that idea. Mentioning God, as Epicurus and Spinoza did, does not excuse one of the charge of atheism, because these systems give no part to God in the origin and conservation of the world.²⁸ Thus, there was still considerable room for a number of positions and ideas within the definition at mid-century. The early modern understanding of atheism was more extensive than the modern definition of atheism as an absence of belief in the existence of God(s), which is one reason for the difficulty of identifying 'real' atheists in the early modern period.

The labeling of religious opponents as atheists functioned in much the same way in the early modern period as when Romans and early Christians exchanged accusations of atheism. As Mark Edwards explains, "in late antiquity atheism can ... mean impiety, the refusal to worship the gods society has agreed to honour." It was this sense of atheism at work in Roman responses to Christianity as atheism. Conversely, early Christians regarded as atheist "any doctrine or mode of worship that belied the existence of the one God or misrepresented his nature. The term could therefore comprehend polytheism, idolatry, heresy, more than one of these, or one by assertion and another by innuendo."²⁹

²⁸ Jean-Henri-Samuel Formey, "Atheisme," in *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Metièrs*, v. 1, eds. Denis Diderot & Jean le Rond d'Alembert (ARTFL Project version 1.0.1 [1751]), 815.

²⁹ Mark Edwards, "The First Millennium," in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, eds. Stephen Bullivant & Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 152. See also Jan Bremmer, "Atheism in Antiquity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

In early modern Europe, the religious schisms and politico-religious conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries created numerous ‘impious’ individuals and groups, while the development of heterodox, non-Aristotelian philosophies such as Cartesianism and materialism led to theological disputes over defining God and how to demonstrate God’s existence. In these disputes, ‘misrepresenting’ the nature of God could easily be seen as atheistic.³⁰

One of the ways in which the early modern understanding of atheism differed from the modern is that many early modern anti-atheist writers thought of atheism as falling into two categories: practical and speculative. Practical atheism was essentially behavioural; the practical atheist professed belief in God but behaved as if there was no God. That is, the practical atheist lived an ‘immoral’ life. Alternatively, the practical atheist *claimed* not to believe in God, or deluded himself that he did not believe in God, in order to pursue a guilt-free lifestyle of drinking, gluttony, debauchery (including sodomy), and blasphemy:

Ils ne sont pas persuadés qu’il n’ya point de Dieu: mais ils vivent comme s’ils l’étoient, & tâchent d’effacer de leur esprit toutes les notions qui tendent à leur prouver une divinité. L’existence d’un Dieu les incommode dans la jouissance de

³⁰ Alan C. Kors examines these theological disputes in detail in *Atheism in France 1650-1729 vol. 1: The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); see also Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, for discussion of disputes in different European contexts.

leurs plaisirs criminels: c'est pourquoi ils voudroient croire qu'il n'ya point de Dieu, et ils s'efforcent d'y parvenir.³¹

In effect, they wished that there was no God, but, according to their critics, were unable to achieve a state of true non-belief. Libertines such as the infamous Earl of Rochester, who supposedly rediscovered his faith in God on his deathbed, exemplified practical atheism.³²

The speculative or philosophical atheist, on the other hand, was someone who *actually* did not believe that God existed. Speculative atheism was considered to be extremely dangerous. It was also, however, thought to be impossible,³³ because belief in God was innate, universal and rational.³⁴ This idea that belief in God was innate and

³¹ Anon., "Athées," in *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Metièrs*, v. 1, eds. Denis Diderot & Jean le Rond d'Alembert (ARTFL Project version 1.0.1 [1751]), 799. "They are not persuaded that there is no God: but they live as if they were, and endeavour to blot out all the notions which tend to prove [the existence of] a divinity to them. The existence of a God disturbs them in the enjoyment of their criminal pleasures: it is why they wish to believe that there is no God, and they try hard to achieve that [state of non-belief]." The author of this lengthy article, most of which consists of a refutation of Bayle's argument that a society of virtuous atheists is possible, notes that this type of atheism is the most common, and exists among both Turks and Christians.

³² On the career of the Earl of Rochester, see e.g. Paul Hammond, *Figuring Sex Between Men from Shakespeare to Rochester* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002) and Frank H. Ellis, 'Wilmot, John, second earl of Rochester (1647–1680)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/view/article/29623>, accessed 17 Feb 2016].

³³ David Hume commented: "There is not a greater number of philosophical reasonings, displayed upon any subject, than those, which prove the existence of a Deity, and refute the fallacies of Atheists; and yet the most religious philosophers still dispute whether any man can be so blinded as to be a speculative atheist. How shall we reconcile these contradictions? The knights-errant, who wandered about to clear the world of dragons and giants, never entertained the least doubt with regard to the existence of these monsters." *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), Section XII part I, p. 109.

³⁴ See e.g. David Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes to Russell* (London: Croom Helm, 1998); Michael Hunter & David Wootton, "Introduction," in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, eds. Michael Hunter & David Wootton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 138; Roger D. Lund, *The Margins of Orthodoxy: Heterodox Writing and Cultural Response 1660-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 2-10; Kors, *Atheism in France*, 18-25; David Wootton, "Unbelief in Early Modern Europe," *History Workshop* 20 (1985): 86; Simone Zurbuchen, "Religion and Society," in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 790-791. Alan Kors' discussion of early modern conceptions of atheism in *Atheism in France* provides a more nuanced perspective on the range of views than can be offered here.

universal, known as the concept of universal consent, took a serious blow thanks to early modern encounters with peoples who appeared to neither believe in nor know about God. As Alan Kors has shown, Europeans' accounts of the native peoples of North and South America, as well as the intense debate over whether the Chinese people and the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers were atheists, undermined this core argument against speculative atheism by showing that it was, in fact, possible not only for individuals to have no innate knowledge of or belief in God, but also (depending on how one interpreted the information coming from the New World and China) for a functional society of atheists to exist.³⁵

The issue of rational belief in God was complex, because reason could just as easily be turned against religion, as in the works of Hobbes and Spinoza, both of whom were widely believed to be atheists; the terms 'Hobbism' and 'Spinozism,' along with 'Epicureanism' and 'materialism,' were commonly-used alternative terms for 'atheism.' Deists such as John Toland argued for rational religion, as opposed to revelatory religion or 'superstition,' as a means of attacking clerical authority, and were also regarded, by some, as atheists.³⁶ Writers such as Ralph Cudworth and Henry More, who developed detailed arguments against atheism, risked being accused of atheism for pursuing a

³⁵ Kors, *Atheism in France*, 135-218. See also Jonathan I. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750-1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 558-572.

³⁶ See Justin Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and its Enemies, 1660-1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Blaise Pascal, however, remarked that deism was "almost as remote from Christian religion as atheism, its complete opposite." *Pensées*, ed. and trans. Roger Ariew (Hackett 2005), [47] Preface to the Second Part, p. 227.

rational approach to religion.³⁷ On the other hand, anti-atheist writers who wanted to use rational arguments could defend their method by suggesting that the method itself was a defense against atheism: a man of reason could not be an atheist because his reason would show him that God exists. John Locke, for instance, argued that while we have knowledge of our own existence through intuition, and of the existence of any other thing by sensation, it is *reason* that makes the existence of God known to us. Such knowledge, Locke wrote, is unavoidable for “all rational creatures.”³⁸

Much was at stake in the theory that real, rational atheism was impossible. If the proper use of reason could, in fact, lead a man to true atheism, then the entire edifice of reasonable religion would be shown to be false, leaving behind either a godless world or superstition (irrational religion). The impossibility argument also implied that true atheism would necessarily be irrational and therefore not human, since reasoning was regarded as a specifically human trait. John Locke, for example, began his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* with the assertion “it is the understanding that sets man above the rest of sensible beings, and gives him all the advantage and dominion, which he has over them,”³⁹ and Descartes famously argued that animals possess no

³⁷ See e.g. David Leech, *The Hammer of the Cartesians: Henry More’s Philosophy of Spirit and the Origins of Modern Atheism* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013).

³⁸ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1689]), 405 & 399.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

capacity for reason at all, as evidenced by their lack of language.⁴⁰ Erica Fudge's analysis of the anti-atheist remarks of the Puritan theologian William Perkins offers useful insights into the conceptual relationship between animals and atheists. Fudge argues that Perkins' thoughts on atheism reveal a slippage, or confusion, within his Reformed theology concerning the distinction between humans and animals. As she explains, Reformed theology held that there was an absolute "distinction of the human from the unreasonable and conscience-less animal,"⁴¹ and required not just predestined, God-given faith, but also knowledge of God's will, in order to be human.⁴² Perkins offers, as Fudge puts it, two versions of the atheist: "in one the atheist is a wilful scorner of true faith, in the other God does not reveal himself." The wilful atheists bark like dogs; the ignorant atheists are like swine.⁴³ Denis Robichaud has also drawn attention to the dehumanization of the atheist, noting that both Plato and the humanist Ficino compared impious philosophers to unruly, barking dogs, and that early modern accounts of the death of the 'atheist' Vanini in 1516 characterized him as an animal who, after having his tongue ripped out, could no longer speak like a man but only bellow like a cow.⁴⁴ Ficino, as Robichaud points out,

⁴⁰ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Related Writings*, trans. Desmond M. Clarke (London: Penguin, 2003), 41. On the beast-human divide, see e.g. Erica Fudge, *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality, and Humanity in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006); Erica Fudge, Ruth Gilbert & Susan Wiseman, eds., *At the Borders of the Human: Beasts, Bodies and Natural Philosophy in the Early Modern Period* (Houndmills: MacMillan, 1999); Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* (London: Allen Lane, 1983).

⁴¹ Erica Fudge, *Perceiving Animals: Humans and Beasts in Early Modern English Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 50.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

⁴⁴ Robichaud, "Renaissance and Reformation," 191-192.

stated in *Platonic Theology* that “without the worship of God ... and the immortality of the soul man would be the most miserable animal.”⁴⁵

The conceptualization of the atheist as a beast or monster was, therefore, doubly determined: gluttony, drunkenness, and debauchery were beastly behaviours, and irrationality placed the atheist in the category of animals. It was not a great leap to conceptualize the atheist as a madman or monster, or both; indeed, several writers referred to atheists as enemies of humanity, suggesting that, like pirates and savages, they were regarded as outside the law.⁴⁶ The following English and French examples illustrate how the term ‘atheist’ was used to vilify opponents and how the figure of the atheist was dehumanized throughout the early modern period. While the specific contexts and applications of the label ‘atheist’ vary, the dehumanizing imagery of beastly, monstrous atheists persists with striking continuity.

To begin with an example of the English Protestant use of the label ‘atheism’ against religious opponents, John Hull’s *The Unmasking of the Politique Atheist* (1602) equates atheism with Catholicism not because Catholics deny the existence of God, but because they deny and defy “Christ, his Gospell, and the Godhead” by “erroneous, superstitious [sic], and ungodly” doctrine, worship and living.⁴⁷ The ancient atheist

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁴⁶ On the ‘enemy of the human race’ concept and its relationship to the moral authority of nature in early modern thought, see Dan Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the Cult of Nature, & the French Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). Curiously, Edelstein does not include atheists among the common incarnations of the enemy of humanity (the others are the savage, brigand, devil, pirate and tyrant).

⁴⁷ John Hull, *The Unmasking of the Politique Atheist* (London, 1602), 3.

pagans, such as Diagoras and Theodorus, were merely blindfolded, but the papist's sight is quickened by envy, and the light by which he sees is lent to him by Satan. If papists realized this, then they would see "that Satan is the master builder of their Church, and Atheisme the chief foundation of their kingdome."⁴⁸ According to Hull, papistry is "a doctrine turning the truth of God into a lye, and religion into superstition"; papists are Machiavellian subverters of religion and the state.⁴⁹ The Antichrist and his army of "heresie and Atheisme ... will one day swallow us up quicke for conspiring with the enemies of Christ" if readers do not learn from "other mens harmes ... to beware."⁵⁰ Hull's treatise is suffused throughout with these apocalyptic expectations, as well as with hatred of the papacy and of Catholicism.

Hull employs a number of striking beastly metaphors to drive home his points about Catholics/atheists. They are changelings and chameleons who can, like hyenas and panthers, trick other beasts in order to devour them.⁵¹ They are also "like the Remora hindering the course of religion";⁵² like wolves in sheep's clothing;⁵³ "blood-desiring or

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, ii-v.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, viii.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 38.

soule-devouring”,⁵⁴ cruel like foxes;⁵⁵ “roaring Lyons, and devouring Wolves”.⁵⁶ Those who say “with brasen faces, & impure mouthes” that there is no God have “beastly manners ... so ill, & conversation so brutish, as they have forsaken God, & betaken themselves unto the Epicure.”⁵⁷ Hull’s vitriol makes the connection between atheism and beastliness perfectly clear; he leaves no opening for the reader to think of atheists as anything other than cruel, terrifying predators who pretend to be religious men but are, in fact, monsters. Hull’s characterization of atheists goes so far as to make it impossible to trust anyone, since an atheist might as easily pretend to be a Protestant as a Catholic in order to fulfil his destructive goals. This was the heart of the problem of early modern atheism: a brutish atheist might reveal himself, but might also conceal his true nature behind a mask of religion.

Further, atheists are liars and hypocrites who “will play of all sides: with Elias worship Iehovah, and with Iezabel offer sacrifice to Baal.” They make no true commitment to any religion, are lukewarm toward all of them, and express a relativistic understanding of truth that makes “a fellowship of righteousnesse, with unrighteousnesse: a communion of light and darkenesse; a concorde between Christ and Beliall: and

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 100.

religion a composition of heresies.”⁵⁸ Atheists “will maintain and establish all religions”⁵⁹ in order to destroy religion — an argument also expressed in the works of French Catholic writers. There can be only one truth, one faith, one God, and so on. Compromise on this point can only mean pretence and, therefore, atheism. That this attitude could only ratchet up intolerance between faiths goes without saying; it insists on a singular truth and, at the same time, discredits anyone who might argue for toleration by associating them with the monstrous position of atheism.

On the French side, Catholics such as the Jesuit polemicist François Garasse equated Protestantism with atheism,⁶⁰ and some French writers expressed fear that toleration of Protestantism would lead to widespread atheism. Claude de Saintes, for example, wrote in 1572 that Protestants seek to implant foreign ‘atheisms’ under the pretext of religion and liberty of conscience,⁶¹ and that while Calvinism appears not to be atheist because it professes to believe in God, it is, in fact, atheist.⁶² The controversialist François Véron argued that choosing to remain neutral with respect to religions and sects was a kind of atheism.⁶³ In the fraught context of the later wars of religion and the Valois

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁶⁰ E.g. “Martin Luther, lequel avoit tant fait par ses journées, qu’il estoit parvenu à la perfection de l’atheisme ...”. In *La doctrine curieuse des beaux esprits de ce temps, ou, Pretendus tels* (Paris: S. Chappellet, 1623), 2. ARTFL-FRANTEXT electronic edition, accessed 9 July 2015.

⁶¹ Claude de Saintes, *Declaration d’Aucuns Atheismes de la Doctrine de Calvin & Beze contre les premiers fondemens de la Chrestienté* (Paris: Claude Fremy, 1572), iv.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 1. De Saintes takes the next 354 pages to show how Calvinism is really atheism.

⁶³ François Véron, *Des nouveaux lutins et esprits familiers de Charenton, induisans à l’Atheisme, decouvertz et conjurez* (Paris: Boulanger, 1633), 6.

succession crisis caused by Henry III's failure to produce an heir prior to his assassination in 1589,⁶⁴ both Henry III and Henry IV were accused of atheism. The short work *L'Atheisme de Henry de Valoys* argues that the king's profession of Catholicism is hypocritical, and that he and his advisors are actually atheists. The author exhorts his readers in the final paragraph to abandon this atheist (Henry) and return to God, or else expect ruin and eternal damnation.⁶⁵ Another work accuses Henry and his advisors of being heretics, atheists and *politiques*, refers to them as insolent and monstrous atheists, and addresses Henry directly as a heretic, *politique* and atheist.⁶⁶ In the dialogue *Theriaque et Anthidot*, published in 1590 after the Protestant Henry of Navarre became Henry IV of France, but before his conversion to Catholicism, the speakers express their fears that Protestantism will be imposed on them by Henry IV, describe the destruction of churches and killing of priests, and suggest that the new king's aim to create a council is merely a pretext for planting not just heresy, but atheism in France.⁶⁷

As examples of a different use of the label 'atheism', both Jean Bodin and Joseph Glanvill argued, nearly a century apart and within very different religious and political

⁶⁴ For useful overviews of the wars and the crisis, see Mack P. Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562-1629* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and Barbara B. Diefendorf, "The Religious Wars in France," in *A Companion to the Reformation World*, ed. R. Po-Chia Hsia (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2004).

⁶⁵ *L'Atheisme de Henry de Valoys: Où est monstré le vray but de ses dissimulations & Cruautez* (Paris: Pierre-des-Hayes, 1589), 30.

⁶⁶ *Les Impostures et Calomnies des Huguenots, Politiques & Atheistes pour colorer le massacre commis és personnes de Messeigneurs les Cardinal & Duc de Guise par Henry de Valois* (Paris, 1589): 24; 30; 33.

⁶⁷ B.D.B., *Theriaque et Anthidot prepare, pour chasser le venin, poison, ou Peste, des Heretiques, Navarrois, & Athees Politiques de la France* (Paris: Hubert du Glan, 1590). The work, dedicated to Cardinal Cajetan, is a dialogue between four characters: le Comte de Richebourg; le Neophile politique; Philalyste amateur de vérité; and le Capitaine Grisouard. See pp. 24; 49; 127.

contexts, that scepticism concerning the reality of witches was, or led to, atheism.

According to Bodin, “atheists and those who mimic the learned” do not want to admit that magic is possible because they do not want to seem ignorant through not knowing the cause of what they see.⁶⁸ He also wrote that “it is hardly less of an impiety to call into doubt the possibility of witches than to doubt the existence of God,” because “He who by His law has assured the latter has also assured the former.”⁶⁹ For Glanvill, scepticism regarding the reality of witchcraft placed one on a slippery slope of questioning biblical authority that led inevitably to atheism.⁷⁰

A broader, but no less hostile, understanding of atheism is evident in Walter Charleton’s 1652 physico-theological treatise *The Darknes [sic] of Atheism Dispelled*, “one of the very earliest works in the English tradition of natural theology.”⁷¹ Charleton shifts the English discourse away from anti-Catholic polemics to a semi-medicalized conceptualization of atheism as a philosophical infection. Charleton, a physician and natural philosopher, presented his treatise as an attempt to resist the “swarms of Atheisticall monsters” infesting England at that time. He characterized these atheists as

⁶⁸ Jean Bodin, *On the Demon-Mania of Witches*, trans. Randy A. Scott (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 1995), 42-43.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁷⁰ Joseph Glanvill, *Saducismus triumphatus, or, Full and plain evidence concerning witches and apparitions* (London: J. Collins & S. Lownds, 1681). Walter Stephens has argued that witchcraft theorists’ obsession with demonic sex was an attempt to counter doubts about the reality of demons and, by extension, of God’s reality. See *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

⁷¹ John Henry, “Walter Charleton (1620-1707),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Sept 2010, accessed 17 Feb 2016, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/view/article/5157>.

licentious and insolent, possessed of a “wild Ambition” to be counted as atheists, “as if the only way to acquire the reputation of being Transcendent Wits, were to seem able, with bold and specious Arguments, to impugne the greatest and most sacred Verities.” This infestation of atheists is greater than any other nation has experienced, and greater than England itself has ever experienced. Charleton diagnoses the cause as the Civil War, which “so shatter’d and undermined” the authority of the Church against the illusions of the Devil that breaches still remained, through which “whole Hosts of the most execrable Heresies, blasphemous Enthusiasms, nay even profes’t Atheism have enter’d upon us,” without meaningful opposition from those who should be protecting society from such plagues.⁷²

Charleton argues that the appropriate approach to atheists is not appeals to Scripture, but argumentation from reason and knowledge of nature. He shifts responsibility for the ‘cure’ from divines to philosophers, pointing out that although “to us whose Mindes are deeply imbued with the sacred tincture of Christianisme,” appeals to faith are sufficiently persuasive concerning the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, “can the meer Naturall man, persisting in the state of Infidelity, never be induced to embrace either any Religion, or any Morall Virtue,” unless he is persuaded “by Reasons Apodictical, desumed from that infallible Criterion, the Light of Nature; from whose Judicature there can be no appeal.”⁷³ In other words, natural philosophy and

⁷² Walter Charleton, *The Darknes of Atheism Dispelled by the Light of Nature: A Physico-theological Treatise* (London: J.F., 1652), “To the Reader” fol. a.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, a3.

natural theology are the only cures for atheism. This is, in terms of the appeal to reason and nature, a reversal of Lucretius's ancient argument that reason and knowledge of nature will free humanity from religion — an argument that will be reiterated many times in the Enlightenment. Nature itself has become the ultimate authority, since, as Charleton recognizes, depending solely on the authority of scripture in a debate over God's providence "is the ready way to confirm [the atheist] in his impiety, and stiffen his infidelity." The atheist does not recognize scripture's authority, so there is no way "to break his objections" but through "the shield of reason" and "a smart retort of arguments desumed from the proper magazine of all temporall knowledge, the Light of Nature."⁷⁴

Charleton is thinking here not of religious opponents *en masse*, but of philosophical opponents who challenge the understanding of God as the omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent creator of the world whose providence intervenes in every individual life. This is not, or at least not simply, a Catholic-Protestant debate. The real danger is the revival of Epicureanism and its "detestable opinion, that Fortune was the Author and Architect of this admirable fabrick the Universe." Charleton focuses on Epicurus, singling him out, as he puts it, as the "most notorious Patron, though not the Father of this execrable delusion," and stating that the ancient philosopher had "a

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 4-5. Regarding the early modern tendency to appeal to the authority of nature, see e.g. Lorraine Daston & Fernando Vidal, eds., *The Moral Authority of Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), and Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right*.

monstrous design to expunge those Characters of Piety and reverence towards the Deity” and to eradicate belief in the punishment of evil and reward of good deeds after death.⁷⁵

There is a curious mix of animal and medical metaphors and gendering within Charleton’s text. Epicurus is a patron, but not a father, and the phrase Charleton uses to describe Epicurus — “being great with a monstrous design” — suggests that the philosopher was pregnant with and then gave birth to that design, as if he was an unnatural mother. The design itself infected “that Spider, Lucretius,” who proceeded to spin it out in webs to trap men’s minds;⁷⁶ it became an epidemic contagion that not only “corrupted the brains of Philosophers” but “dilated even to the infection of the more remote and grosser mindes of Women and Poets (both which Imitation makes easily subject to any impression of falshood) that lived many ages after him.” Charleton provides the example of Danae, daughter of the Epicurean Leontius, who condemned the gods on her way to execution.⁷⁷

Women and (male) poets, then, are especially susceptible to atheism, but the vector of the contagion — the term virus seems appropriate in this context — is the infected brains of male philosophers, and the method of transmission is their poisonous

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 40. John Henry notes in his *ODNB* article that Charleton published translations of Gassendi and Epicurus, and may have been denied membership in the College of Physicians in 1655 due to his support for Epicureanism, which suggests a somewhat conflicted relationship with that philosophy.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 162. This is a rare instance of an author identifying a female atheist, or even acknowledging that women could be atheists. John Milton makes an interesting reference to female “fair atheists” in Book XI (614-627) of *Paradise Lost*; the archangel Michael tells Adam that these women will seduce the godly men away from God, in a reiteration of the original Fall. *Paradise Lost*, ed. John Leonard (London: Penguin, 2000), 263. Milton also describes the rebellious angels as atheists, which suggests that to him, an atheist is a rebel against God, not someone who does not believe God exists.

words. Velleius, the Epicurean speaker in Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*, is a "black Viper" who spits poison from his accursed jaws,⁷⁸ and the arguments of Velleius, Epicurus and Lucretius are venomous. Charleton makes the connection between atheism and beastliness explicit when he refers to these three Epicureans as "eminent Levellers, who endeavoured to supplant man of his birthright, to take away the prerogative of his nature, and reduce him to no greater a share in the favour of his Maker, then the meanest of his fellow Animals."⁷⁹ Elsewhere, Charleton describes atheism as a darkness that blinds those lacking the perspicuity to see through it,⁸⁰ and as a wilful refusal to see the truth by shutting the mind's eye against the light of nature.⁸¹ Atheists are also degenerate, "impertinent Ideots,"⁸² impudent,⁸³ and stubborn.⁸⁴

These characterizations make it unclear whether the atheist is always to blame for his (or her) views, or is merely a victim of a mental infection. Women and poets would seem to contract the infection simply by being exposed to it, since they lack natural resistance, but philosophers appear to bear moral responsibility for their corruption. The problem seems to worry Charleton himself at one point, for he wonders how it is possible

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 85-86.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 68-69.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 71.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 101-102.

that Epicurus, known to have been a great scholar, could simultaneously be such a fool as to believe that God did not create the universe. Charleton's answer is that he was deluded by the Devil.⁸⁵ Like witches, then, atheists are dupes of the Devil, but this does not absolve them of responsibility — if they would just open their minds' eyes, they would either avoid infection or be cured by the self-evident Christian truth revealed by the light of nature.

For the French Protestant Philippe de Mornay, atheists' animalistic behaviour led to irrationality: they “drown reason in filthy and beastly pleasures.”⁸⁶ Another work attributed to de Mornay argues that atheism is an insane opinion, a frenzy,⁸⁷ and a horrible monster.⁸⁸ Marin Mersenne, author of the infamous claim that there were 50,000 atheists in Paris alone, described atheism as a monster, a child of chaos and the night.⁸⁹ Samuel Gardiner wrote that atheists “pester this land, as the Frogs and Caterpillars did Pharaoh's court”;⁹⁰ and as we have seen, John Hull compared atheists to several different dangerous animals. Montaigne referred to atheism in his *Essays* as unnatural, monstrous

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁸⁶ Philippe de Mornay, Preface, *A Work Concerning the Trewnesse of the Christian Religion*, trans. Sir Philip Sidney Knight & Arthur Golding (London: Thomas Cadman, 1587).

⁸⁷ Philippe de Mornay [Baruch Canephius], *Athéomachie, ou Réfutation des erreurs et détestables impiétez des athéistes, libertins et autres esprits profanes de ces derniers temps* ([S.I.]: J. Durant, 1582), 1.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸⁹ Marin Mersenne, *L'impiété des déistes, athées et libertins de ce temps, combattue et renversée par raisons tirées de la philosophie et de la théologie, ensemble la réfutation du poème des déistes* (Paris: Pierre Billaine, 1630), ded. p. 4.

⁹⁰ Samuel Gardiner, *Doomes-Day Booke, or An Alarum for Atheists* (London: Edward Allde, 1606), 51.

and difficult to establish in the human mind.⁹¹ The French historian Scipion Dupleix also made the link between atheism and animality explicit when he wrote that there are atheists who are such enemies of human dignity that they try to equate it to the condition of beasts by arguing that animals have the power of reason.⁹² For Dupleix, not only does atheism threaten humans' superior status, but the idea that animals can reason is part of the atheist 'package' because it challenges that status. We see here yet another way in which heterodox ideas could become assimilated to atheism.

There were important exceptions to the otherwise overwhelmingly hostile depiction of atheists and atheism in early modern Europe. The first is the didactic Epicurean poem *De rerum natura*, or *On the Nature of Things*, by the Roman poet Lucretius, which was rediscovered in 1417.⁹³ As this chapter has already noted, Epicureanism was regarded widely in early modern Europe as an atheist philosophy;⁹⁴ whether it actually was atheist or not, then, it could be certainly read as such. This is important because if one reads the poem as an atheist text, it presents, alongside a strong

⁹¹ Michel de Montaigne, *Les Essais*, 1595 (ARTFL electronic edition), accessed 9 July 2015.

⁹² Scipion Dupleix, *Physique ou science des choses naturelles* (ARTFL Electronic Edition, 2009 [1603]).

⁹³ Modern opinions vary regarding whether Lucretius should be interpreted as an atheist or not. If we take the poem at face value, then Lucretius, like Epicurus, was a kind of theist who believed that gods existed even if they had nothing to do with human affairs. On the other hand, if we prefer an esoteric interpretation, then the weak theism in *On the Nature of Things* is merely a cover for atheism. Both readings are possible and, given how little we know about Lucretius himself, may be regarded as equally valid; how one interprets Lucretius must, I suspect, depend heavily on what one wants to see in the text. Ada Palmer has argued recently that while *On the Nature of Things* is not atheist in the modern sense of denying the existence of god(s), it contains several proto-atheist arguments that "enable modern scientific atheism without enforcing or even intending it." Ada Palmer, *Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 23.

⁹⁴ This did not prevent interest in Epicurean ideas, particularly atomism, and attempts to reconcile them with Christianity. See e.g. Philip Ford, "Lucretius in early modern France," in *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, eds. Stuart Gillespie & Philip Hardie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); J.S. Spink, *French Free-thought from Gassendi to Voltaire* (London: Athlone Press, 1960); Catherine Wilson, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

critique of religion and a materialist explanation of the creation of the universe, a positive image of the atheist.

On the Nature of Things is addressed to Lucretius's friend Memmius. In six books, it explains Epicurean teachings concerning matter and void; atomism; mortality and the soul; the senses; cosmos and civilization; and weather and the earth. Lucretius refers to himself in the first person as a poet and teacher, and also as the pupil of Epicurus, whom he reveres. These first-person references effect a self-fashioning of the poet as a man of reason and peace who desires what is good for all humans. Lucretius makes himself an exemplar of Epicureanism while encouraging Memmius and other readers to adopt the same philosophy.

On the Nature of Things begins with an invocation of Venus. Lucretius asks the goddess to be his partner in writing this poem for his friend; he also asks her to "make the mad machinery of war drift off to sleep" by sweet-talking her lover Mars into granting Romans "a quiet peace." While this opening has the formulaic feel of a standard invocation of the Muses, and a prayer for peace in a time of conflict should not surprise us, this particular way of beginning the poem establishes immediately that Lucretius, the Epicurean, values life, pleasure and peace. He acknowledges the need for his friend Memmius to heed the call to duty during Rome's time of conflict, but makes it clear that a state of war is not desirable.⁹⁵ His goal is not to cause further strife within Roman society; rather, he believes that adoption of Epicureanism will lead to greater happiness and less conflict, as it is fear and religion that cause much of the grief that plagues

⁹⁵ Lucretius, *The Nature of Things*, trans. A.E. Stallings (London: Penguin, 2007), 3-4.

humanity. Lucretius's criticisms of religion are powerful: his first remark about religion is that it, not Epicurean philosophy, "breeds wickedness and ... has given rise to wrongful deeds" such as the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter Iphigenia.⁹⁶ His tone, however, remains for the most part measured and reasonable, even soothing. Indeed, he explains more than once that he is using the honeyed words of poetry to make his philosophical medicine go down more easily:

... I teach great truths, and set out to unknot
The mind from the tight strictures of religion, and I write
Of so darkling a subject in a poetry so bright,
Nor is my method to no purpose — doctors do as much;
Consider a physician with a child who will not sip
A disgusting dose of wormwood; first, he coats the goblet's lip
All round with honey's sweet blond stickiness, that way to lure
Gullible youth to taste it, and to drain the bitter cure,
The child's duped but not cheated — rather, put back in the
 pink —
That's what I do. Since those who've never tasted of it think
This philosophy's a bitter pill to swallow ...⁹⁷

One does not require medicine unless one is ill. Lucretius thus presents himself as a physician administering a cure.

In his more combative statements about religion, Lucretius writes that men are oppressed by "the superstitions and the threats of priests," powerless to resist because they dread punishment after death.⁹⁸ He explains that observing nature and her laws will sweep away "this dread, these shadows of the mind" caused by a lack of understanding

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 30. The same passage is repeated at the beginning of Book IV.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

that leads men to assign explanations of natural occurrences to the divine.⁹⁹ If the reader will only listen to Lucretius/Epicurus, he will be freed from the knots in which religion has bound him; this, in turn, will free him from the fear of death and will thus allow him to enjoy life. All humans are like children who are afraid of the dark until their ignorance and fear are dispelled by knowledge of nature.¹⁰⁰ Religion, which encourages and exacerbates fear, keeps men in a childish state; by implication, it emasculates them. Thus, perhaps, the Epicurean poet, who has overcome childish fears and whose mind is free, is more of a man than one who remains in thrall to religion. These precise arguments against religion, and the idea that the true man is the one who has overcome his childish dependence on it, recur in the atheist texts of the eighteenth century, especially in d'Holbach's *Système de la Nature*.

Another important source of positive imagery for atheists was Pierre Bayle's argument that a society of virtuous atheists was possible. In *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*, the first edition of which was published anonymously in Holland in 1682, Bayle argued that atheists were no more likely to live immorally and criminally than believers in God. While noting that there were no records of atheist nations to inform opinion, common experience showed "that those who believe in a paradise and a hell are capable of committing every sort of crime" and "that the inclination to act badly does not stem from the fact that one is ignorant of the existence of God." Bayle concluded that inclinations to act badly and to act well stem from individual

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

temperaments fortified by education, not from belief or lack of belief in God.¹⁰¹ In effect, Bayle was saying that knowledge of God makes no real difference to the ways people conduct themselves.

Bayle supported this argument mainly by showing how badly believers have behaved despite their faith, but in one section he explains that the existence of atheist martyrs such as Vanini suggests that atheists, like other men, can be motivated by decency and the desire for glory, not just by private utility and pleasure. Bayle asks why Vanini “bothered to dogmatize indiscreetly before persons who could bring him to justice” and why he “preferred to die amidst the severest tortures than to utter a retraction which ... could not do him any harm in the next world” (as an atheist, Vanini would not have believed in a next world or in the soul)? According to Bayle, if Vanini

sought only his own private utility, he should have contented himself with enjoying tranquilly a perfect security of conscience, without troubling himself to have disciples. He therefore must have had the desire to have them, and this either in order to make himself head of a party or to deliver men from a yoke which, in his opinion, prevented them from enjoying themselves as they might. If he wished to make himself head of a party, this is an indication that he did not regard the pleasures of the body, or riches, as his final end but that he worked for the sake of glory. If he worked to deliver men from the fear of hell, men whom he believed were needlessly disquieted, this is a sign that he believed himself obliged to render service to his neighbor and that he judged it to be decent to work for our fellows, not only to our harm, but also at the risk of our life.¹⁰²

The account of Vanini’s death is not only a source of positive imagery. Bayle refers to Vanini ironically as a fool and as ridiculous for preferring to suffer torture rather than

¹⁰¹ Pierre Bayle, *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 180.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 227.

recant his atheism, since an atheist should not be afraid of hypocrisy; furthermore, the description itself conveys the message that atheists faced torture and death for their convictions. It is clear, however, that for Bayle, Vanini was a man of conscience who, like himself, wished to free other men from unnecessary fear.

Between Lucretius and Bayle, therefore, an atheist could find positive images; the committed atheists of the eighteenth century did not create their identity *ex nihilo*. As Kenneth Sheppard has pointed out, a handful of other writers, notably Bernard Mandeville and Anthony Ashley Cooper, Lord Shaftesbury, acknowledged the possibility that virtuous atheists could exist and, in the case of Mandeville, argued that atheists were not a threat to the social and political order.¹⁰³ The existence of these works should not, however, allow us to forget that from the perspective of an early modern atheist, the evidence of widespread hostility to and fear of his (or her) beliefs would have been clear. There was also, as the following sections show, little to no space for the open expression of atheism. In the absence of avowedly atheist ego documents, one can only speculate about the psychological impact of the anti-atheism discourse on atheists themselves, but it is possible that some atheists internalized the dehumanizing discourse and thought of themselves as madmen, fools, beasts or monsters, while others simply felt alienated from society. This may have been damaging to some individuals, but the emergence of resistance to the anti-atheist discourse in the eighteenth-century texts of committed atheism suggests that the dehumanizing discourse (as well as the positive depictions of Lucretius and Bayle) contributed to the development of a positive atheist identity.

¹⁰³ Kenneth Sheppard, "Anti-Atheism in Early Modern England 1580-1720" (PhD. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2012), 354-357.

The Intolerability of Atheism

In their introduction to *Philosophes Sans Dieu*, an edited collection of clandestine eighteenth-century atheist texts, Alain Mothu and Gianluca Mori remark on the French establishment's relative tolerance towards atheism and free thought, noting that atheists and free-thinkers were subject to much less surveillance than certain religious and political factions, that clandestine works circulated among individuals of high rank, and that several of the authors were themselves well-placed in society. They attribute this relative lack of persecution to the apolitical nature of the early clandestine texts, which was itself a way for authors to avoid trouble, and to the fact that these works did not circulate among the general populace.¹⁰⁴ While it is important to recognize that there was a degree of informal toleration, this point should not be misunderstood to mean that atheism was in fact tolerated in any official sense. Official censorship in France aimed to prevent the publication of atheist works (among others), and religious toleration did not extend to atheism.

Toleration of religious dissent developed in Europe as a response to the damaging religious conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, particularly the French Wars of Religion and the Thirty Years' War, and was supported by several Enlightenment figures, notably John Locke and Voltaire; however, religious toleration did not evolve at

¹⁰⁴ Alain Mothu & Gianluca Mori, eds., *Philosophes Sans Dieu: Textes Athées Clandestins du XVIIIe Siècle* (Paris: Honoré-Champion, 2010), 10-11.

the same time or in the same ways across Europe.¹⁰⁵ John Marshall explains that “in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries it had been common to speak of Poland, Transylvania and the Netherlands as the three most tolerant countries in Europe,” but, because Poland began to persecute Jews and Socinians in the 1640s, “by 1660, the recognised ‘tolerant’ countries in Christian Europe had dwindled to just Transylvania and the Netherlands.” The 1680s saw an increase in religious persecution in both England and France, while by this time the Netherlands had enjoyed “extensive religious freedom” since the Dutch Revolt against Spain and the 1579 Union of Utrecht, which established freedom of conscience. The Netherlands became a refuge for those fleeing religious persecution elsewhere: “the Netherlands accommodated large communities of every one of the most significant denominations of Protestant ‘heresy’ and heterodoxy who were burned, banned, and banished from other European countries,”¹⁰⁶ as well as Jews fleeing Iberia and Eastern Europe. Catholics also lived in the Netherlands, although Catholic worship remained illegal until the late eighteenth century (but was tolerated informally).¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ The history of religious toleration is another large scholarly field. See e.g. John Marshall, *John Locke, Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture: Religious Intolerance and Arguments for Religious Toleration in Early Modern and ‘Enlightenment’ Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Alexandra Walsham, *Charitable Hatred: Tolerance and Intolerance in England, 1500-1700* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006); Luisa Simonutti, “The Huguenot Debate on Toleration,” in *The Enlightenment World*, eds. Martin Fitzpatrick, Peter Jones, Christa Knellwolf & Ian McCalman (London & New York: Routledge, 2004); Dale Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton: Yale University Press, 1997); Ch. Berkvens-Stevelinck, Jonathan I. Israel, and G.H.M. Posthumus Meyjes, eds., *The Emergence of Tolerance in the Dutch Republic* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Ole Peter Grell and Roy Porter, eds., *Toleration in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Ole Peter Grell, Jonathan I. Israel, and N. Tyacke, eds., *From Persecution to Toleration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Alan Levine, ed., *Early Modern Skepticism and the Origins of Toleration* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 1999); and Henry Kamen, “Toleration and the Law in the West 1500-1700,” *Ratio Juris* 10, no. 1 (March 1997).

