

THE RISE OF RELIGIOUS SKEPTICISM

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1. Introduction

In James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus expresses his rejection of religion with these words: "I will not serve." In so doing, he intentionally echoes the "*Non serviam*" of Lucifer which marked the fall of a third of the angels from God's sight. If we attempt to understand Stephen's, or Lucifer's, rejection of God, the search for the underlying reason might be endless, for in all likelihood, something other than reason is ultimately behind it. Cranly presses his friend Stephen: "Many persons have doubts, even religious persons, yet they overcome them or put them aside. Are your doubts . . . too strong?" Stephen responds, "I do not wish to overcome them."¹ Stephen's rejection is not based on reasons, but pure choice.

If every case of the rejection of religion is like Stephen's, then there is no hope of understanding the striking rise of atheism in the early modern period, because there is little to be understood, just documented. And to a certain degree, Stephen's case is paradigmatic. Religions neither gain nor lose the majority of their partisans by means of syllogisms. Yet, if there never had been an argument attacking the foundational claims of some or every religion, then it is hard to believe that any intelligent person would ever be attracted to atheism. On the other hand, if reasons began piling up suggesting that there is no God, or that the soul dies with the body, then one would expect to find an increase in boldness in those people who were aware of these arguments, perhaps even leading to a chorus of *non serviam*. Such a chorus can be found in the eighteenth century *philosophes*. Although there can be no enumeration of philosophical developments in the seventeenth century which is sufficient for explaining this rise of atheism, in the following pages we lay out several key developments which were instrumental for the rise of atheism.

The seventeenth century is the natural focus of historians of atheism because, in the century prior, a rational foundation for atheism was generally considered oxymoronic, whereas at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and continually throughout the Enlightenment, philosophical arguments undermining the existence of God, providence, the immortality of the soul, and other foundations of religion circulated, at first clandestinely, and later in the published works of some of Europe's most famous *philosophes*. A radical shift in thinking took place in the seventeenth century, giving rise to skepticism about the foundations of theology.

Formulating an atheistic philosophy was not merely a practical difficulty for thinkers of the sixteenth century, deriving from a temporary lack of metaphysical or scientific arguments, but was, in Lucien Febvre's view, a conceptual impossibility: atheism as a philosophical system, rather than as an immoral, libertine way of life, was literally unthinkable throughout the 1500s and early 1600s.² The sixteenth century was far too saturated in religion, far too restricted by the ecclesiastical Latin in which it communicated its ideas, and far too engrossed in the prejudice (supported by Scripture)³ that only fools and sinners could deny God's existence, for it to conceive of the "speculative atheist" who would begin to cause such a stir in the following century. That said, and seemingly paradoxically, philosophers and theologians of the period devoted much effort toward defeating the specter of the threat of atheism, which they hazily imagined as a constant threat.

At the end of the seventeenth century, however, in the early Enlightenment, not only was the speculative atheist now concretely imaginable but also there were numerous instances of such atheists who were writing books and who had no shortage of ammunition to employ against their theistic counterparts. A study of the clandestine atheistic texts of the early 1700s has led Gianluca Mori to conclude that the earliest overt atheists had found in the previous century a myriad of strongholds for their attacks on religion.⁴ No single philosopher or system had inspired all these atheists, no single target was their aim, and no single strategy was eventually adopted by them all. The rise of atheism was therefore not a case of a single Athena born from the head of a single Zeus. Rather, after centuries of philosophical and theological arguments aimed at drowning this indistinct threat, atheists distinctly emerged from the seventeenth century in full force like Pharaoh's army, frenzied and hostile, from the depths of the Red Sea. The question is therefore vital: what came about in the seventeenth century to breathe life and vigor into the previously unthinkable?

In the following we take numerous soundings in seventeenth century philosophy and find potential sources of the atheism of the next century lying at various depths of the works and trends we consider. We begin by considering individual philosophers: Descartes, Berkeley, Hobbes, Spinoza, Leibniz, and Bayle. Later, we consider a variety of themes related to atheism in diverse ways: Socinianism, theological disputes, idolatry, the secularization of ethics, the scientific revolution, skepticism, and biblical criticism. A word of caution is needed at the outset: Pierre Bayle inevitably figures in the story we have to tell, not only as a philosopher whose ideas were thought to give impetus to the later atheist cause, but also as a fellow commentator who documented the rise of atheism around him. His role in the story, therefore, occasionally changes.

2. The father of modern philosophy

The fundamental text for interpreting philosophy both in the seventeenth century and thereafter is Descartes's *Meditations* (1642). Certainly, insofar as philosophy has ever since taken the so-called epistemological turn, the basic problems of philosophy trace to the questions, distinctions, and arguments that Descartes deployed there. There have been many differing views on precisely what led Descartes to write and publish this work, but at least what he himself actually said about his motivation is very clear, and it gives the work a rather different cast from the usual depiction of it. In the dedicatory letter that begins the work, he draws attention to two topics on which he announces what he takes to be demonstrative proofs, the existence of God and the immortality of the soul.