¹⁰⁶ Marshall, *John Locke, Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture*, 138-139.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 142-145.

In contrast, England did not pass a formal act of official toleration until 1689, when the Toleration Act (promulgated under the rule of William and Mary of Orange after the revolution of 1688 overthrew the Catholic James II) granted freedom of worship to Nonconformist Protestants. In 1685 Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes, which had granted certain rights to France's Huguenots since 1598. France did not re-establish official toleration of the Huguenots until 1787's Edict of Toleration. Frederick II of Prussia, on the other hand, "established policies of wide religious toleration in his kingdom, immediately on his accession" in 1740. Maria Theresa of Austria, who also came to the throne in 1740, persecuted Protestants in Bohemia and Hungary; her son, Joseph II, passed an Edict of Tolerance in 1782 that granted limited freedom of worship to Jews in Lower Austria.¹⁰⁸

The development of religious toleration was thus an uneven process, even if the general trend was towards the eventual recognition of freedom of religion. It is essential to bear in mind that even in the Netherlands, toleration was limited; as noted, Catholic worship was illegal there, and there were restrictions on other groups. The English Toleration Act excluded Catholics.¹⁰⁹ Only Frederick II established toleration for all sects "as long as they made no special claims."¹¹⁰ What is important for my purposes in this chapter is that no major proponent of toleration supported toleration of atheism. Even

¹⁰⁸ Outram, *The Enlightenment*, 120-121. On the Prussian and Austrian contexts, see also Beale, *Enlightenment and Reform*.

¹⁰⁹ On the intolerance of Catholics in England, see Marshall, *John Locke, Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture*, 682-693 and Arthur F. Marotti, "The Intolerability of English Catholicism," in *Writing and Religion in England, 1558-1689: Studies in Community-Making and Cultural Memory*, eds. Roger D. Sell & Anthony W. Johnson (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

¹¹⁰ Outram, *The Enlightenment*, 121-122.

Pierre Bayle, who argued in *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet* that atheists were capable of individual virtue and of forming a virtuous society, rejected the idea of toleration for atheists in his *Philosophical Commentary* of 1686.¹¹¹

Intolerance of atheism was neither new nor unique to the Enlightenment. The idea that atheists had no place in civil society appeared early in the early modern period, such as when Thomas More wrote in 1516 that each individual in his fictional Utopia enjoyed freedom of belief, except for those “who should sink so far below the dignity of human nature as to think that the soul perishes with the body, or that the universe is ruled by mere chance, rather than divine providence.” Anyone who opposes the Utopian belief that there is punishment and reward after death “is hardly a man, since he has degraded the sublimity of his own soul to the base level of a beast’s wretched body.” The Utopians “will not even count him as one of their citizens, since he would undoubtedly betray all the laws and customs of society, if not prevented by fear.” The unbeliever is not punished, but he “is offered no honors, entrusted with no offices, and given no public responsibility; he is universally regarded as a low and sordid fellow.”¹¹²

Looking further back in time, intolerance of atheists can be traced all the way to Plato, who wrote in *Laws* that, since the gods supervise the universe, and belief in the gods is what encourages proper and just behaviour, a lack of belief in the gods will lead to improper and unjust behaviour, which is bad for society; unbelief must, therefore, be

¹¹¹ See Alex Schulman, “The Twilight of Probability: Locke, Bayle, and the Toleration of Atheism,” *Journal of Religion* 89, no. 3 (2009); Marshall, *John Locke, Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture*, 694-706.

¹¹² Thomas More, *Utopia* (1516), 2nd ed., trans. and ed. Robert M. Adams (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 74-75.

discouraged by the law. Plato distinguishes between ‘just’ and ‘unjust’ unbelievers, but even the ‘just’ unbelievers are to be imprisoned. If they demonstrate that they have recovered their “sound mind,” they may return to society. If not, that is, if they persist in their atheism, they are sentenced to death.¹¹³

The core concept in both *Laws* and *Utopia* is that civil society depends on belief in and fear of God or the gods as an inducement to good behaviour; moral behaviour is therefore not possible for an atheist.¹¹⁴ This ancient view persists in various forms among several major Enlightenment figures, including those known for their arguments in favour of toleration.¹¹⁵ For example, Locke’s *Essay on Toleration* of 1667 contains the argument that belief in a deity was “the foundation of all morality & that which influences the

¹¹³ Robert Mayhew, *Plato: Laws 10* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008). For an analysis, see Nathan Powers, “Plato’s Cure for Impiety in *Laws X*,” *Ancient Philosophy* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2014).

¹¹⁴ Sociologist Ara Norenzayan has recently re-presented this argument, claiming that monotheism was a key factor in transforming human societies through the mechanism of supernatural surveillance of behaviour. Norenzayan suggests that freethinkers are “free riders” in religious societies, in that they reap the benefits without having to believe. His analysis is based almost entirely on modern sociological studies, with minimal historical research to support his claims for the origins of religion and transformation of early human societies. See *Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

¹¹⁵ This view persists today, if not so widely as in the eighteenth century. While atheism is protected in western secular nation-states under freedom of religion or freedom of thought statutes, recent sociological studies have shown that atheists are still regarded with suspicion due to their perceived lack of a foundation for moral behaviour. I have personally experienced others’ shock and horror upon learning that I do not believe there is a God. See e.g. Penny Edgell, Joseph Gerteis, & Douglas Hartmann, “Atheists as “Other”: Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society,” *American Sociological Review*, 71, no. 2 (Apr., 2006); and Jennifer Wright & Ryan Nichols, “The Social Cost of Atheism: How Perceived Religiosity Influences Moral Appraisal,” *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 14 (2014). The social and political unacceptability of atheism in western secular nation-states should not be exaggerated, but it nonetheless remains a reality. Other parts of the world can be very dangerous for atheists. For example, in Bangladesh, the atheist bloggers Avijit Roy and Ahmed Rajib Haider have been murdered, while others have been arrested by the secular government. See Agence France-Presse, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/27/american-atheist-blogger-hacked-to-death-in-bangladesh>, accessed 2 November 2015. In Indonesia in 2012, Alexander Aan was attacked by a mob and then imprisoned on a charge “based on the conflict between his atheist Facebook posts and his official registration as a Muslim.” In effect, Aan was charged with lying on his civil service registration form. International Humanist and Ethical Union, *Freedom of Thought 2012: A Global Report on Discrimination Against Humanists, Atheists and the Nonreligious*, http://www.ih.eu/files/IHEU_Freedom_of_Thought_2012.pdf, 12 and 22.

whole life & actions of men without which a man is to be counted no other than one of the most dangerous sorts of wild beasts & soe uncapable of all societie.”¹¹⁶ Locke expanded on this point in the *Letter Concerning Toleration*, where he referred to atheists as madmen¹¹⁷ and wrote

those who deny that there is a Deity are not to be tolerated at all. Neither the faith of the atheist nor his agreement nor his oath can be firm and sacrosanct. These are the bonds of human society, and all these bonds are completely dissolved, once God or the belief in God is removed. In addition, an atheist cannot claim the privilege of toleration in the name of religion, since his atheism does away with all religion.¹¹⁸

Montesquieu wrote in *Spirit of the Laws*, countering Bayle’s argument that atheism was better than idolatry, that from the idea that God does not exist “follows the idea of our independence, or, if we cannot have this idea, that of our rebellion ... he who has no religion at all is that terrible animal that feels its liberty only when it claws and devours.”¹¹⁹ Voltaire, despite his criticisms of Christianity, fanaticism and superstition, suggested in his *Treatise on Toleration* (1763) that it would be better to worship fauns, sylvans or naiads than “to give oneself over to Atheism,” because humans are too weak to

¹¹⁶ John Locke, “Additions to An Essay Concerning Toleration,” in *An Essay Concerning Toleration and Other Writings on Law and Politics, 1667-1683*, eds. J.R. Milton & Philip Milton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010), 308.

¹¹⁷ John Locke, “A Letter Concerning Toleration,” trans. Michael Silverthorne, in *Locke on Toleration*, ed. Richard Vernon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 21.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 37. Philip Stewart notes that Locke’s view of atheists as “repudiating human solidarity on any level and thus vitiating the very basis of any kind of civil government” turns atheists into fanatics, “implicitly the most intolerant of all beings and ... therefore unqualified for being tolerated themselves.” See “Are Atheists Fanatics? Variations on a Theme of Locke and Bayle,” in *Rousseau and l’Infâme: Religion, Toleration, and Fanaticism in the Age of Enlightenment*, eds. Ourida Mostefai & John T. Scott (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 228-229.

¹¹⁹ Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. and ed. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller & Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), XXIV.2, p. 460.

live without religion.¹²⁰ He also wrote, in the *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764), that while fanaticism was more dangerous than atheism, “atheism is a monstrous evil in those who govern; and also in learned men even if their lives are innocent, because from their studies they can affect those who hold office; ... even if not as baleful as fanaticism, [atheism] is nearly always fatal to virtue.”¹²¹ Even the *Encyclopédie*’s article on tolerance, written by Jean-Edme Romilly, argued:

Atheists, in particular, take off the sole bridle capable of restraining the powerful and rob the weak of their only hope. They disturb all human laws in demolishing the authority the laws gain by divine sanction. They leave standing no distinction between what is just and unjust other than frivolous, man-made distinctions, and see no shame in crime beyond the punishment of the criminal. Atheists ... must not demand tolerance in their favor. We should first instruct them, then exhort them with kindness, but if they persist, they should be punished. Finally, break with them and banish them from our society, as they themselves first broke the tie that binds society together.¹²²

Finally, Rousseau stipulated in *Contrat Social* that belief in the Divinity was a requirement of the social contract and that every citizen had to make a public profession of faith in the civil religion and accept all of its teachings. Refusal to do so would result in banishment, while anyone who made the profession but then behaved as if they did not believe the teachings, would be punished by death, because lying before the law is the

¹²⁰ Voltaire, *Treatise on Tolerance and Other Writings*, ed. Simon Harvey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 83. The *Treatise on Tolerance* returned to best-seller lists after the Charlie Hebdo shooting of 7 January 2015. See e.g. John Dugdale, “Voltaire’s *Treatise on Tolerance* becomes bestseller following Paris attacks,” *Guardian* 16 January 2015, accessed 12 October 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/16/voltaire-treatise-tolerance-besteller-paris-attack>.

¹²¹ Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, trans. and ed. Theodore Besterman (London: Penguin, 2004), 56-57.

¹²² Jean-Edme Romilly, “Tolerance,” in *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d’Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*, trans. Leslie Tuttle (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 2010), [add URL and date]. Originally pub. in vol. 16 (1765), p. 390.

greatest of crimes.¹²³ These requirements obviously exclude atheists from the social contract, as they could not make the necessary profession of faith without lying.¹²⁴

According to John Hope Mason, Rousseau's hostility to and fear of atheism stemmed from a view of it as linked to power, "whether it arose from the security and status of the wealthy ... or the persuasive force of systematic argument (and the way the intellect can override the emotions), or the possible justification of the right of the strongest."¹²⁵

Although most writers opposed atheism on the grounds that it was dangerous for society as a whole, some emphasized the danger that atheism posed to individuals. An atheist's soul was, necessarily, damned to eternity in Hell,¹²⁶ but atheism might doubly damn a soul by driving an individual to despair and suicide. John Smith, an Essex vicar, argued in his 1704 account of a parishioner's suicide that atheism was the cause not only of this individual's death, but also of many others': within the past few years, "several

¹²³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du Contrat Social, ou Essai sur la Forme de la République*, in *Oeuvres Politiques*, ed. Jean Roussel (Paris: Bordas, 1989), 576.

¹²⁴ John Hope Mason, "At the Limits of Toleration: Rousseau and Atheism," in *Rousseau and l'Infâme: Religion, Toleration, and Fanaticism in the Age of Enlightenment*, eds. Ourida Mostefai & John T. Scott (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 243.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 255.

¹²⁶ Hence the interest in atheists' behaviour when facing death; a 'conversion' in an atheist's final moments was evidence of the impossibility of sincere atheism. The modern expression "there are no atheists in foxholes" is a reiteration of this idea. Famously, James Boswell visited the dying David Hume (whose alleged atheism remains a subject of much debate) and tried to convince him to embrace Christianity, but Hume would have none of it. Gregory Bouchard has argued recently that Hume took deliberate control of his own death as a statement of irreligion that would inspire others. See "Making a Pagan's Death: David Hume's Self-Fashioning in his Final Days," in *Mediating Religious Cultures in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Torrance Kirby and Matthew Milner (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2013).

other Persons of Atheistical Principles” had “been given up to Madness and Folly, even to lay violent Hands upon themselves.”¹²⁷

Intolerance of atheism was not merely a debating topic for intellectuals. Although there is very little evidence of formal prosecution of atheists, there was always the possibility of consequences for atheism. Vanini, as we have seen, was tortured and executed for the crimes of *lèse-majesté* and atheism in 1619. In 1738 Tinkler Duckett, a fellow of Caius College, was tried before the Consistory Court of Cambridge University on a charge of atheism. He was expelled and his degrees were revoked. Duckett, it seems, had brought himself inadvertently to the attention of University authorities by means of a letter to a friend, in which he appeared to refer to his own development of atheist beliefs.¹²⁸ As late as 1781, Muyart de Vouglans’ survey of the criminal laws of France included atheism among crimes against religion. De Vouglans distinguishes atheism from deism, theism, and polytheism, but makes it clear that these are all forms of blasphemy and therefore of divine *lèse-majesté*. This placed atheism under the authority of various royal decrees against blasphemy dating all the way back to an ordinance of 1264.¹²⁹ One famous victim of the blasphemy laws, whose case became a *cause célèbre*, especially for Voltaire, was the Chevalier de la Barre, who was convicted of impiety, blasphemy and

¹²⁷ John Smith, *The Judgment of God upon Atheism and Infidelity, In a Brief and True Account of the Irreligious Life and Miserable Death of Mr. George Edwards*, 2nd ed. (London: G. Croom & J. Taylor, 1704), 3-4. I have analysed this case in “The Judgement of God: Using Suicide to Combat Atheism,” in *Mediating Religious Cultures in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Torrance Kirby and Matthew Milner (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2013).

¹²⁸ Charles Henry Cooper and John William Cooper, *Annals of Cambridge*, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Warwick & Co., 1852), 241. Duckett’s “Letter to Stephen G—bbs” is printed in *Gentleman’s Magazine* vol. 9 (April 1739). I intend to investigate this case further in my future research.

¹²⁹ Muyart de Vouglans, *Les Loix Criminelles de France, dans leur Ordre Naturel*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1781), 81-90.

sacrilege and sentenced to death at Abbeville. The sentence was confirmed by the Parlement of Paris, and on July 1, 1766 the young man had his tongue cut out before being beheaded and burned, with a copy of Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique* nailed to his chest.¹³⁰

Intolerance of atheists continued into the French Revolution, despite (or perhaps partly in response to) the brief dechristianization campaign characterized by the destruction of churches, attacks on priests, and the short-lived Cult of Reason.¹³¹ One indication that revolutionary anti-clericalism did not necessarily extend to supporting atheism is the inscription on one side of Voltaire's sarcophagus in the Panthéon, which praises him for having fought against atheism and fanaticism, and for tolerance.¹³² More

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 85-87. De Vouglans includes the judgement of the Paris Parlement. July 1st is apparently observed by French freethinkers as Chevalier de la Barre Day. See <http://canadianatheist.com/2015/07/01/chevalier-de-la-barre-day/>, accessed 16 February 2016. The de la Barre case was shocking at the time because such punishments were no longer normal; it was a highly unusual sentence in the latter half of the eighteenth century. The public shock can be interpreted as a sign that French society was becoming tolerant, but on the other hand, the execution itself must have reminded atheists that they were vulnerable under the blasphemy laws.

¹³¹ On the dechristianization movement and the Cult of Reason, see e.g. Nigel Aston, *Christianity and Revolutionary Europe c. 1750-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 211-218; Alphonse Aulard, *Le Culte de la Raison et le Culte de L'être Suprême (1793-1794): Essai Historique*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Felix Alcan, 1904); Alphonse Aulard, *Christianity and the French Revolution*, trans. Lady Frazer (London: Bouverie House, 1927); Richard Ballard, *The Unseen Terror: The French Revolution in the Provinces* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010); Richard Cobb, *The People's Armies : The armées révolutionnaires: instrument of the Terror in the departments April 1793 to Floréal Year II*, trans. Marianne Elliott (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 442-479; Jonathan Israel, *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from The Rights of Man to Robespierre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 479-592; John McManners, *The French Revolution and the Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969); Mona Ozouf, "De-Christianization," & "Revolutionary Religion," in *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, eds. François Furet & Mona Ozouf, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 1989); Sanja Perovic, *The Calendar in Revolutionary France: Perceptions of Time in Literature, Culture, Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Timothy Tackett, *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 2015), 312-319; Michel Vovelle, *The Revolution Against the Church: From Reason to the Supreme Being*, trans. Alan José (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991).

¹³² Voltaire was pantheonized in July 1791. The inscription reads "Il combattit les athées et les fanatiques[;] Il inspira la tolérance[;] Il réclama les droits de l'homme contre la servitude de la féodalité[.] Author's observation on site. On Voltaire's pantheonization, see e.g. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment*, 83-88.

obvious, and threatening, instances of intolerance are found in Maximilien Robespierre's speeches to the National Convention on 7 May (18 Floréal) 1794 and at the Festival of the Supreme Being on 20 May (Prairial), at which an effigy of Atheism was burned.¹³³ In the lengthy speech of 7 May, Robespierre accuses atheists of egoism, of associating with the Duke d'Orleans, and of being enemies of humanity.¹³⁴ In the festival speeches on the Supreme Being, he described the poisons of atheism as one of the weapons of the kings conspiring to assassinate humanity; in doing so, he made atheists enemies of the Republic.¹³⁵ Actual enemies of the Republic, such as the abbé Barruel, argued that the Revolution was the outcome of a longstanding conspiracy of atheist and deist

¹³³ Ozouf, "Revolutionary Religion," 565. The burning of an effigy of atheism at the festival is well-attested, including in images such as the estampe titled "Destruction de l'athéisme" (Paris, ca. 1794), available at <http://frda.stanford.edu/en/catalog/fn359cv1423>. The effigy seems to have been female, presumably to evoke the female figures of the Cult of Reason.

¹³⁴ J. Mavidal and E. Laurent, eds., *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860: recueil complet des débats législatifs & politiques des chambres françaises*, Vol. 90 (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1972), 135-140.

¹³⁵ *Discours de Maximilien Robespierre* (n.p., 1793). Israel suggests that the backlash and the Terror were a "full-blooded Counter-Enlightenment," *Democratic Enlightenment*, 947-948.

philosophes,¹³⁶ while across the Channel the anti-republican English press made atheism one of the Revolution's monstrous features.¹³⁷

Censorship

The invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, and the subsequent development of a publishing industry, meant that information and ideas could be disseminated rapidly to many readers in many places, a phenomenon that would lead eventually to what has been called the 'reading revolution.' It also led to the imposition of controls not only over the content and sale of printed materials, but also over printers themselves. Perhaps the most famous of such controls was the Catholic Church's Index of Prohibited Books, which first appeared in 1559; however, secular authorities became the primary governors of printing. Beginning in fifteenth-century Venice, European rulers established systems of granting exclusive privileges to selected printers, publishers and

¹³⁶ McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment*, 56-88. Barruel's conspiracy thesis was published in *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du jacobinisme*, 4 vols. (London: Ph. Le Boussonnier & Co., 1797-1798). For a detailed analysis of atheism and the French Revolution, see Shane H. Hockin, "Les Hommes Sans Dieu: Atheism, Religion, and Politics During the French Revolution" (PhD diss., Florida State University, 2014).

¹³⁷ The British Museum possesses several cartoons linking atheism with the French Revolution, sedition and democracy, including "The Contrast," by John Rowlandson, which was first printed in 1792. In this image, two medallions contrast British Liberty with French Liberty. The figure representing French Liberty is Discord, drawn as a gorgon. She is trampling a body and brandishing a trident with a severed head impaled on it. The accompanying text below the figure is a list of negative terms, including atheism, perjury, anarchy, murder, equality, famine, and so on. Available at http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?assetId=38450001&objectId=1478884&partId=1. This cartoon was used on an earthenware mug made in 1793, suggesting that it was a popular image. http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=70631&partId=1&searchText=atheis*&page=1. There is a clear modern parallel in Cold War-era and present-day imagery of evil "godless communists" bent on destroying civilized society.

booksellers; these could be exclusive rights to publish certain books or certain classes of books. Only officially sanctioned individuals could own presses or sell printed material. Authors could not publish their works except through the printers' guilds, and works could not be published unless they had passed a censor's inspection and received official approval: "Nothing, in principle, could be printed or published if it did not conform to the religious, moral and political doctrines of the state."¹³⁸ Even the relatively tolerant Dutch Republic banned numerous books in the seventeenth century, including Remonstrant and Socinian tracts, Gisbert Voetius' *Vruchtelosen Biddagh*, Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, and the works of Spinoza. Balthasar Bekker and Pierre Bayle lost their posts as a result of controversies over their works, and Adriaan Koerbagh died in prison after publishing his *Flowerbed* and *A Light Shining in Dark Places* in 1668.¹³⁹

The systems in place differed, but the underlying principles of state control and select monopolies were essentially the same throughout Europe until the end of the seventeenth century. For several reasons, including arguments for religious toleration, the English pre-publication licensing system and the monopoly of the Stationers' Company came to an end in 1695: "restrictions on individual expression in published works were

¹³⁸ Carla Hesse, "Print Culture in the Enlightenment," in *The Enlightenment World*, eds. Martin Fitzpatrick, Peter Jones, Christa Knellwolf & Ian McCalman (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), 368-369. On the control of printers and their negotiations with the system in France, see Jane McLeod, *Licensing Loyalty: Printers, Patrons and the State in Early Modern France* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011). On the 'reading revolution,' see e.g., in addition to Hesse, James Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹³⁹ Wiep van Bunge, "Censorship of Philosophy in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic," in *The Use of Censorship in the Enlightenment*, ed. Mogens Laerke (Leiden: Brill, 2009). See also van Bunge's introduction to Adriaan Koerbagh, *A Light Shining in Dark Places, To Illuminate the Main Questions of Theology and Religion*, ed. and trans. Michiel Wielema (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

now limited, post-publication, only by laws on sedition and libel”;¹⁴⁰ and, we must add, the laws against blasphemy, used against the free-thinking University of Edinburgh student Thomas Aikenhead in 1697.¹⁴¹ Most eighteenth-century states, however, continued to regulate publishing to some degree, “with the French monarchy overseeing the continent’s most elaborate structures of prevention and repression.”¹⁴²

Until the Revolution, when freedom of the press was instituted, authors in France were required to submit their works to royal censors for approval before they could publish. They could receive formal approval, could be denied approval, or could be required to make changes to their work. Police and inspectors worked to prevent the import and sale of illegal books, and the Parlement issued its own post-publication bans on books. According to Carla Hesse, “most of the key works of the French Enlightenment” were “summarily banned and burned” in the mid-eighteenth century, and “most of the key figures of the French Enlightenment led the lives of quasi-fugitives, suffering repeated imprisonment and exile.”¹⁴³ This seemingly draconian system had its loopholes: some authors were able to get around the official system by receiving tacit approval from the censors, and the chief censor himself, Malesherbes, was an ally of the

¹⁴⁰ Hesse, “Print Culture in the Enlightenment,” 372. See also Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 264-265.

¹⁴¹ Parliament re-enacted the 1661 law against blasphemy in 1695. Aikenhead was executed for blasphemy on 8 January 1697. Michael Hunter notes that in 1696 the Privy Council ordered a search of Edinburgh booksellers’ shops for atheistical or profane works. Michael Hunter, “‘Aikenhead the Atheist’: The Context and Consequences of Articulate Irreligion in the Late Seventeenth Century,” in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, eds. Michael Hunter & David Wootton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

¹⁴² Raymond Birn, *Royal Censorship of Books in Eighteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 2.

¹⁴³ Hesse, “Print Culture in the Enlightenment,” 373.

philosophes who protected and advocated for them and their works when he could, such as when the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d’Alembert was under attack by the Paris Parlement. For example, in 1759 Malesherbes “brought legal proceedings against the *Encyclopédie* to a halt” and saved the project “by ensuring that the publication of subsequent volumes could proceed with tacit permission, the cancellation of full *privilège* actually serving the editors’ interest by sparing them the rigours of preliminary censorship which could have accompanied advance scrutiny of the text.”¹⁴⁴

Potentially controversial works could be published outside France and smuggled into the country: there was a thriving trade in illegal books, many of which were philosophical, anti-religious, pornographic, or encompassed all three genres at once.¹⁴⁵ The Baron d’Holbach, for instance, had several illegal “best-sellers,” with *Système de la Nature* near the top of the list.¹⁴⁶ Authors who knew their works would not pass the royal censors, such as d’Holbach, sent their manuscripts abroad. The printed works, which often listed false places of publication on their title pages, were then smuggled into France and sold illegally, at considerable risk to the booksellers and *colporteurs*, who

¹⁴⁴ Daniel Roche, “Encyclopedias and the diffusion of knowledge,” in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought*, eds. Mark Goldie & Robert Wokler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 180-181.

¹⁴⁵ See Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995), esp. 22-82, and *The Corpus of Clandestine Literature in France, 1769-1789* (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995); Jeffrey Freedman, *Books Without Borders in Enlightenment Europe: French Cosmopolitanism and German Literary Markets* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Hesse, “Print Culture in the Enlightenment.”

¹⁴⁶ Darnton, *Forbidden Best-Sellers*, 63-64, table 2.5.

were subject to inspections and raids that could result in imprisonment.¹⁴⁷ For example, a 1727 police report describes the arrest and imprisonment in the Bastille of a printer for having printed books contrary to religion, the state and good morals.¹⁴⁸

Barbara de Negroni's work on censorship in eighteenth-century France emphasizes the complexity of the practices and the contrast between the ferocity of the regulations and the reality of their application. Her research has established that only 8% of official condemnations in the period 1723-1774 address works written by the *philosophes*. Of the rest, 64% were related to the controversy over the papal bull *Unigenitus*, and 28% were political works.¹⁴⁹ De Negroni suggests that authorities avoided overt, public condemnations of philosophical works in order to minimize drawing attention to them. She also notes, however, that the censorship of philosophical works increased after 1750, and suggests that this abrupt zeal was motivated by rivalries between the Parlements, the bishops, and the Sorbonne. Each party, she argues, was attempting to demonstrate through condemnations of philosophical works that it alone was defending religion and good morals against those heretics and libertines who attacked them.¹⁵⁰ Another factor in this increase in apparent zeal was Louis XV's decree

¹⁴⁷ Hesse, "Print Culture in the Enlightenment," 373. Hesse notes that the number of imprisonments increased throughout the eighteenth century.

¹⁴⁸ Bibliothèque Arsenal, Archives de la Bastille MS 10032, 42-44.

¹⁴⁹ Barbara de Negroni, *Lectures Interdites: Le travail des censeurs au XVIIIe siècle 1723-1774* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995), 195.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 199-201.

of April 1757, which responded to Peter Damiens' attempt to assassinate the king by making it punishable by death to write, print, or sell works that attacked religion.¹⁵¹

Works that expressed, or appeared to express, atheist ideas or ideas that could encourage atheism, such as materialist philosophy, were beyond the pale of acceptability. Denis Diderot was imprisoned in 1749 for having published *Lettre sur les aveugles*,¹⁵² and the publication of Claude Adrien Helvétius's materialist tract *De l'esprit* in 1758 caused a scandal that resulted in the book being banned and burned by the Parlement of Paris.¹⁵³ Diderot would continue to publish, but was required to promise never to publish works against the Catholic religion; he would encounter censorship again, for instance when the *Encyclopédie* was banned.¹⁵⁴ Helvétius did not publish again during his lifetime; his treatise *De l'homme* did not appear until after his death in 1771.

The Parlement's condemnations reveal why certain works were banned and the consequences for those who published and sold them. The Parlement's declaration of July 7th, 1746 against Julien Offray de La Mettrie's *Histoire naturelle de l'Ame* and Diderot's

¹⁵¹ Moegens Laerke, Introduction to *The Use of Censorship in the Enlightenment*, ed. Moegens Laerke (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 14. The decree is reproduced in *Recueil Général des Anciennes Lois Françaises, depuis l'An 420 jusqu'à la Révolution de 1789*, vol. 22 (Paris, 1830), 272-274.

¹⁵² Colas Duflo, "Diderot and the Publicizing of Censorship," in *The Use of Censorship in the Enlightenment*, ed. Mogens Laerke (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 127.

¹⁵³ For a detailed treatment of the Helvétius scandal, see D.W. Smith, *Helvétius: A Study in Persecution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965); see also Birn, *Royal Censorship*, 28-32.

¹⁵⁴ Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 710. On Diderot and the censorship of the *Encyclopédie*, see e.g. Birn, *Royal Censorship*; Duflo, "Diderot and the Publicizing of Censorship"; Jonathan Israel, "French royal censorship and the battle to suppress the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and D'Alembert," in *The Use of Censorship in the Enlightenment*, ed. Mogens Laerke (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Robert Darnton, "Bourbon France: Privilege and Repression," in *Censors at Work: How States Shaped Literature* (London: British Library, 2014).

Pensées philosophiques states that official silence regarding offensive books appeared to grant them impunity; in order to protect the public from such books, it was necessary to condemn them and make an example of their authors (who were not known to the Parlement). La Mettrie's *Histoire naturelle de l'Ame* was condemned for undermining the foundations of all religion and virtue, while Diderot's *Pensées philosophiques* presented criminal and absurd opinions and made religions indistinguishable from one another. The Parlement ordered that both books be whipped and burned for being scandalous and contrary to religion and good morals. Booksellers, printers, *colporteurs* and any others who printed, sold or distributed these books in any way were subject to corporal punishment.¹⁵⁵

Diderot continued to live and work in Paris, but La Mettrie fled to Holland. He would have to leave Holland, too, after publishing *L'homme machine* in 1747. A 1774 declaration condemns Helvétius's posthumous *De l'homme* and d'Holbach's *Le bon sens* for impiety, describing the author of *Le bon sens* (quite correctly) as an apostle of atheism who, fearing that the dreadful poison of *Système de la Nature* would not circulate quickly enough due to its elevated tone, has simplified the style and arguments of the earlier work in order to make it palatable to a wider audience. As the declaration puts it, *Le bon sens* is a sort of catechism, for the use of the common people, of the principles and "monstreuses conséquences" of *Système de la Nature*.¹⁵⁶ The clear danger in this case is not just that the

¹⁵⁵ *Arrest de la Cour du Parlement*, 7 July 1746 (Paris: Pierre-Guillaume Simon, 1746).

¹⁵⁶ *Arrest de la Cour du Parlement*, 12 January 1774 (Paris: Pierre-Guillaume Simon, 1774). Newberry Library.

work presents atheist arguments, but that it is intended to be read by the common people. De Vouglans included a remark in his commentaries on French criminal laws that atheists and other blasphemers often commit their crime in writing, that is, by circulating impious works among the public; Louis XV's decree of 1757 was, therefore, the appropriate response to such a threat.¹⁵⁷

Raymond Birn has argued that the French royal censors were not the enemies of innovation in knowledge,¹⁵⁸ and Adrian Johns has pointed out that “the early modern state had neither the ideology, nor the finances, nor the mechanisms, nor the police and personnel to construct a régime of censorship recognizable as such to late twentieth-century eyes.”¹⁵⁹ Complicating the picture further, Mogens Laerke notes that “the popular image of the heroic Enlightenment thinker standing up against the vicious censors of the Ancien Regime is blurred by the fact that numerous Enlightenment thinkers explicitly defended the practice and institution of censorship,” including Spinoza and John Toland, who opposed toleration for atheists.¹⁶⁰ Nevertheless, regardless of the relationship between censorship and the Enlightenment as a whole, and the degree of informal toleration that atheists might experience in their lives, both pre- and post-publication censorship in France and elsewhere forced atheist writers who were unwilling to face imprisonment or exile to protect themselves by keeping their works or their identities

¹⁵⁷ De Vouglans, *Les Loix Criminelles de France*, 87.

¹⁵⁸ Birn, *Royal Censorship*, xi.

¹⁵⁹ Johns, *Nature of the Book*, 189.

¹⁶⁰ Laerke, Introduction to *The Use of Censorship in the Enlightenment*, 18. The analysis of the deist Toland's intolerance of atheism appears in Tristan Dagron's essay in the same volume, “Toland and the Censorship of Atheism.”

secret. The next chapter examines how atheist writers responded to this restriction on their freedom of expression.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the construction of an atheist identity in the eighteenth century took place within a hostile context in which the discourse about atheism and atheists was almost universally negative. What effect did the dehumanizing anti-atheist discourse, lack of toleration for atheism, and official censorship have on early modern atheists? Most obviously, they forced atheists to either remain silent about their beliefs or adopt measures to protect their identities if they wished to express their beliefs. The lack of widespread prosecutions of atheists in the eighteenth century does not mean that it was safe to express atheist ideas publicly, or that atheists would have felt safe in doing so, even if there was some degree of informal toleration. States need not imprison, torture or execute large numbers of their citizens in order to create or maintain a chilling effect on certain parts of the population. Atheists — and others — had to find ways to work around the repressive structures of the eighteenth-century French state, taking advantage of the “grey zones” of the censorship regime.¹⁶¹ As the next chapter will show, this created a conflict for atheists between their perception of themselves as knowers of the truth and the necessity of lying in order to survive within a hostile environment. Without wishing to travel too far along the path of psychological analysis, it seems

¹⁶¹ “Grey zone” is Mogens Laerke’s expression, in *The Use of Censorship in the Enlightenment*, 15.

reasonable to conclude that an atheist in early modern Europe would have felt himself (or herself) to be an outsider who could not hope for genuine inclusion within his society unless its institutions, understandings and attitudes changed radically. Clearly atheists managed, for the most part, to reconcile themselves to living behind masks, but the sense of estrangement must have been profound.

The texts of committed atheism that begin to appear in the eighteenth century are infused with an awareness of alterity. What is striking about this is the way in which the texts counter the negative, dehumanized image of the atheist with a positive construction of the atheist as a virtuous, rational, even superior kind of person. This construction might not have had much effect on the attitudes of anti-atheist readers. An atheist, on the other hand, would have found affirmation in these texts of his (or her) beliefs and his value to society, as well as proof that there were others like him who were willing to take the (mitigated) risk of putting those beliefs into writing. This may have been more important for the long-term development of atheism than the presentation of arguments against the existence of God.

CHAPTER 3

SUPERIOR STRANGERS: ATHEIST IDENTITY

Overview

As the previous chapter showed, the social imaginary of early modern Europe described atheists as inhuman others: monsters, madmen or beasts who spread atheism like a sickness or poison. Shifting perspective now to how atheists wrote about themselves and their relationship to society, it is clear that they agreed with their detractors about their otherness. In fact, they embraced the idea of their own difference and turned it on its head in order to transform that otherness into a positive quality. This chapter examines the subjective dimension of the atheist identity that was expressed in the eighteenth century, arguing that this identity had three intertwined and self-reinforcing main elements: a sense of estrangement from the rest of society; a sense of superiority over non-atheists; and a sense of duty to share the atheist ‘truth’ about religion and the nature of the world.

This atheist identity was defined against specific others. According to the atheist texts, most people are enslaved by the delusions of religion, but the atheist is sane,

rational and free. Unlike superstitious women, Jews and fools, the atheist is not blinded by fear and ignorance. In contrast with priests and theologians, who keep humanity enslaved, the atheist aims to free humankind from its chains. In addition, the atheist is moderate, virtuous, and wishes to serve society by showing how it could be improved.

This identity was also shaped by gender and class. Although some of the texts suggest women could achieve and benefit from knowledge of the truth, the figure of the atheist is not only primarily male, but also a member of the elite class. There is an explicit distinction in many of the texts between their authors, their audience, and the common people, and some of the texts are clear that only those with sufficient education and leisure for study can achieve the status of virtuous atheist. Having said this, it is important to recognize tensions and variations within the corpus of atheist texts: some, such as Jean Meslier's *Mémoire*, are more egalitarian than others, and none focus on issues of gender and class as central topics. These issues are not ignored, but the texts typically deal with them very briefly. My readings in this chapter will draw out the texts' explicit and implicit statements about gender and class as they pertain to the atheist identity, showing how the texts create a patriarchal atheist space that marginalizes women, men who are not part of the elite class, and non-atheists by depicting them as children in need of paternal leadership. The following chapter will address how such statements pertain to the atheist ideology, or how atheists thought society should be organized.

Writing provided an outlet for individuals to express their beliefs and identity, but atheist texts also presented — in some cases, to a wide and public readership — a distinct

alternative to the image of the dehumanized, monstrous atheist. The texts rehumanize atheists; they also, however, go beyond mere rehumanization by asserting that atheists are the *best* humans, the only truly enlightened members of society. Atheists are the ideal father figures, who should be trusted to cure everyone else's childish fear of the dark. This construction of the atheist as father figure to a society of fearful children places non-atheists in a subordinate and even dependent position. Atheist texts do more, then, than resist repression and intolerance: they implicitly claim social power and authority on the basis of possessing truth and virtue. Mirroring the anti-atheist discourse, they express estrangement while simultaneously normalizing atheism and pathologizing religious belief.

The texts examined in this chapter demonstrate that their authors perceived that they were repressed through censorship and intolerance, and resisted such repression not only through the act of writing about and disseminating their ideas, but also through explicit references to it. By drawing attention to their repressed beliefs (or non-beliefs) and analyzing the mechanisms of repression, the authors of atheist texts create what Foucault would call "points, knots or focuses of resistance" within the "dense web" of power relations between themselves, church, state, and society.¹

The authors of these texts were not, in an objective sense, oppressed individuals. They were educated men, some of whom worked in positions from which they exercised power on behalf of the state or the church. The Baron d'Holbach is the most obvious example of an individual who exercised power as a result of his wealth, education and

¹ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 96.

noble status, but others, such as Nicolas Fréret, also operated within the networks of power. Nevertheless, they represented themselves as repressed because they had to conform outwardly to the official religion of the French state and keep their atheist views hidden. To these authors, this repression was unjust not only because it prevented freedom of expression, but also because atheists were good citizens. Their claims to be good, even superior citizens reveal a set of values held in common with much of elite eighteenth-century French society, including amiability, moderation, sensibility and sociability. Despite the non-conformity of their views about God and religion, and despite their expressions of estrangement from society, atheists were also, therefore, willing conformists to some aspects of the social imaginary that surrounded and shaped them.

The texts also show that their authors perceived themselves, to varying degrees, as truth-tellers engaged in a battle to liberate humanity from the shackles of religion. The authors share a sense of being members of a sane minority in a society of madmen. While they seem to have believed that they were superior to others due to their capacity to see the truth, they also, for the most part, felt a sense of obligation and duty to share the truth, if only to a single reader or small circle of like-minded individuals. In this sense, they are similar to the *parrhesiast*, or truth-teller, of ancient Greek and Roman society that Foucault describes in *The Courage of Truth*. Foucault explains that the notion of *parrhesia*, the “act of truth,” entailed in its positive sense “the manifestation of a fundamental bond between the truth spoken and the thought of the person who spoke it,” by which he means that the parrhesiast speaks the truth as he thinks it, without reluctance. In addition, “for there to be *parrhesia*, in speaking the truth one must open up, establish,

and confront the risk of offending the other person, of irritating him, of making him angry and provoking him to conduct which may even be extremely violent. So it is the truth subject to risk of violence.”²

The texts considered in this chapter indicate that there was indeed a fundamental bond between the truth spoken and the speaker; the authors present the truth as they see it, with little, if any, esotericism. The reality of official hostility toward atheism meant that for most of the eighteenth century, writing and disseminating atheist ideas involved risk. The authors of these texts did not, with the exception of Julien Offray de La Mettrie, manifest the truth openly; they concealed their identities in order to minimize the risks of speaking the truth even as they proclaimed themselves to be truth-tellers.

Alain Sandrier has also examined the relationship between official repression and the production of anti-religious works, in his analysis of the philosophical style of d’Holbach. Sandrier argues that the repression forced authors like Voltaire, Diderot, d’Holbach and others to adopt various strategies, including pseudonyms and anonymity, in order to successfully play the ‘game’ of anti-religious proselytizing in eighteenth-century France. While Sandrier is more interested in the strategies themselves, he has also noticed the tension between the desire to speak out and the need for dissimulation. In particular, he pinpoints a difference between d’Holbach and some of the earlier *philosophes*, such as Bayle. Citing Diderot’s remark that only the Baron expressed his (atheist) ideas plainly, Sandrier notes that d’Holbach’s only dissimulation was to hide his

² Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II, Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2012), 11.

identity, which was a necessary measure in order to say what needed to be said.³ In general, the heterodox *philosophes* adopted a ‘double doctrine,’ in which lying was an acceptable response to the perversion that religion introduced into society and to the religious repression of the state and church.⁴ The price, however, was a guilty conscience, and Sandrier suggests that d’Holbach’s style of writing ‘in the clear,’ especially in works like *Le Bon Sens*, was an expression of an exoteric creed that rejected the traditional fear of the masses as an excuse for hiding the truth ‘between the lines.’⁵

Of the works considered in this chapter, only Jean Meslier’s *Mémoire* evinces clear signs of a guilty conscience; however, it must be said that the repetitive emphasis within this literature on the repression of free thought and expression comes across, at times, as an exaggeration of the situation in order to justify any dissimulation. Ironically, given Sandrier’s argument that d’Holbach adopted an exoteric approach, it is d’Holbach who can seem to protest too much. D’Holbach’s style is, in fact, very repetitive; he makes the same points several times within a work, and repeats many of them in different works.⁶ This is, no doubt, for didactic reasons, but we might interpret the constant motif of religious repression in the Baron’s works as a sign of the guilty conscience Sandrier has identified. After all, despite his exoteric writing style, d’Holbach remained

³ Alain Sandrier, *Le Style Philosophique du Baron d’Holbach: Conditions et Contraintes du Prosélytisme Athée en France dans la Seconde Moitié du XVIIIe Siècle* (Paris: Honore Champion, 2004), 52-58.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 59-60. Sandrier cites Leo Strauss for the term ‘double doctrine.’

⁵ *Ibid.*, 60-62.

⁶ This is not limited to d’Holbach; both Meslier and La Mettrie can be very repetitive as well.

anonymous.⁷ Nearly all of the atheist texts I am about to discuss, especially d’Holbach’s *Système de la Nature*, construct an image of the atheist as an honest, virtuous citizen — an image at odds with the practices of dissimulation, and thus, perhaps, a site of anxiety. This image, however, is constructed and deployed in order to stake a claim to the right to speak freely and to live without fear of persecution.

My intent is not to judge or criticize the authors of these texts for failing to achieve an ideal standard of *parrhesia* or for not resisting repression more openly. We might usefully interpret the act of self-construction as a refusal of an Althusserian interpellation and thus as an assertion of agency. In re-constructing the atheist as virtuous and non-threatening, these texts refuse the ‘call’ of the dominant ideology — the atheists refuse to ‘answer’ as the monstrous atheists of that dominant ideology, while simultaneously attempting to redefine ‘atheist’ as a positive identity to which they *are* willing to ‘answer.’ Further, the decision to remain hidden is another way of refusing to answer the ‘call,’ so this, too, can be read as an assertion of agency even if, as Sandrier suggests, it results in a guilty conscience.⁸

Foucault remarks in *The Courage of Truth*, in a discussion of *parrhesia* in the political field, that exiles did not have the right to speak freely. He cites the speech of the character Polyneices in Euripides’ play *The Phoenician Women*, in which Polyneices

⁷ Jonathan Israel explains that d’Holbach’s authorship was known to “every connoisseur of literary and philosophical activity in Paris and some further afield,” but they kept his secret despite the offer of a large reward in France, in 1770, for information leading to the arrest of the author of *Système de la Nature*. The secret was not revealed to the public until 1821. *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750-1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 788-790.

⁸ My thinking is influenced here by Judith Butler’s discussion of interpellation, subjectivation and the possibility of misrecognition in her essays “Subjection, Resistance and Resignification: Between Freud and Foucault” and “‘Conscience Doth Make Subjects Of Us All’: Althusser’s Subjection,” *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

states that exile “is the hardest thing to bear, because in exile one does not have *parrhesia*, one does not have the right to speak, and so one finds oneself the slave ... of the masters, and one cannot even oppose their madness.”⁹ This statement captures neatly the relationship between the authors of atheist texts and their society. Atheists were, in effect, exiles within their own societies, without the right to tell the truth as they saw it. As I have noted in the previous chapter, atheists were by no means the only group without the right to speak freely, but they were a group which could expect no official, public toleration. Foucault’s insights regarding power relations, resistance and *parrhesia* draw attention to some of the tensions within these texts and provide a framework for understanding their shared preoccupations.

To conclude this overview, I have presented my analysis of atheist identity text-by-text, in approximate chronological order of composition, in order to provide background on each work. Some of these texts will be more familiar to readers than others, and questions of their authorship and textual history can be quite complex, so some individual contextualization is required, particularly for the clandestine works.¹⁰ In addition, the three main elements of the atheist identity are, as noted above, intertwined and mutually reinforcing, such that attempting to untangle them is difficult and, it seems to me, unwise if we wish to understand how these texts constructed that identity. Different texts emphasize different elements of the identity, and they can express seemingly contradictory ideas about gender, class, and truth-telling. My readings are

⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁰ For a useful synthesis of scholarship on clandestine works, see Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 684-703.

intended, therefore, to nuance the somewhat schematic concept of a single atheist identity. Existing analyses of these texts do not, for the most part, address the themes I am interested in, but I have drawn on them whenever I have found them helpful, while relying on my own interpretations. I am not aware of any other analyses that treat these texts as expressions of an atheist identity.

Le Philosophe

Le Philosophe, attributed to the lawyer and grammarian César Chesneau Du Marsais (1676-1756), was composed between 1716 and 1720 and first published in 1743 in *Nouvelles libertés de penser*.¹¹ A version of it was also published in the *Encyclopédie* in 1765, and in an abridged form by Voltaire in 1773.¹² Several other clandestine works of the period have also been attributed to Du Marsais, with varying degrees of certainty.¹³ He was regarded as an atheist during his lifetime, as evidenced by a police report of July 1749, but appears to have avoided trouble with the authorities.¹⁴

The beginning of *Le Philosophe* suggests that the issue of religion's falsity has already been solved, and that it is time for would-be *philosophes* to move beyond it. The text asserts that many people regard as the only true *philosophes* those who recognize that

¹¹ *Nouvelles libertés de penser* was, according to Gianluca Mori, the first printed work composed entirely of clandestine works, and is believed to have been edited by Du Marsais. "Du Marsais philosophe clandestin: textes et attributions," in *La Philosophie clandestine à l'Age classique*, eds. Antony McKenna & Alain Mothu (Paris: Voltaire Foundation, 1997), 189.

¹² Mothu & Mori, *Philosophes sans Dieu*, *op. cit.*, 22.

¹³ Mori, "Du Marsais philosophe clandestin," 172.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

there is no God who demands the worship of humans, that the mutiplicity and contrariety of religions proves that there are no revealed religions, and that religion is merely a human passion, like love. There is more, however, to being a *philosophe* than the rejection of religion: “on doit avoir une idée plus vaste et plus juste du philosophe.”¹⁵ *Philosophes* might be atheists, but that is not all that they should be; atheism is merely a starting point.

This brief comment on God and religion is all that *Le Philosophe* offers in terms of statements about atheism. It is, however, an important text, despite the absence of overt atheist arguments, because it describes an ideal and expresses an understanding of the atheist *philosophe*'s place in society. Du Marsais describes this ideal through a set of comparisons with non-*philosophes*, with “the people”. First, the *philosophe* is a machine like any other man, but, unlike most people, he is capable of reflecting on his own movements and controlling his passions. Reason, for the *philosophe*, is the equivalent to grace for the Christian; he is a critical thinker who proceeds through observation and critical thinking while others adopt principles without thinking about them. The *philosophe* possesses a discernment of judgment that most people lack.¹⁶ Intellectually, then, Du Marsais' *philosophe* is a superior kind of person.

Beyond outlining the *philosophe*'s superior intellectual qualities, Du Marsais argues that the *philosophe* is not, like “la plupart des grands,” a libertine who attacks

¹⁵ César Chesneau du Marsais, *Le Philosophe*, in Mothu & Mori, *Philosophes Sans Dieu*, 27. For a recent analysis that highlights the text's atheism, see Miran Božovič, “The Philosophy of Du Marsais's *Le Philosophe*,” *Filozofski vestnik* XXIX, 2 (2008). “One ought to have a bigger and more just idea of the *philosophe*.”

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 28-31.

those he does not consider equal to him; he is also not a misanthrope who avoids people.

In a striking passage, Du Marsais writes:

Notre philosophe ne se croit pas en exil en ce monde; il ne croit point être en pays ennemi; il veut jouir en sage économe des biens que la nature lui offre, il veut trouver du plaisir avec les autres, et pour en trouver il faut en faire. Ainsi, il cherche à convenir à ceux, avec qui le hasard ou son choix le font vivre, et il trouve en même temps ce qui lui convient: c'est un honnête homme qui veut plaire et se rendre utile.¹⁷

Here, Du Marsais downplays the sense of estrangement that many later atheist texts express, and it is noteworthy that he does not emphasize truth-telling, perhaps because, as already suggested, he regards the issue at stake as not worthy of further discussion. This rather serene attitude is unusual for atheist writers, but it is also entirely consistent with Du Marsais' ideal of reasonableness.

The *philosophe* regards civil society as the only legitimate religion, and he praises and honours it by his own probity. He pays attention to his work and avoids becoming a useless and troublesome member of that society. He is self-controlled because he is reasonable; the more reason he has, the more controlled he is. In contrast, passions and fits of anger exist where there are fanaticism and superstition.¹⁸ His reason also, while allowing him to find pleasure, prevents him from committing crimes by encouraging

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 32. "Our *philosopher* does not find himself in exile in this world; he does not at all believe himself to be in enemy territory; he wants to enjoy like a wise housekeeper the goods that nature offers him; he wishes to find pleasure with others: and in order to do so, he must give it: thus he seeks to get along with those with whom he lives by chance or his own choice; and he finds at the same time those who suit him: he is an honorable man who wishes to please and to make himself useful." Du Marsais, César Chesneau. "Philosopher." *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*. Translated by Dena Goodman. Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, 2002. <http://hdl.handle.net/login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/2027/spo.did2222.0000.001> (accessed March 2, 2016). Originally published as "Philosophe," *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 12:509–511 (Paris, 1765).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

tranquility.¹⁹ Du Marsais sums up his explanation with the following definition: “Le philosophe est donc un honnête homme qui agit en tout par raison, et qui joint à un esprit de réflexion et de justesse les moeurs et les qualités sociables.”²⁰ He should not be dominated by ambition or by libertinism, and should not be indolent; a poor *philosophe* is still a *philosophe* if he works to deliver himself from his situation.²¹ The true *philosophe* is, in short, an excellent citizen who will attempt to make himself useful to society rather than be a burden to it. As Pierre Saint-Amand has remarked, “the *philosophe* appears as a supercitizen, of which he constitutes the paragon.”²² This is Bayle’s “virtuous atheism” in practice, and, like Bayle, Du Marsais is suggesting that the popular prejudice against atheists/*philosophes* is unwarranted: *philosophes* are like other men except that they are free from the errors which dominate most people, and they work on “l’esprit.”²³ Since for Du Marsais, *philosophes* are atheists, this essay is implicitly a plea for society to accept atheists — at least the enlightened variety, the *honnête hommes* — and not to fear them.

This benign construction of the atheist philosophe as an *honnête homme* presents a more refined version of the atheist masculinity found in *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*. Strength and courage are apparently unnecessary for Du Marsais’ atheist, who is noteworthy instead for his critical thinking, work ethic, usefulness, and self-control.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 37. “The *philosopher* is thus an honorable man who acts in everything according to reason, and who joins to a spirit of reflection and precision, morals and sociable qualities.” Trans. Dena Goodman, *op. cit.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

²² Pierre Saint-Amand, *The Laws of Hostility: Politics, Violence, and the Enlightenment*, trans. Jennifer Curtiss Gage (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 111.

²³ Du Marsais, *Le Philosophe*, 38-39. For more detailed discussion of the connection with Bayle, see Božovič, “The Philosophy of Du Marsais’s *Le Philosophe*,” 66-67.

Neither fanatical nor superstitious, he is not subject to uncontrollable passions — in other words, he is not a child who throws temper tantrums. Although pleading for social acceptance hints at a certain degree of subservience, Du Marsais elevates the atheist *philosophe* above everyone who has not already rejected religion, implying that they are irrational children prone to violent outbursts. Atheist *philosophes*, in this construction, are the adults — the true men — of society, and society should recognize this fact.

Traité des Trois Imposteurs

The *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, “one of the most radical anti-religious clandestine works that circulated in the eighteenth century,”²⁴ has an extraordinarily complex history, having begun its existence as an imaginary blasphemous book titled *De tribus impostoribus*, which was attributed to the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II by Pope Gregory IX in 1239, and which supposedly argued that Moses, Jesus Christ and Mohammad were impostors. No such book existed, but rumours about it persisted for centuries, until, at some point in the late seventeenth century, manuscript copies of a *De tribus impostoribus* began to appear in Germany. This *De tribus impostoribus* was possibly compiled by a Johann Joachim Müller in 1688. Müller apparently gave the manuscript to Johan Friedrich Mayer of the University of Kiel; multiple copies were made of this manuscript, and multiple variants appeared, each claiming to be the

²⁴ Richard H. Popkin, “Foreword: The Leiden Seminar,” in *Heterodoxy, Spinozism, and Free Thought in Early Eighteenth-Century Europe: Studies on the Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, eds. Silvia Berti, Françoise Charles-Daubert & Richard H. Popkin (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996), viii.

‘authentic’ *De tribus impostoribus*.²⁵ As Georges Minois explains, it “scarcely makes sense” to “speak of an authentic original text of the *De tribus impostoribus*,” given “the proliferation of copies, the multiplication of variants, and the anonymity of the scribes. All the copies are in some sense ‘authentic’ in their originality—they are all authentic impostures.”²⁶

This observation applies also to the *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, which is an entirely different work. The *Traité des Trois Imposteurs* was first published by Charles Levier in 1719 at The Hague under the title *La Vie et L’Esprit de Spinoza*. The section called *La Vie* was a biography of Spinoza; the second section, *L’Esprit*, would become the *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, which circulated throughout Europe in the eighteenth century as a clandestine manuscript and in several editions as a banned printed book.²⁷ Richard H. Popkin explains that “The work purports to have been written by the secretary of Frederick II in the 13th century. However, since it contains materials taken directly from Thomas Hobbes, Gabriel Naudé, Francois La Mothe le Vayer, and Baruch Spinoza,

²⁵ Georges Minois, *The Atheist’s Bible: The Most Dangerous Book That Never Existed*, trans. Lys Ann Weiss (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 124-137.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 137.

²⁷ Printed editions appeared in 1719, 1721 (the first to be titled *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*), 1768, 1775, 1776, 1777, 1793 and 1796. See Abraham Anderson, *The Treatise of the Three Impostors and the Problem of Enlightenment: A New Translation of the Traité des Trois Imposteurs (1777 edition)*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), ix-xiv. Silvia Berti has published a dual-language edition, in French and Italian, of the 1719 *Traité*, as *Trattato Dei Tre Impostori: La vita e lo spirito del Signor Benedetto de Spinoza* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 1994).

and since it mentions Descartes, it is obviously of later origin.”²⁸ Opinions regarding the authorship of the *Traité* have differed. The early pioneer of the study of clandestine texts, Ira O. Wade, believed that the Comte de Boulainvilliers was the author.²⁹ More recently, Margaret Jacob has argued that it was produced by members of a group of radical Freemasons at The Hague called the Knights of Jubilation, especially Charles Levier and Rousset de Missy,³⁰ while Silvia Berti has compiled evidence that the *Traité* was the work of a Dutch diplomat named Jan Vroesen.³¹ The ongoing debate over the *Traité*'s origins and authorship, and its appropriation of material from multiple sources, demonstrates the complexity of this particular text.

In the following analysis, I have dealt with the *Traité* as an original and coherent work, rather than attempt to address the ways in which it adapts its source material, with the exception of the *Traité*'s use of Spinoza's concept of *Deus sive natura*. What is most

²⁸ Popkin, “Foreword: The Leiden Seminar,” viii-ix. On the first printed edition and its sources, see also Silvia Berti, “The First Edition of the *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, and its Debt to Spinoza's *Ethics*,” in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, eds. Michael Hunter & David Wootton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); and her “L'Esprit de Spinoza: ses origines et sa première édition dans leur contexte spinozien,” in *Heterodoxy, Spinozism, and Free Thought in Early Eighteenth-Century Europe: Studies on the Traité des Trois Imposteurs*. Several other essays in the volume *Heterodoxy, Spinozism, and Free Thought in Early Eighteenth-Century Europe: Studies on the Traité des Trois Imposteurs* address the origins of the treatise; of particular note is the sceptical essay by Bertram Eugene Schwarzbach and A.W. Fairbairn, “History and structure of our *Traité des trois imposteurs*.” Jonathan Israel provides a useful summary of the debate over the origin and authorship of the *Traité* in *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 695-700.

²⁹ Ira O. Wade, “Les Trois Imposteurs,” in *The Clandestine Organization and Diffusion of Philosophic Ideas in France from 1700 to 1750* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1938), 127. Israel describes Henri de Boulainvilliers (1658-1722), comte de Saint-Saire, as the “second founding father — after Fontenelle — of the French Radical Enlightenment.” Boulainvilliers was known as a historian during his lifetime, but he was also an opponent of Louis XIV's ‘despotism’ and a clandestine philosopher whose manuscript *Essay de métaphysique* contributed to the spread of Spinozism in France. As noted in my introductory chapter, Boulainvilliers was a member of the Entresol *coterie* that included Du Marsais and Fréret. *Radical Enlightenment*, 565-574.

³⁰ Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans*, 2nd ed. (Lafayette: Cornerstone, 2006 [1981]), xv and 185-188.

³¹ Berti, “The First Edition of the *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*,” 204-209.

interesting about the *Traité* is not the originality of its arguments,³² but the fact of its appearance and its evident intention to undermine orthodox religion. The 1719 edition of the *Traité* is divided into twenty-one chapters. The later editions and, according to Silvia Berti, the manuscript copies, are divided into six chapters dealing with God; the reasons why men imagine a being called God; what ‘religion’ means and why there are so many religions; ‘sensible and evident’ truths; the soul; and demons.³³ The most notorious aspect of the text is its characterizations of Moses, Jesus Christ and Mohammed as impostors who duped their people into believing the lies of their religions, but the text also challenges political authority based on religion. Berti has described the *Traité* as “the first portable philosophical compendium of free-thought, at once anti-Christian and anti-absolutist.”³⁴ It is the paradigmatic example of the themes described above: as an anonymous text, it conceals its author because it is dangerous to speak the truth, while it argues simultaneously that the truth is necessary and that those who know and speak it are a braver and better class of human being than those who refuse to see it. Like the other texts considered in this chapter, the *Traité* inherently resists the power of both church and state by the mere fact of its existence, as well as by the arguments it contains.

³² As Schwarzbach and Fairbairn note, “The preponderance of sources quoted or paraphrased, usually with linking sentences of the author’s invention, is simply not exceptional among the clandestine texts,” and quoting or paraphrasing without attribution was common practice among scholars more generally. “History and structure of our *Traité des trois imposteurs*,” 115.

³³ Berti, “The First Edition of the *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, and its Debt to Spinoza’s *Ethics*,” 193-194.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 186.

The *Traité* begins by invoking the importance of truth for all men,³⁵ then states that very few men know the truth, because they are either incapable of seeking it for themselves, or because they cannot be bothered to seek it. As a result, the world is full of vain and ridiculous opinions supported by ignorance, which is the sole source of men's false ideas about divinity, the soul, and religion. Custom then persuades men to accept these false ideas without challenging them, the more so since self-interested individuals construct laws to prevent challenges. Their own interests can only be served by keeping the people ignorant, so they have made it dangerous to combat them: "Ainsi on est contraint de déguiser la vérité, ou de se sacrifier à la rage des faux savants, ou des ames basses & intéressées."³⁶ They have also, the author (or authors) notes, painted the truth "comme un monstre qui n'est capable d'inspirer aucun bon sentiment," in order to discourage anyone from seeking it.³⁷

In this simple statement, the *Traité* deconstructs the opposing discourse by showing how it has turned the truth into something to be feared and shunned. That truth

³⁵ Although the atheist texts should generally be read as if "men" refers in the abstract to humans of both sexes, I have adopted "men," unless the author uses some other expression, in order to retain the male-oriented tone. It is important, I think, to remember that in these texts, men represent humanity unless the author specifies otherwise.

³⁶ "Thus one is constrained to disguise the truth, or to sacrifice oneself to the rage of false savants, or to base and [self-] interested souls." *Traité des Trois Imposteurs* (s.n., 1700-1800), ch. 1, s. 1-3, p. 103. Available online at <http://gallica.bnf.fr/Search?ArianeWireIndex=index&p=1&lang=EN&q=Traité+des+trois+imposteurs>. I have used this edition rather than Berti's 1719 edition, on the grounds that the six-chapter version of the *Traité* was more common and thus would have been more familiar to eighteenth-century readers. According to Anderson, the editions of the 1770s and 1790s are identical to the 1768 edition published by Marc-Michel Rey of Amsterdam, who was also d'Holbach's publisher. Schwarzbach and Fairbairn suggest that the 1768 edition published by Rey was 'bowdlerized' by d'Holbach by removing any theistic content and much of the Spinozism. See "History and structure of our *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*," 113-115. There are a few textual differences besides the chapter divisions; for example, the cited passage referring to the truth having been painted as a monster does not exist in the 1719 edition, although the gist of the critique is the same.

³⁷ *Ibid.* "Like a monster that is incapable of inspiring any good sentiment."

is that God is not what the mind ordinarily imagines.³⁸ in chapter 4, the *Traité* explains that “Dieu n’étant, comme on a vu, que la nature, ou, si l’on veut, l’assemblage de tous les êtres, de toutes les propriétés & de toutes les énergies, est nécessairement la cause immanente & non distincte de ses effets.”³⁹ It is a universal being, neither good nor evil, that cares no more for a man or a lion than for an ant or a stone; “il n’y a rien à son égard de beau ou de laid, de bon ou de mauvais, de parfait ou d’imparfait.” This being so, no sensible man can believe in gods, Hell, spirits or devils.⁴⁰

As Silvia Berti has pointed out, this concept of God, contained in chapter IV, is derived from the Appendix to the first part of Spinoza’s *Ethics*, in which he elaborates his concept of *Deus sive natura*.⁴¹ This version of the ‘truth’ about God is, however, only a very partial paraphrase of what Spinoza says; it ignores Spinoza’s definition of God at the beginning of the *Ethics* as “a being absolutely infinite, that is, a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence,” as well as the set of demonstrations concerning God’s existence and attributes.⁴² The *Traité*’s brief paraphrase of the Appendix is accurate, but its rather blunt depiction of God as nature, stripped of Spinoza’s concerns with living well and with loving God

³⁸ *Ibid.*, ch. 1, s. 3, p. 3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, ch. 4, s. 2, p. 70. “God being, as we have seen, only nature, or, if one wishes, the assemblage of all beings, of all properties and of all energies, is necessarily the immanent, not separate, cause of these effects.” This version of the definition of God is somewhat different from that found in the 1719 edition: “Dieu est un Etre simple, ou une Extension infinie, qui ressemble à ce qu’il contient, c’est-à-dire qui est matériel...” *Trattato Dei Tre Impostori*, 214.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, ch. 4 ss. 3-4, pp. 71-72. “Nothing to it is beautiful or ugly, good or evil, perfect or imperfect.”

⁴¹ Berti, “The First Edition of the *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, and its Debt to Spinoza’s *Ethics*,” 183.

⁴² Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley (London: Penguin, 1996), 1.

intellectually as the highest good,⁴³ transforms Spinoza's God into something irrelevant to human interests or concerns from a moral or ethical point of view.⁴⁴ Either the author of the *Traité* read only the Appendix, or he was willing to distort the intention of his source, thus revealing a point of tension between the truth and misrepresentation in its service.

In just a few short paragraphs, the *Traité's* author establishes that he, and by extension his readers, are different from most of humanity. Unlike most men, they are *not* too lazy or stupid to seek the truth, they are not afraid of the "partisans" of absurdities,⁴⁵ and they can see through the painted illusions of those partisans. The *Traité's* conclusion reiterates these points, stating that in all ages there have been strong minds and sincere men who, despite persecution, have spoken out against the absurdities of their time, just as the *Traité* does. The author has sought to please only lovers of the truth, who might find consolation in the *Traité*.⁴⁶

These passages express clearly the intertwined senses of estrangement, superiority and duty to the truth, as well as the construction of an atheist masculinity. Put simply, the

⁴³ *Ibid.*, part V "Of Human Freedom," esp. 168-171.

⁴⁴ The issue of Spinoza's theology is too complex to give adequate consideration here. As noted in the first chapter, scholars continue to debate whether Spinoza was an atheist or pantheist, a distinction that was not recognized by early modern readers. Alan Donagan helpfully explains the fundamental issue as follows: "If God is conceived as traditionally minded Jews and Christians conceive him, Spinoza denies his existence, and can legitimately be accused of atheism. ... Spinoza's God, however, is more like the Jewish and Christian one than than like those of paganism; and the intellectual love Spinoza thinks due to his God, while unlike monotheistic worship, has some analogy to it. Spinoza can legitimately claim that his absolutely infinite being is sufficiently like the Jewish and Christian God, and the attitude it would be rational to take to such a being sufficiently like worship, for it to be proper to describe it as 'God'." "Spinoza's theology," *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Don Garrett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 356-357.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, ch. 1, s. 2., p. 2.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, ch. 6, s. 7, p. 89-90. The wording of the quoted passage is slightly different in the 1719 edition: "de tout tems aussi, il s'est trouvé des Esprits sincères, qui se sont récriez contre une pareille injustice, ainsi que nous venons de faire dans ce petit Traité." *Trattato Dei Tre Impostori*, 238.

author of the *Traité* identifies with men of the past who are characterized as strong, sincere, intelligent and courageous, and suggests that most men (i.e., non-atheists) do not truly possess these qualities. In one sense, this is a thoroughly conventional image of masculinity; at the same time, it emphasizes mental or intellectual strength and courage rather than the physical variety. The atheist man bravely takes up the pen, not the sword! It is important to note as well the implicit suggestion that the courage of the atheist goes beyond speaking out against absurdities and lies. If, as the *Traité* says, the universal being is indifferent to humans, then we must face existence alone. The atheist knows he has nothing to fear from gods and other immaterial beings, but, if he is to be truly free, he must be self-sufficient. This image of the strong, courageous and self-sufficient atheist will recur throughout the eighteenth century, with minor variations, which may explain, in part, why atheism was described as a masculine endeavour. The atheist is necessarily autonomous, at least inside his own head; women in eighteenth-century Europe, however, were normally viewed, as a class, as *necessarily* dependent on and subordinate to male authority. This may have made it difficult to imagine a female counterpart to the male atheist, although, as we shall see, there were other reasons as well.

Interestingly, the *Traité* does not follow up on its initial characterization of the author and reader by claiming that they possess or require special intelligence or knowledge. Opening one's eyes and mind to the truth does not require "hautes spéculations" or deep penetration into nature's secrets. Seeing the truth requires only a little common sense and the ability to question authorities, who are neither more able nor

better instructed on these matters than other men.⁴⁷ Although most people are ignorant and credulous,⁴⁸ and are encouraged in their credulity by the mercenary priests, the author does not suggest that only certain classes of men are capable of seeing the truth; he does, however, state that “il n’y a point de gens plus propre à donner cours aux plus absurdes opinions que les femmes & les idiots,” which is why Jesus had no learned followers.⁴⁹ He also refers to the Hebrews as the most ignorant and credulous people,⁵⁰ but this reference occurs in a discussion of Moses, so it is not clear whether this slur is meant to apply to contemporary Jews.⁵¹ The remark about women and fools is, however, clearly a general one. If only a little common sense is needed in order to see the truth, then evidently women and foolish men, who are implicitly feminized by the connection made here, lack even that little bit of sense. They are disqualified from the outset, then, from the circle of those who know the truth, while those who can see the truth (strong, intelligent, courageous men) are inherently superior to those cannot.

The *Traité* is suffused with a tone of contempt for those who believe the “absurdities” of religion, and appears to blame certain groups — Jews, women and fools

⁴⁷ *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, ch. 1, s. 4, pp.3-4.

⁴⁸ Schwarzbach and Fairbairn also note that “our author is very conscious of the ‘ignorance’ of the people.” “History and structure of our *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*,” 121.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, ch. 3 s. 16, p. 54. “There are no people more inclined to give currency to the most absurd opinions than women and idiots.”

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, ch. 3, s. 10, p. 40.

⁵¹ Contempt for the alleged ignorance and credulity of the ancient Jews was a feature of many anti-clerical and anti-religious works, including Voltaire’s *Philosophical Dictionary* of 1764 (see e.g. the entry on Abraham) and d’Holbach’s *L’Esprit du judaïsme* (London, 1770). For a recent discussion of Enlightenment anti-Judaism, see David Nirenberg, “Enlightenment Revolts against Judaism: 1670-1789,” *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2013). It should be noted that Nirenberg’s discussion of *L’Esprit du judaïsme* contains several errors, including mistakenly describing it as a translation of a work by the English deist Anthony Collins.

— for allowing them to spread. At the same time, however, the author seems to believe that the truth is not difficult to grasp and that anyone could do it if they wished or had the opportunity; they are simply prevented from doing so by the machinations of the priests and authorities. In a striking passage towards the end of the *Traité*, the author writes that theologians, who sell fables instead of the truth, act in bad faith by abusing the people's credulity “comme si le vulgaire étoit absolument indigne de la vérité.”⁵² Here, while drawing a distinction between the common people and learned men like himself and his readers, the author argues that the common people deserve the truth, which implies that they are capable of understanding and accepting it. The word “fables” implies that the theologians treat the people like children by telling them stories and thus keeping them in an intellectually immature state. It is not a simple case, therefore, of the author “despis[ing] the people that he wants to ‘liberate’,”⁵³ but a more complex situation in which the author expresses contempt for the ignorant but also suggests that it is not entirely their fault that they are ignorant. Ignorance is undeniably bad, but fostering it in bad faith is worse.

Although the *Traité* puts the arguments against religion before the reader, and appears to be arguing in favour of the common people being relieved of their ignorance, the author takes no responsibility for what the reader might do with those arguments, and seems uninterested in a general effort to show people the truth. Rather, the reader is instructed to take responsibility (like an adult) for his own enlightenment:

⁵² *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, ch. 6, s. 7, p. 89. “As if the common people were absolutely unworthy of the truth.”

⁵³ Schwarzbach & Fairbairn, “History and structure of our *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*,” 121.

*c'est à vous d'examiner s'ils [Moses, Jesus and Mohammad] méritent que vous les respectiez, & si vous êtes excusable de vous conduire par des guides que la seule ambition a élevés & dont l'ignorance éternise les rêveries. Pour vous guérir des erreurs dont ils vous ont aveuglés, lisez ce qui suit avec un esprit libre et désintéressé, ce sera le moyen de découvrir la vérité [italics added].*⁵⁴

There is no suggestion to spread the truth, even by passing on the *Traité* to another reader. This approach to truth-telling is thus a limited form of *parrhesia* and resistance designed only for the benefit of solitary individuals, not for any kind of broader social enlightenment. At best, if the author had general social change in mind, it could only happen incrementally. In this way, the *Traité des Trois Imposteurs* sets the pattern for many of the atheist works of pre-revolutionary France. It also sets the pattern of defining the atheist (male) identity against numerous Others, particularly women, priests or theologians, and fools.

Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe

Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe, believed to have been composed between 1720 and 1725, circulated anonymously in manuscript form before its first publication in 1765.⁵⁵ It is attributed by most scholars to Nicolas Fréret (1688-1749), a historian from a Jansenist family who was himself “imprisoned on suspicion of Jansenist opinions.” Fréret

⁵⁴ *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, ch 3, s. 23, p. 69. “It is for you to examine whether they merit your respect, and if you are excusable if you are led by guides whom ambition alone has elevated and whose ignorance drags out their day-dreams. In order to cure yourself of the errors with which they have blinded you, read what follows with a free and disinterested spirit; that will be the means to discover the truth.”

⁵⁵ Alain Mothu and Gianluca Mori, “Présentation” to *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*, in *Philosophes sans Dieu*, 51-52. Mothu and Mori state that the work was published in 1765 by Marc-Michel Rey, at the instigation of d’Holbach.

became *secrétaire perpétuel* of the Académie des Inscriptions et belles-lettres, and was known in his lifetime for “his efforts to reconcile Christian and Chinese chronology, Christian and pagan history.”⁵⁶ The *Lettre* was published in several editions of Fréret’s complete works from 1775 to 1796, but the attribution to him has been disputed.⁵⁷ I have not attempted to untangle the complex question of authorship, but have accepted the standard attribution to Fréret.

This text is presented as a letter written by Thrasybule to his female friend Leucippe, during the first century CE, in one of the Roman provinces; Thrasybule is attempting to dissuade Leucippe from joining the Christian religion. Throughout the letter, Thrasybule addresses Leucippe affectionately as “ma chère Leucippe,” and remarks at one point on how well he knows her: “Je vous connaie mieux que vous ne pensez, j’ai étudié votre tempérament; et je vous tromperais si je vous parlais autrement.”⁵⁸ It is clear that there is a considerable level of intimacy between author and reader, which underscores the tone of concern for Leucippe’s well-being. Thrasybule is not engaged in a purely intellectual critique of religion and of the idea of divinity; he is also emotionally engaged, wishes Leucippe to be happy, and is convinced that she will be

⁵⁶ Antony McKenna, “Fréret, Nicolas,” in *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, ed. Alan C. Kors, v. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 90. On Fréret as a historian, see e.g. Dario Perinetti, “Philosophical reflection on history,” in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, v. 2, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1112-1113.

⁵⁷ On the various manuscript copies and printed editions, see Miguel Benítez, “La composition de la *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*: Une conjecture raisonnable,” in *Le Foyer clandestin des Lumières: Nouvelles recherches sur les manuscrits clandestins*, v. 1 (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2013), 75 n. 1. Benítez casts doubt on Fréret’s authorship of the *Lettre* in this essay, largely on the grounds that it is too poorly written and argued to be Fréret’s work. On the composition, influences and argumentation of the work, see Benítez, *op. cit.* and the “Présentation” by Mothu & Mori, *op. cit.*

⁵⁸ Nicolas Fréret, *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*, in Mothu & Mori, *Philosophes Sans Dieu*, 70. “I know you better than you think, I have studied your temperament; and I would be misleading you if I said otherwise.”

unhappy if she chooses a life of religious devotion. This text, then, is partly about character: what kind of character is compatible with the ‘delirium’ of religion, and what kind of character is incompatible? This text is the first among the atheist corpus to address a female reader and suggest that she could be happy as an atheist. The only other such work that I am aware of is d’Holbach’s *Lettres à Eugénie*, which is modeled on *Thrasybule à Leucippe*. This in itself makes the text important, but it is also noteworthy for its lucid analysis of the psychological difficulties faced by the atheist. One of the strongest and most evocative statements of atheist estrangement within the corpus of eighteenth-century atheism, *Thrasybule à Leucippe* depicts atheism as hard work.

The letter begins by remarking that devotion is the sweetest and most desirable of all passions, as long as it is sincere and unbroken; however, it is not the objects of devotion themselves that cause happiness in the devout, but the ideas we have of them and the feelings that they inspire. Those devoted to a tyrannical God are unhappy, while those devoted to the idea of a loving master experience tenderness and joy in obeying his demands and sacrificing themselves.⁵⁹ Thrasybule says that if he believed Leucippe could achieve this state of joyous transport, he would be the first to urge her to take up the life of devotion, especially since it would ameliorate her solitude. He challenges, however, the idea of the existence of a kind and wise God, calling the idea of divinity a phantom, and those who believe it as suffering from delirium. This delirium being contagious, the number of those affected has increased: there are so many deluded people that the wise, knowing it is impossible to resist “cette multitude de furieux,” have elected to respect

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 63-64.

their folly and pretend to suffer from the same malady.⁶⁰ He advises Leucippe that, since escape from the madness of fanaticism is forbidden, she must dissimulate and feign belief if she wishes to obtain peace. She must not, however, allow her outward compliance to become a true contagion by the delirium.⁶¹

As Thrasybule explains, allowing herself to be poisoned by the madness would make Leucippe deeply unhappy. In effect, he says she would find it so contrary to her own nature that the stress would damage her body. Leucippe's mind is too just, too penetrating and too broad to ever be completely persuaded by the delirium of devotion; the absurdities of the entire religious system would revolt her reason no matter how hard she tried to submit to them. Combined with her natural melancholic temperament, delicacy and inquietude, the conflict between the absurdities and her own reason would leave her perpetually torn. In the end, he says, her body would succumb.⁶² The life of devotion is not for her because she could never maintain the sincerity and constancy of faith necessary to achieve tranquility.