Descartes allows that faith is sufficient to ground the belief of those who already accept the existence of God, but to appeal to faith through Scripture, he says, in order to convince the unbeliever would be circular, because Scripture is reliable only if it records the word of God. Thus, an independent demonstration relying on reason alone is necessary. The existence of God had long been held amenable to such treatment, based on Wisdom 13 and Romans 1, such that all ignorance of God was held to be culpable. The immortality of the soul, on the other hand, had been viewed by some as in a different category, knowable only on the basis of faith, because reason strongly suggests that the soul dies with the body. But at the Fifth Lateran Council (1513), the Church expressly condemned this view, and, as Descartes reports it, “enjoined Christian philosophers to refute [the view] and to establish the truth.”⁵

The great irony was that in responding to these needs, Descartes may well have done more for the cause of atheism and materialism than if he had remained silent on the topic. For even among his followers, Descartes’s arguments on these topics were not found convincing. Indeed, there were more than a few in his own time, and there are a few now, of the view that Descartes deliberately subverted with bad arguments the very views for which he only feigned support. Such conscious dissimulation is hard to credit, but the irony remains that Descartes’s philosophical method, concepts, and overall project greased the skids to the obvious religious skepticism of the next century.

The *Meditations* deploys a very demanding version of the method of doubt first introduced in the *Discourse on the Method* four years earlier. In seeking the certainty that he craves after an education stuffed with too much falsehood, Descartes takes the apparently opposite course of doubting everything that can be doubted, even for the slightest conceivable reason. The premise is that if he finds something that cannot be doubted, then it can be accepted, indeed must be accepted, as certain. What he appears to know on the basis of the senses is easily set aside, ultimately on the basis that he might be dreaming. Even in dreams some things might be true, such as arithmetic and geometry, but they too are impugned by doubt on the basis that the omnipotent God could create him and the world such that even this putative knowledge might be false.

Only in the Second Meditation does Descartes take the next step in his application of doubt when with the *cogito* he finds that he cannot doubt his own existence. Before that, however, he exacerbates the skeptical crisis of the First Meditation by raising and answering an objection to his method in a way that has the effect of calling the existence of God into question. The objection is that constant and constrained deception about such obvious things as mathematics would be inconsistent with God’s goodness, and hence doubt of mathematics is unreasonable. The reply is that the fact of any deception at all is no less inconsistent with divine goodness, and yet the fact that we are at least sometimes mistaken is undeniable. And to sustain this skeptical challenge, Descartes goes even further in his doubt:

Perhaps there may be some who would prefer to deny the existence of so powerful a God than believe that everything is uncertain. Let us not argue with them, but grant them that everything said about God is a fiction.⁶

This concession, even just for methodological purposes, goes further than, for example, Aquinas did, whose preface to his own demonstration of the existence of God asks “whether God exists.” But Descartes goes even further, for he finds that, even with the conscious intention to doubt all his former beliefs, some of the longer held of them

continue to intrude upon him. To counterbalance their force, he pretends that they are not just dubitable but “utterly false,” and to bring himself to this state, he pretends that “not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive [him].”⁷ The supposition is not just atheism, but diabolism.

Now, Descartes is prepared to invoke this hyperbolic doubt, as he calls it, because he is confident that beginning in the Third Meditation he can demonstrate the existence of God in a way that makes it more certain even than the *cogito* itself. But suppose that his attempt to do so fails, or is perceived to fail as it was even by his most devoted and gifted followers. Notably, Nicolas Malebranche thought that Descartes’s argument needed correction (which he tried to supply, but with no greater success in convincing the philosophical world). Suppose further that Descartes thought that if his attempt failed, no other would succeed. The consequences for theism were immediately drawn by philosophers who were theists themselves. Pierre-Daniel Huet was one who criticized Descartes on this (and almost everything else in his system).

According to Huet, Descartes should consider

whether he acted with sufficient modesty and prudence when he boasted with obvious pride that he had shown that God exists with arguments more certain than any geometrical theorem proved by the mathematicians, and that he had found the only way to arrive at certain knowledge of so great a thing, which, if sought by others hereafter in some other way, will perforce show them to be impious.⁸

That is, Descartes was so arrogant as to claim that unless he succeeded in proving the existence of God, no one else would, and that this was so obvious that any other attempt to do so would be an offense to religion. Such pride might goeth before the fall, in this case into atheism.

3. Berkeley’s testimony

One sophisticated, and appalled, observer of the atheist development was George Berkeley, an ordained Anglican priest and, later, bishop, who tried to interrupt its continuation. Against materialism he argued for idealism, the view that nothing exists apart from the mind’s perception, that the world we perceive through the senses exists only in the mind that perceives it. This apparently strange view, which Berkeley took to be actually closer to common sense than its competitors, was advanced as a “new and unanswerable proof of the existence of God” and of His providence. The view is found in his *Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710) and *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* (1713), as well as in his first work, the *Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision* (1709), in which he tried to forestall the objection to his idealism that some things exist outside the mind because we perceive them at a distance. The tree on yonder hill cannot exist only in the mind because it is seen to exist out there. The rebuttal is that distance consists of relations between sensations, all of which exist only in the mind. Roughly, the idea is that vision is a language that God uses to communicate with us about what to expect through touch. Visual perceptions, such as an increasing size, are signs designed to advise us about the tactile, which in the form of hard objects might imperil our well-being. This semiotic relation between God and human perceivers is Berkeley’s way of recognizing the intimacy expressed in Acts 17:28: “In him we live and move and have our being.”