Thrasybule is not questioning Leucippe's capacity for sincere devotion, only her ability to reconcile her innate rationality with the absurdities which one must accept in order to live a life of *religious* devotion. This implies, of course, that those who *can* achieve tranquility through religious devotion are irrational and deluded. It is especially noteworthy that Thrasybule is saying this to a woman. There is no trace here of the

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 64-67.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 67-68.

conventional view that women were less rational or more superstitious than men;⁶³ Leucippe is being treated as an intellectual equal with a right to a peaceful life congruent with her temperament. The danger that religion poses to her is the same as it poses to any rational person. The pull of the delusion is so strong that even when a man abandons it in a fit of violent passion and sees his past actions, such as sacrificing to chimerical objects, as foolish, he will be unable to sustain his freedom and will soon fall back into the madness. The rest of his life will consist of a continual passage “de la honte au repentir et du repentir à la honte.” This back-and-forth conflict causes him stress, unhappiness and terror.⁶⁴ Since it is so difficult and stressful to free oneself from the delirium of religion, which is instilled from childhood,⁶⁵ it is better to avoid it at the outset; helping Leucippe to do so is why Thrasybule engages in a detailed and thorough critique of the foundations of religion. He recognizes that she may be susceptible to the contagion, not only because humans are naturally superstitious, but also because she, raised in Rome, is now living on the outskirts of the Empire, where a lack of amusements and society contribute to her *ennui* and melancholy. Some extra effort is therefore required to prevent her from succumbing to the contagion: “il faut attaquer le mal dans les formes.”⁶⁶

⁶³ On Enlightenment views of women’s capacity for reason, see e.g. Dorinda Outram, “Enlightenment thinking about gender,” *The Enlightenment*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); many of the essays in Sarah Knott & Barbara Taylor, eds., *Women, Gender and Enlightenment* (Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005); Londa L. Schiebinger, *The Mind Has No Sex? Women in the Origins of Modern Science* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Lieselotte Steinbrügge, *The Moral Sex: Women’s Nature in the French Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Siep Stuurman, *Poulain de la Barre and the Invention of Modern Equality* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Merry Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁶⁴ Fréret, *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*, 69. “From shame to repentance/regret and from repentance/regret to shame.”

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 70. “It is necessary to attack the evil in its forms.”

Thrasylbulos follows these introductory remarks with a long critique, the essence of which is that the arguments of the partisans of religion are not persuasive, that we cannot know what caused the universe to exist but that a God is not necessary, and that religion is not necessary for morality. Echoing Bayle, he remarks that he knows Leucippe too well to believe that, once having thrown off the yoke of religion, she would fall into the excesses into which some claim 'atheists' are plunged. Morality, he argues, depends on one's natural temperament and sensibility, and Leucippe is too sweet and melancholic to be susceptible to the lures of love and ambition which are the causes of the public excesses of some women.⁶⁷ After reinforcing a materialist conception of nature, Thrasylbulos concludes by reasserting that Leucippe is too sensible to let herself be frightened by phantoms that do not exist except in the imaginations of poets and the mind of a timid and superstitious populace. She knows how to use her reason, which one must use in order to achieve happiness and tranquility; while reason does not augment our pleasures, it regulates our desires and fears, destroys vain terrors of the imagination, and allows us to live according to nature and free from the influence of opinion.⁶⁸

Throughout the letter, Thrasylbulos constructs and reinforces an image of himself, Leucippe, and other rational people as a silent, sane minority forced to conceal their true beliefs from a mad society. The society as a whole cannot, it seems, be cured; at least, Thrasylbulos does not suggest attempting to do so, and he writes scornfully of those who have allowed themselves to be persuaded by and to defend the absurdities of religion,

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 180-181.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 185.

especially those who convert from one religion to another, as simply wishing to spare themselves the trouble of long and careful examination of those absurdities.⁶⁹ Being so greatly outnumbered, all the atheist can do is comply with the outward forms of religion while privately resisting the contagion. What is remarkable about Thrasybule's commentary is the keen analysis of the psychological and even physical distress caused when a rational person tries to be sincere in their religious devotion. To put it in modern terms, Thrasybule recognizes that cognitive dissonance causes stress, and asserts that religion creates cognitive dissonance in the mind of a rational individual. What also comes across clearly is the idea that rejecting religion involves active resistance: one must *throw off* the yoke of religion, not merely allow it to be lifted from one's shoulders. A willed use of reason is required to resist or overcome the contagious delirium of religion. It is possible that not everyone is capable of such active resistance; indeed, Thrasybule suggests that some people achieve genuine happiness and tranquility in their devotion, and he does not seem to feel that they should be interfered with. Thus, the atheist must passively conform outwardly to the society in which he or she lives, in order to achieve the primary goal of a peaceful life, but must be inwardly active and on guard against the contagion of religious delirium. There is an implication here that there may be many atheists hidden within society, all keeping their heads down in order to avoid trouble.

Thrasybule à Leucippe is an us-against-the-world kind of document that expresses clearly the atheist sense of estrangement and superiority. It suggests that both women and

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 168.

men can resist religion's delusions, as long as they are rational human beings; it is not easier for one sex, nor, apparently, is one sex more inclined to atheism than the other. Like other atheist texts, it defines atheists as rational possessors of the truth, against the deluded or lazy religious members of society. It also emphasizes the idea that atheists are individuals who have overcome their childhood religious conditioning through difficult intellectual effort. It is not, however, focused on widespread proselytizing, so its commitment to sharing the atheist truth is limited.

Meslier's Mémoire

Jean Meslier was born in 1664 in Mazerny, in the Ardennes. After training at the seminary of Reims, in 1689 he became the *curé* of the small Ardennes village of Etrépigny, where he remained for forty years until his death in 1729.⁷⁰ He spent the last several years of his life ministering to his village during the day and then composing his atheist *Mémoire* by night, in secret. The manuscript of this long work, which Michel Onfray describes as “une bombe philosophique,” was discovered at Meslier's death.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Maurice Dommanget, *Le Curé Meslier: Athée, Communiste et Révolutionnaire sous Louis XIV* (Paris: Julliard, 1965), 13-23.

⁷¹ Michel Onfray, *Les Ultras des Lumières: Contra-histoire de la philosophie*, vol. 4 (Paris: Grasset, 2006), 44-50. In another essay, Onfray refers to the *Testament* as a “time bomb” and a “fire ship”. See “The War Song of an Atheist Priest,” preface to *Testament: Memoir of the thoughts and sentiments of Jean Meslier*, trans. Michael Shreve (Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 2009), 23. For a detailed description of Meslier's environs, see Michel Deveze, “Les villages et la région du curé Meslier sous Louis XIV, d'après les rapports des intendants,” in *Le Curé Meslier et la vie intellectuelle religieuse et sociale à la fin du 17e et au début du 18e siècle: Actes du Colloque international de Reims 17-19 octobre 1974* (Reims: Bibliothèque de l'Université de Reims, 1980), 11-18.

Meslier left three manuscript copies and a letter synthesizing his work.⁷² At least thirty-five clandestine manuscript copies were in circulation after Meslier's death, under the title *Mémoire des Pensées et Sentiments*, making it one of the most-copied clandestine works of the early Enlightenment (1680-1750).⁷³ Both Voltaire and d'Holbach published abridged editions of the *Mémoire*, in 1761 and 1772 respectively, but the full text was not published until 1970, in the critical edition of Roland Desné.⁷⁴

Meslier has been accorded a central place in the history of atheism, but some caution must be exercised in considering his role in the development of atheism and the Enlightenment. Michel Onfray, in his preface to the English translation of the *Mémoire*, claims that Meslier "invented modern materialism" and that he was a truly original thinker whose ideas were "pillaged" by La Mettrie, Helvétius, Diderot and d'Holbach.⁷⁵ Onfray's outraged statements on Meslier's behalf must be taken with a grain of salt. Ann Thomson has shown convincingly that La Mettrie probably did not read the *Mémoire*,⁷⁶ and Onfray's note that Meslier did not have Lucretius in his library, a comment meant to

⁷² Roland Desné, "L'Homme et son Oeuvre," in *Oeuvres Complètes de Jean Meslier*, v. 1, ed. Roland Desné (Paris: Editions Anthropos, 1970), xlvi-lviii.

⁷³ Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 690 table 2. Meslier's *Mémoire* ranks fourth on the list.

⁷⁴ Jean Meslier, *Mémoire des Pensées et Sentiments*, in *Oeuvres Complètes de Jean Meslier*, vols. 1-3, ed. Roland Desné (Paris: Editions Anthropos, 1970).

⁷⁵ Onfray, "Preface," 20-23.

⁷⁶ Ann Thomson, "Meslier et La Mettrie," in *Le Curé Meslier et la vie intellectuelle religieuse et sociale à la fin du 17e et au début du 18e siècle: Actes du Colloque international de Reims 17-19 octobre 1974* (Reims: Bibliothèque de l'Université de Reims, 1980), 467-484.

reinforce Meslier's originality and genius, ignores the fact that Meslier cites and quotes Lucretius many times.⁷⁷

Nevertheless, Meslier's influence is evident; for example, he was regarded as an inspiration by at least one revolutionary, the atheist Anacharsis Cloots. Cloots, a German nobleman who took the name Anacharsis during the French Revolution, had been traveling through Europe when the Revolution began. He returned to Paris and became a revolutionary, eventually being elected as a member of the National Convention in 1792. Proclaiming himself the Orator of the Human Race, he argued for the expansion of the revolution to Europe and the world. Cloots' career came to an end when he was guillotined during the Terror for having supported a radical, atheist faction of dechristianizers.⁷⁸ On 11 November 1793, shortly before Robespierre's attack on the atheists, Cloots made a speech to the National Convention in which he suggested that

l'explosion qui frappe nos regards révolutionnaires, est le résultat de 50 ans de travaux et de persécutions. C'est en attaquant avec une courageuse opiniâtreté toutes les fausses révélations, que nous sommes arrivés à l'époque de la révélation du bon sens. La conversion d'un grand peuple nous prouve que les philosophes n'ont pas semé sur un sol ingrat, et que le prosélytisme de l'erreur est moins rapide

⁷⁷ Onfray, "War Song of an Atheist Priest," 20. Meslier cites Lucretius in several places, drawing this material from Montaigne's *Essays*. Thanks to the wide circulation of Lucretius's ideas, Meslier did not have to own a copy of *De Rerum Natura* in order to have access to them. See e.g. Meslier, *Mémoire*, vol. 1, 229 n. 1.

⁷⁸ For a brief summary of Cloots' revolutionary career, see Jonathan Israel, *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from The Rights of Man to Robespierre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 316-320 and 552.

que celui des principes éternels. C'est aujourd'hui que les bénédictions de la vérité font oublier les malédictions du mensonge.⁷⁹

At the end of the speech, he says that the adversaries of religion should be recognized, singling out Meslier for the honour of a statue in the Temple of Reason (the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, converted by the dechristianizers⁸⁰):

Il est donc reconnu que les adversaires de la religion ont bien mérité du genre humain; c'est à ce titre que je demande, pour le premier ecclésiastique abjurant, une statue dans le temple de la Raison. Il suffira de le nommer pour obtenir un décret favorable de la Convention nationale: c'est l'intrépide, le généreux, l'exemplaire Jean Melier [*sic*], curé d'Etrépigny en Champagne, dont le Testament philosophique porta la désolation dans la Sorbonne et parmi toutes les factions christicoles. La mémoire de cet honnête homme, flétrie sous l'ancien régime, doit être réhabilitée sous le régime de la nature.⁸¹

Given the context of the speech in the midst of the dechristianization campaign, it is not surprising that Cloots chose the atheist priest Meslier for special recognition; however, in calling him the first abjuring priest, Cloots ignores the fact that Meslier kept his atheism

⁷⁹J. Madival and E. Laurent, et. al., eds., *Archives parlementaires de 1789 à 1860: recueil complet des débats législatifs & politiques des Chambres françaises*, tome 79 (Paris: Librairie administrative de P. Dupont, 1862-), 372. <http://purl.stanford.edu/cz619pv6608>. Accessed 23 July 2015. "The explosion which strikes our revolutionary eyes, is the result of fifty years of work and persecutions. It is in attacking with obstinate course all the false revelations, that we have arrived at the epoch of the revelation of common sense. The conversion of a great people shows us that the philosophes did not sow in a barren soil, and that the proselytizing of error is less swift than that of eternal principles. It is today that the blessings of the truth make [us] forget the curses of falsehood."

⁸⁰ Notre Dame was the site of a Festival of Liberty and Reason on 10 November 1793. Michel Vovelle, *The Revolution against the Church: From Reason to the Supreme Being*, tran. Alan Jose (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991), 180.

⁸¹ *Archives Parlementaires*, tome 79, 372. "It is thus recognized that the adversaries of religion have deserved well of the human race; it is for this reason that I ask, for the first abjuring priest, a statue in the temple of Reason. In order to receive the favourable decree of the national Convention, it suffices to name him: the intrepid, generous, exemplary Jean Meslier, curé of Etrépigny and Champagne, whose philosophical Testament brought desolation to the Sorbonne and among all Christian factions. The memory of this honest man, withered under the old regime, must be rehabilitated under the regime of nature."

secret until after his death and was not, therefore, quite as courageous as Cloots makes him out to be.⁸²

Meslier's *Mémoire* begins with a preface addressed to his "chers amis" in which he says that it would have been too dangerous for him to say openly, during his life, what he thought. He wishes to open his readers' eyes to the "vaines erreurs" in which everyone is born and lives, errors which lead to evil, superstition, and tyranny.⁸³ The source of all the evils which trouble the good of human society is the desire of men to dominate others unjustly. This desire leads "politiques" to take advantage of the weakest and least-educated people by making them believe that the would-be rulers are divine or have divine sanction. All religion, according to Meslier, including Christianity, is but a trick to establish and maintain tyrannical government.⁸⁴

Meslier has a certain readership in mind, that is, his friends; however, unlike some of the other clandestine texts, such as the *Dissertations* and *Thrasylbule à Leucippe*, it is clear immediately that Meslier is not writing to people who already think as he does. He has, in fact, been responsible, as he says, for keeping them in the dark. As their priest, it has been his disagreeable obligation to perpetuate the lies of religion, which he has done "avec beaucoup de repugnance et avec assés de negligence."⁸⁵ He has lived, in effect, as

⁸² For further discussion of Meslier's influence, see Dommanget, *Le Curé Meslier*, 407-489. Sandrier suggests that the testamentary format of the *Mémoire* became a model adopted by other philosophes as a means of assuaging their own guilty consciences over having to hide their true beliefs. See *Le Style Philosophe du Baron d'Holbach*, 64-68.

⁸³ Meslier, *Mémoire*, "Avant-Propos," v. 1, 5.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 6. "With much repugnance and some neglect."

one of the wise men described by Fréret in the *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*, concealing his own beliefs while, albeit reluctantly, reinforcing the lies, injustice and tyranny which destroy in men everything that could lead them to be better, and which are the causes of all evils and miseries.⁸⁶ He has not had the opportunity to engage in discussion with like-minded individuals; as far as he is aware, he is the first person to denounce the evils he sees. Meslier himself had glimpsed “les erreurs, et les abus, qui causent tant de si grands maux dans le monde” in his youth, so that, “sans avoir jamais eu beaucoup de commerce dans le monde,” he recognized its impiety, injustice and corruption.⁸⁷ What took him longer to understand was that politics and self-interest kept others from criticizing the errors even though they must have been aware of them.

Meslier describes himself as motivated not by passion, but by a love for justice and truth and an aversion to vice and wickedness; the oppressors must be reprimanded for their crimes. As he notes, he is speaking against his own priestly profession, but, he argues, “nullement contre la verité, et nullement contre mon inclination, ni contre mes propres sentimens.” He would have preferred to treat his duties with open contempt, if that had been permitted.⁸⁸ As a youth, however, he entered the church to please his parents, who wanted a life for him that would be easy and honourable,⁸⁹ and he was afraid to expose his true opinions out of fear of physical torments and punishments.⁹⁰ He

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 7-9. “The errors and the abuses which cause so much of the evil in the world”; “without ever having had much to do with the world.”

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 26. “Not against the truth, and not against my inclination, nor against my own sentiments.”

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 26-27. On p. 38 Meslier refers to the likelihood that his parents and friends will be grieved by the reports of him after his *Mémoire* is revealed.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

seems to have felt that he had no other choice than to persist in his career as a priest, despite his unbelief and his hatred for the ways in which the church and its ministers took advantage of their flocks. He was obligated to teach his parishioners about their religion, which meant acting and speaking “entierement contre mes propres sentimens” and keeping them “dans des sottes erreurs, et dans des vaines superstitions et des idolatries, que je haïssois, que je condamnois, et que je detestois dans le coeur.”⁹¹ As a result, he developed a guilty conscience: “il me semble que j’abusois d’autant plus indignement de votre bonne foy, et que j’en étois par consequent d’autant plus digne de blame et de reproches.”⁹²

It is difficult to overstate the deep sense of estrangement that Meslier expresses. He has lived for many years in full consciousness of his own hypocrisy and collusion in the errors and abuses he despises. He has attempted to mitigate his involvement in the systemic oppression of the people, but has been unable to avoid it altogether, and has been unwilling to take the risk of speaking and acting in accordance with his true views. By his own lights, he has resisted the system as much as he could, but recognizes that he has left his friends and parishioners in the dark, betraying their trust in him. The *Mémoire* is meant to reveal the truth once Meslier himself is beyond danger.

Meslier does not describe himself as strong or courageous; on the contrary, he emphasizes his fears and weaknesses, effectively diminishing his own masculinity and moral authority. He does, however, as we have seen, suggest that he recognized the truth

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 32. “Entirely against my own sentiments”; “In foolish errors, and in vain superstitions and idolatries, which I hated, which I condemned, and which I detested in my heart.”

⁹² *Ibid.* “It seems to me that I abused very unworthily your good faith, and that I was in consequence of this most worthy of blame and reproach.”

early in his life, perhaps even as a child, and that he did so without any assistance or guidance. This hints at the same sense of intellectual superiority and maturity that comes across so clearly in other texts.

Meslier is not, perhaps, as heroic a figure as Anacharsis Cloots believed, but it is important to note that in composing his *Mémoire*, which he evidently intended to circulate after his death in order to spark change, he went beyond anything most of the other clandestine authors did. He put his name to his text and held nothing back in his attack on the errors and injustices he perceived. Instead of merely conforming outwardly in order to maintain a life of peace, and then continuing the illusion of conformity at his death, he created a weapon with which he hoped to destroy the religious and political system. He kept his atheism secret while he was alive, but was fully committed, in his own way, to the duty to share the truth as he saw it.

Two Clandestine Dissertations

The clandestine literature of the eighteenth century encompasses a range of material, much of which is anti-clerical and opposed to revealed religion, but it tends to be deist rather than atheist. There are, however, some atheist texts, much less well known than the *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, including the *Dissertation sur la Formation du Monde* and the *Dissertation sur la Résurrection de la Chair*, two rare manuscripts which exist only in single copies held at the Bibliothèque Mazarine of Paris.

Claudia Stancati, who has edited these texts, argues from both internal and external evidence that *Formation du Monde* was composed between 1710 and 1740, while *Résurrection de la Chair* was composed between 1735 and 1747.⁹³ They may have been written by the same author, as Wade suggests,⁹⁴ but this is not certain, and the authorship of the texts remains unknown.⁹⁵ The style of the two *Dissertations* is similar, and, in my opinion, the similar titles and the false attributions to Thomas Browne (see note below) suggest a single author. While recognizing that this cannot be a conclusive argument, for the sake of convenience I have treated the two texts as written by the same individual.

As Stancati explains, “ces deux traités sont représentatifs des tendances les plus radicales de la littérature clandestine: l’athéisme et le matérialisme.”⁹⁶ These two radical positions are expressed succinctly at the end of the introduction to *Dissertation sur la*

⁹³ Claudia Stancati, *Dissertation sur la Formation du Monde & Dissertation sur la Résurrection de la Chair: Manuscrits du recueil 1168 de la Bibliothèque Mazarine de Paris* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2001), 19-20. The usual dating for these texts is 1738 for *Dissertation sur la Formation du Monde* and 1743 for *Dissertation sur la Résurrection de la Chair*, following the dates marked on the manuscript title pages, but Stancati suggests that a citation of Boulanger’s *Dissertation sur Elie et Enoch* in *Résurrection de la Chair* indicates that a later date of composition is possible. See also Wade, *Clandestine Organization and Diffusion of Philosophic Ideas* and Winfried Schröder, *Ursprünge des Atheismus: Untersuchungen zue Metaphysik- und Religionskritik des 17. und 18. Jarhunderts*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 2012).

⁹⁴ Wade, *Clandestine Organization and Diffusion of Philosophic Ideas*, 23.

⁹⁵ Each text’s title page includes a false attribution to the English physician Thomas Browne, the author of *Pseudodoxia epidemica* (1646) and *Religio medici* (1642). As Stancati explains, Browne could not have been the author of the *Dissertations*, since the *Dissertation sur la Formation du Monde* cites John Toland, who was only twelve years old when Browne died. The work cited is *Doutes sur la religion*, which was falsely attributed to Toland, but is in fact a version of *Examen de la religion dont on cherche l’éclaircissement de bonne foi*, which was probably written by Du Marsais around 1710. This brief excursus on authorship illustrates something of the nature of eighteenth-century clandestine literature. Stancati, 16-19.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21. “These two treatises are representative of the most radical tendencies of the clandestine literature: atheism and materialism.”

Formation du Monde, where the author presents his two main arguments: “1.

L'impossibilité qu'il y a que dieu soit l'auteur du monde, au sens où on l'entend: 2. Que le monde a son principe en lui-même.”⁹⁷ The *Dissertation sur la Résurrection de la Chair* argues, not surprisingly, that corporeal resurrection, and thus the miracle of the Resurrection, is impossible.⁹⁸ Unlike the *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, these *Dissertations* are not just compilations from other sources, but arguments worked out — admittedly, with numerous references to other sources — by a learned author. As in my discussion of the *Traité*, I shall focus on what the texts tell us about the author's self-image, and on the themes of resistance and truth-telling.

Dissertation sur la Formation du Monde consists of eight chapters plus an introduction and conclusion. The main text focuses on explaining what matter is, how it acquired movement, how forms and beings were produced, and so on. *Dissertation sur la Résurrection de la Chair* consists of three parts, which deal with an examination of theological proofs of Jesus's resurrection, resurrection in general, and with arguments showing that resurrection is impossible. Both works are fairly short and present their arguments concisely. The bulk of the two texts is devoted to explication of the author's arguments and proofs; he reveals little about himself, but what he does say about himself and his motivations suggests an attitude of resistance to religious authority, a sense of superiority, and a desire to correct the false tenets of religion.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 80. “1. The impossibility that there is a god who is the author of the world, in the sense that we understand it: 2. That the world has its [originating] principle in itself.”

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 174.

The two *Dissertations* are less aggressive in tone and approach than the *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*. Whereas the *Traité* begins with a blunt declaration that it is going to share the truth that has been kept hidden from most of mankind, the *Dissertation sur la Formation du Monde* opens with a claim that the author has written this treatise with some reluctance, as he is afraid of astonishing rather than instructing the reader. He has, it seems, been pressured into writing by someone who has demanded that he speak of the world, a task which has plunged him into an abyss. The author complains, too, that he would have preferred to write on this subject in another language, one which is well-known to him and his reader, and which provides all the necessary expressions.⁹⁹ The author does not specify which language he means, but we may infer that it is Latin, the language of learned men and the language of Lucretius, who also wrote about the formation of the world for a friend. The complaint about language echoes Lucretius specifically, for Lucretius remarks in Book I of *De rerum natura* that he must “coin much new terminology, because of our tongue’s dearth” in order to treat subjects of Greek philosophy in Latin poetry.¹⁰⁰ A citation of Horace¹⁰¹ completes the impression that the author and his demanding reader are learned individuals.

The author then explains that he is also afraid of his work falling into the wrong hands, that is, the hands of an ignorant person who would condemn him without understanding him. Such fools are to be feared because there are so many of them, and

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁰⁰ Lucretius, *The Nature of Things*, trans. A.E. Stallings (London: Penguin, 2007), 7 (I.135-139).

¹⁰¹ Stancati, 79.

because they see everything that does not accord with their own prejudices as false. For example, most men assume that there is a God, just as they used to believe that the sun revolved around the earth. But what, the author asks, becomes of this God if he is not the creator of the world? He would be no more than a useless, powerless being. The author states that he has demanded proofs of their opinions from the “Partisans du Systeme religieux” — he says he is *one of those* who have done so — and that he knows their prejudices mean his own proofs against religion will not be accepted. In order to protect their own interests, the partisans of religion claim that they alone have the right to discuss the creation of the world. The author objects to this claim of exclusive authority and to the failure (in his view) to accept “solid conjectures” and proofs.¹⁰² In the conclusion, he states that his main purpose has been to refute those philosophers, “partisans de la Première Cause,” who grant the power of thought only to humans (one of his central arguments is that humans and animals are made of the same matter).¹⁰³

We can see from these statements that the author of this *Dissertation* sees himself as a learned, rational individual who is capable of presenting clear arguments against the system of religion and its partisans. He believes his method is superior to theirs, and seems to resent the uneven playing field on which he must engage them. He does not dwell on the idea of resistance to religious authority, nor on his role as truth-teller; these aspects of his purpose are addressed succinctly. It is only in response to the pressure of a friend, he says, that he composes his *Dissertation*. It is possible that this is merely a

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 137.

rhetorical gesture of humility, but the comment about fearing that he will astonish rather than instruct the reader suggests that he thinks the reader may not be able to handle the truth he is about to tell them. The author expresses concern about the risk of his work falling into the wrong hands, but is willing to take that risk in order to share his ideas with his friend.

In contrast with the *Dissertation sur la Formation du Monde*, the *Dissertation sur la Résurrection de la Chair* does not contain an address to a reader, or a statement of reluctance. It begins much more directly, by stating that the most important of all questions is that of the Resurrection, because the dogma of resurrection and happiness after death lies at the heart of Christianity and other religions. The author does, however, criticize the “Partisans du dogme de la resurrection” in much the same terms as in the previous *Dissertation*: according to him, they deal with objections to their dogma by dismissing them instead of proving that their own position is correct. The author is going to expose some of those objections, which, if the partisans cannot answer them, will destroy their “hypothèse.” He concludes the introduction by stating that he is not writing for those who proceed by deciding in advance whether they agree with an opinion. It is necessary, according to him, to assess the evidence first and then decide whether to agree.¹⁰⁴ This is the problem with religion: it discourages critical thinking and reasoning based on proofs rather than on “prejudice.”

One does not get the impression that the author is calling for all-out war against religion. It is clear, however, that, as in the first *Dissertation*, he is challenging its claims

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 173-174.

to authority and its dogmatism. He also writes as if he is part of a (small) community of like-minded individuals who see themselves as opposed to and by the “partisans” of religion. Religion is characterized as an erroneous system that can only defend itself by silencing or refusing to consider reasonable arguments and proofs against its tenets.

Unlike some other works, such as the anonymous *Jordanus Brunus Redivivus*, which was composed sometime before 1771 and makes the same point more forcefully,¹⁰⁵ the author of the *Dissertation* does not give examples of repression; he seems to have little interest in polemics. He regards himself and his reader(s) as thinkers superior to the partisans of religion, but as fighting at a disadvantage against the entrenched position of their intellectual adversaries. As in the first *Dissertation*, there is a sense that the author is taking a risk in order to share the truth. This is a limited kind of *parrhesia*, in which the truth is shared with a friend but under cover of anonymity. In contrast with the *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, the author of the *Dissertations* does not say anything about women or Jews being especially credulous. He mentions fools, but does not dwell on them; the Others against which he defines himself are theologians, men of similar stature to himself even if they are wrong.

¹⁰⁵ *Jordanus Brunus Redivivus*, in *Philosophes Sans Dieu: Textes Athées Clandestins du XVIIIe Siècle*, eds. Alain Mothu & Gianluca Mori (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2010), 277-278. *Jordanus Brunus Redivivus* suggests that “l’esprit philosophique” has survived through the ages despite such persecution and is more powerful than ever despite having been nearly destroyed (292). Like the two *Dissertations*, *Jordanus Brunus Redivivus* refers to the partisans of religion as adversaries, delineating a clear division between the *philosophes* who pursue the truth and the defenders of religion; in one section, it refers to combatting other *philosophes*, that is, those who defend religion (339).

Réflexions sur l'existence de l'âme et sur l'existence de Dieu

According to Alain Mothu and Gianluca Mori, the authorship of *Réflexions sur l'existence de l'âme et sur l'existence de Dieu*, composed before 1734 and first published in *Nouvelles libertés de penser* in 1743 along with several other clandestine works, cannot be determined. It is sometimes attributed to Du Marsais, author of *Le Philosophe*, but Mothu and Mori suggest that the absence of clear textual evidence does not allow a definitive attribution.¹⁰⁶ The date of composition can be determined with more certainty, as the existence of a manuscript of this title is attested in a work by the Abbé Molinier, *Discours contre les impies du temps*, that was published in 1734.¹⁰⁷

Réflexions is one of the shorter works in the clandestine canon, but noteworthy for being “peut-être le premier texte imprimé moderne où l'existence de Dieu soit explicitement niée.”¹⁰⁸ As Mothu and Mori note, the author attacks the existence of God as a prejudice; the text describes it as “le plus grand et plus enraciné” of prejudices, whose source is humans’ imagination.¹⁰⁹ The Christian idea of God is self-contradictory, and the fact that other societies have imagined different gods for themselves is evidence that God does not exist outside of human imagination.

¹⁰⁶ Mothu & Mori, *Philosophes Sans Dieu*, 265. Wade provides only a single paragraph on this text, in *Clandestine Organization*, 259. Schröder makes some scattered references to it in *Ursprünge des Atheismus*, but offers no sustained commentary on it. I am not aware of any other scholarly analyses of this text.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 266.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 265. “Perhaps the first printed modern text in which the existence of God is explicitly denied.”

¹⁰⁹ *Réflexions sur l'existence de l'âme et sur l'existence de Dieu*, in Mothu & Mori, *Philosophes Sans Dieu*, 273. “The greatest and most rooted.”

Réflexions begins with an explanation of how difficult it is to get rid of the religious prejudices that are implanted in childhood. Some traces always remain, despite the many ways in which we come to think differently, as adults, than we do as children; they are engraved on our hearts. Hope and fear lead us to accept the teachings of the wise, and even when we have freed ourselves from religious prejudices, “l’épaisse obscurité qui nous environne” makes us return to those prejudices, for man wishes to know who he is and does not want to be in doubt; he therefore uses his imagination instead of his reason. Believing he sees the light, he only ends up returning to the shadows.¹¹⁰ The solution is to study man himself in order to understand man, and to accept the limitations of human reason. This may not satisfy our vanity, but it will keep us from inventing explanations, such as the existence of God and the immortal soul, for what we do not understand.¹¹¹

Like ‘Thrasylbule’, the author of the *Réflexions* regards himself and like-minded readers as surrounded by a society that is in the grip of a delusion. He, too, sees religious beliefs (prejudices) as very difficult to get rid of once they are embedded in the mind; there is a similar description of how an individual who manages to break the chains of prejudice will return to them in order to avoid doubt. Although the author does not say so explicitly, he seems, like ‘Thrasylbule,’ to recognize that breaking the chains is stressful. By implication, an atheist is someone who has overcome childhood conditioning and man’s natural inclination to invent explanations to satisfy his curiosity, as well as the

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 269-270. “The thick obscurity which surrounds us.”

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 270.

authority of the learned who reinforce religious prejudices. He is, by necessity, an individual possessed of a strong capacity for reason and a strong enough will to resist the internal and external pressures — to efface the prejudices engraved on his heart.

The author of *Réflexions* argues that atheism is not for “the people”; although the true foundation of society is simply the contract between men to help each other, this “moral”, while not dangerous in itself, should only be preached to gentlemen, since “the people” are not restrained in their behaviour by the delicate sentiment of *amour-propre*.¹¹² This is one of the more blunt statements of elitism among the atheist texts, combining disdain for the people with a suggestion that the ‘truth’ should be withheld from them. Roland Mortier has argued that both esotericism and elitism were inherent to free-thinking in the Enlightenment, with esotericism the necessary means of protecting elite libertinage against the vulgar; according to the free-thinkers, their ideas, including atheism, could not be diffused safely due to the incurable ignorance and violence of the masses. Free-thinking, then, was the privilege of a very few.¹¹³ This is not always true — some of the authors discussed in this chapter argued that atheism could be disseminated safely precisely because the masses would not understand it — but it is this esotericist sentiment being expressed in the *Réflexions*.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 275.

¹¹³ Roland Mortier, “Esoterisme et lumières: Un dilemme de la pensée du XVIIIe siècle,” in *Clartés et Ombres du Siècle des Lumières* (Geneva: Droz, 1969), 62-63.

La Mettrie's Discours Preliminaire

Julien Offray de La Mettrie, the son of a merchant, was born in 1709 in Saint-Malo in Brittany. He attended several colleges before studying medicine at the Faculty of Paris and the University of Reims, then continued his medical studies with two years under Hermann Boerhaave in Leiden. He returned to Saint-Malo to practice, then “served as a personal physician to the Duke de Grammont and as physician to a battalion of the *gardes françaises*.” He began his writing career during this time, publishing satires against his medical colleagues and works of materialist philosophy. These works, including *L'Histoire Naturelle de l'âme*, led to his exile to Holland, where he published *L'Homme Machine* in 1747. The Dutch exiled him for this work. La Mettrie then “sought refuge at the court of Frederick the Great, where he died in 1751 after eating contaminated pâté.” Little more is known of La Mettrie’s life than this, due to a lack of biographical source material.¹¹⁴ Kathleen Wellman notes that La Mettrie was disavowed by the *philosophes*, even by such radicals as Diderot and d’Holbach, for his ‘immoral’ hedonism. Unlike the other authors discussed in this dissertation, La Mettrie published his controversial works during his lifetime and under his own name, and aimed them at a general, educated audience;¹¹⁵ he was, therefore, the closest of the authors discussed in

¹¹⁴ Kathleen Wellman, *La Mettrie: Medicine, Philosophy, and Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 6. La Mettrie’s medical satires were interventions in the conflict between doctors and surgeons.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* Ann Thomson points out that *L'Homme Machine* was in fact first published anonymously in Leiden, with the false date of 1748; however, a revised version appeared under La Mettrie’s name in 1750, in his collected *Philosophical Works*, and an English translation named him as the author in 1750. See Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *Machine Man and Other Writings*, trans. and ed. Ann Thomson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 2 (unnumbered page).

this chapter to the ideal parrhesiast, who not only tells the truth but also puts himself at risk in doing so. In this analysis, I shall focus on La Mettrie's *Discours Preliminaire* to his collected works.

The *Discours Preliminaire* was attached to an edition of La Mettrie's philosophical works in 1750. As Ann Thomson notes, La Mettrie's works had attracted considerable criticism for undermining religious belief and, in the *Anti-Seneca* (1748), allegedly inciting crime, but the *Discours Preliminaire* was La Mettrie's only systematic defense of his works.¹¹⁶ In it, he "reaffirm[s] his materialism and ... show[s] that his philosophy is not dangerous, because the object of philosophy is totally separate from that of morality and religion; philosophy is concerned with the search for truth, while the aim of morality and religion is to protect society." The volume was apparently too controversial even for Frederick II, La Mettrie's protector, as it seems to have been banned by the Prussian king and "withdrawn from sale," although it continued to be printed up until 1796.¹¹⁷

In his description of the philosopher, La Mettrie emphasizes calmness, the love of truth, and lack of any desire to "interrupt" politics. The philosophers' 'apostles' and 'ministers' consist of only a small number of gentle and peaceful faithful individuals.¹¹⁸ Philosophy, as a means to finding the truth, does society no harm; it is the enemies of

¹¹⁶ Ann Thomson, "Introduction," in La Mettrie, *Machine Man and Other Writings*, xxiv-xxv.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, xxv-xxvi. Thomson notes that interest in La Mettrie's works peaked in the 1770s, apparently in response to Holbach's *Système de la Nature*. I have used the 1753 edition held by the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, while consulting Thomson's translation of the 1750 edition in *Machine Man and Other Writings*.

¹¹⁸ Julien Offray de La Mettrie, "Discours Preliminaire," *Oeuvres Philosophiques* vol. 1 (Amsterdam, 1753), 16.

freedom of thought and writing who degrade the human race by keeping it ignorant.¹¹⁹

We can see here La Mettrie's awareness of repression, as well as a reversal of the charge that atheists are enemies of the human race. He defends philosophy further on the grounds that there is no reason to fear that *philosophes* will corrupt the people, because the people do not pay attention to what *philosophes* write and would not understand it if they did:

Le peuple ne vit point avec les Philosophes, il ne lit point des Livres philosophiques. Si par hazard il en tombe un entre ses mains, ou il n'y comprend rien, ou s'il y conçoit quelque chose, il n'en croit pas un mot ... Ce n'est qu'aux Esprits déjà éclairés, que la Philosophie peut se communiquer, nullement à craindre pour ceux-là, comme on l'a vû. Elle passe de cent coudées par dessus les autres têtes, où elle n'entre pas plus que le jour dans un noir cachot.¹²⁰

La Mettrie presented a similar view in *L'Homme Machine*, which begins with the bold statement that the wise man must not only study nature and the truth, but must also "oser la dire en faveur du petit nombre de ceux qui veulent & peuvent penser; car pour les autres, qui sont volontairement les Esclaves des Préjugés, il ne leur est pas plus possible d'atteindre la Vérité, qu'aux Grénouilles de voler."¹²¹ La Mettrie's overt elitism serves to separate philosophers, including atheists, from the majority of society by virtue of their education and cleverness; they alone are able to handle the truth, unlike the unenlightened

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 30-31. "The people neither live with philosophers nor read philosophical books. If by chance one falls into their hands, they either understand nothing or, if they perceive something, they do not believe a word of it. ... Philosophy can only be transmitted to already enlightened minds, which have nothing to fear, as we have seen. It passes a hundred feet over other heads, where it can no more enter than can daylight into a dark dungeon." Trans. Ann Thomson, *Machine Man and Other Writings*, 156.

¹²¹ Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *L'homme Machine* (Elie Luzac: Leiden, 1748), 1. "Dare to proclaim it for the benefit of the small number of those who are willing and able to think; for the others, who are the willing slaves of prejudice, are no more capable of reaching the truth than are frogs of flying." Trans. Ann Thomson, *Machine Man and Other Writings*, 3.

masses who cannot recognize it. Early in this text, then, we find evidence of the mutually reinforcing elements of the atheist identity, contained within a defence of philosophy in general.

Shortly after his defense of philosophy, La Mettrie engages in a defense of atheists. Following Bayle, he argues that atheists are just as capable as any other people of living in a virtuous society because there is no necessary connection between one's belief, or lack thereof, and being a bad citizen. An individual's natural physiological "organisation" will determine whether he is an "honnête homme" or not.¹²² Furthermore, the atheist, like the philosopher, is peaceful, happy, and agreeable; he is memorable for his politeness and the gentleness of his morals.¹²³ The atheist is clearly a superior sort of man, law-abiding and sociable, who does not deserve the complaints, clamour, and calumnies that La Mettrie himself has suffered. In one passage, La Mettrie argues that kings should double their guard on those governed by (religious) prejudices, while lowering it on atheists, thanks to atheists' possession of cool minds which are "amis de la paix, ennemis du desordre & du trouble ... dont l'imagination ne s'échauffe jamais, & qui ne décident de tout qu'après un mûr examen ... tantôt portant l'étendart de la vérité, en face même de la Politique."¹²⁴ Here, La Mettrie presents a complete reversal of the anti-atheist discourse which painted atheists as enemies of civil society. His description of cool-headed atheists echoes Du Marsais' depiction of the self-controlled *philosophe*

¹²² La Mettrie, *Discours Préliminaire*, 36-37.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 38-39.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 40. "Friends to peace and enemies of unrest and trouble ... whose imagination is never overheated and who decide everything only after mature examination ... sometimes defending the colours of truth against politics itself." Trans. Ann Thomson, *Machine Man and Other Writings*, 160.

who does not fall prey to his passions, but is more blunt in its construction of the religious as those who cannot (again, like children) control themselves and are therefore the real threats to law and order.

La Mettrie remarks as well on the use of the label ‘atheist’ to attack unorthodox ideas. Hostility towards unorthodox ideas, even to demonstrations of the weakness of proofs of the existence of God, would be unwarranted; for in pursuing truth, La Mettrie would have increased “les lumières publiques, & l’Esprit répandu dans le monde, en communiquant mes recherches, & en osant afficher ce que tout Philosophe timide ou prudent se dit à l’oreille.”¹²⁵ Here he demonstrates awareness of the way in which the ‘atheist’ has been constructed as a threat, while attempting to disarm the force of the label by arguing that disseminating the truth is beneficial to society.

As he concludes the *Discours*, La Mettrie argues that a philosopher must be as free in his writings as in his actions; he must write “avec une noble hardiesse, ou qu’il s’attend à ramper comme ceux qui ne le sont pas.”¹²⁶ This construction of the bold philosopher, much like that of the strong and courageous atheist of the *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, is clearly gendered and suggests that the philosopher who writes with noble daring will gain status, obviating the requirement to degrade himself before others for their approval. La Mettrie is himself the model of the daring philosopher, of course, but he ends the *Discours* with a long exhortation to other philosophers to be as bold as he is:

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 60. “Public enlightenment and the intellectual level of society by transmitting my research and daring to publish what every timid or prudent philosopher whispers.” Trans. Ann Thomson, *Machine Man and Other Writings*, 167.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 70. “With noble daring or expect to crawl like those who are not philosophers.” Trans. Ann Thomson, *Machine Man and Other Writings*, 171.

“Ecrivez, comme si vous étiez seul dans l’Univers, ou comme si vous n’aviez rien à craindre de la jalousie & des préjugés des hommes, ou vous manquerez le but.”¹²⁷ This urging to abandon prudence is strikingly at odds with the practice and words of the other texts considered in this chapter; only *La Mettrie* took on the obligation to speak the truth so freely. No one else would, in fact, write as if they had nothing to fear (at least, not until the French Revolution), but atheist writers would continue to see themselves as speakers of the truth.

Lettres à Eugénie and Système de la Nature

Probably the best-known of the eighteenth-century atheists is the Baron d’Holbach, author of the infamous *Système de la Nature* and many other atheist and anti-religious books. Paul Henry Thiry was born in 1723 in Edesheim, in the German Palatinate. He studied at the University of Leiden from 1744 to 1748/1749, where he received a scientific education. Having inherited a large fortune and the title of baron from his uncle in 1753, he settled in Paris after leaving university and became the host of a famous salon. According to Alan Kors, d’Holbach published over fifty books and around 400 articles on a variety of topics, including scientific and philosophical works; however, “almost every work he translated, published, edited or wrote, from the most innocuous or scientific to the most philosophically daring, was published in the strictest

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 74. “Write as if you were alone in the universe or as if you had nothing to fear from men’s jealousy and prejudices, or you will miss your target.” Trans. Ann Thomson, *Machine Man and Other Writings*, 172.

anonymity.”¹²⁸ Not until after his death in 1789 (before the Revolution) did it become known that he was the author of the radical anti-religious works *Christianisme Dévoilé*, *Système de la Nature*, and *Bon-Sens*, as well as many others. Ann Thomson has suggested that the publication of *Système de la Nature* in 1770 marked “the high point” of an “atheistic and materialistic campaign orchestrated by Baron d’Holbach,” in which he “published translations of several English works, ... as well as new editions of La Mettrie’s treatises and clandestine treatises.”¹²⁹ In this section, I shall discuss just two of d’Holbach’s many works: *Lettres à Eugénie* and *Système de la Nature*, both of which address the themes of this chapter.

Lettres à Eugénie was published anonymously in 1768, by d’Holbach’s regular publisher, Marc-Michel Rey. The original letters were apparently written in 1764 to the young Marguerite, Marchioness de Vermandois, whose husband was a friend of d’Holbach. According to the translator of the 1870 Boston edition, Marguerite had been shocked to discover that d’Holbach and several of his circle were unbelievers. After withdrawing to her husband’s estates, on the advice of her confessor to cut her ties with this social group, she wrote to d’Holbach of her fear and confusion; the *Lettres* were d’Holbach’s response.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Alan C. Kors, *D’Holbach’s Coterie: An Enlightenment in Paris* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 11-13. See also Philipp Blom, *A Wicked Company: The Forgotten Radicalism of the European Enlightenment* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2010); Alan C. Kors, “Holbach, Paul-Henri Thiry d’,” in *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, v. 2, ed. Alan C. Kors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 213-215.

¹²⁹ Ann Thomson, *Bodies of Thought: Science, Religion, and the Soul in the Early Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 218.

¹³⁰ Paul Henry Thiry, Baron d’Holbach, *Letters to Eugenia; or, A Preservative Against Religious Prejudices*, trans. Anthony C. Middleton (Boston: Josiah P. Mendum, 1870), xvi-xvii.

The “Avertissement” to *Lettres à Eugénie* relates, in some detail, a false history which suggests that the work has existed for a long time as a carefully-guarded secret manuscript, which has only recently become better-known, and whose author and original recipient remain completely unknown. The author claims to have collated several manuscript variants in order to produce the present edition; in fact, the letters were revised by d’Holbach himself for publication.¹³¹

These deceptive remarks about the conjectural author and recipient of the *Lettres* capture succinctly the contradictions inherent in the position of an eighteenth-century French atheist who wanted to be a truth-teller. On one hand, we are told that the text is distinguished by its honesty. The author is evidently a man of probity and virtue, someone one would wish to have for a friend, who has written the *Lettres* not from a desire for fame, but from “le desir seul de faire du bien à ses semblables en les éclairant.”¹³² According to this characterization, which of course describes d’Holbach himself, the author is not only a truth-teller, but also a humble one, who shares the truth for altruistic reasons, not for any personal gain.

On the other hand, the author’s identity remains a secret. He has not taken the full risk of the true parrhesiast described by Foucault; while he has shared his thoughts, he has not done so openly and publicly. The “Avertissement” explains that there never has been and never will be “un homme de Lettres assez imprudent ... assez insensé, pour

¹³¹ “Avertissement,” in Paul Henry Thiry, Baron d’Holbach, *Lettres à Eugénie ou Préservatif contre les Préjugés*, vol. 1 (Londres [Amsterdam], 1768), i-iv. I have not been able to determine the authorship of the “Avertissement”; the 1870 edition names Naigeon, but Sandrier suggests that it was d’Holbach himself. See *Le Style Philosophique du Baron d’Holbach*, 58.

¹³² “Avertissement,” vi-viii. “The sole desire to do good to his fellow men by enlightening them.”

publier, où laisser imprimer, de son vivant, un livre ou il foulera aux piés les Temples, les Autels & les Statues des Dieux, & où il attaquera sans aucun ménagement les opinions religieuses les plus consacrées.”¹³³ This is, of course, precisely what d’Holbach is doing and will continue to do; the author is telling a straightforward lie here in suggesting that the *Lettres* and all such works before the public eye are posthumous. The lie has a dual purpose: it misdirects, or at least gives the plausible illusion of misdirecting, the authorities, and it shows how oppressive the current regime is if the truth can only be told by dead men. This point is reinforced by urging readers not to investigate the author’s identity because their curiosity could compromise the repose, fortune, and liberty of the relatives and friends of the authors of such bold books.¹³⁴

The “Avertissement” as a whole constructs an image of the author as honest and bold, yet humble, prudent, and concerned for others’ welfare. It makes a manly virtue out of dissimulation, in sharp contrast with Meslier’s fears for himself and La Mettrie’s exhortation to other philosophers to throw caution to the wind. Here, the fear of discovery is not a weakness, but a sign of good sense and a duty to protect friends and family. The atheist is still daring, but moderates his boldness in order to prevent harm.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, xi. “A man of letters so imprudent, ... so insane, as to publish, or allow to be printed, in his lifetime, a book that will trample underfoot the temples, altars and statues of the gods, and will attack without mercy the most sacred religious opinions.”

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, xii. See Sandrier, *Le style philosophique du baron d’Holbach*, 70-73, for remarks on the presentation of both *Lettres à Eugénie* and *Système de la Nature* as posthumous works.

The *Lettres* themselves are reminiscent of Fréret's *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*,¹³⁵ in that they offer counsel to a particular woman who is described as too good for religious superstition. Similar themes of the psychological distress caused by religion recur throughout the *Lettres*, beginning with d'Holbach's remark that he, too, had once suffered religion-induced terrors but now, thanks to reason and philosophy, enjoyed "le calme." He would not, he says, have dared "vous découvrir une façon de penser trop éloignée de la votre, ni combattre les opinions funestes auxquelles on vous persuade que votre bonheur est attaché," but for her letter, which has invoked "un devoir sacré" to tell her the truth.¹³⁶ Right away, then, d'Holbach identifies himself as one who has been cured of an affliction and who, although not a proselyte (!), feels a sense of obligation to share what he has learned in order to relieve his friend's suffering. If he has a duty, though, so does she: "Eugénie" should pursue the course d'Holbach recommends for the sake of her husband, her children, her friends, and the world, as well as for her own sake. Religion will only continue to make her unhappy, which will interfere with her ability to contribute to the happiness of others; religious devotees lack amiability and sociability, and religious devotion is either "une passion triste & sombre, ou une passion emportée." In addition to characterizing religious devotees in general in this way, d'Holbach distinguishes "Eugénie" from other women, advising her to leave superstition "à ces

¹³⁵ The "Avertissement" cites Fréret's *Lettre*, and *Lettres à Eugénie* was included in an edition of Fréret's complete works published in 1775, 1776 and 1777 by Marc-Michel Rey. Alain Sandrier points out that both John Toland's *Letters to Serena* (1695) and Fontenelle's *Entretiens sur la pluralité des Mondes* (1686) also provided models for the *Lettres à Eugénie*. *Le style philosophique du Baron d'Holbach*, 116-118.

¹³⁶ Paul Henry Thiry, Baron d'Holbach, *Lettres à Eugénie ou Préservatif contre les Préjugés*, vol. 1 (Londres [Amsterdam], 1768), 2-3. "To discover to you a way of thinking too far from your own, nor to combat the fatal opinions to which you are persuaded that your happiness is bound."

femelettes ignorantes, dont l'esprit rétréci est incapable de réfléchir."¹³⁷ He goes on to say that religion transforms the most gentle, indulgent and fair men into ferocious beasts, while princes, magistrates and judges become "inhumains et sans pitié, dès qu'il s'agit des intérêts de la Religion." Finally, religious devotion fills the heart with a bitter gall that disturbs the harmony of society.¹³⁸

Within a few short pages, d'Holbach has constructed an image of the religious believer as melancholy, fearful, violent, stubborn, narrow-minded, silly and ignorant. He dehumanizes the religious man, making him a cruel monster, and suggests that devotees are unsociable, destabilizing to society, and controlled by their passions instead of controlling them. These characterizations define the atheist as possessing, by default, the opposite qualities. Most importantly, perhaps, the religious devotee is unhappy. We have seen this theme before, in Freret's *Thrasybule à Leucippe*, but d'Holbach adds a layer to the argument: if Eugénie can abandon religious superstition, she will not only be happy herself, but will be able to do a better job of making others happy. Unlike the male *philosophe*, who contributes to society's enlightenment through his cool intellect, the female atheist's social role is merely to make others happy. It is also clear that d'Holbach sees Eugénie as capable of atheism because she is an *exceptional* woman who is not limited by her sex's typical small-mindedness and inability to think critically. In effect, she is an honorary *honnête homme*, albeit one with a limited social role. There is no suggestion that Eugénie should take up the pen herself in order to spread the truth in bold

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 12-14. "A passion sad and dark, or a passion that is carried away"; "to these ignorant females, whose narrow mind is incapable of reflection."

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 16-18. "Inhuman and ruthless when it comes to the interests of religion."

books; she is a passive recipient of the truth, not an active parrhesiast with a sacred duty to share the truth with others.¹³⁹

In the final letter, d'Holbach turns to the issue of atheists, having argued that the theologians' explanations and descriptions of God are incomprehensible: "Ne soyez donc point surprise, Madame, s'il se trouve des gens qui osent révoquer en doute l'existence d'un être que les Theologiens, à force de le méditer, ne sont jamais parvenus qu'à rendre plus incomprehensible, ou même à détruire tout-à-fait."¹⁴⁰ D'Holbach confirms here that atheists are real and that Eugénie has met some — and that these are, to adopt the terms of the anti-atheist discourse, speculative rather than practical atheists. D'Holbach describes them as those who find "ni bien ni mal, ni ordre ni désordre réels dans l'univers, que ces choses ne sont jamais que relatives aux différents états des êtres qui les éprouvent, & que tout ce qui se fait dans l'univers est nécessaire & soumis au Destin."¹⁴¹ D'Holbach argues that atheists do not deserve to be hated and exterminated, because they merely see things differently and use different terms: Nature instead of Divinity, Destiny

¹³⁹ As Alain Sandrier points out, certain aspects of d'Holbach's life charge the *Lettres* with a certain resonance. D'Holbach's first wife died in 1754, only four years after their marriage. According to some interpreters, this event was the catalyst for d'Holbach's hostility to Christianity and eventual conversion to atheism; as the story goes, his good, amiable, innocent and pious wife approached her end in terror of what awaited her, and this made him see the harm that religion caused. This is, as Sandrier notes, a very convenient explanation, based on anecdotes, that should not be adopted uncritically. It does, however, highlight the intriguing connection between d'Holbach's depiction of the unhappy religious devotee and his beloved first wife. D'Holbach's second wife, who happened to be the first's sister, is a somewhat ambiguous figure who may have been gradually developing into an "*esprit fort*" under her husband's influence. See *Le style philosophique du baron d'Holbach*, 101-107.

¹⁴⁰ Paul Henry Thiry, Baron d'Holbach, *Lettres à Eugénie ou Préservatif contre les Préjugés*, vol. 2 ('Londres' [Amsterdam], 1768), 151. "Do not be surprised, Madam, if one finds some people who dare to call into question the existence of a being that the theologians, by the force of meditating on it, have only ever managed to make it more incomprehensible, or to destroy it completely themselves."

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 154. "Neither good nor bad, neither order nor real disorder in the universe, that these things are only ever relative to the different states of beings which experience them, and that all that which occurs in the universe is necessary and subject to Destiny."

or Fate instead of God. In this section, d’Holbach represents the mere label of ‘atheist’ as sufficient to provoke irritation and fury, despite the atheist’s good motives and adherence to laws and morality; the atheist’s morality is, in fact, superior because it is based on nature.¹⁴² These passages reinforce the theme of the atheist’s estrangement and victimization by a society in the grip of irrational prejudices. They also reinforce the idea that atheists are better people than religious devotees. Eugénie is being invited to join this elite group of morally- and intellectually-superior citizens, but she is also receiving an implicit warning that if she does, she, too, will face hatred and extermination unless she conceals her true beliefs.

I shall turn now to *Système de la Nature*, d’Holbach’s atheist *magnum opus*. This infamous book was published pseudonymously in 1770 under the name of Jean-Baptiste de Mirabaud, a radical *philosophe* who had died in 1760.¹⁴³ A lengthy, proselytizing presentation of the atheist ideology and of innumerable arguments against religion,¹⁴⁴ it

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 155-163. In his 1870 translation, Middleton avoids the term ‘atheist,’ preferring ‘Freethinker’ despite d’Holbach’s use of ‘Athée.’

¹⁴³ It is necessary to note the existence of a long-running debate among scholars concerning the role of Denis Diderot in the production of *Système de la Nature*. In a nutshell, some scholars believe that Diderot was responsible for any parts of the work that reads well, especially the concluding address to Nature. Alain Sandrier addresses the evidence for Diderot’s contribution and argues that much of it is false and the rest inconclusive. Regarding the closing address to Nature, Sandrier suggests, based on a stylistic comparison between it and the *Discours Préliminaire*, that it was written by Naigeon. *Le style philosophique du baron d’Holbach*, 477-535.

¹⁴⁴ Aside from Jonathan Israel’s analysis in *Democratic Enlightenment*, about which I shall have more to say in the next chapter, and Alain Sandrier’s *Le style philosophique du baron d’Holbach*, surprisingly little has been written about the ideas expressed in *Système de la Nature*, or about any of d’Holbach’s other works. I have found the older studies by Wickwar, Cushing and Topazio, cited in chapter 1, of very limited use for my purposes. For a summary of the argumentation that focuses on d’Holbach’s (and Naigeon’s) “sensationalistic empiricism,” see Alan C. Kors, “The Atheism of d’Holbach and Naigeon,” in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, eds. Michael Hunter & David Wootton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). On the reaction to *Système de la Nature*, see esp. Mark Curran, *Atheism, Religion and Enlightenment in Pre-Revolutionary Europe* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Royal Historical Society, 2012) and Jonathan I. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 648-675 and 779-807. For other perspectives, see e.g. the essays in *Matérialistes français du XVIIIe siècle: La Mettrie, Helvetius, d’Holbach*, eds. Sophie Audidière et al. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2006) and Miguel Benitez, “Un Atelier Immense Sans Artisan Intérieur? Le Panthéisme dans *Le Système de la Nature*,” in *Le Foyer Clandestine des Lumières*.

contains the most detailed expression of atheist identity of any of the texts in the eighteenth-century atheist corpus, bringing several elements of that identity together in a purposeful construction of the virtuous atheist.

I begin my discussion of *Système de la Nature* with the *Discours Préliminaire*, which was written by d'Holbach's friend and frequent collaborator Jacques-André Naigeon (1738-1810). Like the "Avertissement" to *Lettres à Eugénie*, the *Discours* misdirects the reader, beginning with a lament that the reader will only encounter the book when its author is already dust, a remark no doubt intended to support the work's false attribution to the deceased Mirabaud.¹⁴⁵ This unfortunate state of affairs is the result of a crisis: nature, truth, and virtue are under assault, and the friend of humanity who wishes to offer instruction and remedies is forced to keep his thoughts secret by the superstition and tyranny that keep the world oppressed with their lies.¹⁴⁶ This short work hammers away relentlessly at this theme of tyranny based on the lies of religion: later in the *Discours*, Naigeon issues a call to arms in just defiance of those who oppose the progress of reason.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Naigeon's *Discours Préliminaire* was printed with only one edition of *Système de la Nature* (1770) and is now very rare. I have consulted the copy held at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Little is known about Naigeon before he became part of the circle of Diderot and d'Holbach in the mid-1760s. He became d'Holbach's collaborator, and, in the 1780s and 1790s, edited the works of Diderot and Rousseau, among other authors. He also published his own works on philosophy in the 1790s. Naigeon's relationship with the Revolution shifted: initially enthusiastic, "he turned against it over its persecution of the Roman Catholic Church and its promulgation of the deistic Cult of the Supreme Being. He was an atheist who favored the disestablishment of the Catholic Church, but with religious toleration, freedom of opinion and publication, and no revolutionary religious creed." Alan C. Kors, "Naigeon, Jacques-André," in *The Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment* v. 3, 115-116.

¹⁴⁶ Jacques-André Naigeon, *Discours Préliminaire*, in Paul Henry Thiry, Baron d'Holbach, *Système de la Nature* v. 1 ('Londres' [Amsterdam], 1770), 1.

¹⁴⁷ "Arme-toi donc, ô homme!" *Ibid.*, 12.

The most interesting aspect of this text, however, is its repeated identification of religious belief with infancy. Naigeon argues that the “two furies” of superstition and tyranny victimize humans from infancy, teaching them to become not magnanimous, virtuous citizens but useless, superstitious, immoral, ignorant, blind, and criminal devotees.¹⁴⁸ In short, religion infantilizes humans, preventing them from growing up and reaching their true potential. A proper, sensible (not religious) education, on the other hand, would benefit society by creating families of active and hard-working fathers, reasonable and tender mothers, and docile, grateful and submissive children. Spouses would be united and faithful, friends would be sincere and strong, and subjects would be zealous and courageous. The sovereign would be a visible God to his people, creating a new race of men who have left all terrors and chimeras behind.¹⁴⁹ This utopian passage could, of course, have fit into my analysis of the atheist vision of an ideal society. I have addressed it here in order to highlight the way in which Naigeon himself infantilizes religious believers and implies that atheists¹⁵⁰ have reached a new stage of human development ahead of the rest of society, which has some catching up to do. It is also noteworthy for its depiction of a future atheist family that sounds like a patriarchal dream come true — a theme that will be explored in detail in the next chapter.

Fortunately for the still-immature non-atheists, Naigeon’s call to arms is not literal; the fight is intellectual, to be conducted without hatred, injustice or cruelty. He

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

¹⁵⁰ Naigeon does not use the word ‘atheist,’ but the context of the *Discours* makes it clear that atheism is the truth which the reader is being urged to seek.

even addresses those who believe in God, urging them to be tolerant of others who have different opinions.¹⁵¹ Towards the end of the *Discours*, after a long description of “revolting” spectacles of religion around the world, Naigeon explains that the reader should bless the audacity of reason’s apostles, who are the true friends of the human race. They do not, he assures us, wish to impose their truth on anyone; they always urge others to subject their ideas to critical examination. The *philosophe* is not arrogant like the theologian or manipulative like the sophist. He wishes only to have the opportunity to persuade others of the truth, without coercion or fear.¹⁵²

The *Discours* is, of course, only the warm-up act, so to speak, for *Système de la Nature*, the core argument of which is that the source of all human unhappiness is ignorance of nature, which leads to errors and superstition, which then leads to enslavement by religion and by tyrants. In order to be happy and free, man must renounce the prejudices he learned in childhood. The purpose of the book is to explain the truth to the reader who is prepared for that renunciation; in other words, for the reader who is ready to grow up. Although d’Holbach does not say so in the preface, another of his purposes is to establish that atheists are virtuous citizens. In order to accomplish this objective, he attacks religion ceaselessly as the cause of misery and evil, transforming priests and theologians into inhuman monsters who oppress humanity. Those who remain under the spell of these monsters are slaves, blinded by enforced fear and ignorance, or children, kept afraid of the dark by those who ought to help them overcome their fear.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 10-12.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 15-16.

As in so many of the other atheist texts, the atheist is one who can see clearly and is unafraid because he possesses knowledge of the truth — in this case, knowledge of nature. D’Holbach’s atheist is also a victim of fear and persecution: “Au seul nom d’un Athée, le superstitieux frissonne, le Déiste lui-même s’allarme, le Prêtre entre un fureur, la Tyrannie prépare ses bûchers, le vulgaire applaudit aux châtimens que des loix insensées décernent contre le véritable ami du genre humain.”¹⁵³ In this statement, d’Holbach distinguishes atheists from deists, priests, tyrants and the common people, emphasizes the persecution of atheists, and claims, against the anti-atheism discourse, that the atheist is a true friend of the human race, not its enemy. The atheist is above all a *thinker* who destroys the chimeras that are harmful to the human race — or would, if the human race would let him.¹⁵⁴ His awareness that religion is the source of evil brings a responsibility to challenge it. If religion imprisons humanity within walls of ignorance, superstition and fear, it is up to the atheist to set humanity free: “Un Athée qui écrit n’est-il pas un échappé qui fournit à ceux de ses associés assez courageux pour le suivre les moyens de se soustraire aux terreurs qui les menacent?”¹⁵⁵ Once again, we see the image of the atheist as the truth-teller or parrhesiast who sets humanity free through having the courage to share the truth.

¹⁵³ Paul Henry Thiry, Baron d’Holbach, *Système de la Nature* v. 2 (‘Londres’ [Amsterdam], 1770), 323. “Merely at the name of Atheist, the superstitious man shudders, the Deist himself becomes alarmed, the Priest enters a frenzy, Tyranny prepares its pyres, the common people applaud the punishments that the insane laws decree against the true friend of the human race.”

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 323-324.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 363. “Is not an Atheist who writes an escapee who provides to those of his associates enough courage to follow the means of shielding themselves from the terrors which menace them?”

D'Holbach proceeds further to present a detailed image of the atheist as honest, virtuous, enlightened, possessed of a great mind, humane, in control of his passions, and, in general, as having overcome man's natural tendency to ignorance, fear, and lazy attachment to superstition. He distinguishes between the man drawn to irreligion by his reason and the debauched libertine who adopts an irreligious stance as a matter of lifestyle convenience.¹⁵⁶ D'Holbach's rational atheist is a male member of the privileged classes; most people are not, at present, capable of the intellectual and moral achievement that is atheism, although they may perhaps be capable of it one day. To pass from the abyss of superstition to absolute atheism requires reflection, study, a long chain of experiences, the habit of studying nature, and so on. "Pour être Athée, ou pour s'assurer des forces de la nature, il faut l'avoir méditée ... L'Athéisme, ainsi que la philosophie & toutes les sciences profondes & abstraites, n'est donc point fait pour le vulgaire, ni même pour le plus grand nombre des hommes."¹⁵⁷ Those with the abilities, resources, and leisure to engage in the necessary meditation and research must do so on behalf of the rest of society, without expecting any recognition or honour during their lifetimes.¹⁵⁸ It is rare, d'Holbach says, to find a man with the necessary combination of spirit, talent, knowledge, well-regulated imagination, and courage to successfully combat the chimeras which penetrate the mind.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 364.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 381-382. "In order to be an atheist, or to be sure of the forces of nature, it is necessary to have meditated ... Atheism is not made, therefore, for the common people, nor for the greatest number of men."

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 382.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 382-383.

The requirement of education and the leisure to contemplate nature excluded men and women who had to work for a living, as well as higher-status women who were occupied with child-rearing, household management, and pleasing their husbands rather than with philosophical studies. Women were also effectively excluded from the ranks of atheism because their physiology made them fearful and changeable, while their education (or lack thereof) made them predisposed to credulity and superstition.¹⁶⁰ This would seem to be at odds with d’Holbach’s confidence in Eugénie, but it is clear from the *Lettres* that he regarded her as unusual, “toujours fort au dessus des foiblesses de votre sexe.”¹⁶¹ She, in his view, had sufficient intellect, education and courage to grasp the truth. Evidently, d’Holbach thought most women did not, although at least some read and appreciated *Système de la Nature*, including Madame Marie-Jeanne Roland, the eminent *salonnière* of revolutionary Paris.¹⁶²

We can see why Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who attended d’Holbach’s salons, dismissed atheism as aristocratic — a view that Maximilien Robespierre used to attack his atheist political opponents during the French Revolution. For all its elitism and sexism, d’Holbach’s construction performs some important work on behalf of the atheist identity by arguing that the true atheist (unlike the debauched libertine) possesses a noble character and that an atheist society would be better than a religious society. This construction establishes a model character to which atheists can aspire. If, however, only

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 388 n. 94. D’Holbach is remarking in this note on the observation that there are very few female atheists, which he says is not surprising.

¹⁶¹ D’Holbach, *Lettres à Eugénie*, vol. 1, 1-2. “Always strong above the weaknesses of your sex.”

¹⁶² Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 666.

a select few men are capable of virtuous atheism, what of everyone else? It would seem that those who cannot renounce their childhood prejudices are doomed to perpetual infancy, which, as d'Holbach's remark about working on behalf of society suggests, means intellectual dependence on the atheists. Presumably, a rational, atheist education would mitigate the general ignorance and unhappiness of humanity, but only some will have the innate talents to lead the war against chimeras. Both women as a class and men of the labouring classes are excluded from such leadership roles, meaning that they will remain subordinate to their atheist betters. The social hierarchy is preserved, but with atheists replacing priests and tyrants at the top as wise father figures to the children who make up the rest of society.

An Atheist Against Atheists

The final text I shall discuss is *Le Mot et L'Énigme Métaphysique et Morale, appliqué à la théologie et à la philosophie et du temps, par demandes et par réponses*.

This work was written by Dom Léger-Marie Deschamps (1716-1774), a Benedictine monk who corresponded with Helvétius, Diderot, Voltaire and D'Alembert, and led a philosophical salon called the Academy of Metaphysics.¹⁶³ Deschamps is something of an outlier among the committed atheists, for he could easily be placed among the anti-atheist

¹⁶³ Bronislaw Baczek, *Utopian Lights: The Evolution of the Idea of Social Progress*, trans. Judith L. Greenberg (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 336 n. 6. Very little has been written about Deschamps. On e.g. the similarities between Deschamps' ideas and those of Diderot, see Jean Wahl, "Dom Deschamps et Diderot," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 75, 1 (1970), 47-49. Charles Rihs includes a brief discussion of Deschamps in "Utopisme des Lumières et Communautés Primitives," *Revue d'histoire économique et sociale* 52, 4 (1974), 568-576.

writers: his *Avertissement to Le Mot et L'Énigme* states explicitly that his intent is to combat atheism,¹⁶⁴ and the text argues specifically against Holbach's *Système de la Nature*. Indeed, Jonathan Israel categorizes Deschamps as an *anti-philosophe*.¹⁶⁵ However, Deschamps describes his own radical, idiosyncratic views as “enlightened atheism” and suggests that he is an atheist who fights atheists.¹⁶⁶ He is, therefore, an intriguing example of an individual who felt alienated in some sense not only from his society — Deschamps argued that the current social order had to be destroyed in order to achieve a truly moral society — but also from other atheists. I shall discuss Deschamps' anarchist vision of the ideal society in detail in the following chapter; for now, I shall focus on how, despite his disagreement with other atheists, he expresses the same kind of identity.

Like other atheists, Deschamps guarded his ideas and identity: he published only two works in his lifetime, one of them being a version of *Le Mot et L'Énigme* minus the most dangerous passages. Both pamphlets were published anonymously, and were virtually unknown to contemporaries. Deschamps' works were consigned to oblivion until they were rediscovered in the late nineteenth century by E. Beaussire, in the

¹⁶⁴ Léger-Marie Deschamps, *Le Mot et L'Énigme Métaphysique et Morale, appliqué à la théologie et à la philosophie et du temps, par demandes et par réponses*, in *Oeuvres Philosophiques*, vol. 1, ed. Bernard Delhaume (Paris: J. Vrin, 1993), 183.

¹⁶⁵ *Democratic Enlightenment*, 660.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 241 n. x.

archives of the Municipal Library of Poitiers.¹⁶⁷ He was not isolated from intellectual society; as noted above, he led a philosophical salon, which was held at the Marquis d'Argenson's château at Ormes. The Marquis put him in contact with Diderot and with other major figures of the period, including Talleyrand and Dumouriez.¹⁶⁸

Despite his privileged position, Deschamps regarded his own society as corrupt and incapable of producing true morality and happiness. According to Deschamps, humans had progressed from a savage state to a state of laws, or a kind of police state that was violent and enslaved its members. The next stage of development was the state of natural moral law; this state had never existed, and could only come into being when humans understood the metaphysical truth.¹⁶⁹ Neither orthodox religion, natural religion (deism), nor atheism could produce the state of natural moral law, because none of them were based on the metaphysical truth of *Le Tout*, by which Deschamps meant a fundamental unity of all parts of the whole of existence within the whole of existence.¹⁷⁰ His sense of estrangement from society is evident in his view of the world as suffused with moral evil, the only remedy for which was to destroy the existing structures of church and state in order to live in anarchist communes.

¹⁶⁷ Bernard Delhaume, "Introduction," *Oeuvres Philosophiques*, *op. cit.*, 22; Baczko, *Utopian Lights*, 73. The two published pamphlets were *Les lettres sur l'esprit de siècle* (1769) and *La voix de la raison contre la raison du temps et particulièrement contre celle de l'auteur du Système de la Nature, par demandes et réponses* (1770). Deschamps' major work, if he could be said to have one, is *Le Vrai Système*, which I shall discuss in the next chapter. Delhaume notes (21) that Deschamps revised his works until the end of his life, which makes it impossible to determine exactly when he composed them. Since d'Holbach's *Système de la Nature* was published in 1770, those texts which critique it were obviously composed in or after that year.

¹⁶⁸ Baczko, *Utopian Lights*, 336 n. 6.

¹⁶⁹ Deschamps, *Le Mot et L'Énigme*, 183-184.

¹⁷⁰ Deschamps' metaphysical system is decidedly abstruse. Baczko describes it as a materialistic mysticism, in which the individual must seek annihilation through fusion with the absolute of all material bodies (*Utopian Lights*, 108). Like Spinoza, Deschamps could also be classified as a pantheist.

Deschamps' conflict with other atheists such as d'Holbach was that they did not go far enough in their attacks on religion and society. He condemns the author of *Système de la Nature* (he did not know this was d'Holbach) and all preceding atheists as lacking both moral and metaphysical principles. Despite d'Holbach's moralistic maxims and rationales, he has no moral basis other than a violent antagonism to religion as the cause of evil in men. According to Deschamps, d'Holbach and other atheists seek to destroy religion, but fail to establish any new basis for morality; in effect, they leave the structural causes of violence, enslavement and moral evil in place. *Système de la Nature* is dangerous because it was written not only for a few honest souls, but for the public. Now d'Holbach's ideas are available to the *malhonnêtes* and *honnêtes* alike, with the former outnumbering the latter by twenty to one. Young people, too, can read this dangerous book. Deschamps rejects completely the idea that *Système de la Nature* was written in good faith as an attempt to improve society's morals, for its author could hardly have believed that it would have a positive effect in a society that is so corrupt. The motive for publishing this book could only have been personal interest.¹⁷¹

Deschamps also argues that d'Holbach and other atheists are deceiving themselves when they say that the principles of atheism are not for the ambitious, for schemers, or for restless souls, because the atheist code lacks moral and metaphysical principles. Further, he suggests that these men (he uses the word *messieurs*) believe themselves to be without religion but cannot, in fact, ever completely eradicate it from their hearts because it was a religious education that turned them into *honnêtes*

¹⁷¹ Deschamps, *Le Mot et L'Énigme*, 215-216.

hommes.¹⁷² This critique does not dehumanize atheists — they are not monsters, madmen or beasts — but it does undermine their claims to moral authority based on possession of the truth. Deschamps presents atheists as self-deluded fools and hypocrites who can only make the moral evil of society worse because they do *not* possess the necessary metaphysical truth. Deschamps, of course, claims that *he* possesses that truth, which makes him superior to everyone, including those atheists who are only semi-enlightened.

Deschamps' attack on other atheists denies identification with them, but, at the same time, expresses many of the same elements of identity that they express. He sees himself as the sole possessor of the truth and feels the need to share that truth while protecting his anonymity; he positions himself as a guardian of morals; and he has a low opinion of most members of society. Only a few people, it would seem, are capable of understanding the metaphysical truth required for the next stage of human development, but Deschamps has discovered it — which would make him the prophet or even the father of the new society.

Conclusion

The examples discussed in this chapter show that atheist texts, ranging from the cobbled-together *Traité des Trois Imposteurs* to the radical critique *Le Mot et L'Énigme*, consistently express the three main elements of an atheist identity. First, the texts express a sense of estrangement: atheists are described as unjustly repressed, feared and

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 218-219.

persecuted, and they believe society must change. Second, the texts demonstrate that atheists believed they were better than other people, not only because they were able to see the truth, but also because they were morally superior citizens. Third, they represent atheists as seekers of the truth, obliged by a sense of duty to share the truth they have found, even if only with like-minded others. For the most part, these texts express the view that the majority of people are incapable of understanding either philosophy in general or atheism in particular. Some regard this as a reason to withhold the truth from the masses, while others treat this as a reason for wider dissemination, since the masses will not even understand the texts. All contest the idea that atheists are dangerous to society, on the grounds that they are rational thinkers and more likely to be virtuous and useful members of society than religious believers, who are prone to fanaticism and prejudices. These texts thus construct a positive image of atheists in order to counteract the fear and hostility that causes society to repress them.

The texts also reveal certain tensions between the desire to tell the truth and the need to protect oneself against the risks of expressing atheist ideas. In Foucault's terms, each text is a site of resistance to repression that strives toward *parrhesia* but, in most cases, does not quite attain it because the author conceals his identity and thus mitigates the inherent risk of veridiction. The key element of the atheist identity is, in fact, the pursuit of the truth — not so much the denial of the existence of God, but the seeking-out of the truth that led to that denial. Once the truth has been discovered, the atheist cannot help but see him- (or her-) self as a member of a superior minority surrounded by those who are either blind to the truth or cynical servants of the grand lie that is religion. While

Alain Sandrier is correct to point out d'Holbach's particular commitment to an exoteric style, it must be said that most of the texts examined in this chapter do not require much, if any, reading between the lines; with the exception of Deschamps' *Le Mot et L'Énigme*, the atheism is always more or less on the surface, and even Deschamps calls himself an atheist. The secretiveness is in the 'game-playing' that Sandrier has identified as a characteristic feature of anti-religious proselytizing, as well as in the elitism evident in many of the texts.

This chapter has also demonstrated the ways in which gender and class shape the atheist identity expressed in these texts. In several works, including the *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, La Mettrie's *Discours Preliminaire* and d'Holbach's *Système de la Nature*, the atheist is a male figure who exemplifies certain masculine qualities of strength, boldness, courage, rationality and self-control. These are, however, intellectual qualities; the atheist is a writer, not a fighter. This image is modified in various ways throughout the corpus of atheist texts. D'Holbach, for example, emphasizes prudence if one wishes to publish daring books. Consistently, however, the texts delineate an elite masculine atheist space that allows little room for women or for men who are not part of the elite social class. The exclusiveness of the atheist identity marginalizes those who are not perceived to share it, regarding them, often explicitly, as children. Such characterizations constitute claims to paternal moral authority over the rest of society.

When we consider the emphasis that atheist writers placed on their difference from others, combined with what can seem to be arrogance about their own qualities, it is noteworthy that so many of them also described themselves as exemplars of polite,

peaceable sociability. This is, perhaps, the contradiction at the heart of the atheist identity that allowed them to plead their case for acceptance instead of engaging in violent resistance against those who repressed them. For the most part, the atheist writers internalized the imaginary significations of their society, including amiability, sensibility, and sociability. Despite their constant assertions of difference, they were, in many ways, entirely typical men of elite eighteenth-century French society.

The emergence of atheists who not only asserted their existence but also claimed moral authority over the rest of society was a significant moment in the history of atheism; however, its immediate impact should not be overstated. While the atheists of the pre-revolutionary eighteenth century certainly inspired at least some individuals, such as the aristocratic revolutionary Cloots, there was no sudden wave of tolerance for atheism, and the brief alliance of atheism and revolution ended with a renewed attack on atheists as enemies of humanity. Finally, there are dark undertones to the atheist identity as it formed in this period that should not be ignored: as sympathetic as one might be to the atheists' desire for freedom of thought and expression, we should not romanticize a group that so consistently expressed contempt for those who reject its version of truth.