In the event, Berkeley's efforts to establish idealism and thwart religious skepticism failed miserably, and he was led to another attempt with his *Theory of Vision Vindicated* (1733), which is of interest here because of its assessment of what he was trying to refute and the causes of his failure, all of which he traced to the seventeenth century. As Berkeley sees it, there is a deliberate and mendacious progression during the first thirty years of the eighteenth century from the seeming rational defense of Christianity to its elimination in favor of natural religion, or deism, and then to outright atheism. He does not explicitly identify the villains, but Matthew Tindal might well have been one of them. The title of one of his works gives the game away: *Christianity as Old as the Creation*. The implicit message is that anything of truth in revealed religion could have been known by reason prior to any revelation, which is therefore superfluous, so that the putative defense of Christianity as rational is in fact revealed as a snake in its breast. The next step, as Berkeley saw it, was to subvert all religion by an ostensible defense of natural religion against Christianity. Because religion for Berkeley is founded on the recognition of a "watchful, active, intelligent, free Spirit," deism meant the elimination of religion. Deistic defenders of religion are thus a fifth column, whose motivations are castigated by Berkeley in no uncertain terms.

Of a piece with the perceived slide into atheism was an altered conception of the human soul, its governance, and its fate. The deists denied the existence of an immortal soul with the prospect of reward or punishment in an afterlife based on the performance or failure to perform duty in this life. They substituted taste for duty and denied that there were rewards or punishments for actions beyond those actions' natural consequences. The *bête noire* in this instance is clearly identified as Shaftesbury, in his *Characteristics* (1711).

These historical developments are explicitly found in the early eighteenth century. Their roots, according to Berkeley, span the previous century: "That atheistical principles have taken deeper root and are farther spread than most people are apt to imagine will be plain, he says, to whoever considers that pantheism, materialism, and fatalism are nothing but atheism a little disguised." From whom do these views spring? At this point, Berkeley names names. The spread of atheism will be plain to whoever considers "that the notions of Hobbes, Spinoza, Leibniz, and Bayle are relished and applauded."⁹ Certain obvious connections suggest themselves – Spinoza with pantheism, for example; but none of those listed can be obviously connected with all three of the views, and at least one, Bayle, seems unconnected with any of them. Our view is that Berkeley's principal target is, though unmentioned, Descartes. As we see it, it was he whom Berkeley regarded as the main obstacle to be removed by his ground-clearing work, the *New Theory of Vision*. We now turn to a reading of Descartes that extends the obstacle he represents to the domain of religion.

4. Descartes

It is clear from Berkeley's notebooks (later published as *The Philosophical Commentaries*) both that Berkeley read Descartes's work and that he did not like what he found there. But like Newton, the philosophical implications of whose work also displeased Berkeley, Descartes is hardly mentioned by Berkeley. It may be that their undeniable achievements, particularly in the sciences, gave them a status of respect lacking in the case of Locke, who without such achievement is explicitly attacked by Berkeley. In any case, it was Descartes who can be read as both advancing the three views identified by Berkeley

and as the source of them to the extent they appear in the four authors he names. His theory of vision, especially its metaphysical infrastructure, is certainly under attack both in the *New Theory of Vision* and the *Vindication*.

That the dualist Descartes should be read as a materialist perhaps seems hardly credible until it is recalled that by the term Berkeley means anyone who asserts not the strong view that everything is material but the weaker view that material substance exists. Descartes certainly falls under that description with his view that extension, space, and matter are all the same thing, a thing that answers to Berkeley's characterization of a material substance as inert, insensible (i.e. unsensing), and independent of mind.

Pantheism is also a view that at first seems hard to attribute to Descartes, who clearly asserts that God creates the world with a freedom of indifference. No Spinozistic deduction here of a world really identical to God. But when in his doctrine of substance Descartes tries to ground the distinction between God and creation, he fails to do so:

By *substance* we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its existence. And there is only one substance which can be understood to depend on no other thing whatsoever, namely God.¹⁰

Everything else depends on God not only for its initial existence (creation) but also for its continued existence (concurrence). To draw the distinction between God and creation, Descartes is led to distinguish, as Spinoza does not, between causal and ontological dependence. But even this distinction had been obscured when in the Sixth Meditation Descartes practically asserts verbatim Spinoza's later formula "*Deus sive natura*" (God or nature). There, in the context of a proof of the existence of body, Descartes discusses the teaching of nature. And what is this "nature"? He tells us, "if nature is considered in its general aspect, then I understand by the term nothing other than God himself, or the ordered system of created things established by God."¹¹

Finally, fatalism also initially appears inimical to Descartes's system. For it recognizes not just freedom, but a freedom of indifference in both God and man. That is, both God and man are capable of alternative actions apart from any constraint whatsoever. But once again, there are other views that introduce a competing view. In his account of the formation of the world, Descartes claims that the world progresses through every possible state of which it is capable. That is, every possible state is eventually actualized. This claim was viewed, and criticized, as a form of fatalism.

Thus, might Descartes be read as a source of all three of the ills that Berkeley identifies? How accurate a reading is it? We think that although the reading is not wildly implausible, and although there were others beside Berkeley who subscribed to all or part of it, the reading is superficial and ignores many other texts that lead in a very different direction. But our concern is with the historical account of the rise of atheism, not its justification, and so we now turn to the authors that Berkeley explicitly mentions.

5. Hobbes

Hobbes was surely in mind when Berkeley worried about the rise of materialism in the age. One of the earliest thinkers to focus on Hobbes's materialism and its consequences for religion was Henry More. More belonged to the Cambridge Platonists who were known for a preoccupation with theology, a rigid mind-body dualism, a strong

belief in the eternal existence of rational and moral principles, and an opposition to the mechanical science. They sought an alternative philosophical response to the downfall of Aristotelianism from the ones on offer from Hobbes and Descartes, who were frequently the targets of their criticism.

In chapter 3 of *The Immortality of the Soul, So Farre Forth as It Is Demonstrable From the Knowledge of Nature and the Light of Reason* (1659), More identifies the primary cause of doubts about the immortality of the soul to be the belief that the notion of “spirit” is nonsense. It is for this reason that he soon goes on to consider the views of Hobbes, whom he called “the Exploder of immaterial substances,” for in *Human Nature*, to take just one of many possible examples, Hobbes writes, “to conceive a spirit, is to conceive something that hath dimension. But spirits supernatural commonly signify some substance without dimension; which two words do flatly contradict one another.”¹² In Hobbes’s view, spirits are extremely subtle bodies which do not work on the senses, a view More found equivalent to the denial of the existence of spirit altogether. Of the attribution of the word “spirit” to God, Hobbes wrote that we do not conceive of what we mean, but rather seek to show a sign of reverence to God by abstracting from “all corporeal grossness.” For Hobbes, God is in every way incomprehensible, and so we can ascribe qualities to him only out of ignorance or a sense of reverence, a view which is compatible both with fideism (which seems to be Bayle’s interpretation of Hobbes in the *Dictionary* article devoted to him) and with atheism, which was More’s worry.

6. Spinoza

Spinoza is a far from unlikely target for Berkeley, for he was the target of just about everyone else in his time. Indeed, with not too much stretching, Spinoza might qualify under all three of Berkeley’s specific complaints. He held what Bayle called the “hideous hypothesis” that there is only one substance in the universe and that is God, *Deus sive natura* (God or nature) as he called it. It is hard to find a clearer statement of pantheism in this or any other period. The one substance is the subject of an infinite number of attributes, of which two are known to us, the Cartesian pair of thought and extension. Because for the Cartesians extension and matter are one and the same, this would mean that Spinoza is a materialist – not in the sense that everything is only matter, for the one substance also has the attribute of thought, but in the sense that everything is at least material. In addition, although Spinoza ends by asserting a kind of human freedom in part 5 of his *Ethics*, it is of an entirely intellectual sort, with roots in the no less problematic views of the ancient Stoics. Moreover, earlier in the work, he made clear that the whole of the universe, and *a fortiori* God Himself, was subject to a strict determinism which ruled out the intelligibility of teleological explanations and thereby of any recognizable notion of providence.

7. Leibniz

Leibniz’s appearance with Hobbes, Spinoza, and Bayle, is *prima facie* rather surprising. However unjustly, the latter were widely regarded as philosophically suspect, whereas the irenic, undogmatic diplomat Leibniz seems to be, and seems to have been regarded as, no threat to orthodoxy. It was he, after all, who was chosen to represent the Lutheran side in the effort to find reconciliation with Roman Catholicism, an effort that failed through no fault of his. As for the impending Enlightenment that Berkeley sought to

forestall, Leibniz was regarded by it, not as a source of support, but as an antiquated object of ridicule.

Nonetheless, Leibniz's conception of the principle of sufficient reason might have given Berkeley cause for concern. If it's the case, as Leibniz thought, that every change in an individual substance, or monad, occurs as the expression of the concept of that individual, then it might be argued that everything we do is fated to be done just as we do it, and that we have no free will. Leibniz's efforts to distinguish himself from the fatalists might be successful, but his technical attempt to secure the compatibility seems rather less so. Even if the analysis that shows a given state to be part of the individual concept requires an infinite number of steps, the fact is that the state is a part, and our inability to complete the analysis shows only our ignorance of how we are determined, not that we are undetermined. Bayle was one who objected to Leibniz's monadism at the base of his determinism as making relations between humans, and between them and God, mechanical, with no room for genuine dialogue or responsibility.

8. Bayle

After the publication of the first edition of his *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1697), Pierre Bayle spent the rest of his life replying to a variety of charges lodged on the basis of that work, mainly of Pyrrhonian skepticism and atheism. The *Dictionary* was to become the philosophical best seller of the eighteenth century, inspiring not only the works of the French deistic and atheistic *philosophes*, but also the likes of Hume and Kant. Early readers saw in the *Dictionary* a work of unparalleled erudition, but also the seeds, if not the very fruits, of religious skepticism. The articles mainly cited in this regard are "Manicheans," "Marcionites," and "Paulicians," all of which concern the Manichean sect and their claim that there is not one, single, benevolent God, but two warring first principles of all things – good and evil. Bayle's thesis throughout the *Dictionary* and his later works is that the Manicheans are able to explain the origin of evil better than Christians. His remedy for the inability of Christian theologians to offer an adequate solution to the problem of evil was faith. Because Scripture claims that God is one and that He is good, and because it also claims that He permitted evil in the world, the Manichean hypothesis must be incorrect, though we can know this only through faith in the Bible.