CHAPTER 4

LIVING IN A MATERIAL WORLD: ATHEIST IDEOLOGY

Overview

If, as the atheists argued, there was no divinity and religion was an oppressive lie, how were humans to achieve happiness and social order? Could moral behaviour be inculcated and maintained throughout an entire society without religion? What would such a society look like? Although nearly all of the atheist texts of the eighteenth century address the benefits of knowing the truth for the enlightened individual, and, as the previous chapter showed, argue that atheists were moral and virtuous members of society, only a few deal directly with these questions, doing so in markedly different ways despite sharing the core concept of the materiality of the world. This chapter examines these attempts to change the social imaginary, focusing on the works of Jean Meslier, Julian Offray de La Mettrie, Baron d'Holbach and Dom Deschamps. These writers presented visions of ideal societies, based on the core concepts of the materiality of the world, the necessity of organizing societies rationally in accordance with nature's laws, and the subordination of individuality to the common good and social or moral order. As

discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation, these core concepts constitute an ideology, or shared system of beliefs regarding the ideal arrangement of society.

In contrast with the expressions of identity that I addressed in the previous chapter, the moral and political views of eighteenth-century atheists have received more scholarly attention, although there are still very few useful, sustained analyses of these writers and their works. An important recent contribution is Jonathan Israel's claim that it was the philosophy of the radical Enlightenment that caused the French Revolution, by changing the way people thought: "nothing about the French Revolution as a general renewal of law, legislation, and society, or its causes, can be understood without beginning with the philosophical controversies raging before, during, and after all its main stages."¹ The diffusion of radical philosophy in the eighteenth century transformed "the public outlook" and taught the public "to examine questions of government and politics."²

The Baron d'Holbach and his fellow "conspirators," Diderot and Helvétius, are the heroes of Israel's account, having set out, along with the rest of the radical Enlightenment, to "revolutionize human existence by changing men's ideas."³ This is a good description of what atheists and at least some of the other *philosophes* were attempting to achieve; it is another way of saying that they were trying to transform the social imaginary. However, Israel's enthusiasm for d'Holbach and the other *philosophes*

¹ Jonathan I. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750-1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 784.

² *Ibid.*, 775.

³ *Ibid.*, 27. On the revolutionary conspiracy, see p. 131.

he categorizes as radicals leads to uncritical readings of their works. In his eyes, they are all democratic republicans committed to universal truth and human rights — the same universal truth and human rights that he believes everyone has a duty to defend “not just against Foucault and Postmodernist philosophy but also against the exponents of historiographical theories and approaches focusing attention on sociability, ambiguities, and ‘spaces’ rather than real basic ideas interacting with real social context.”⁴

As valuable as Israel’s work is for drawing attention to an important set of texts, the atheist works, including d’Holbach’s, are not straightforward statements of democratic republicanism. Meslier’s and Deschamps’ ideal societies were anarchist communes, La Mettrie was in favour at most of educational reform, and d’Holbach’s ideal society was not as democratic or different as Israel implies. Further, and again *contra* Israel, I argue in this chapter that the ideology of atheism, as expressed by these four figures, contained a totalizing aspect in which the ideal societies they imagined subordinated individuality to the rationalized and naturalized good of the whole. As in the previous chapter, my aim is not to attack the atheist writers for their views, but to look closely at what those views were and how they were constructed. To paraphrase Michel Foucault, I do not feel one needs to be for or against the atheists in order to try to understand them.⁵ Moreover, I have avoided making connections between the atheist writings and the French Revolution. Israel makes a persuasive case for the probable influence of radical philosophy on making revolution a possibility; however, his aims of

⁴ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

⁵ Michel Foucault, *What Is Enlightenment?* in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 43.

defending the (radical) Enlightenment against all suggestions that it may have had a dark side, and of upholding the secular values of modernity, limit the value of his analysis. A less teleological approach is necessary in order to recognize the tensions, contradictions and, indeed, ambiguities of the ways in which atheists constructed their ideology.

Before presenting my analyses of atheists' ideas about happiness, morality and social order, I shall discuss the atheist understanding(s) of nature and matter. This is necessary in order to grasp the connections between the core concepts of atheist ideology. A materialist understanding of nature was the primary core concept of eighteenth-century atheism and the foundation of atheist ideas about happiness, morality and social order. The central elements were materialism, mechanism and vitalism, separate philosophies that intertwined in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to form several different theories that intersected numerous fields of thought, including but not limited to theology, physics and medicine. Atheist texts frequently combine materialism, mechanism and vitalism as they imagine an active, self-governing nature that creates and maintains all existence. As I shall discuss below, this active nature was gendered female, but not emphatically so; there is an implicit suggestion that nature is maternal, but the focus of atheist naturalism is primarily on the physical human machine and its drives. Anything that interferes with those drives, such as religion, is harmful.

Atheist ideology privileges nature and the natural, and constructs visions of ideal societies around the core concept that nature, whose mechanisms are only properly understood by rational (atheist) men, is the arbiter of what is right. This has some beneficial (from our perspective) outcomes, such as a positive attitude toward sex and

recognition that the inability to escape unhappy marriages is damaging to women. On the other hand, privileging nature and reason as the foundations of society also leads to essentialism and an inability to accommodate other truths. The atheist societies were ideal for the elite men who would lead them, but less so, perhaps, for everyone else, whose roles would be determined by the paternal figures who determined what was natural and reasonable, and what was not.

Core Concept: A Material World

The fundamental theory of materialism, a philosophy associated with atheism since antiquity, is that everything in the universe is composed of particles of matter in motion. This theory rejects the possibility of immaterial substances or beings, and thus challenges the existence of spirits, the soul, and God or gods. The theory also explains, or purports to explain, that the world came into existence without the intervention of a creator. Materialism may, as Frederick Albert Lange suggested, be “as old as philosophy,”⁶ but its early development in the form of atomism is usually credited to Democritus and Epicurus.

To simplify the history of this philosophy greatly, atomist materialism was transmitted to early modern Europeans primarily through Lucretius’s *De rerum natura*

⁶ Frederick Albert Lange, *History of Materialism and Criticism of its Present Importance* vol. 1, trans. Ernest Chester Thomas (New York: Arno Press, 1974 [1879]), 3.

and Gassendi's seventeenth-century synthesis of Epicureanism with Christianity.⁷ Its most notorious proponent in early modern Europe was Thomas Hobbes, who argued in *Leviathan* that since there could be no incorporeal substances, God had to be a corporeal substance — an argument that, as Hobbes's seventeenth- and eighteenth-century readers understood, had atheistic implications even if Hobbes denied that he was an atheist.⁸ Spinoza's thesis that there was only one substance in the universe was also regarded as atheistic, because it too made God a material being.⁹ Despite the claims of their opponents, not all materialists were atheists: many, such as Robert Boyle, argued that although everything in nature is material, that matter was created by God.¹⁰ Boyle, in fact, established a series of annual public lectures in defence of Christianity; the first series, delivered by Richard Bentley in 1692, was a set of eight sermons against atheism.¹¹ As noted in chapter 1, Helvétius, whose books *L'Esprit* and *De L'Homme* present some of the strongest statements of materialism in the period, still referred to

⁷ See e.g. J.S. Spink, *French Free-Thought from Gassendi to Voltaire* (London: Athlone Press, 1960), 85-168; Claudia Stancati de Santis, "Les sources de l'idée de matière et d'infinité du monde dans quelques traités clandestins," in *La Philosophie clandestine à l'Age classique*, eds. Antony McKenna & Alain Mothu (Paris: Voltaire Foundation, 1997), 433-439.

⁸ See e.g. Samuel I. Mintz, *The Hunting of Leviathan: Seventeenth-Century Reactions to the Materialism and Moral Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962) and Jon Parkin, "The Reception of Hobbes's *Leviathan*," *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes's Leviathan*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁹ See e.g. Pierre-François Moreau, "Spinoza's reception and influence," in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Don Garrett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹⁰ In e.g. *A Free Enquiry into the Vulgarly Received Notion of Nature*, ed. Edward B. Davis & Michael Hunter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). See also John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 117-191, for discussions of the relationship between concepts of divinity and mechanical universe, as well as science and religion in the Enlightenment.

¹¹ The Boyle lectures were revived in 2004. For an overview and commentary, see Alister McGrath, "A Blast from the Past? The Boyle Lectures and Natural Theology," *Science and Christian Belief* 17, 1 (April 2005): 25-33. Bentley's lectures are available in *Eight Boyle Lectures on Atheism* (New York: Garland, 1976).

God's will. Materialism of some sort seems to have been necessary to atheism (that is, to the philosophical variety of atheism discussed in this dissertation), since there would otherwise be no explanation for the existence of the world and the things in it. Yves Charles Zarka has described the eighteenth century as a golden age for French materialism, which helps explain, perhaps, the surge of published atheist works.¹²

Materialism raised several problems. According to Rob Illiffe, "the nature of matter was perhaps the most keenly contested issue in eighteenth-century natural philosophy, and ontological positions were deeply entangled in epistemological, metaphysical, and confessional commitments." The primary question was whether matter was inert until acted upon by an external force, or whether "activity was essential and inherent to matter." The view that matter contained an inherent active principle could lead to materialist and atheist systems of thought in which "the mere organization of matter gave rise to emergent properties such as consciousness and that there was thus no need to posit a dualism of spirit and matter," or to maintain that God was active in the world or even existed. The opposing view, that "matter was essentially lifeless but had had other properties superadded to it ... allowed a providentialist conception of God's activity in the world, but there was then the difficulty that the building blocks of the universe seemed to enjoy an existence independent of God."¹³ John Locke's remark in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, that God could have superadded properties to matter, such as

¹² Yves Charles Zarka, "Préface: Les deux voies du matérialisme," in *Matérialistes français du XVIIIe siècle: La Mettrie, Helvétius, d'Holbach*, eds. Sophie Audidière, Jean-Claude Bourdin, Jean-Marie Lardic, Francine Markovits, & Yves Charles Zarka (Paris: Presses Universitaire de France, 2006), vii.

¹³ Rob Illiffe, "Philosophy of Science," in *The Cambridge History of Science. Vol. 4: Eighteenth-Century Science*, ed. Roy Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 275.

thought, sparked a contentious debate in both England and France over ‘thinking matter.’¹⁴

It was unclear how consciousness could arise from matter if there was no immaterial and immortal soul; further, if there was no soul, and consciousness was merely an effect caused by the motion of particles of matter, did humans possess free will?¹⁵ The problem of free will was, and still is, “related to a cluster of philosophical issues” that it is worthwhile outlining in order to appreciate the complexity and high stakes of this still-relevant discourse:

moral agency and responsibility, dignity, desert, accountability, and blameworthiness ... the nature and limits of human freedom, autonomy, coercion, and control ... compulsion, addiction, self-control, self-deception, and weakness of will ... criminal liability, responsibility, and punishment ... the relation of mind to body, consciousness, the nature of action, and personhood ... the nature of rationality and rational choice ... questions about divine foreknowledge, predestination, evil, and human freedom ... and general metaphysical issues about necessity and probability, determinism, time and chance, quantum reality, laws of nature, causality, and explanation.¹⁶

For obvious reasons, I am not going to attempt to describe atheist views on all of these issues, but it is important to be aware of the discursive reverberations of statements related to a materialist conception of the world.

¹⁴ For detailed analysis of these debates, see e.g. John W. Yolton, *Locke and French Materialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) and *Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). I agree with Yolton’s argument in *Locke and French Materialism* that Locke did not in fact believe in thinking matter and was not pursuing a hidden materialist agenda (39).

¹⁵ On the problems raised by materialism, see e.g. Jonathan Kramnick, “Living with Lucretius,” in *Vital Matters: Eighteenth-Century Views of Conception, Life, and Death*, eds. Helen Deutsch & Mary Terrall (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012); on the debate over the soul, see esp. Ann Thomson, *Bodies of Thought: Science, Religion, and the Soul in the Early Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁶ Robert Kane, “Introduction: The Contours of Contemporary Free-Will Debates (Part 2),” in *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, 2nd. ed., ed. Robert Kane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3-4.

Turning now to mechanism, the essence of this philosophy in the Enlightenment was the attempt to establish “a comprehensive system of measure and order, a universal *mathesis* ... a mathematical description of reality was seen as the way to escape the perceived horrors of contingent – and hence, unsure – knowledge.” Nature was systematized and objectified, described as operating according to fixed laws of motion and causation,¹⁷ and matter itself was “streamlined and simplified ... defined as homogeneous, extended, hard, impenetrable, movable, and inert.”¹⁸

Encouraged by familiarity and fascination with clockwork mechanisms and with automata, such as those of the engineer Jacques Vaucanson, the machine was a common metaphor in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, used to describe animals, the human body, human labour, the workings of the state, and natural processes.¹⁹ As Minsoo Kang points out, even erotic literature, such as John Cleland’s mid-century novel *Fanny Hill* and the works of the Marquis de Sade, incorporated mechanism by describing

¹⁷ Peter Hanns Reill, “The Legacy of the ‘Scientific Revolution’: Science and the Enlightenment,” in *The Cambridge History of Science. Vol. 4: Eighteenth-Century Science*, ed. Roy Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 26-27. Reill suggests that the mechanistic movement was driven by a desire to re-establish uniformity, regularity and certainty in the wake of the seventeenth-century crises (25).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁹ See e.g. Minsoo Kang, *Sublime Dreams of Living Machines: The Automaton in the European Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); Otto Mayr, *Authority, Liberty & Automatic Machinery in Early Modern Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Allison Muri, *The Enlightenment Cyborg: A History of Communications and Control in the Human Machine 1660-1830* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007); Jessica Riskin, “Mr. Machine and the imperial me,” in *The Super-Enlightenment: Daring to Know Too Much*, ed. Dan Edelstein (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2010); and Simon Schaffer, “Enlightened Automata,” in *The Sciences in Enlightened Europe*, eds. William Clark, Jan Golinski, & Simon Schaffer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999): 126-165.

characters' sexual bodies as machines.²⁰ Kang also argues that the machine analogy tended initially to carry a positive meaning, with classical mechanists celebrating the natural body, for instance, as a “beautiful, intricate, and well-functioning” creation of God.²¹ In the later part of the eighteenth century, however, the machine was being associated negatively with “tyranny, inequity and static hierarchy,” as a result, Kang suggests, of increasing interest in radical ideas among the middle classes alienated by the wars and crises of the century.²²

Allison Muri also highlights the political resonances of the machine, drawing a close parallel between modern images of cybernetic organisms, or cyborgs, and the “early modern tropes for the human-machine,”²³ suggesting that

much as the cyborg construct of networked human machine represents the health or sickness of a political-social body for cultural theorists today, the man-machine in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was figured as a communications

²⁰ Kang, *Sublime Dreams of Living Machines*, 138 and 165-166. Kang observes that in Sade's works “the sadomasochistic enterprise works precisely because the vital body is treated like the machine that it is *not*.” On other links between materialism, mechanism and pornography, see Margaret C. Jacob, “The Materialist World of Pornography,” in *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800*, ed. Lynn Hunt (New York: Zone, 1993).

²¹ Kang, *Sublime Dreams of Living Machines*, 131.

²² *Ibid.*, 154-155. Peter Hans Reill makes a similar argument in “The Legacy of the ‘Scientific Revolution,’” 28-29. Our modern relationship with machines is deeply ambivalent. Machines are essential to our lives, but no one wants to be treated as a mere machine without feelings. Marx famously railed against the reductive instrumentalization of the worker, and the fictional genres of science fiction and horror have dealt frequently with the uncanniness of the sentient machine that can pass as human; the recent film *Ex Machina*, directed by Alex Garland (2015) is a particularly successful treatment of this theme. In a powerful essay, Judith Butler has suggested that the frames of modern war transforms humans into mechanisms of war. On the justifications of attacks on Palestinians supposedly using children as human shields, she writes: “We are asked to believe that those children are not really children, are not really alive, that they have already been turned to metal, to steel, that they belong to the machinery of bombardment, at which point the body of the child is conceived as nothing more than a militarized metal that protects the attacker against attack.” *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2010), xxvii.

²³ Allison Muri, “Enlightenment Cybernetics: Communications and Control in the Man-Machine,” *The Eighteenth Century*, 49, no. 2 (2008): 142.

system that represented the governance of the social and commercial hierarchies of the nation.²⁴

Muri's reading of various early modern authors, including La Mettrie, illuminates the implications of the man-machine for the body politic, particularly its levelling effect of making all men essentially the same. Curiously, however, she says almost nothing about the man-machine's implications for religion, other than to remark that La Mettrie turned learning and morality into mechanical processes. To Muri, what made La Mettrie's work "so dangerous to the body politic" was the lack of a "steersman in the brain controlling the body's movements." Muri does not make the connection explicit, but she seems to be suggesting that a conception of the human body working without a "steersman" was anarchic.²⁵

Mechanism did not necessarily lead to atheism. As Minsoo Kang explains, "most classical mechanists were dualists who affirmed that the soul and the body were entities of different essences, the former being immaterial and transcendent, the latter material and mechanical ... as dualists, [they] tended to restrict mechanistic descriptions to the body, excluding the soul."²⁶ Descartes, for instance, argued that the laws of nature were established by God: "He established the laws of nature and gave nature the help to act as it usually acts, we may believe, without casting doubt upon the miracle of creation, that

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 159.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 158. I do not disagree with Muri's analysis of the connection between the man-machine and concepts of governance; however, leaving out the religious implications misses the vital connection between religion and socio-political order and ignores the intent of La Mettrie and other writers, such as Meslier and d'Holbach, who used universal mechanism and/or the image of the man-machine to subtract God from the universe. Muri has not only failed to comprehend fully the actors' categories, she has also imposed a modern view of cybernetics that does not take religion into account. This is a fatal flaw in any analysis of early modern science and philosophy.

²⁶ Kang, *Sublime Dreams of Living Machines*, 131.

all purely material things would have been able, in time, to make themselves into what we see them to be at present in this way alone.”²⁷ It was, however, possible to extend mechanism in dangerous directions by combining it with single-substance materialism to argue that the mind and/or soul were also material and thus part of the machine-body or, alternatively, that there was no such thing as a soul at all. Atheist writers would take precisely this step by subtracting God from nature entirely while adopting the mechanical view of the universe presented in the works of Descartes, Newton and Harvey, among others.

La Mettrie was the most infamous proponent of the ‘dangerous’ view that humans are machines without souls.²⁸ In *L’Homme machine*, La Mettrie wastes little time before stating unequivocally that “l’homme est une Machine si composée, qu’il est impossible de s’en faire d’abord une idée claire, & conséquemment de la définir.”²⁹ He seems to mean here that we cannot understand the human machine from the outside; it is necessary to rely on experience and observation. The soul and body are not, however, truly separate, because the body affects the soul. For example, La Mettrie says that

²⁷ René Descartes, *A Discourse on the Method of Correctly Conducting One’s Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, trans. Ian Maclean (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 38.

²⁸ For detailed discussions of various aspects of La Mettrie’s materialism not covered in my analysis, see e.g. Günther Mensching, “L’esprit dans l’oeuvre de La Mettrie,” in *Matérialistes français du XVIIIe siècle: La Mettrie, Helvétius, d’Holbach*, eds. Sophie Audidière, Jean-Claude Bourdin, Jean-Marie Lardic, Francine Markovits, & Yves Charles Zarka (Paris: Presses Universitaire de France, 2006); and Francine Markovits, “La Mettrie et le thème de l’histoire naturelle de l’homme,” in *Matérialistes français du XVIIIe siècle: La Mettrie, Helvétius, d’Holbach*, eds. Sophie Audidière, Jean-Claude Bourdin, Jean-Marie Lardic, Francine Markovits, & Yves Charles Zarka (Paris: Presses Universitaire de France, 2006).

²⁹ Aram Vartanian, ed. *La Mettrie’s L’Homme Machine: A Study in the Origins of an Idea*, critical ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 151. “Man is a machine constructed in such a way that it is impossible first of all to have a clear idea of it and consequently to define it.” Trans. Ann Thomson, *Machine Man and Other Writings*, 5.

L’Ame & le Corps s’endorment ensemble. A mesure que le mouvement de sang se calme, un doux sentiment de paix & de tranquillité se répand dans toute la Machine; l’Ame se sent mollement s’appesantir avec les paupières & s’affaisser avec les fibres du cerveau: elle devient ainsi peu à peu comme paralitique, avec tous les muscles du corps. Ceux-ci ne peuvent plus porter le poids de la tête; celle-là ne peut plus soutenir le fardeau de la pensée; elle est dans le Sommeil, comme n’étant point.³⁰

The soul is the mind; later in the work, La Mettrie says “l’Ame n’est donc qu’un vain terme dont on n’a point d’idée, & dont un bon Esprit ne doit se servir que pour nommer la partie qui pense en nous.”³¹ In another example of the soul’s dependence on the body, La Mettrie explains that “le corps humain est une Machine qui monte elle-même ses ressorts; vivante image du mouvement perpetuel.” Food fuels the machine and the soul: if you feed the body with vigorous sugars and strong liquors, then the soul becomes generous and courageous.³² After some other examples, La Mettrie concludes that “Les divers Etats de l’Ame sont donc toujours corrélatifs à ceux du corps” – and then suggests using comparative anatomy to prove the point by opening up the entrails of humans and animals.³³

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 153. “The body and the soul fall asleep together. As the blood’s movement is calmed, a sweet feeling of peace and calm spreads throughout the machine. The soul feels itself lazily becoming heavy together with the eyelids, and relaxing together with the brain fibres. It thus slowly becomes as if paralysed, together with all the body’s muscles. They can no longer hold up the weight of their head, while the soul can no longer bear the burden of thought. When it is asleep, it is as if it did not exist.” Trans. Thomson, *op. cit.*, 6.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 180. “Thus the soul is merely a vain term of which we have no idea and which a good mind should use only to refer to that part of us which thinks.” Trans. Thomson, 26.

³² *Ibid.*, 154. “The human body is a machine which winds itself up, a living picture of perpetual motion.” Trans. Thomson, 7.

³³ *Ibid.*, 158. “The different states of the soul are thus always related to those of the body.” Trans. Thomson, 9.

La Mettrie's main concern in *L'Homme Machine* is to show that humans are the same as animals. He uses Descartes' concept of the animal-machine, but then extends it to humans, even suggesting that despite all of our prerogatives over animals, to put us in the same class as them is to do us an honour. Animals are born with stronger and better survival instincts than children are; it is only education that elevates humans above animals.³⁴ Humans are simply "des Machines perpendiculairement rampantes."³⁵ As I shall discuss later in the chapter, this idea lays the groundwork for La Mettrie's arguments about morality.

D'Holbach's *Système de la Nature* also illustrates the merging of materialism and mechanism. D'Holbach argues that the universe consists only of matter and continuous motion. Everything that exists consists of matter only, not matter and spirit. An essential aspect of d'Holbach's universe is that the continuous motion of matter is caused by nature itself, by forces internal to matter, such as gravity, not by any supernatural source.³⁶ God is rendered entirely superfluous, indeed impossible, in a purely material, mechanical universe; for if nothing can exist that is not matter, then God must be matter, in which case God is not God, that is, not the God of spirit that the theologians describe.

Like La Mettrie, D'Holbach argues that humans and animals are essentially the same in that they are purely material beings. D'Holbach considers humans to be in a class

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 192. "Vertically crawling machines."

³⁶ Baron Paul Henry Thiry d'Holbach, *Système de la Nature*. 2 vols. ('Londres' [Amsterdam], 1770), v. 1, ch. 2. D'Holbach refers specifically to Newton on gravitation, but this is also a Lucretian idea.

by themselves above the other animals because the manner of his physical organization gives them certain abilities that other beings do not have.³⁷ Neither humans nor animals, however, possess immaterial souls. The soul is part of the body; it is material, subject to the same laws of nature as every other being. The soul is born with the body, grows with it, and perishes with it. D’Holbach explains that the concept of the soul arose because man felt within himself a hidden force that invisibly directed his machine, that is, his body. He therefore supposed that he was a dual being, mistaking the mind for something immaterial.³⁸

D’Holbach describes living beings as machines at numerous points. For example, in an earlier discussion of the two types of motion to which all beings are subject – external motion of the entire body from one place to another and internal, concealed motion that one is unaware of but which produces effects – d’Holbach writes that man is an extremely complex machine that contains hidden springs that put it into motion.³⁹ Here he uses the word “machine” to mean both something that man *is* and something that he possesses. D’Holbach conceives of two types of machines. All beings are machines, but some are insensible, or “mere” machines, while others are sentient; however, this difference between sentient and non-sentient machines is only a function of the degree of complexity in a being’s organization. All beings are made the same way, through the motion of matter, and all end the same way, with the dissolution of the body and the soul.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, v. 1, ch. 13, esp. 257-259.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, ch. 6, 76-77.

D'Holbach explains that a living being (an 'organized being') can be compared to a clock, which, once broken, is no longer suitable for its designed use. The soul, which requires the body's organs in order to feel, think, suffer pain, feel pleasure, or even be aware of its own existence, cannot continue to exist after the destruction of the body.⁴⁰ This conviction that the soul is mortal, and dies when the body dies, is crucial to d'Holbach's argument against religion. In a meditation based on Lucretius's discussion of death and the fear of dying, d'Holbach suggests that it is man's uncertainty of what happens to the soul after the body's death that causes fear. If men could accept that "mourir, c'est cesser de penser & de sentir, de jouir & de souffrir," there would be no need to fear death.⁴¹ Death is to sleep in a state of insensibility; there are no dreams, and we are unconscious of what is happening to our bodies. The natural law of necessity which caused us to be born and to die will return our bodies to nature, in order to constitute some new being, of which we will never know. Man is not exempt from the laws of nature which decree that all things perish, change and are destroyed. Man's machine is so frail, so complicated and so mobile, that if the earth can experience change and even be destroyed, if even comets and planets are subject to death, then it is foolish to believe that men are not subject to the same laws. Accepting the inevitability and finality of death allows one to die without fear, content in the knowledge that death is part of the unceasing motion of the universe.⁴²

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, ch. 13, 262.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 266. "To die is the end of thought and feeling, of pleasure and suffering."

⁴² *Ibid.*, 268.

Jean Meslier's *Mémoire* demonstrates further the complex relationship between atheism, materialism and mechanism. In contrast to La Mettrie and d'Holbach, Meslier does not describe human beings as machines. His first reference to machines appears in a discussion of animal sacrifice. He argues that sacrifices are cruel and barbaric because animals "sont sensibles au mal et à la douleur aussi bien que nous, malgré ce qu'en disent vainement, faussement, et ridiculement nos nouveaux cartesiens." These new Cartesians think that animals are pure machines without souls or feelings, which encourages cruelty and pleasure in inflicting pain.⁴³

Meslier is responding to the Cartesian idea that animals' lack of language and unconscious, that is, unreasoning, actions, showed that they do not possess rational souls: "they have no mental powers whatsoever ... it is their nature which acts in them, according to the disposition of their organs; just as we see that a clock consisting only of ropes and springs can count the hours and measure time more accurately than we can in spite of all our *wisdom*." Without mental powers, they cannot possess rational souls. To attribute souls to animals would suggest that "we have nothing more to fear or hope for after this present life, any more than flies and ants."⁴⁴ The basis for this argument was animals' lack of language. Meslier attacks this argument on the grounds that it could be used to classify other peoples, such as the Iroquois, Japanese, or even Spaniards and

⁴³ Jean Meslier, *Mémoire des Pensées et Sentiments*, in *Oeuvres Complètes de Jean Meslier*, ed. Roland Desné (Paris: Editions Anthropos, 1970), v. 1, ch. 22, 215-216. "Are as sensitive to injury and pain as we are, despite that which our new Cartesians vainly, falsely and ridiculously say." For detailed analyses of the philosophical connections between animal-machines and human machines, see Leonora Cohen Rosenfield, *From Beast-Machine to Man-Machine: Animal Soul in French Letters from Descartes to La Mettrie* (New York: Octagon Books, 1968); Thomson, *Bodies of Thought*; and Ann Thomson, "Animals, Humans, Machines and Thinking Matter, 1690-1707," *Early Science and Medicine* 15 (2010).

⁴⁴ Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 48. Original italics.

Germans as soulless, unfeeling machines because they do not share the French language.⁴⁵

Meslier does use the mechanistic-sounding metaphor of springs when referring to the human body: “Nous ne voions point ... de liaison necessaire, entre notre volonte et le mouvement de notre bras, ou de nos jambes, nous ne connoissons pas même la nature, ni l’usage de ces ressorts cachés qui servent à faire remüer nos bras et nos jambes.”⁴⁶ This reference to the movement of hidden springs is part of Meslier’s assault on the argument that the beauty and perfection of nature necessarily prove the existence of a maker or creator. According to Meslier, these aspects of nature are not proof of the existence of God, because if nature was made by a creator, then that creator had to have been made by another, and so on and so on in an infinite regression.⁴⁷ Nature and its perfections can be seen everywhere, but God, an imaginary being, has never been seen. It makes more sense, in Meslier’s view, to attribute existence itself to the world itself than to attribute it to a being no one has ever seen. Likewise, it is easier to believe that the world and everything in it have always existed, formed by themselves, than to believe that a divine being created the world and everything in it *ex nihilo*.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Meslier, *Mémoire*, v. 3, ch. 91, 94.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, v. 2, ch. 66, 183. “We do not see ... a necessary bond between our will and the movement of our arms and legs, we do not even know the nature or use of the hidden springs that are used to move our arms and legs.”

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, ch. 64, 169-170.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 171-174.

For Jean Meslier, matter itself, and matter alone, is the first, eternal cause.⁴⁹ Matter creates everything in the world, in nature, through the natural laws of motion and different configurations, combinations, or modifications of matter.⁵⁰ There is, thus, a finite amount of matter in the universe that has always existed and will always exist. The laws of nature, understood to be laws of motion, govern how matter moves and combines to construct all things that exist. Matter and bodies move themselves according to these laws; they are not moved by the will of God. A being without body, that is, a body without matter, would be purely spiritual and unable to act upon matter; therefore, God, if one assumes God to be a spiritual being, cannot act upon matter.⁵¹ Here, Meslier quotes Lucretius, who states in *De Rerum Natura* that “tangere enim et tangi, nisi corpus, nulla potest res.” (For nothing can touch or be touched, except body.)⁵²

In effect, nature runs itself; there is no need for God, nor any way for a God who is purely spirit to affect nature in the ways it would have to in order to produce all the effects of nature and to regulate every part of every body that could exist.⁵³ In this section, Meslier argues that a being that could make so many great and so many little things, like so many diverse and admirable machines, would exceed infinity itself.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, ch. 65, 180.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 232-233.

⁵² Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, Loeb Classical Library, trans. W.H.D. Rouse, rev. Martin F. Smith (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 1.304, pp. 26-27.

⁵³ Meslier, *Mémoire*, v. 2, ch. 71, 261.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 258.

Despite having a sense of nature working like a machine in the regularity of its laws, he appears to be hostile to the idea that living creatures are machines; certainly, he expresses a strong antipathy to the Cartesian concept of the animal as “pure machine.” There is no machine-man in Meslier’s *Mémoire*, although there is a mechanical universe. He accepts that humans have souls, but not that the soul is spiritual or immortal; the thing that we call the soul is material, consisting of a portion of the most delicate, subtle, and restless matter of our body mixed with another, “cruder” kind of matter. This material mixture animates the body with life, movement and feeling.⁵⁵ If there is no immortal soul, then there is neither reward nor punishment after death, and therefore no sovereign recompense for the just and innocent or sovereign justice for the wicked. If these things are true, then “il n’y a donc point d’Etre infiniment parfait, et par consequent point de Dieu.”⁵⁶

We can see in this chain of reasoning that the subtraction of God relies on the mechanical, materialist universe. But Meslier does not suggest that humans are machines, partly because he believed that thinking of living beings as machines encouraged cruelty. Another reason for avoiding the suggestion that humans are machines is that Meslier wanted his readers to rebel, not just against religion, but against the political order: “Tachez de vous unir tous, tant que vous êtes, pour secoüer entierement le joug de la tyrannique domination de vos roys et de vos princes; renversez partout ces trosnes d’injustices et d’impietés; brisez toutes ces testes couronnées ... ne souffrez pas plus

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, v. 3, ch. 93, 119.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 119-120. “There is no infinitely perfect being, and as a consequence, there is no God.”

qu'ils regnent jamais aucunement sur vous."⁵⁷ Meslier goes on in this vein at length in the final chapter of his book, urging quite specifically that works like his should be circulated in secret in order to help free men's minds from the tyranny and superstition that oppresses them. Humans who were pure machines, or automata, would not be able to do what Meslier desperately exhorted his readers to do; at the same time, however, a nature that worked in a mechanical way, according to laws, was essential to his goal of releasing men from superstition.

Materialism and mechanism might appear to be sufficient, from an atheist perspective, for the purpose of eliminating God from the natural world, but dissatisfaction with mechanical explanations and models led to a new approach in the late eighteenth century, known as vitalism. According to Peter Hans Reill, the vitalists believed that mechanism failed "to account for the existence of living matter" and was therefore forced to rely on mind/body dualism. As a means of resolving this problem, vitalists, drawing on the earlier theories of such figures as Francis Glisson and Georg Ernst Stahl, theorized that living matter possessed "active or self-activating forces" and that all of nature was connected.⁵⁸ Vitalism was an important movement within medicine and natural history in particular, but also had political implications, suggesting that the appropriate model for society was not a machine directed by a central ruler, but a harmonious "federation" of

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, ch. 96, 140. "Try to unite everyone, as many as you are, to shake off entirely the yoke of tyrannical domination of your kings and princes; overthrow everywhere the thrones of the unjust and impious; break all the crowned heads ... do not suffer any longer that anyone should rule over you."

⁵⁸ Reill, "The Legacy of the 'Scientific Revolution,'" 32-35.

autonomous individual parts.⁵⁹ Vitalism also had clear theological implications: while it was not necessary to eliminate God from the vitalist universe, theories that matter possessed an inherent life force made it even easier to argue that a divine creator was superfluous.

Atheist texts of the eighteenth century combine materialism, mechanism and/or a kind of proto-vitalism in order to present explanations of how the world and different beings came to exist without divine intervention, as well as of the relationship between humans, other beings, and nature as a whole. The *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, for example, asserts that God is nature and is therefore material, and that a subtle fluid or fire, whose source is the sun, is spread throughout all parts of the world and, when enclosed in a body, makes it capable of sensation. This purest fire is the soul of the world and the animating force of everything.⁶⁰

While the *Traité's* discussion of materiality and nature is extremely brief, the *Dissertation sur la Formation du Monde* argues in detail that motion is an essential property of matter, and that matter acquired this property through a natural process (thus obviating the need for a superior being). Although there is only one kind of substance, the particles of that substance contain all its qualities in different proportions, creating particles with, for instance, greater and lesser degrees of fluidity and penetrability.⁶¹ Due

⁵⁹ Kang, *Sublime Dreams of Living Machines*, 158-160.

⁶⁰ *Traité des Trois Imposteurs* (s.n., 1700-1800), ch. 5 s. 7, 80-81.

⁶¹ Stancati, Claudia, ed. *Dissertation sur la Formation du Monde & Dissertation sur la Résurrection de la Chair: Manuscrits du recueil 1168 de la Bibliothèque Mazarine de Paris* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2001), 95.

to their varied composition, some bodies absorbed fluid more than others, which created disequilibrium; the resulting shifting of weight led to movement.⁶² Like the *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, the *Dissertation* asserts that fire is the vivifying and animating element of everything in the world, but goes further, explaining that everything (except the earth's crust) is alive since everything possesses some amount of fire; even rocks are alive, and would move if they were not so heavy, that is, if the ratio of fire to earth in them was different.⁶³

La Mettrie also included a vitalist element in his mechanistic understanding of bodies, asserting that all bodies, including those of humans, possess an innate force that allows independent movement in their every part. La Mettrie cites several examples of animals' body parts continuing to move after the death of the animal, including the movement and reproduction of polyps after they are cut up. He then explains that the human heart must possess the same property of independent movement, because human and animal hearts share the same structure. He suggests that the only reason the human heart has not been observed to move after death is that no one has dissected a warm corpse to see what happens to the heart: "Si les dissections se faisoient sur des Criminels suppliciés, dont les corps sont encore chauds, on verroit dans leur coeur les mêmes

⁶² *Ibid.*, 101-102.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 110-114.

mouvements, qu'on observe dans les muscles du visage des gens décapités."⁶⁴ La Mettrie deduces from this post-mortem movement that each fibre of the body oscillates naturally, but also that in order for the fibres to oscillate, they must have fuel: "Le corps n'est qu'une horloge, dont le nouveau chyle est l'horloger." The chyle enters the blood and is fermented in order to stimulate the muscles and the heart. The soul is therefore not the only cause of movement.⁶⁵

A self-sufficient material nature, whether it included mechanist aspects, vitalist aspects, or both, was essential to the atheist ideology as it developed in the eighteenth century. This core role for nature raises the issue of how gender inflected atheist ideology, for, as Carolyn Merchant and other feminist scholars have shown, nature was invariably gendered female in early modern Europe. Merchant argued -- and many scholars have followed her in this -- that the early modern attitude toward nature was violent, rapacious, and destructive, especially during and after the Scientific Revolution and the emergence of a mechanistic cosmology that, as discussed above, tended to regard matter as inert and passive, requiring the active intervention of God. Man dominated nature, which operated according to the external laws of God, and believed he had a right to force secrets and

⁶⁴ Vartanian, *La Mettrie's L'Homme Machine*, 180-182. "If dissections were practised on executed criminals while their bodies were still warm, we would see the same movements in their hearts that are observed in the facial muscles of decapitated people." Trans. Thomson, 28. Natania Meeker, in an interesting analysis of the Lamettrian machine-man as a literary trope, points out La Mettrie's debt to Epicurean atomism via Lucretius. "The Materialist Tropes of La Mettrie," *Eighteenth Century: Theory & Interpretation*, 48, no. 3 (Fall 2007).

⁶⁵ Vartanian, *La Mettrie's L'Homme Machine*, 186. "The body is nothing but a clock whose clockmaker is new chyle." Trans. Thomson, 31.

resources from her in an obvious parallel with male domination of women that had and continues to have negative consequences for both women and the natural environment.⁶⁶

Judith Butler's analyses of gender and materiality are also relevant to this chapter's discussion of atheist conceptions of nature and the body. In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* her 'sequel' to *Gender Trouble*, Butler considers several important questions about how the materiality of the body is linked to the performativity of gender, how the category of "sex" fits within that connection, and what it means to say that gender is constructed. She problematizes both constructivism and essentialism in several complex ways. For example, she points out that constructivism tends to assume some sort of social agency operating upon a passive nature: "the social construction presupposes the cancellation of the natural by the social." Sex, in this formulation, is cancelled out by gender, and "the natural," as the "site or surface of inscription," loses its value as anything other than such a site.⁶⁷ Butler argues that materiality is itself sexed, having been associated with femininity since the ancient Greeks.⁶⁸ This is problematic for feminists who wish to "retrieve the body from ... the linguistic idealism of poststructuralism" by, for example, presuming that sex is "the irreducible point of departure for the various cultural constructions it must bear," with the

⁶⁶ Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980); also e.g. Londa Schiebinger, *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

⁶⁷ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London: Routledge Classics, 1993), xiv.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

“sexed specificity of the female body” functioning as a grounding point for feminist critique. Butler suggests that if

this ‘irreducible’ materiality is constructed through a problematic gendered matrix, then the discursive practice by which matter is rendered irreducible simultaneously ontologizes and fixes that gendered matrix in place. And if the constituted effect of that matrix is taken to be the indisputable ground of bodily life, then it seems that a genealogy of that matrix is foreclosed from critical inquiry. Against the claim that poststructuralism reduces all materiality to linguistic stuff, an argument is needed to show that to deconstruct matter is not to negate or do away with the usefulness of the term. And against those who would claim that the body’s irreducible materiality is a necessary condition for feminist practice, I suggest that prized materiality may well be constituted through an exclusion and degradation of the feminine that is profoundly problematic for feminism.⁶⁹

Although the subjects of sex, gender, masculinity and femininity are not central concerns within eighteenth-century atheist texts, in the sense that not much space is devoted to them, these texts do discuss matter, nature and bodies at length. As Butler points out in the above quotation, how we conceptualize materiality, especially if that conceptualization *genders* materiality, has consequences for how we understand sex, gender and the body; further, the process of gendering materiality necessarily relies upon prior conceptualizations of sex, gender and body, so that all of these terms are caught up in a complex and mutually-reinforcing matrix (itself a gendered term, as Butler notes).