In the last years of his life, Bayle engaged in a lengthy war of words with Jean Le Clerc, which ultimately gave rise to Bayle's last book, *Dialogues of Maxime and Themiste* (posthumous, 1707). Le Clerc argued that Bayle's position on the problem of evil could lead only to the worst kind of Pyrrhonism, and possibly atheism, for it amounted to the claim that we have no rational basis for asserting that God is good, or that He is not a deceiver. Without these facts about God in place, God's very existence is questioned, as is the foundation of all knowledge. In recent years, Gianluca Mori has offered the best case, much like the one offered by Le Clerc, that Bayle's philosophy leads to atheism. Mori's argument is that throughout Bayle's works, particularly in his treatment of the problem of evil, "Christian theology only uselessly amplifies the difficulties of philosophy by condemning it to the most exaggerated irrationalism."¹³ In other words, by showing the necessity of the appeal to blind faith in order to uphold the doctrines of Christianity, in Mori's view, Bayle was attempting to show the ridiculousness of those doctrines. Mori's interpretation is essentially the Enlightenment interpretation of Bayle, which has come in for heavy criticism.¹⁴

From a consideration of some of the major authors whose works were considered by Berkeley and others to be an important source of atheism, we turn now to various themes associated with the rise of atheism in the seventeenth century.

9. Socinianism

Berkeley's ruminations about incipient deism were not entirely a matter of rational reconstruction after the fact. A version of proto-deism had long been recognized under the term "Socinianism." The movement, if that is what it was, began with Fausto Sozzini (1539–1604). Sozzini was something of a religious reformer, who because of his views was chased from one European locale to another. His doctrine amounted to a systemic revision of Christianity based on what he took to be rational principles, beginning with the rejection of original sin, and with it the need for a divine redeemer. Instead, people save themselves through a moral life, without the need of grace. Those who do not save themselves are simply annihilated rather than condemned to eternal punishment, which also was contrary to Sozzini's rational principles.

Although there is a more or less continuous history of Socinianism throughout the seventeenth into the eighteenth century, there is a sense in which it was a movement without adherents. For Socinianism, and its cognates, was a term of abuse. No one of any respectability or standing admitted to being a Socinian. Nonetheless, the systematic significance of the doctrine was repeatedly articulated in what was thought to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of it. A good example, with later implications for religious skepticism, was Sozzini's conception of the deity. Again, on what he took to be rational principles, he addressed the problem of evil by arguing that no benevolent God would create the world knowing the evil that humankind would produce and hence that He did so in ignorance of what in fact came unpredictably from human free will. In short, God was surprised by the events of the Garden of Eden. This elimination of omniscience, in particular of divine foreknowledge, was, to say the least, the unraveling of a conceptual thread whose termination historically was for some the elimination of all divine attributes and outright atheism.

With varying degrees of plausibility, many in the seventeenth century were accused, and accused each other, of Socinianism. Locke is the best-known philosopher who came under such scrutiny, holding as he did views that were either heterodox or suspicious in Socinian terms. In a recently discovered text, Leibniz implicated him as at least a fellow traveler: Locke, said Leibniz, "inclined to the Socinians." In a philosophically very important debate, Edward Stillingfleet, Bishop of Worcester, found Locke's views on substance subversive of key doctrines such as the Trinity, which is to say the divinity of Christ, and the resurrection of the body at the Second Coming. Jonathan Edwards saw that Locke's rejection of original sin had unsettling implications for the doctrine of the redemption. Leibniz had many concerns, principally with Locke's apparent rejection of the natural immortality of the soul. In a text from book 4 of the *Essay*, Locke sought to illustrate how poor our ideas of matter and thinking are by supposing that, for all we know, God might have superadded to matter, "fitly disposed," the power of thinking. But if the mind is material, according to Leibniz, then it is divisible and the best argument for its immortality, namely its simplicity, is upset. Whether Locke intended all these consequences is doubtful, but implications of his views were made explicit and were embraced in no uncertain terms by the deist John Toland, the title of whose main work gives the gist: *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696).¹⁵

10. Kors's thesis

Alan Charles Kors's *Atheism in France* is likely to remain a reference book on the rise of atheism for some time.¹⁶ Kors's thesis is that to explain the rise of atheism is not a matter of explaining how atheistic theses were first conceived and developed, because these had always been around, but rather it is a question of how the atheistic position came to be seen as stronger than the opposing theistic one. Eighteenth century atheists had only to look to the works of orthodox Christian theologians and philosophers of the previous century to find their weapons ready-made. In fact, the atheists hardly needed weapons; Kors's thesis is that the rise of atheism owes its success to "fratricide" among believers.

Kors begins with the paradox alluded to at the outset of this chapter. In the sixteenth century, the atheist was equated with the debaucher, and never with the calm, studious philosopher, yet arguments abounded against the possible objections of clever atheists. Theologians were attacking an "atheism without atheists." Kors argues that the reason for this was the style of Scholastic disputation common at the time, wherein the necessary first step was always to consider the objections of possible opponents to one's thesis. Hence the objections of atheists always preceded proofs of God's existence. In addition, the Thomistic notion of a "preamble to faith" suggested to many in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that all discussion of religion and morality had to be prefaced with rational proofs of God's existence, the immortality of the soul, and other such doctrines accessible to reason, upon which revelation was built. The upshot of the combination of these Scholastic traditions was that most orthodox theological works began with a statement and refutation of the views of atheists. In many such works, these atheistic views were developed quite strongly, and in some cases even more strongly than the refutations which followed them.