Butler’s remarks suggest that the gendered matrix of materiality is necessarily problematic because it associates materiality with the negative qualities associated with femaleness, such as passivity. Butler seems to assume that the gendering of something as feminine always entails a devaluation. Katharine Park, however, has outlined a more

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

complex account of nature's gendering, explaining that personifications of nature changed between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. In the medieval period, Nature was represented typically as a clothed, queenly figure with both physical and moral authority (delegated by God) over the created world; although she was vulnerable to disorder through human sexual misconduct, "Nature was an active and articulate ... figure."⁷⁰

Strikingly, Park argues, against Merchant, that Nature was not identified with motherhood "in any but a passing way" in the Middle Ages, and that this association was an invention of the Renaissance,⁷¹ which portrayed Nature as naked or partially clothed, often lactating and/or multi-breasted. Nature was also represented in the Renaissance as God's servant, bound to God rather than wielding her own (delegated) authority. Park suggests that this reduced Nature's vulnerability to human disorder by showing that she, as God's creation, remained unsullied. It also reduced Nature's moral authority by limiting her contribution to human life "to conferring on individual humans the particular physical attributes and mental inclinations with which they were born; she did not preside over or participate in the long process of socialization, education, and voluntary effort that shaped their character and moral worth."⁷²

⁷⁰ Katharine Park, "Nature in Person: Medieval and Renaissance Allegories and Emblems," in *The Moral Authority of Nature*, eds. Lorraine Daston & Fernando Vidal (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 55-56.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 68-69.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 60-65.

Continuing her critique of Merchant's thesis, Park argues that Merchant has overstated the violence of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century personification of nature, and has mistakenly portrayed that personification as a recent shift away from a traditional image of maternal nature. According to Park, the image of nature as maternal was itself recent, and was merely given "a particular twist" by Francis Bacon, the *bête noir* of Merchant's study. Park does agree that "the new Renaissance figuration of nature as naked and female certainly authorized a more exploitative attitude toward the natural world, although the dominant metaphor was consumption ... rather than inquisition, dissection, or rape."⁷³

French atheist texts can hardly avoid gendering nature as female, since nature is a feminine noun in the French language. Occasional references suggest that atheist writers did think of nature or the world as female, at least metaphorically. The *Dissertation sur la Formation du Monde*, for example, describes the earth as a womb fertilized by water and quickened by fire: "La Terre est la matrice, l'Eau est le germe, le feu est le Principe vivifiant et productif."⁷⁴ Atheist texts do not, however, emphasize the femaleness of nature, and they do not describe nature as passive or vulnerable to human interference. The atheists' nature is active and self-governing, the producer of everything that exists. Nature's secrets must be studied, but for the purposes of enlightenment and avoidance of ignorance-based fear, not for material or economic gain. As described above, these texts argue that humans are a kind of animal, differentiated from other species only by the way

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

⁷⁴ *Dissertation sur la Formation du Monde*, 113. "The earth is the womb, water is the seed, fire is the invigorating and productive principle."

in which their physical matter is organized; humans are, therefore, fully integrated parts of the whole of nature. Finally, to greater or lesser degrees depending on the text, nature determines humans' physical drives and capacities and, thus, our behaviour as well. Far from dominating nature, humans are ruled by it.

D'Holbach, who presents the most complete and detailed conceptualization of nature, treats it as active and powerful, even though he regards nature as “une vaste machine.”⁷⁵ Nature is the entire universe, and humans are part of it. Nature sets its own laws, and may keep secrets from man, who must consent to ignore what it has hidden. It is the ultimate authority and organizing force, and deserves attention and respect. In his chapter on motion and its origins, d'Holbach explains that everything in the universe is in continual motion because “l'essence de la nature est d'agir.”⁷⁶ Nature receives this motion from itself, since it is “le grand tout, hors duquel conséquemment rien ne peut exister.”⁷⁷ In other words, Nature is not “un amas de matieres mortes, dépourvues de toutes propriétés, purement passives”: it is an active, living whole.⁷⁸

The atheist conceptualization of nature as active, alive, self-governing and creative was an important attempt to change the social imaginary significations associated with nature. An active nature was, of course, necessary in order for a godless universe to exist. This understanding of nature also places it in the role of governor over

⁷⁵ D'Holbach, *Système de la Nature*, v. 1, 246.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 18. “The essence of nature is to act.”

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 21. “The great all, without which nothing could exist.”

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 25. “A mass of dead matter, devoid of any properties, purely passive.”

all life, including humans. This has the specific consequence that nature, while itself being neither good nor evil, becomes the determinant of whatever is right and moral. In order to live a moral life, one need only understand nature and its laws, as our natural inclinations will lead us toward the good and away from the bad. We are children of nature, dependent on it for our existence, our individuality, and our moral instruction. Like the atheist, nature is clearly a parental figure, albeit an abstract one, who would make us happy if only we would grow up, stop being afraid, use our natural ability to reason, and listen to it. The linguistic and occasional metaphorical gendering of nature as female sets up an implicit relationship between a maternal nature and the paternal figure of the atheist, who, as described in the previous chapter, is also imagined as a moral guide or exemplar.

In the following sections, I shall examine the ways in which Meslier, La Mettrie, d'Holbach and Deschamps imagine the relationship between nature, human happiness, morality, and social order through the depiction of ideal societies. None of these ideal societies are utopias, in the strict sense of being non-existent, isolated places, although they do fit the definition of utopian texts as those which “seek to provide a vision of future possible worlds in which the conflicts and injustices which dominate contemporary societies are overcome.”⁷⁹ All four of these writers criticized their own societies, and three envisioned detailed future societies, that is, ones that could or would exist once men became enlightened enough. They appear to have regarded these ideal societies as real

⁷⁹ “Utopia/nism,” in *Cultural Theory: The Key Concepts*, 2nd ed., eds. Andrew Edgar & Peter Sedgwick (London: Routledge, 2008), 372.

possibilities; that they might not appear as such to us is a function of our ability to look back on various failed attempts to establish and sustain ‘utopias,’ including the Soviet Union. I avoid the term ‘utopia’ in order to avoid connotations of fantasy and impossibility, and to focus on how these writers constructed their ideal societies.⁸⁰

Jean Meslier

The earliest of the works considered in the rest of this chapter, Meslier’s *Mémoire* imagines an anarchist, communist society as an alternative to his own, which he sees as fundamentally unjust due to abuses by both religious and secular powers.⁸¹ This injustice originated when certain men, shrewder and perhaps more wicked than the others, wanted to elevate themselves above the rest, so they exploited the ignorance and stupidity of their fellow men and claimed that they were Gods and sovereign lords, in order to be feared and respected. The other men allowed these clever ones to become their masters, and so the first belief in the gods was born.⁸² Meslier is presenting here the basic argument of the *Traité des Trois Imposteurs* that religion’s origins lie in self-interested trickery and

⁸⁰ I am going somewhat against the grain in doing so; both Meslier and Deschamps are often described as utopians. For various categories of utopia, and examples from the Enlightenment, see R.B. Rose, “Utopianism,” *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, v. 4, ed. Alan C. Kors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 215-218. Rose includes Deschamps among the utopians, but does not mention Meslier. Charles Rihs includes both Meslier and Deschamps in “Utopisme des Lumières et Communautés Primitives,” *Revue d’histoire économique et sociale* 52, 4 (1974): 573-575.

⁸¹ The classic account of Meslier’s ideas, including a discussion of whether Meslier should be considered a precursor of anarchism, is to be found in Maurice Dommanget, “Les Idées Politiques et Sociales,” *Le Curé Meslier: Athée, Communiste et Révolutionnaire sous Louis XIV* (Paris: Julliard, 1965), 273-360. Dommanget’s study remains valuable, but I have not relied on it for my own analysis, which approaches the *Mémoire* with a different purpose. See also Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 724-728.

⁸² Meslier, *Mémoire*, v. 2, 347.

imposture, with most of humanity being the dupes of a few clever and crafty individuals and their followers, who obtained and held power by manipulating the ignorance and fear of the people. Meslier's materialist analysis of how the world and its creatures came to be is, like that of other atheists, targeted against religious explanations, particularly the idea that God created the world from nothing. It is his analysis of injustice and his utopian vision that are of most interest, however.

Meslier outlines several doctrinal errors of religion, such as Christians' worship of "foibles petites idoles ou images de paste,"⁸³ before describing what he calls the three principal errors of Christian morality. First, Christianity makes "l'amour et ... la recherche des douleurs et des souffrances" its highest good; second, it condemns not only the deeds, but also "les pensées, les desirs, et les affections de la chair" which are natural and necessary for the preservation and multiplication of the human race; finally, it contributes to the oppression of the good and weak by demanding that they suffer injustice without anger or complaint.⁸⁴

Meslier denounces all of these errors on the grounds that they are contrary to Nature. Indeed, they are more than just errors — it is madness, he says, to pursue that which is contrary to nature, such as poverty, pain, hunger, thirst, and persecution. The Christian doctrine claims that suffering for a good purpose will earn the sufferer a place in the kingdom of heaven, which is imaginary; this doctrine therefore abuses the people's simplicity, ignorance and credulity by making them endure or even seek out pain and

⁸³ *Ibid.*, v. 1, ch. 35, 421. "Feeble little idols or images of dough."

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, ch. 40, 498-500. "The love and pursuit of pain and suffering"; "the thoughts, desires, and affections of the flesh."

suffering in the hope of an illusory reward. Since it is obviously contrary to nature for humans to be poor, unhappy, hungry and thirsty, the doctrine itself is contrary to nature and thus mad.⁸⁵ It is also wrong to condemn sexual acts and desires, which are natural in men and women and which, moreover, are necessary for the preservation of the human race. Meslier is careful to explain that he is not encouraging debauchery or disobedience of the law: one must conform to the customs and practices of one's country. He praises those wise individuals who can control themselves — however, he also says, somewhat wistfully perhaps, that they are fools who do not dare, at least sometimes, because of bigotry or superstition, to taste sexual pleasure.⁸⁶

These interesting remarks indicate an egalitarian view of sexuality: both men and women have sexual urges, and both are equally entitled to pursue them. This perspective on the naturalness of sex and sexuality appears in other atheist texts as well. For instance, the *Dissertation sur la Formation du Monde* suggests sex is a natural desire born of the necessity of sexual reproduction and the need to balance excesses of fire and water in the bodies of men and women respectively.⁸⁷ As I shall discuss below, Dom Deschamps also argues that sex is a natural need for both men and women.

The final error of Christian morality is its demand to turn the other cheek when one is injured. Meslier objects that refusing to seek revenge, or to resist viciousness, is contrary to natural right and reason and to the social order. As he explains, it is self-evidently natural justice to preserve our life and property, and it is natural to hate evil and

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 501-502.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 503-505.

⁸⁷ *Dissertation sur la Formation du Monde*, 123-124.

those who commit it. Christian morality upends natural right and justice by favouring the wicked and vicious, encouraging them to attack the weak without fear of retribution; it also exposes the good to the kind of suffering that Meslier has already argued is contrary to nature.⁸⁸

Meslier's analysis of all three errors shows clearly the central role of nature, or at least his concept of what is natural, in determining what is moral and what is not. He also shows here his interest in social equality and the common good. Meslier argued that men are born equal, and protested against the huge disproportions between states and conditions of men: "Tous les hommes sont égaux par nature, ils ont tous également droit de vivre, et de marcher sur la terre, également droit d'y jouir de leur liberté naturelle, et d'avoir part aux biens de la terre, en travaillans utilement les uns et le autres pour avoir les choses nécessaires ou utiles à la vie."⁸⁹ Unfortunately, some men dominate others, who live as miserable slaves. This inequality is "toute à fait injuste et odieuse" because it is not based on merit and only breeds destructive passions that lead to countless evils and viciousness.⁹⁰

The injustice of society is based on numerous abuses, which Meslier describes in detail. These range from the abuse of allowing mediant monks to beg instead of working for a living to the outright tyranny of absolutist rulers. Through his analysis of these

⁸⁸ Meslier, *Mémoire*, v. 1, ch. 40, 506-510.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, v. 2, ch. 42, 17. "All men are equal by nature, they all have an equal right to live, and to walk on the earth, an equal right to enjoy their natural liberty, and to have a portion of the goods of the earth, in working usefully together in order to obtain necessary or useful things for living."

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16. "Wholly unjust and odious."

abuses, Meslier imagines an ideal society based on equality, truth, and justice.⁹¹ In his vision of this society, there are only two fundamental truths: first, people only need to follow the lights of human reason in order to achieve their principal goal in life, which is to be knowledgeable in the sciences and arts. Second, to establish good laws people only have to follow the rules of human wisdom, that is, the rules of honesty, justice, and natural equality, and avoid being sidetracked by charlatans, idolaters and “superstitieux deicoles.”⁹²

The basic form of Meslier’s imagined society is communal. According to Meslier, the original source of abuse within human society was the individual appropriation of the goods and riches of the land. These should instead be possessed and enjoyed in common. All members of a community would see themselves as brothers and sisters and would live peacefully and in common together, eating the same or similar food and being equally well clothed and well housed, applying themselves equally to the community’s work. Other communities would make alliances to keep the peace and aid each other in time of need. If everyone’s needs are met equally, there will be no unjust suffering and no hatred or envy, which cause innumerable wicked deeds.⁹³ In contrast with actual society, which tolerates large number of useless people, such as beggars, rich sluggards, monks and nuns, tax collectors, soldiers and, especially, the vermin nobility,⁹⁴ all must work, and all

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, v. 1, ch. 1, 6.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 35. “Superstitious god-cultists.”

⁹³ *Ibid.*, v. 2, ch. 48, 60-67.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, chs. 43-44, 26-31.

work would be of value: “les plus viles et des derniers emplois dans une bonne republique sont utiles et necessaires.”⁹⁵ Discrimination between families, a source of community strife, will also end, as there will be no reason for scorn or bragging.⁹⁶

A key component of Meslier’s imagined society is the right to dissolve marriages. Meslier objects to the Christian insistence on the indissolubility of marriages on the grounds that forcing men and women to stay together when they are unhappy only leads to misery, cruelty and abandonment. Freedom to leave an unhappy union and find pleasure and contentment with whomever suited them would not only benefit the man and woman: children, too, would no longer have to suffer abandonment or cruel treatment by step-parents. Meslier also suggests that bad marriages are a cause of poverty and ignorance, for unhappy parents will neglect their children’s welfare, especially their education; lack of education then condemns these children to lives as poor, ignorant adults who will continue the cycle of misery in their own families.⁹⁷ In a communal society, all children will be raised and supported in common, equally well educated in good manners and honesty, as well as in the arts and sciences, in accordance with what suits them and is useful to the public. This uniformity of upbringing and education will reduce differences of opinion and temperament, thus ensuring toleration of each other and peaceable living.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, ch. 47, 55. “The basest and worst jobs are useful and necessary in a good republic.”

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, ch. 49, 67-70.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, chs. 50-51, 71-86.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, ch. 51, 82.

In Meslier's communal society, who would be responsible for establishing the laws? Meslier does not state explicitly that some people are naturally more talented and useful than others, and that they should be entitled to higher status and authority. He recognizes that although all are born equal, men live in society, and society cannot function well without some relationships of dependence and subordination. This is not problematic as long as such relationships are just and well-proportioned.⁹⁹ If we connect this idea to Meslier's argument that individual appropriation of the goods and riches of the land is the source of injustice, we can say that he does not have in mind here that some people would possess more goods and riches than others; rather, some — the wise, in particular — would bear the responsibility for establishing and enforcing the laws in accordance with reason and nature.¹⁰⁰ There is, however, a hint in his comments on children that not everyone will receive precisely the same education, which could mean, although Meslier says nothing about how such matters will be decided, that certain individuals will be guided toward the role of law-givers. Although this society is based on material equality and equality of rights, it is not without authority figures or social differentiation. It is clear, too, that no one who still believed in the illusions of religion, that mainstay of political and social injustice, could be part of this ideal society.

Meslier's vision is certainly utopian, but it is more than a story or thought experiment. He believed, unlike most atheist writers, that the ideal of an enlightened populace was attainable. Meslier wanted the poor to reject blind beliefs, banish the

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, ch. 42, 16-17.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, v. 3, ch. 96, 140.

priests, and unite to throw off tyranny's yoke. He wanted them to see that the tyrants could have no power over the poor without their acquiescence. He even provided the specific suggestions that the road to freedom should begin with secret communications, and that would-be liberators in France should look to the Dutch and Swiss rebellions for inspiration.¹⁰¹ Meslier never implies that the poor are incapable of enlightenment or of living morally by the natural lights of reason: indeed, they appear to be his hope for the future.

La Mettrie

La Mettrie wrote several philosophical texts, two of which are of particular interest for their remarks on happiness, morality and social order: *L'Homme Machine* and *Anti-Seneca*.¹⁰² *L'Homme Machine*, the earlier work, is by far the most famous today, but it is *Anti-Seneca* that pushes hardest against conventional morality and presents the stronger challenge to the social imaginary. As Ann Thomson explains, it was *Anti-Seneca*'s exploration of the moral consequences of materialism "that so much shocked his contemporaries, to the extent that he was disowned by all the eighteenth-century materialists, and even those who in the nineteenth century attempted to rehabilitate him,

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 145-150.

¹⁰² According to Ann Thomson, *Anti-Seneca* appeared in two editions during La Mettrie's lifetime, the first, published in 1750, consisting of only twelve copies. The second edition, of 1751, was a revised version of the text. Various versions of *Anti-Seneca* were included in all posthumous editions of La Mettrie's *Philosophical Works*, typically under the title *Discours sur le Bonheur*. See *Machine Man and Other Writings*, 118. I have used Thomson's translation of the 1751 edition. For recent additional commentary on La Mettrie's career, see Francine Markovits's Introduction to the relevant section in *Matérialistes français du XVIIIe siècle, op. cit.*, 3-6.

like Lange, ignored this compromising work.”¹⁰³ More recently, Jonathan Israel’s summary of La Mettrie’s career and analysis of his ideas detaches him from the radical Enlightenment that Israel valorizes, on the grounds that La Mettrie’s amoral hedonism was inconsistent with the radical *philosophes*’ values. As he explains, the *philosophes* disavowed La Mettrie themselves on precisely those grounds, but Israel’s critique makes it clear that he shares their dislike of the “unvirtuous atheist,” if only because he has been used by “post-modernists” such as Charles Taylor (!) to cast the Enlightenment into disrepute.¹⁰⁴

The essence of La Mettrie’s position, as outlined earlier, is that humans are merely material machines, whose behaviour, like that of any other animal, is governed by the needs and desires of their bodies. In *L’Homme Machine*, La Mettrie explains that our individual machine’s construction determines whether we are lively or brave, and even how we think. Hunger makes us cruel, and age affects our reason. Both men and women are subject to derangements caused by alterations in their bodies: pregnancy, for instance, causes not only depraved tastes, but also “a quelquefois fait exécuter à l’Ame les plus affreux complots; effets d’une manie subite, qui étouffe jusqu’à la Loi naturelle. C’est ainsi que le cerveau, cette Matrice de l’esprit, se pervertit à sa manière, avec celle du corps.” Both genetics and the environment, to put it in modern terms, play a role in the construction and maintenance of the machine. Differences between individuals, and changes within an individual, are caused by their food, their father’s seed, and the

¹⁰³ Thomson, *Machine Man and Other Writings*, xxii.

¹⁰⁴ *Enlightenment Contested*, 794-813.

different elements swimming chaotically in the air, while education, climate and the actions of those around us also exert influence.¹⁰⁵

Indeed, it is only education that elevates humans above other animals, which are otherwise far better equipped for survival than we are. Pushing this argument further, La Mettrie suggests that the deaf, those born blind, imbeciles, madmen, savages, hypochondriacs and brutes in human form are not fully human.¹⁰⁶ He does not say what ought to be done with such people — he does not, for instance, suggest exterminating them — but the context indicates that he thinks attempts to educate individuals like these would be a waste of time and effort, since their machines lack the capacity to benefit from it.

Elsewhere in *L'Homme Machine*, La Mettrie argues that there may be no reason for man's existence other than chance, and that while virtue is a law of nature that teaches us to not do to others what we would not want them to do to us, “ce sentiment n'est qu'une espèce de crainte, ou de fraieur, aussi salutaire à l'espèce, qu'à l'individu.”¹⁰⁷ In other words, we act virtuously in respecting others only because we fear the consequences for our own lives and property if we do not. This law does not come from God, whom La Mettrie reduces to “une verité théorique, qui n'est guères d'usage dans la Pratique.” Since we cannot know for certain whether God truly exists, or what happens

¹⁰⁵ Vartanian, *La Mettrie's L'Homme Machine*, 156-157. “It [pregnancy] sometimes makes the soul execute the most atrocious plots, the effects of a sudden mania which smothers even the law of nature. Thus the brain, the mind's womb, is perverted, in its way, together with that of the body.” Trans. Thomson, 8.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 175. “This feeling is only a kind of fear or fright which is as salutary for the species as it is for the individual.” Trans. Thomson, 22.

after we die, it is better not to think about it.¹⁰⁸ La Mettrie claims to sit on the fence regarding atheism and belief in God, but it is clear that he is being ironic; he quotes a friend, who may be La Mettrie himself (he cites himself as if he were a different person at various points in the book), as saying that although a philosopher cannot decide between the two positions, “l’Univers ne sera jamais heureux, à moins qu’il ne soit Athée,” because, if atheism were accepted, religion would be destroyed:

Plus de guerres théologiques; plus de soldats de Religion; soldats terribles! la Nature infectée d’un poison sacré, reprendroit ses droits et sa pureté. Sourds à toute autre voix, les Mortels tranquilles ne suivroient que les conseils spontanés de leur propre individu; les seuls qu’on ne méprise point impunément, & qui peuvent seuls nous conduire au bonheur par les agréables sentiers de la vertu.¹⁰⁹

This will not happen unless men study nature using experience; in other words, unless they come to understand the mechanical nature of the universe and of mankind. This knowledge will free men from the fear of death, since they will understand that what happens after death is unknowable. Knowledge of nature, and freedom from religion’s unhealthy influence, will also make men more respectful of nature and of other humans: “le Matérialiste convaincu, quoi que murmure sa propre vanité, qu’il n’est qu’une Machine, ou qu’un Animal, ne maltraitera point ses semblables ... suivant la Loi

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* “A theoretical truth which serves very little practical purpose.” Trans. Thomson, 22.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 179. “The universe will never be happy unless it is atheistic”; “No more theological wars, no more soldiers of religion, those dreadful soldiers! Nature, now infected by sacred poison, would regain its rights and its purity. Peaceful mortals, deaf to all other voices, would only follow the spontaneous promptings of their own individual being, which are the only ones that we ignore at our peril and which alone can lead us to happiness along the pleasant paths of virtue.” Trans. Thomson, 25.

Naturelle donnée à tous les Animaux, faire à autrui, ce qu'il ne voudroit pas qu'on lui fit."¹¹⁰

These passages highlight one of the problems with taking nature as the touchstone for a social order: the tendency to classify things, and people, as either natural or unnatural, pure or impure.¹¹¹ Although La Mettrie does not use these terms, he identifies certain categories of people as unnatural and impure due to physical or mental 'defects'. By stating that religion is a poison, and that nature can only be pure again when there is no religion, he implies that religious people are also poisonous and impure, since religion cannot exist without them. The imagined natural virtue of the atheist is reinforced at the expense of the believer, in a surprisingly optimistic assessment of humans' innate sense of right and wrong.

La Mettrie later changed his mind on this point,¹¹² arguing in *Anti-Seneca* that "men are generally born wicked" and that education alone has improved on mankind's organisation, directing them and winding them up like clocks to be useful. "This is the origin of virtue: the public good is its source and object."¹¹³ Virtue is not innate, and it is

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 197. "The materialist, convinced, whatever his vanity may object, that he is only a machine or an animal, will not ill-treat his fellows ... following the law of nature given to all animals, he does not want to do to others what he would not like others to do to him." Trans. Thomson, 39.

¹¹¹ On eighteenth-century theories concerning human nature, especially how philosophers categorized women, other races, animals and the blind, see e.g. Aaron Garrett, "Human Nature," in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 160-233.

¹¹² Ann Thomson suggests that La Mettrie's views changed after reading *L'examen de la religion*, a clandestine deistic manuscript that had recently been published in several editions: "this deistic work contains a chapter denying the existence of absolute moral values and attributing remorse to education." p. xxiii. La Mettrie states specifically in *Anti-Seneca* that the view put forward in *L'Homme Machine* was a mistake (139).

¹¹³ Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *Anti-Seneca*, in *Machine Man and Other Writings*, 129.

so fragile that it requires constant shoring up through education and examples in order to prevent backsliding. Laws and punishment are necessary if there is to be any kind of civil society.

La Mettrie makes the radical implications of materialism clearer when he argues that there are no absolute moral values, citing Augustine in support: “good and evil possess no specific signs to characterise them absolutely ... they can be distinguished from each other only by the interests of society ... Remove this support, and farewell morality! Vices and virtues are absolutely indiscernible... Such is natural equity.”¹¹⁴ He provides several examples of cultures with different moral values, noting, for instance, that “Aristotle was in favour of sodomy in order to prevent too great a number of citizens” and that “Lycurgus had weak and unhealthy children drowned and was proud of his wisdom.”¹¹⁵ Nature does not impart moral values; virtues and vices are imagined by each society according to its own needs, and then humans are conditioned to believe in that imagined morality and to feel remorse when they commit evil. Remorse itself, therefore, is not truly natural; moreover, it is useless in preventing wickedness and only harms the good.¹¹⁶

La Mettrie’s ultimate suggestion for increasing human happiness is to eliminate remorse: “Remorse seems to me to add to the problems of machines which are as much to be pitied as they are badly regulated, and which are led on towards evil as the good are

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 131-132.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 128.

towards good.”¹¹⁷ The wicked must still be punished in order to maintain civil society, but requiring them to feel remorse for acts they cannot help committing does nothing to deter such acts; reducing remorse will, therefore, also reduce unhappiness. Only fear deters wicked behaviour, which is itself natural, motivated by the desire for well-being: “The will is necessarily determined to desire and seek what is to the immediate advantage of the soul and the body.” Since it is our machines that determine whether we act virtuously or wickedly, we are not free, but are “only following nature’s order.” Punishment of crime should therefore be lenient, for

if someone who is guilty in relation to society [that is, according to society’s laws] is not free in his actions, it no doubt follows that he was not free not to be guilty ... to put it bluntly, he is clearly not guilty at all and only deserves compassion ... what equity is there to take the life of a miserable wretch, who is the slave of the blood galloping in his veins, as the hand of a watch is the slave of the works which make it move?¹¹⁸

La Mettrie is by no means an anarchist or political revolutionary. He argues that social order is a source of happiness,¹¹⁹ and, in the *Discours preliminaire*, says that he only wishes “that those who hold the helm of the state should be a little philosophical,” which will make them better able to distinguish between their arbitrary laws, tyranny and

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 141-143. For discussion of the calls for reform of punishment and criminal law in eighteenth century France, especially the influence of Montesquieu and Beccaria, see e.g. Frederick Rosen, “Utilitarianism and the reform of the criminal law,” in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought*, eds. Mark Goldie & Robert Wokler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Daniel Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, 314-319; Randall McGowen, “Law and Enlightenment,” in *The Enlightenment World*, eds. Martin Fitzpatrick, Peter Jones, Christa Knellwolf & Ian McCalman (London: Routledge, 2004), 509-512; Peter Gay, “The Politics of Decency,” *The Enlightenment v. 2: The Science of Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996 [1969]), 423-447; Lynn Hunt, “‘Bone of their Bone’: Abolishing Torture,” *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007).

¹¹⁹ La Mettrie, *Anti-Seneca*, 142.

religion, and “truth, equity and justice.”¹²⁰ He does, however, provide a serious critique of the legitimacy and justice of laws and punishment, undermining the law’s claims to be just and equitable, based on absolute values of right and wrong. At the same time, La Mettrie states that one must chain up a madman and destroy a dangerous dog in order to protect the public good, so he is not suggesting a free-for-all of wicked behaviour, only, perhaps, more awareness of the arbitrariness of justice and greater compassion for those who are not responsible for their crimes due to what we would call diminished capacity or insanity. This is not a revolutionary vision, but it is perhaps the most practice-oriented of the four discussed in this chapter, being concerned primarily with education, punishment and protection of the public good.¹²¹

Baron d’Holbach

Of the four atheist writers considered in this analysis, the Baron d’Holbach devoted by far the most energy and pages to questions of happiness, morality and social order. In addition to *Système de la Nature*, he published several further expositions of his philosophy regarding the appropriate way to establish and maintain a moral society, including *Système Social* (1773), *La Morale Universelle* (1776) and *Ethocratie* (1776). Atheism is downplayed in these later moral-political works, but materialism remains the foundation for d’Holbach’s imagined society.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹²¹ While recognizing his “profoundly subversive impulse,” Israel dismisses La Mettrie’s political, social and moral views as “conservative and timid,” in order to distance him further from his beloved radical *philosophes* (*Enlightenment Contested*, 813). Considering the ideas that La Mettrie put before the reading public, this description seems almost perverse.

As *Système de la Nature* lays the groundwork for the d'Holbach's later exploration of moral and political ideas, it is useful to begin with the first sections of that book, which establish quickly the centrality of nature. The first line of d'Holbach's preface to *Système de la Nature* is "L'homme n'est malheureux que parcequ'il méconnoît la Nature."¹²² D'Holbach argues that because he is taught to disdain the study of nature, man pursues phantoms. It is error that leads to religious terror, the enslavement of peoples of all nations by tyrants and priests, and hatred and violence: man is a degraded captive of inhuman jailers, "dépourvu de grandeur d'ame, de raison, de vertu."¹²³

The first chapter begins with the statement that "les hommes se tromperent toujours quand ils abandonneront l'expérience pour les systèmes enfantés par l'imagination."¹²⁴ Such thinking is futile, for man is a purely physical being that exists within nature and is bound by nature's laws. This vain pursuit leads to unhappiness; it is only the man who has learned to understand the world through experience and his own reason who can be happy. Man has been deceived "par l'imagination, l'entousiasme, l'habitude, le préjugé, & sur-tout, par l'autorité"; he must raise himself above the clouds

¹²² Baron Paul Henry Thiry d'Holbach, *Système de la Nature*, 2 vols. ('Londres' [Amsterdam], 1770), v. 1, Preface. "Man is unhappy because of his ignorance of nature." This is Lucretius' argument in a nutshell. In Book 1 of *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius says that superstition, born of ignorance of nature, is the cause of evil deeds. The priests seek to control men through fear, and

there is no way of resistance and no power, because everlasting punishment is to be feared after death. ... This terror of mind therefore and this gloom must be dispelled, not by the sun's rays or the bright shafts of day, but by the aspect and law of nature. ... For assuredly a dread holds all mortals thus in bond, because they behold many things happening in heaven and earth whose causes they can by no means see, and they think them to be done by divine power. Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, 1.110-154.

¹²³ *Ibid.* "Devoid of greatness of soul, of reason, of virtue."

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1. "Men always deceive themselves when they abandon experience for the childish systems of the imagination."

of prejudice and return to his senses and reason in order to understand the universe and thus overcome fear and superstition.¹²⁵ Man already possesses the natural ability to reason and understand through experience, and only needs to leave behind such man-made impediments as reliance on imagination and authority in order to achieve happiness.

D'Holbach contrasts the happy, moral, civilized and enlightened man, who acts in accordance with his natural tendencies, thinks for himself, and resists external pressures that are injurious to his welfare, with the wild man, “un enfant dénué d'expérience, incapable de travailler à sa félicité” because he has not learned to resist external impulses, and the unhappy man, who is incapable of enjoying the benefits of nature because he allows others to think for him.¹²⁶ Happiness, according to these descriptions, stems from knowledge and acceptance of one's physical existence as a being within and part of nature, and from intellectual independence. The man who is ignorant of nature and allows others to think for him — that is, the religious or superstitious man — is a child or savage who will not achieve happiness until he grows up, sheds his fear, and learns to think for himself. These passages remind us of the way in which the atheist identity is defined against several Others: as Richard Nash has argued, “the figure of the wild man constitutes a complex alter ego to the idealized abstraction of the Citizen of

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 8-10. “By imagination, fanaticism, custom, prejudice, and above all, by authority.”

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 4-5. “A child devoid of experience, incapable of working toward his happiness.”

Enlightenment,”¹²⁷ and here we can see that specific use of the ‘savage’ to highlight the traits of the civilized and enlightened man who lives in harmony with his own nature.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, d’Holbach’s understanding of the world is materialist: everything consists of matter, including the soul or mind. One consequence of d’Holbach’s insistence on the materiality of the soul is that man is not a free agent. He argues that the idea of free agency depends on a concept of the soul as immaterial and distinct from the body and thus unaffected by physical laws. In fact, d’Holbach says that all our ideas, thoughts, and opinions are caused by our physical senses; we are born without our consent and have no input in the way we are made. Our ideas are involuntary, and we are constantly modified by external causes over which we have no control.¹²⁸ The idea of free agency is the root of religion, since only a being with free will could merit reward or punishment from a divine being. Since the will is a modification in the brain determined by sensory input, the only being with free will is one without senses.¹²⁹

This does not mean that man cannot act virtuously without free will – or without religion. D’Holbach argues that morality derived from God is in fact arbitrary, since it distorts reason and obliges humans to stifle their nature. Man does not need God in order to be able to distinguish vice from virtue; the needs of his machine, that is, of his body,

¹²⁷ Richard Nash, *Wild Enlightenment: The Borders of Human Identity in the Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 3.

¹²⁸ D’Holbach, *Système de la Nature*, v. 1, 188.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 191. On d’Holbach’s fatalism, or system of necessity, see Jean-Claude Bourdin, “Le materialisme de d’Holbach pour ‘sortir’ de la philosophie?” in *Matérialistes français du XVIIIe siècle: La Mettrie, Helvétius, d’Holbach*, eds. Sophie Audidière, Jean-Claude Bourdin, Jean-Marie Lardic, Francine Markovits, & Yves Charles Zarka (Paris: Presses Universitaire de France, 2006).

will lead him to behave virtuously toward others in order to earn their benevolence, which he requires for his own well-being. Selfishness, or vice, will isolate him: “le trouble & le désordre de sa machine l’avertiront promptement que la nature n’approuve point sa conduite, qu’il la contredit.” Nature instructs man to be sociable, honest, active, loving, and ashamed of his crimes; religion depraves man by leading him to hate and avoid society, to be abject, to waste energy in prayer instead of doing work, to prefer God over his parents, to be ashamed of sexual love, and to regard confession to God as sufficient expiation for one’s crimes. In short, religious morality is opposed to natural morality in all ways.¹³⁰

The concept of the machine is key to d’Holbach’s reasoning. “Machine” refers to both the body and the mind, which operate together according to natural laws. The mechanism that is the human being makes him moral and virtuous automatically in order to preserve itself. Religion corrupts this natural morality and thus must be rejected as harmful to the individual machine and to society. D’Holbach reprises his position that religion is harmful in his later moral-political works, in which he argues that morality based on religious precepts is flawed because it starts from the premise that man is corrupt. Religious morality attempts to suppress man’s natural and necessary passions; this suppression then leads to unhappiness and vice. Governments, being made up of men who, like their subjects, are under the spell of priests and their prejudices, become tyrannical. The remedy for these problems is reason; a man who uses reason can escape

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, v. 2, ch. 9, esp. 273-275. “The trouble and disorder of his machine warns him promptly that nature does not approve his conduct, which contradicts it [nature].” Maurice Cranston describes this concept as the invisible hand of Nature. See *Philosophers and Pamphleteers: Political Theorists of the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 134.

the darkness of ignorance and superstition and learn to achieve virtue. When a government uses reason, it can guide society towards virtue through laws based on reason rather than on superstition.¹³¹

Unlike Meslier and Deschamps, d’Holbach believes in the importance of authority, even if that authority should not be religious. In *Morale Universelle*, d’Holbach argues that government is necessary in order to enforce the social pact which binds men together; without government, people will forget the pact. Of course, if all men are enlightened and reasonable, that is, committed to using reason, then there would be no need for government, either.¹³² Since not all men are enlightened and reasonable — and d’Holbach did not believe they ever would be¹³³ — then government is required. The form of government did not matter as long as it conformed to equity, maintained the social pact, and acted as the pact’s guardian, for every sovereign exercises legitimate authority.¹³⁴ That legitimacy depends, however, on the just and equitable application of

¹³¹ For another perspective on this issue, which focuses on the materialist theory of the passions, see Josiane Boulad-Ayoub, “‘L’homme de la raison future’ et la politique naturelle des passions,” in *Matérialistes français du XVIIIe siècle: La Mettrie, Helvétius, d’Holbach*, eds. Sophie Audidière, Jean-Claude Bourdin, Jean-Marie Lardic, Francine Markovits, & Yves Charles Zarka (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2006).

¹³² Paul Henri Thiry, Baron d’Holbach, *La Morale Universelle, ou les Devoirs de l’Homme fondés sur sa Nature*, facs. ed. (Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1970 [1776]), v. 1, s. 4, ch. 2, 22. Originally published in three volumes by Marc-Michel Rey, d’Holbach’s regular publisher, in Amsterdam. *Morale Universelle* and *Système Social* are essentially the same books, with the same ideas presented somewhat differently. *Ethocratie, ou le Gouvernement fondé sur la Morale* (Amsterdam: M.-M. Rey, 1776) is a condensed version of the ideas set out in *Morale Universelle* and *Système Social*. I have used both *Morale Universelle* and *Système Social* for this discussion, but not *Ethocratie*.

¹³³ As discussed in the previous chapter, d’Holbach, like many other atheist writers, regarded atheism as impossible for the common people because it requires a fully developed capacity for reason. D’Holbach wrote in *Système de la Nature* that it would not be possible to eradicate superstition from all of mankind, or even from the majority of mankind. This rather begs the question of how a society free of religion would be achieved.

¹³⁴ D’Holbach, *Morale Universelle*, v. 1 s. 4, ch. 2, 24.

the laws to all. Tyrants lose their legitimate authority and bring rebellion upon themselves: “Tout Prince qui se révolte contre des loix équitables, invite ses sujets à se révolter contre lui.”¹³⁵ The people have the right to resist a tyrant and even to treat him as an enemy, because, if he has broken the laws, he has no right to claim their protection.¹³⁶

Monarchy could be a good form of government: *Morale Universelle* includes an address to Louis XVI, in which he exhorts the king to receive the pure and disinterested homage of one who reveres him and to continue to be a “Prince vraiment bon,” and to restore justice, repeal barbarous laws, and become the legislator of a great people.¹³⁷ D’Holbach wrote favourably of republics, but was opposed to democracies because the people are not enlightened and reasonable enough to run a moral society,¹³⁸ and warned that a perfect equality between members of society would be a true injustice because distinctions and ranks are important and necessary ways of marking and rewarding those who are more useful to society.¹³⁹ In an important sense, d’Holbach’s imagined society would look much like the society he already lived in, with its hierarchies and social inequalities. The basis for such inequalities would be different, but the underlying

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, v. 1, s. 4, ch. 3, 59. “Any prince who revolts against equitable laws, invites his subjects to revolt against him.”

¹³⁶ Paul Henri Thiry, Baron d’Holbach, *Système Social, ou Principes Naturels de la Morale et de la Politique, avec un examen de l’Influence du Gouvernement sur les Moeurs*, 3. vols., facs. ed. (Kissinger Publishing [Amsterdam: M.-M. Rey, 1773]), v. 2, ch. 5, 84.

¹³⁷ D’Holbach, *Morale Universelle*, v. 2, s. 4, ch. 2, 31-32.

¹³⁸ D’Holbach, *Système Social*, v. 2, ch. 2, 47.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, v. 1, ch. 12, 204.

principle is that humans are not born equal in talent and ability and should not be treated as if they are.

D'Holbach even includes, most surprisingly given his view of religion as the source of mankind's unhappiness, a role for the clergy within his imagined society. In *Morale Universelle*, d'Holbach explains that any religion, opinion, doctrine, and so on that is contrary to the nature of a reasonable and sociable man must be rejected; however, he allows that religion can conform to nature and to a true divinity. Morality is the touchstone of religion,¹⁴⁰ and all who follow wisdom or reason can be regarded as very religious, even if they are atheists. This rather startling chapter establishes freedom of belief and worship as long as everyone conforms to the laws and morals of the society.¹⁴¹ The clergy are respected, provided that they and their religion are not undermining society's laws and morals, and d'Holbach suggests that they have valuable experience and expertise in educating the young.¹⁴²

If d'Holbach is relatively indifferent regarding the form that legitimate authority takes, he is more definitive about how people should act in his imagined moral society, beginning with the precept that virtue consists of contributing to the well-being of society. Virtue alone is worthy of affection, esteem and veneration. Vice, defined as that which harms the well-being of society, merits hate, contempt and punishment. Whereas the virtuous man is wise and reasonable, the vicious man is blind, insane, a child devoid

¹⁴⁰ D'Holbach, *Morale Universelle* v. 2, s. 4, ch. 7, 146.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 154-155.

of experience and reason.¹⁴³ In *Morale Universelle*, D'Holbach lists several social virtues, including but not limited to: justice, the social pact, compassion, temperance and chastity, prudence and tolerance. The corresponding list of bad morals includes injustice, homicide, theft, cruelty, vanity, luxury, greed, ingratitude, envy, hypocrisy and intemperance, among others. But how does a society become moral? It is not quite as simple as eliminating religion and teaching everyone about materialism. People learn by the example of others, so, in addition to parents providing proper education for their children, all of society must demonstrate good morals. The only way to accomplish this, d'Holbach suggests, is through a top-down approach: "Le Gouvernement seul peut faire régner dans un Etat les vertus générales & les mœurs publiques."¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, parents, particularly fathers, must take special care to set proper examples for their children, who imitate what they see.¹⁴⁵ The whole moralization process is initiated through the enlightened education of princes and other future leaders, who will grow up to lead their states toward virtue and morality through their own example.¹⁴⁶ Magistrates will enforce the laws, just as they do in actual society; however, if they are to retain their posts, they must themselves adhere to the laws and morals.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, v. 1, s. 3, ch. 1, 150.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, v. 3. s. 5, ch. 3, 66. "The government alone can make general virtues and public morals rule in a state." Alain Sandrier remarks that d'Holbach's obsessive fear of the common people's excesses made him disinclined to leave reform in their hands. *Le Style Philosophique du Baron d'Holbach*, 544.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 66-68.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, v. 2 s. 4. ch. 7.

Although all children should receive a public or national education, they will not all study the same things; rather, along with the essential moral education, they will be taught according to their own dispositions and abilities, which will ensure that the state has enough trained physicians, astronomers, philosophers, and so on. Children of the nobility must receive a military education in order to fulfil their eventual roles, while the poor will be consoled by their moral education.¹⁴⁸ Again, it appears that not much will actually change in d'Holbach's imagined society, for the social and economic hierarchies will remain. The children of the rich will, as always, have better opportunities than the children of the poor, who, it seems, will continue much as they were, but will feel better about their honourable lives of hard work.¹⁴⁹

Système de la Nature says almost nothing about women, but d'Holbach does not forget them in his moral-philosophical works. *Système Social*, for instance, includes a full chapter devoted to women. This is a strongly expressed denunciation of the cruelty inflicted on women when they are forced to marry men they do not love and may not even know; when they are seduced; and when they are forced into prostitution. D'Holbach condemns the indissolubility of marriage, arguing that nothing is more absurd, unjust, and tyrannical than to force two spouses who hate each other to remain together (D'Holbach was, by all accounts, happily married and was a loyal husband and

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, v. 3. s. 5, ch. 3, 87-93. Both William Doyle and Jonathan Israel have pointed out that d'Holbach argued for the abolition of the nobility, yet here he is clearly treating them as having a particular role to play in the moral society. This illustrates the difficulty of pinning down d'Holbach's political and moral philosophy, which is reformulated multiple times in his copious books and articles. See William Doyle, *Aristocracy and its Enemies in the Age of Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 141-142; Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 808. Doyle cites *Ethocratie*; Israel cites *Système Social*.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 93.

dutiful father).¹⁵⁰ The misery of unhappy spouses leads to vice, including and especially sexual vice. Women are particularly vulnerable to sexual vice because they spend their time in idleness or on frivolities such as reading novels, which corrupt them with their lascivious messages.¹⁵¹

The essential problem, according to d'Holbach, is that women are not properly educated. Their lack of education leaves them incapable of using reason and therefore susceptible to the lies of religion. Women are valued only for their beauty, charm, and virginity at marriage, not for their capacity for reason or for productive work (we see here a clear class bias, but d'Holbach was not writing for the peasants). They are therefore encouraged to remain idle, and are discouraged or prevented from learning. D'Holbach's anger at this state of affairs is clear. As he explains it, the deliberate failure to educate girls renders them effectively powerless against their parents and their husbands because they accept the poisonous and controlling religious morality that is all they have been taught. They then perpetuate abuses against their own daughters because they do not know any better.¹⁵²

D'Holbach does not believe women are destined by nature to servitude and victimization. He argues that women are just as capable as men are of learning and of using reason; he even cites Plato to support the idea that women could govern states and command armies if their education was the same as that of men. Some women have in

¹⁵⁰ D'Holbach, *Système Social*, v. 3, ch. 10, 186-187. *Morale Universelle* contains the same arguments within the chapter on education.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 188-189.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 174-184.

fact, as he puts it, governed empires with wisdom and glory. But when women rulers are capricious, frivolous, and immoral, they will quickly lead a state to ruin.¹⁵³ Therefore, a proper, enlightened education is essential. The chapter concludes with an exhortation to women to respect themselves, to cultivate the fine spirits and lively imaginations that nature has given them, to use reason, to reject the lies and machinations of men who would seduce them, and to set good examples for the nation through their virtuous conduct.¹⁵⁴ In short, d'Holbach wants women, as well as men, to become enlightened so that the nation as a whole will eventually become enlightened and virtuous.

D'Holbach believed in natural individuality — he explains in *Système de la Nature* that no two individual creatures are the same, and that no two humans will achieve happiness in exactly the same way. This natural differentiation or inequality between individuals is necessary to society, for without it humans all have the same abilities and would not need to associate with each other.¹⁵⁵ Despite this valued individuality, d'Holbach's imagined society is, as Maurice Cranston notes, one in which individual freedom is subordinated “to discipline, law, and virtue.”¹⁵⁶ Becoming a virtuous member of society requires training from infancy in learning to moderate one's natural passions, for it is immoderate passions that lead to many of the vices, such as sexual debauchery and violence. In addition to education and legislation, there would be considerable social pressure to present oneself as a virtuous example; every member of

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 184-185.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 192-194.

¹⁵⁵ D'Holbach, *Système de la Nature*, v. 1, ch. 9.

¹⁵⁶ Cranston, *Philosophers and Pamphleteers*, 129.

society is, in effect, responsible for the moral lessons that other members of society learn. Further, while it is true that d'Holbach defends entitlements on the grounds of utility, in that they are rewards for being more useful to society than others, it is obvious from what he says about education that entitlements would be passed down from parents to children. The most radical proposals within d'Holbach's works concern women and marriage: there is an undeniable egalitarian component to his ideal society that would grant women more control over their own lives than they possessed in actuality. This is overall, however, an imagined society that ameliorates the conditions of actual society rather than overturning or reinventing them.¹⁵⁷

Dom Deschamps

Dom Deschamps, the “enlightened atheist” who criticized other atheists, particularly d'Holbach, for not being radical enough, set out his own imagined society in *Le Vrai Système*, a work that remained unpublished until the twentieth century. This short but complex book explains some of the same points as *Le Mot de L'Énigme Metaphysique et Moral*, which I discuss in the previous chapter, but focuses more sharply on Deschamps' vision of the moral state of human existence. This is the most radical of the atheist imaginaries; although it shares features in common with Meslier's communal society, it is more strongly anarchist in its rejection of all laws as oppressive.

¹⁵⁷ My assessment challenges that of Jonathan Israel, who regards d'Holbach as a revolutionary thinker and democratic republican. See e.g. *Democratic Enlightenment*, 653. Israel does recognize that d'Holbach thought direct democracy was impossible (*ibid.*, 813), but is, I think, too committed to the idea that d'Holbach was opposed to monarchy and aristocracy. This is perhaps an instance of ambiguity that Israel cannot bring himself to acknowledge.

Deschamps begins with the thesis that the universe is a unity, *Le Tout*. It is being, movement, time, perfect unity, primitive beauty.¹⁵⁸ Everything that exists within the universe is part of its whole, including humans; thus, everything has both a physical existence as a single body and a metaphysical existence as a connected part of *Le Tout*, or, as Deschamps expresses it, “les êtres sont dans l’être,” or “il y a Tout dans le Tout.”¹⁵⁹ This concept of *Tout dans le Tout* is what leads Bronislaw Baczko to refer to Deschamps’ philosophy as “mystical materialism.”¹⁶⁰ It is the key to Deschamps’ imagined society, for it is our metaphysical existence within the perfect unity of *Le Tout* that gives us “le vrai principe moral”: our moral equality as human beings.¹⁶¹

Paralleling this triple physical, metaphysical and moral existence, which Jean Thomas and Franco Venturi suggest is an interpretation of the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity,¹⁶² Deschamps argued that men existed in two actual states and one potential state. The first is the savage state of disunion without any form of social union; the second is a state of extreme disunion within a social union, which Deschamps called the present state of laws. The potential state is a state of union without disunion that would be the state of

¹⁵⁸ Dom Deschamps, *Le Vrai Système*, eds. Jean Thomas & Franco Venturi (Geneva: Droz, 1963), 71-78, esp. 78 n. h.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 88 n. r. “Beings are within the being”; “there is Everything in the All.”

¹⁶⁰ Bronislaw Baczko, *Utopian Lights: The Evolution of the Idea of Social Progress*, trans. Judith L. Greenberg (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 71-110. Baczko’s summary and analysis of Deschamps’ ideas has been very helpful, although we are interested in different aspects of *Le Vrai Système*.

¹⁶¹ Deschamps, *Le Vrai Système*, 83-85.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, Introduction, 37-39.

customs, or the social state without laws. In this final state, the truth alone can make men happy.¹⁶³

Deschamps' critique of the state of laws focuses on the idea that it was founded "sur l'absurdité des lois prétendues divines."¹⁶⁴ Just as these divine laws subjugate humans under an imaginary God, human laws subjugate them under tyrants, while the church subjugates the heart and spirit of the ignorant man. The soldier and the priest work together, or, indeed, perform essentially the same function in ensuring that the people remain servile to their rulers. Heaven and the defense of the people are the dual masks of the church and the sword that maintain the oppressive power of rulers.¹⁶⁵ Deschamps theorizes that social inequality originates in physical inequality and a lack of understanding of the metaphysical and moral equality of humans. That understanding can come only through difficult meditation, so it is no surprise that, in order to evolve beyond the state of savagery, humans committed the true original sin of establishing the state of laws, which, for Deschamps, is inherently tyrannical.¹⁶⁶ Morality is innate,¹⁶⁷ so divine laws — indeed, any laws — are an unnecessary and harmful imposition that leads to tyranny as those in power strive to maintain order and protect themselves. As Baczko

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 101-102.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 106. "On the absurdity of the pretended divine laws."

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 115-117.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 100-105.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 150.

notes, Deschamps provides only an abstract explanation of how the third state will come about; there will be war, but he refers to no specific war or state.¹⁶⁸

Turning now to Deschamps' ideal state — the state of customs or morals — it is immediately apparent that it is much like Meslier's imagined society, in that land will belong to all and will be cultivated together for the common enjoyment.¹⁶⁹ Deschamps elaborates on this important aspect of his moral society, explaining that although property exists in nature, even among savages and animals, it will be *unnatural* in his future state of morals for anyone to work land only for himself. He distinguishes between what merely occurs in nature and what is natural, using the example of sodomy, which certainly occurs in nature but is "*contre nature* dans le sens qu'elle est contre la génération [original emphasis]."¹⁷⁰

He makes a somewhat different distinction between what is against nature and what is not in order to support his arguments that both marriage and celibacy are unnatural and cruel, and that women should be held in common.¹⁷¹ Deschamps has a general sexual freedom in mind, with men being a common good to women as women are to men;¹⁷² he also writes that although nature made women physically weaker than men, men should not abuse this difference and remove women's right to social equality, although he seems to believe that women are so different from men physically and in

¹⁶⁸ Baczko, *Utopian Lights*, 79-80.

¹⁶⁹ Deschamps, *Le Vrai Système*, 121.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 120 n. i. "Against nature in the sense that is it against generation."

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 120-125.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 163.

their intellectual capabilities that their only function and desire is to stay home and be pleasing to men.¹⁷³ Any claim by a man to exclusive access to a woman or women creates a property relation, which Deschamps believes to be the source of strife.¹⁷⁴ Specifically, claims to possess women and the goods of the earth as property are the sole primitive objects of division and war.¹⁷⁵ To those who would say that this kind of sexual freedom is unnatural, Deschamps concedes that it would indeed be unnatural in both the state of savagery and the state of laws, but insists that it is completely natural in the state of morals, in which there is no property and everyone has same morals and beliefs.¹⁷⁶

Education is important for inculcating the appropriate morals, but very little of that education is to be formal: after all, humans are born moral, and only need the example of others in their moral society. The only book that should be read is *Le Vrai Système*, which will provide all the knowledge one needs regarding the foundations of the natural world!¹⁷⁷ Besides, all other books and works of art will have been destroyed, in order to prevent the members of the state of morals from learning about the state of laws' vices and faulty morals, including the vice of luxury.¹⁷⁸ Grammar, rules of logic, eloquence, music, painting, and all the other liberal arts will be useless, as everyone is

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 124-125.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 122-126.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 150-151. Baczek points out that Deschamps' salon, described in the previous chapter, was in effect a secret society that initiated proselytes to the truth, who would then spread the revolution. *Utopian Lights*, 109-110.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 158.

born with knowledge they need, and such arts will only be detrimental to their reason, health, sense of equality, and tranquility.¹⁷⁹ It appears that only men will receive what little formal education there is, as there is no reference to women in these passages.

Another feature of this society of customs or morals is that all members will work together, without pretending that one kind of work is more useful than others.¹⁸⁰ Women and men will do different work, but everyone will live together in villages that help each other when needed.¹⁸¹ Women will nurse all infants as necessary, not, like the mercenary wet-nurses of the society of laws, for money, but for the common good.¹⁸² Each day will be much like any other,¹⁸³ and everyone will speak the same language, one which is easy to understand.¹⁸⁴ Work will not seem like work,¹⁸⁵ no one will fear death, there will be no burial ceremonies,¹⁸⁶ and men will be wise, just, and always in accord with each other.¹⁸⁷

A reader brought up to value individuality and diversity might be forgiven for shuddering at this detailed description of bland conformity, which conjures up images of totalitarian repression. A system for enforcing morals is, however, strikingly absent from Deschamps' state of morals, presumably because no one ever violates them. If all laws

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 174-175.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 163.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 171.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 168-169.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 173.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 183.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 176.

are a form of tyranny, then law enforcement is obviously out of the question. It is not even clear how decisions will be made. What is clear is the determining role of nature, which is the measure of everything in the state of morals: whatever is part of the state of morals is natural, or is included within the state or morals because it is moral. The argumentation is tautological, but highlights the absolute importance of the appeal to nature in this radical atheist vision.

Conclusion

Despite the differences between these four atheist writers' imagined societies, they share several features in common as an ideology. First, all are based on a materialist conception of the world: there is only one substance, there is no immaterial soul, and there is no God. Second, they develop this core concept by placing nature at the heart of their imaginaries: nature is the determinant and arbiter of what is right and good. Finally, they all require subordination of individuality to the public good or social order. Despite these shared core concepts, however, they diverge into distinct visions.

La Mettrie presents a radically relativistic view that strips all absolutes from morality and suggests that criminals are not responsible for their actions, yet proposes no reorganization of society and no reforms other than to improve education and cease trying to inculcate remorse in individuals. This particular reform is intended to increase individual happiness. La Mettrie otherwise appears to support measures to protect social

order, including capital punishment: one simply must not be deluded that such punishments reflect true justice.

D'Holbach's imagined society is organized much like his own, although its distinctions and hierarchies are meant to be based on merit. His most radical suggestions involve women and marriage, supporting women's education, freedom to choose their own spouses, and right to divorce. He even contemplates the possibility of female rulers, provided they have been properly educated. The inclusion of religion and clergy within his ideal society is its most startling aspect, given his hostility toward religion. He did not, as we know, believe that common people were capable of achieving virtuous atheism, so, evidently, religion retains a role in establishing and maintaining morality.

Meslier and Deschamps share similar visions of anarchist, communist societies free of religion, tyranny and inequality. Meslier is more blunt regarding the necessity of violent revolution in order to achieve the ideal society, while Deschamps presents a more detailed picture of what life would be like in his state of morals. Both assume that humans possess an innate sense of morality that only needs the correct education in reason to flourish. Strikingly, Deschamps' society rejects art, literature, and all knowledge other than what is contained in *Le Vrai Système* as tainted by the tyrannical and immoral state of laws.

Considering these four imagined societies together, what stands out is their somewhat counter-intuitive focus on uniformity and the common good. This focus is surprising, I suggest, because we might have expected atheists in eighteenth-century France to be non-conformists by nature; after all, they are themselves obviously non-

conformist by virtue of being atheists, even if they adhere outwardly to every law and custom of their society. They appear, however, to have perceived no value in an individualistic, pluralistic society. This can, it seems to me, be traced to their sense of their own intellectual and moral superiority as atheists who know the truth: if the truth is already known, why would a society require other truths? The emphasis on social order and the public good may also be a function of these writers' desire to show that religion is not required in order to prevent chaos. The desire for order seems, however, to be a genuinely important aspect of these atheist visions that can lead to rigid, totalizing models of how a society should be organized so as to achieve individual happiness and social order.

This highlights the dark side of claiming to possess the truth: there is no room for competing visions, divergent imaginaries, or different opinions about what moral behaviour is. Anyone who does not accept the truth cannot be part of the social imaginary and, thus, of the atheist society. As we have already seen in chapter 3, many atheist writers believed that most men and women were incapable of understanding the truth, which suggests that the ideal atheist societies would either be very small or would have two social classes: the elite men who have achieved atheism, and everyone else. To take a cynical view, it would (still) be the elite men telling everyone else what was natural and therefore right, which would open the door to the same kinds of exploitation and abuse that the atheists were trying to prevent. Seemingly progressive arguments in favour of sexual freedom, for example, take on a different hue if considered in light of the exclusion of women from the privileged circles of truth. When only one group has the

moral authority to decide what is natural and what is unnatural, they have a tremendous amount of power over the rest of their society. The parallel with priests and theologians is unavoidable.

These observations should not make us lose sight of the fact that all of these writers aimed to liberate humanity, one way or another, from what they saw as its unnatural oppression by religion, traditional morality and abuse of secular power. In that sense, they were revolutionaries of the mind, even if they did not all propose radical social and political change. It is necessary, however, *pace* Jonathan Israel, to acknowledge that their ideology was less democratic or progressive than the defenders of modern secularity might wish.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Summary

Chapter 1 introduced my research questions, outlined the sources and methodology of this dissertation, and presented a survey and critique of the existing historiography of atheism. One of the central points of that chapter was that the eighteenth century was an important moment in atheism's long and obscure history because that is when systematic atheism emerged into public view as part of the French Enlightenment. Chapter 1 also established that this dissertation takes a different approach to the study of atheism. First, it focuses not on atheism's causes, influence or intellectual sources but on its subjective dimensions. Second, it fuses intellectual and cultural history by incorporating the insights of gender history, a general cultural-studies understanding of identity as a construction, and the concept of ideology as a system of shared beliefs about the ideal arrangement of society. This dissertation argues that the men who produced works of committed atheism in the eighteenth century were attempting to transform the social imaginary significations, or complex web of meanings permeating

and directing early modern European society, that dehumanized atheists and, in their view, imprisoned humans in the oppressive delusions and lies of religion.

Chapter 1 explores some of the methodological issues associated with the study of atheism, including the difficulty of identifying committed atheists and the thorny problem of whether to read texts esoterically in order to ‘uncover’ hidden atheist meanings. As the introduction explains, I have avoided esoteric readings and concentrated instead on drawing as clear a distinction as possible between committed atheism, other heterodoxies, and ‘covert’ atheism. This necessitated leaving out many works written by anti-clerical and deist authors, such as Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau. What emerged from this winnowing process was a small but relatively cohesive corpus of French atheist works.

The introduction also examines the recent historiography of atheism and finds that much of it is flawed by a narrow intellectual-historical approach that ignores the potential contributions of cultural and gender history. More importantly, perhaps, the existing historiography is overly concerned with the role of atheism in the making of modernity; the problem here is not so much with that subject itself, but with a general lack of reflexivity regarding *a priori* commitments to one narrative or another about modernity. These commitments encourage one-sided interpretations that tend to cast atheists in the exaggerated roles of heroes or villains. This tendency is most evident in the work of Jonathan Israel, who argues in his series of books on the Enlightenment and the French Revolution that the radical Enlightenment was essentially atheist and that this atheism generated the democratic republicanism that created the secular modern world. In this

account, atheists from Spinoza (whom many historians would not agree was an atheist) to d'Holbach are the heroes of modernity.

This dissertation has avoided direct engagement with the debate over atheism and modernity, as well as with the long-standing debate over whether the Enlightenment was essentially anti-religious. My goal has been to understand the atheism of the eighteenth century for itself, not to make grand claims regarding its significance. We need to pay closer attention to what atheists said and how they were read before drawing broader conclusions. This attention must be open-minded; that is, historians should not assume that the presence of a handful of atheist works among the vast number of texts produced during the Enlightenment means the Enlightenment as a whole was anti-religious. Conversely, negative reactions to such works should not lead us to assume that no one agreed with them. It is clear that atheism generated a great deal of interest in the eighteenth century.¹ It is less clear what that means. This dissertation's major contribution to the historiography of atheism, and to that of the Enlightenment, is to show that eighteenth-century atheism was a complex and contradictory phenomenon that, while revolutionary in its aims to change the social imaginary, does not map neatly onto 'radical,' 'modern' or 'progressive' positions. As chapters 3 and 4 demonstrated, atheist identity was exclusionary, and atheist ideology tended to naturalize the subordination of individuality to the common good. These aspects of eighteenth-century atheism need to

¹ See e.g. Mark Curran, *Atheism, Religion and Enlightenment in Pre-Revolutionary Europe*, appendices 2 and 3, for lists of responses to d'Holbach's works (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Royal Historical Society, 2012); Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*, table 2.5, for the number of orders of clandestine books, including several by d'Holbach (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995), 63-64; and Jonathan Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750-1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 779-807 on the diffusion of radical philosophy, especially d'Holbach's.

be better understood before we can draw general conclusions about its role in European, Western or global history. The horse needs to be put back in front of the cart.

This dissertation also contributes to the study of contemporary atheism in terms of identity and ideology, an approach being pioneered by sociologists such as Stephen LeDrew. If LeDrew is correct, as I believe he is, that “New Atheism is a *secular fundamentalism*, a modern utopian ideology that is also an active movement for social transformation [original emphasis],” then we need to connect it to its roots and historical analogues in order to understand it fully. LeDrew challenges “the assumption that the secular movement is liberal and progressive” and remarks that “the rightward political drift of atheism is an amazing development for a movement with roots in socialism, revolution against established powers, and social justice.”² My research suggests that this development would seem less amazing if LeDrew looked beyond the nineteenth century to the ways in which eighteenth-century atheists, for all their interest in transforming the social imaginary, constructed an identity and ideology that restricted authority to the elite men who were capable of grasping the truth of atheism and subordinated everyone else.

Chapter 2 contextualized the analysis of atheist texts by examining the anti-atheist discourse and practices of early modern Europe. In this discourse, atheism was imagined as a poison and atheists as monsters or madmen — enemies of humanity who would destroy the Christian social order if given the opportunity. This dehumanizing anti-atheist discourse was moderated somewhat by the availability of Lucretius’s poem *De rerum natura*, which presented a positive image of atheists, and by Pierre Bayle’s argument that

² Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism: The Politics of a Modern Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2-3.

virtuous atheism and civil atheist societies were possible. There were no mass persecutions of atheists to parallel the witch hunts, pogroms against Jews, or massacres of ‘heretics.’ Furthermore, there appears to have been no push by the populace for the persecution of atheists. Anti-atheism seems to have been, like systematic atheism itself, largely an elite phenomenon.

Anti-atheism was, however, put into practice through the refusal of official toleration, which was gradually extended to religious minority groups from the sixteenth to the late eighteenth centuries, and through censorship. Neither intolerance nor censorship were restricted to atheism, and atheists suffered far less from actual persecution than other groups. Nevertheless, these conditions shaped the development of an atheist identity based on a sense of estrangement and resistance to repression.

Chapter 3 argued that atheists were well aware that their beliefs were intolerable to their society and that they had to keep them hidden. This created a tension within the atheist identity between the desire to resist repression and share the truth, and the need to conform in order to avoid the risk of exposure. Works such as *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*, by Nicholas Fréret, counselled a life of outward conformity to a worldview that seemed not only false, but delusional; Jean Meslier loathed himself for perpetuating the lies of religion through his priestly office, but kept his atheism secret until his death; and the Baron d’Holbach hid his identity as the author of dozens of anti-religious works, including the ‘atheist bible’ *Système de la Nature*. Atheists felt alienated, estranged from their society, but also saw themselves as superior to the majority of people within it because they alone could see and understand the truth that there is no God and all religion

is an oppressive lie. An atheist identity formed in the eighteenth century around those elements of estrangement, superiority, and a sense of duty to share the truth.

As expressed in French atheist texts, the atheist identity is clearly elitist. For many of the authors, atheism was an intellectual achievement that was within the reach of only a select few members of society. Atheists imagined themselves and their beliefs as virtuous. True atheism was not simply a matter of denying the existence of God, but also entailed a superior morality based on an understanding of nature. This virtuous atheism was a primarily masculine pursuit, for only exceptional women possessed the intellectual capacity, education, and moral sense to overcome their childish fears and superstitions. Atheists defined themselves as virtuous, superior men — as wise father figures — against several Others, including priests, fools, savages and women, but, most importantly, against the figure of the child who fears the dark.

This self-definition was a necessary attempt, for atheists, to re-humanize themselves in order to claim a space and positive role within civil society. The eighteenth-century atheist writers deserve more recognition for the boldness of this attempt to change the social imaginary, which may have been as important as the arguments against God and religion. At the same time, the atheists were conformists in their assumptions about what virtuous behaviour meant and who was capable of it — aside, that is, from the decidedly non-conformist idea that atheists could be virtuous. Tracing the impact of the virtuous atheist identity of the eighteenth century is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but it seems reasonable to speculate that it shaped the self-understandings of late eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century atheists.

It is suggestive, for example, that the revolutionary Sylvain Maréchal introduces his *Dictionnaire des Athées* of 1800 with an explanation of what an atheist is not — an immoral sybarite — and what he is, that is, a good family man and worker. The atheist's identity is explicitly domesticated; Maréchal suggests that a happy, unified family has no need of God. A typical day in the life of an atheist begins in the arms of his wife; after getting up, he gives his children their first lesson of the day and then has breakfast with his family. He spends his day in useful activity, never being bored and always finding an observation to make or a service to render. In the evening, he relaxes with his family or with a friend before enjoying a peaceful sleep.³ In short, the man without God is happy and useful, a philosopher without pretension, as Maréchal puts it, capable of independent thought but with no need for “une ostentation puérile.”⁴

There is a certain appeal to this bourgeois, family man identity that Maréchal imagines; it is at least not aristocratic. It is still, however, an exclusive identity. It is available only to men, who, according to Maréchal, are the natural heads of families. Maréchal argued elsewhere against teaching women to read, and blamed women's backsliding for the continued power of priests in French society. What he wanted above all was a society based on filial piety, with fathers as the benevolent and enlightened rulers. Women were to be respected mothers and wives, but not philosophers and therefore not atheists — unless, one supposes, their fathers were atheists.⁵

³ Sylvain Maréchal, *Dictionnaire des Athées anciens & modernes*, ed. Jean-Pierre Jackson (Paris: Coda, 2008), 5-11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

The gendered and exclusionary nature of Maréchal's godless family man reminds us of the problematic elements of the atheist identity as it was imagined in the eighteenth century, and suggests that attention ought to be paid to what ideas were transmitted in atheist texts along with the arguments against God and the critiques of religion. The imagery of fearful children, ignorant fools and savages, and so on was used to reinforce the atheist claims to be wise, clear-eyed adults who feared nothing, including death. It necessarily created a distinction between classes of citizens: the adults/fathers and the dependent children, or everyone else. Since children, fools and savages could hardly be trusted to make meaningful decisions, leadership of society would fall to the mature atheists. Maréchal makes this explicit in *Dictionnaire des Athées*, referring several times to believers as children and envisioning a republic of atheist citizens that will be superior to a society based on adherence to religion.

Maréchal was following in the footsteps of earlier atheist writers who also described ideal, imagined societies. Chapter 4 argued that eighteenth-century atheism articulated an ideology, or shared system of beliefs about the ideal arrangement of society. Jean Meslier, Julien Offray de la Mettrie, the Baron d'Holbach, and Dom Deschamps attempted to change the social imaginary by presenting alternative moral and social orders based on a materialist concept of nature as active and self-sufficient. This active nature determined everything through the laws of cause and effect, reducing humans to machines governed by their physical drives. While some aspects of these imagined societies could be seen as progressive, such as the concern for justice and an egalitarian view of sexuality that saw it as a natural need for both men and women, as

well as arguments for the free dissolution of unhappy marriages, others are troubling. In particular, despite the differences between these imagined societies in terms of their political forms, all four emphasized the subordination of the individual to the common good, under a single moral code. This is not because these atheists thought every human was the same: La Mettrie and d'Holbach, for example, both wrote specifically about how individual variations within the human machine led to different needs, desires, tolerances, talents and so on. The emphasis on nature (whether genetic or environmental), however, as the determinant of human behaviour led to the conclusion that the same moral code could and should apply to everyone in order to ensure a peaceable civil society. For La Mettrie, this moral code was arbitrary, with no absolute good or evil; for d'Holbach, Meslier and Deschamps, morality was innate and only needed to be set free from the chains of fear, ignorance and religion in order to flourish.

It is unfair, perhaps, to zero in on the subordination of the individual in these imagined societies, for none of these figures seem to have considered in a meaningful way the possibility of dissent within their enlightened societies. This should not be too surprising, for if all humans share the same basic machine design and therefore the same basic needs and drives, and if morality, or, as La Mettrie would have it, the desire to avoid punishment, is innate, then where would dissent come from once the ideal society has been established? Furthermore, all of these ideal societies were imagined before the revolutions of the late eighteenth century, before the Terror, before the age of nationalism, and before the age of total war and totalitarianism. None of these authors had to witness the consequences of attempting to build new societies; the world was not yet

disillusioned with utopias.⁶ Nevertheless, it is important to recognize this element of atheist thought, this blindness to the possibility of resistance to the truth, especially since atheists themselves were necessarily dissenters within eighteenth-century French society. They exhorted readers to think for themselves, but it seems that this was only important for the purposes of getting rid of religion. Once that had happened, further free thought was apparently unnecessary.

From a feminist perspective, another troubling element of these imagined societies is precisely the focus on nature as the cause and determinant of everything about human life. This way of thinking slips easily into biological essentialism and the assumption that women's only meaningful function is to produce children. None of the atheist texts go quite that far, but there are strong hints in Deschamps' *Le Vrai Système* that women's role within that society is merely to please the men and, indeed, to raise children. None of the atheist imagined societies seem to have a role for women as leaders, although d'Holbach suggests that they may be capable of political leadership if properly educated (which he held to be a requirement for male rulers, too). In general, atheist texts were written for male readers. With the exceptions of *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe* and *Lettres à Eugénie*, which may also have been intended for male readers even though addressed to women, all of the works of the atheist corpus take man as the norm and assume the reader is male.

Women are, for the most part, irrelevant in the eighteenth-century atheist imagination except in precisely the spheres we would expect to find male interest in

⁶ On this point, see e.g. Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge MA: Belknap, 2010), esp. 120-175.

them: sex, marriage and motherhood. The gendering of atheism as masculine that we see in the formation of the atheist identity is reiterated and reinforced in the depictions of imagined societies based on natural morality; as I have already pointed out, Sylvain Maréchal wrote explicitly that atheism was for men, suggesting that this gendering could be imbibed along with the rest of the ideas put forward in atheist texts.

My incorporation of gender in the analysis of atheist texts is perhaps the most novel of this dissertation's contributions. As far as I am aware, no other scholars of atheism have set out to include gender analysis of these texts, except to note that some of the authors supported some rights for women. Furthermore, as Christine Overall noted a few years ago, little has been written about feminism and atheism.⁷ This dissertation begins to bridge the gap between these two fields by showing that gender is relevant to the study of atheism. Moreover, my findings on the exclusion of women from the atheist identity suggest that feminists should not assume atheism would necessarily be better for women than the monotheist religions they have typically criticized.⁸

I do not mean to suggest that the atheist texts of the eighteenth century should be ignored or rejected because of the issues I have noted. Alongside their elitism, subordination of individuality, and troublesome remarks about women, the 'old' atheists also expressed optimism that humans could, in fact, free themselves from the bonds of ignorance and fear, and that society could be more just, equitable and peaceful for both

⁷ Christine Overall, "Feminism and Atheism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 233.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 246. On the 'boys' club' of New Atheism, see e.g. Melanie Elyse Brewster, "Atheism, Gender, and Sexuality," in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, eds. Stephen Bullivant & Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 517.

men and women. They all believed in the importance of education for everyone, even if that education might be, as in the case of Deschamps' moral state, limited to what was deemed necessary for the common good. In short, they believed in moral and social progress and thus were, in at least this broad aspect of their thinking, part of the Enlightenment mainstream. La Mettrie makes the striking remark in his epigrammatic work *The System of Epicurus* that it is his belief that humans are machines that allowed him to have respect for them: this belief lets him treat their flaws, misdeeds and weaknesses of character as "only slight defects." In characteristically mischievous fashion, he adds that "materialism is the antidote to misanthropy."⁹ This statement sums up neatly the more positive side of eighteenth-century atheism, which, despite its darker shades, was ultimately an optimistic worldview.

Final Thoughts

In the introduction to *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor explains that his approach to talking about belief and unbelief focuses on them "not as rival *theories*, that is, ways that people account for existence, or morality, whether by God or by something in nature, or whatever [original emphasis]," but as "different kinds of lived experience ... alternative ways of living our moral/spiritual life in the broadest sense." Taylor argues that everyone, both believers and unbelievers, perceives their lives to have a "moral/spiritual shape" centered on "a fullness, or richness" that make life "fuller, richer, deeper, more worth

⁹ Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *The System of Epicurus*, in *Man-Machine and Other Writings*, ed. Ann Thomson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 103.

while, more admirable, more what it should be.” The nature of that source of fullness or richness is what varies between and among believers and unbelievers: both belief and unbelief are “lived conditions, not just . . . theories or sets of beliefs subscribed to.”¹⁰

I encountered Taylor, and this particular argument, while researching secularism and secularization. That research led me to the history of atheism, which I knew next to nothing about at the time. Taylor’s suggestion that unbelief is not only a theory, but also a lived condition, with a moral/spiritual shape, stimulated my questions about how eighteenth-century atheists perceived their own lives and their relationship to their society. These questions were not answered by the existing historiography, which, as I have noted, focuses on other issues. My purpose in this dissertation has been, therefore, not to examine atheist arguments concerning the existence of God, but to explore what *else* atheists in the eighteenth century had to say. How did non-belief in God shape their worldview? Did they envision alternative bases for morality and social order, and if so, what did those look like? To put it in Cornelius Castoriadis’s terms, what were the social imaginary significations of an atheist worldview in the eighteenth century?

My research has not dealt with all the possibilities inherent in an inquiry into worldviews and social imaginary significations in the Enlightenment, but it has brought into focus the attempts of eighteenth-century atheists to change the social imaginary significations of their society through the formation of a re-humanized atheist identity and the development of an ideology that based morality and social order on the materialist concept of an active, self-sufficient nature.

¹⁰ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 2007), 4-8.

The moral/spiritual shape of this atheism, to come back to Charles Taylor, was centered on the fullness and richness of nature and strove to change the social imaginary in order to make life better for everyone who was willing to see the truth. My analysis of the atheist identity and ideology has been critical, but also recognizes the optimistic core of eighteenth-century atheism.

If we wish to develop a better understanding of atheism, in the past as well as in the present, we need to see it as more than a collection of anti-theological arguments or, as Alan Kors' work suggests, as an accidental by-product of theological disputes. Rethinking atheism in terms of identity and ideology opens up new possibilities for analysis and critique and for tracing links between 'old' and 'new' atheism. Further research might include direct comparative analyses of atheist ideas from the eighteenth through the twenty-first century, in order to better comprehend the continuities and ruptures between them. My own sense is that the basic content of atheist arguments against religion and the existence of God have changed very little since they were first presented by the ancient Greeks. It is debatable whether the atheist identity and ideology have changed much, either. What is different in our society is the possibility of public celebrity for outspoken atheists: the New Atheists do not need to publish anonymously, and are free to speak in public. They have gained more influence over public opinion than d'Holbach could have dreamed of. Atheists have therefore certainly benefited from the Enlightenment's campaigns for freedom of religion, freedom of the press, public education, and human rights. How much credit they should receive for those benefits remains to be explored more closely.

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