The fratricidal debate which is central to Kors's argument involves the Cartesians and Thomists of the mid- to late seventeenth century. Both groups were eager to prove God's existence, and both thought the other group's proofs were inadequate. The Cartesians, wary of sense knowledge, doubted that the Thomistic *a posteriori* proofs could ever lead to knowledge of the existence of a perfect being. Only *a priori* reason, which is far more perfect than the senses, could afford such knowledge. On the other hand, Thomists never ceased pointing out fallacies in Descartes's move from the idea of a perfect being to the reality of that being outside the mind. Each side accused the other of ruining the foundations of religion and abetting atheists, and in so doing, the two sides unwittingly laid the foundations of disbelief. Kors's thesis is not the strong view that these debates led participants or onlookers to atheism; rather, it is the mitigated claim that all that the later atheists would need to build up a philosophical refutation of religion could be found in the texts of these debates.

11. Idolatry

The issue of idolatry furnishes another example of how the logic of theistic internecine dispute paved the way to religious skepticism. Halbertal and Margalit have advanced the thesis that the charge of idolatry that was originally deployed by anthropomorphic, "folk" religion against its rivals was later redirected by philosophical religion against it and ultimately against religion itself. The logic was that if there is false worship, there is no guarantee that there is any true worship. All religion might turn out to be a form of idolatry.¹⁷ Moreover, one result of this philosophical religion was the disambiguation

of the rabbinic formula for idolatry, namely “strange worship,” which could mean a violation either of proper ritual or of the proper object of that ritual, namely God. Philosophical religion largely ignored ceremony and focused on the proper metaphysical conception of God. The abstract possibility of universal idolatry thus became the possibility of atheism.

Idolatry is, literally, the worship of idols, or, more generally, of false gods. But why would anyone ever engage in such a gravely punishable offense? To do so out of ignorance would not be punishable, as idolatry certainly was, and to do it deliberately would be suicidal, not to say just plain weird. Halbertal and Margalit have shown that the earliest Jewish model for the relation between God and His people was marriage: God as husband, and Israel as His wife.¹⁸ In these terms, idolatry was conceived of as marital infidelity. The attraction of idolatry was twofold: freed of the strictures of her proper spouse, who is repeatedly described in Scripture as a jealous God, Israel was free to indulge in every sort of licentiousness, and, moreover, the act itself of idolatry came to have an erotic charge.¹⁹ Not incidentally, we can here apply this work to a seventeenth century characterization of idolatry that otherwise seems strange. Locke in his *Letter on Toleration*, for example, cites Galatians 5, and takes idolatry to be “a work of the flesh” along with adultery and fornication. For him and for others in the period, the characteristics of the model were applied literally to the modeled well beyond the original metaphor.²⁰

In the early modern period, difference between sects was often cast in terms of idolatry; the only reason a rival sect had different religious beliefs, about the Trinity for example, and worshiped with a different ritual, without the Eucharist for example, was that the object of the belief and ritual was different and, presumably, mistaken. That is, a false conception of the divinity leads to false religious belief, inappropriate religious ceremony, and inappropriate behavior generally. This drift is clear in an important text from Descartes. Gassendi had objected that the idea of God is not innate, as Descartes had claimed in the Third Meditation, but instead was constructed piecemeal from ideas derived from the senses, and therefore that it is not true, as Descartes had also claimed, that nothing can be added to or taken away from the idea of God. Descartes replied by deploying a stark version of the traditional theory of reference:

An idea represents the essence of a thing, and if anything is added or taken away from the essence, then the idea automatically becomes the idea of something else. This is how the ideas of Pandora and of all false Gods are formed by those who do not have a correct conception of the true God.²¹

Descartes stops short of calling Gassendi an idolater, but others later in the seventeenth century, Bayle for example, were not so polite.

Bayle was, perhaps most of all in his various occupations, a defender of his fellow French Protestants’ cause against their Catholic persecutors. Both sides were nominally Christian, but differed on two fundamental issues. One was the nature of grace, which determined their competing views on predestination, free will, and other philosophically interesting questions. It had been discussed ad nauseam by the time of Bayle, who instead concentrated on the second issue, the Catholic doctrine according to which Christ is “truly, really, and substantially present” in the Eucharist. Both sides agreed that if the doctrine is true, then Catholics are right to adore the sacrament on the altar, but that if it is false, and the Eucharist is, for example, only a symbol of Christ, then such adoration would be idolatrous, and Bayle explicitly drew this damning inference. Our

interest in the debate is less for the arguments for and against the doctrine than for the philosophical issues they raised. For example, if Christ is divine, then he is omnipresent and the sacrament on the altar in any case would have no special status.²² Such abstract issues went a long way in the direction of deism and eventually of outright atheism as the sensibility of a personal, intimately present God began to evaporate. An omnipresent deity who is never personally present in any particular place is essentially an absent deity and not far from a nonexistent one.

There is another connection between idolatry and atheism brought out in Bayle's writings which helps us understand more deeply the way in which religious infighting in the period led to a rise in atheism. In the *Pensées diverses*, chapter 117, Bayle argues that idolaters, those whose ideas of God and religion are false, are the true atheists. His point is a subtle one, given the reinterpretation of the term "atheist" on offer in that work. For Bayle's purposes, when he argues that atheists can be moral (a claim we will consider in greater detail later), he understands atheists to be those people who deny the existence of God on speculative grounds. He is aware, however, that the majority of his readers mean something entirely different by the word "atheist," namely "moral reprobate." When Bayle argues that idolaters are the "true atheists," he means that idolaters answer more closely to the term atheist as it is commonly used; that is, idolaters are the moral reprobates. There is a surprising reversal here: real atheists turn out not to be atheists at all (as this term is popularly understood), whereas the nominally religious can be, and often are, atheists. The charge is surely being targeted at Catholics, largely on account of their widespread persecution of fellow (Protestant) Christians, but his point is deeper than just this and transcends denominational boundaries.

Idolatry is motivated by what Bayle calls "false zeal," the unmistakable sign of which is that "men follow the morality of the Church very badly, while they fight like lions for the spread of its theory."²³ Idolaters acknowledge a God or gods, but this belief has no effect on their moral lives. Nothing is more scandalous in Bayle's view than intolerant theological disputes arising from the zeal of idolaters:

When I see churchgoers exact revenge on their enemies, either through defamatory libel or through calumny secretly spread about, I do not hesitate to say that such a gentleman as had crippled a peasant with the blows of a stick offended God less than they would. The black bile and gall that are seen on every page of many books . . . presuppose a disposition of the heart more removed from Christian charity than does the violence of a cavalier who beats his landlord and who throws his furniture out the window.²⁴

The *Pensées diverses* aims to prove that one's intellectual principles can be independent from one's actions, such that atheists can be moral and religious believers can be immoral. Bayle's thesis is that such a separation between one's religious beliefs and one's actions is the surest cause of atheism in a community and, indeed, ought itself to be considered the true atheism.

12. Morality without salvation

As we have seen, Descartes dedicated his *Meditations* to the faculty of the Sorbonne with the promise of proving God's existence and the immortality of the soul. Equally

important to recognize in that prefatory letter is the reason Descartes gives for why he will do this:

since in this life the rewards offered to vice are often greater than the rewards of virtue, few people would prefer what is right to what is expedient if they did not fear God or have the expectation of an after-life.²⁵

Descartes is merely repeating here a commonplace of his time concerning moral motivation: people are by and large incapable of acting morally without the aid of fear and expectation of an afterlife. This view was still widespread well after the seventeenth century (and has no shortage of proponents to this day), but it came in for interesting and systematic criticism for the first time in the decades following Descartes. These criticisms paved the way for the thoroughly secular moral theories of the eighteenth century, either deliberately or accidentally aiding the atheist's cause.

Moral thought in the seventeenth century remained tightly linked to religion in certain respects. On the metaphysical level, God was seen as necessary to ground the validity of moral principles. There was much debate concerning the way in which God grounded these principles, but little debate ensued about whether God's existence was in some way necessary as a foundation for morality. Voluntarists, such as Descartes, held that God creates moral precepts by an indifferent act of His will, whereas intellectualists, such as Malebranche, held that God's will, like ours, is constrained by law, often expressed in terms of God's knowledge of eternal truths; but both agreed that moral principles derived in some way from God. A possible exception to this was Hugo Grotius, who famously wrote of his version of the natural law, that

what we have been saying would have a certain degree of validity even if we should concede that which cannot be conceded without the utmost wickedness, that there is no God, or that the affairs of men are of no concern to Him.²⁶

J. B. Schneewind argues, however, that too much has been made of this comment, and downplays its role in the later history of the secularization of ethics.²⁷

Although the existence of God remained a first principle of morality on the metaphysical level throughout the seventeenth century, it did not remain so on the epistemological level. That is, moral thinkers began to see moral action as independent of *belief* in God, whether or not they could imagine a theoretical system of morality independent of God's existence. This is important for our purposes, for as we have seen, atheism was virtually equated with immorality at this time, and one of the principal reasons for this, as Descartes mentions in his letter to the Sorbonne, is that atheists do not fear God or eternal damnation, and so they lack motivation for acting morally. Therefore, to the degree that living morally came to be seen as independent of the hope or fear of God and the afterlife, to that degree the traditional conception of the atheist was challenged. If one can live morally without holy fear, then atheists can live morally; but then what is an atheist if he is no longer necessarily vicious? Hence, the modern atheist's identity was in part shaped through developments in seventeenth century ethics. Three phases in that development will be considered immediately here.

It was commonly held throughout the seventeenth century that few people would be saved, and that the majority of people, including many believers, would remain forever corrupted by sin. The question arose therefore whether the unsaved could live morally,

or at least peaceably in society, and if so, how, given their corruption? One positive response to this question invoked a providential theory of human passion. By following one's instinct of self-love, morally good action is not exactly attained, but can be imitated such that nobody can tell the difference. Building upon the moral thought of Blaise Pascal, Pierre Nicole forwarded such a view in his *Moral Essays* (1671), which were read well into the eighteenth century. By following self-interest in the form of servile fear, all the effects of divine charity can be mimicked such that neither we, nor anybody else, can tell what our true motive is. Because we desire and need the respect of others, we are kind to them, show gratitude toward them, practice patience with them, and so on.²⁸ Self-love can give rise, not to true salvific morality which only flows from Christian charity, but to the appearance of virtue, and to all common customs needed for life in human society. Thus, with or without the fear of God, a peaceful society is within reach.

A similar line of thought is found in Bayle's discussion of the possibility of a society of atheists, in his 1682 *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*. Bayle argues that atheists can have a sense of moral decency, that they can be motivated to perform good works for the sake of glory and praise, and that their vices are kept in check by human laws as much as those of believers. It follows that atheists possess all that is necessary to function in society. Bayle consequently asks an important question, marking a significant moment in the history of atheism: "Whence comes it, then, . . . that everyone supposes atheists to be the greatest scoundrels in the universe, who kill, rape, and plunder all they can?" His answer indicates the fundamental error he finds in most moral theories hitherto: "It is because one falsely imagines that a man always acts according to his principles, that is, according to what he believes in the matter of religion."²⁹ That people do not act according to their principles is what Bayle seeks to prove over the course of the rest of the *Various Thoughts*. One argument for this has a religious foundation, namely the fall of Adam, after which human beings were subject to their passions, and not their reason, in all that they do. But the fact of a radical separation between principles and actions is clear enough from a myriad of empirical examples, which Bayle relishes in providing. On the one hand, there have been virtuous atheists, such as Epicurus, Vanini, and Spinoza, whereas on the other hand, there has never been a shortage of vicious believers, as the crusades and religious persecution, mainly by Catholics, amply demonstrate.

In his *Various Thoughts*, after having challenged the myth of the vicious atheist, Bayle relates a story intended to illustrate why even Christians should desire a separation between morality and the hope or fear of an afterlife. This story points us to what is perhaps the most surprising chapter in the separation of morality and religious belief in the seventeenth century, that dealing with the Quietists. The story, well known at the time, runs thus:

an ambassador from Saint [King] Louis to the Sultan of Damascus, having asked a woman whom he found in the streets what she had in mind in carrying a flame in one hand and water in the other, learned from this woman that she intended to burn paradise with the fire and extinguish the flames of hell with the water so that men would no longer serve the divinity for mercenary reasons.³⁰

The story, which was first related in a life of Saint Louis, was frequently depicted by artists, and was meant to represent the ideal of living morally, not for the sake of reward

or out of fear of punishment, but from a pure motive of doing good for good's sake. The image of this woman aptly became the emblem of the Quietist cause.³¹

Quietism was given its impetus by Miguel de Molinos's *Spiritual Guide* (1675), a work on the topic of prayer that sought to free people from the restrictive Jesuit methods of meditation. It taught the prayer of quiet contemplation instead, which involved an abandonment of all intellectual acts, all imagination, even every act of the will, replacing these with an "obscure faith" and a "pure love." The importance of the *Spiritual Guide* cannot be exaggerated: it was written originally in Spanish, but within five years, it was already in its sixth edition in Italian (Molinos lived and taught in Rome) and was being translated into Latin, French, Dutch, English, and German. The spread of the work was halted after Molinos's 1687 condemnation by the Inquisition, which found sixty-eight heresies in the work. Among them, "the soul should neither reflect upon itself nor upon God: in the prayer of quiet all reflection is hurtful, even reflection upon one's own actions and sins"; "he who gives his free will to God is not concerned about heaven or hell, or about perfection, or about virtue, or about sanctity: he must do away with all hope of salvation too"; and "he who loves God by means of rational argumentation or intellectual understanding does not truly love God."³²

Though Molinos's work was allegedly intended as an aid to Christian piety, it eliminated any role in the moral life for explicit thoughts about God, and especially for hope and fear of an afterlife. Molinos believed that virtue should not be practiced out of fear of hell or from the prospect of a reward, nor for any other explicitly religious motive; rather, it should be the quiet inspiration of the Holy Spirit that comes only to those who have no distinct religious thoughts in their mind. The sincerity of Molinos's religious beliefs has been questioned up to our own day for obvious reasons. In any case, his ideas ultimately led to one of the greatest theological battles of all time, between Jacques Bossuet and François Fénelon, both French bishops. The latter developed Molinos's insight that thoughts of the afterlife should be eradicated from the mind in order to live a truly moral life. Bossuet in turn argued that this destroyed the Christian virtue of hope. Bossuet ultimately won the debate, earning a condemnation of Fénelon's ideas by Pope Innocent XI in 1699. However, the damage was already done: the necessity of the afterlife as a motivation for acting morally was now seriously in question, and mainly because of the writings of Catholic theologians. Like many other theological debates, the Quietist controversy did not itself lead directly to atheism, but it inadvertently provided atheists with arguments with which to pursue their cause; in this case, it provided arguments that morality could and should be independent of the expectation of an afterlife.

13. The new science

It is tempting today to look at the scientific revolutions of the seventeenth century as the cause of the rise of atheism in the period. Most outspoken atheists today tend either to be scientists or to make their case on the basis of science. Indeed, the "new science" of the seventeenth century, especially due to its tendencies toward mechanism and materialism, which challenged any role for the soul in animal activity, was feared for its potential consequences for religion, especially for the doctrine of the immateriality and immortality of the human soul. However, the target of the new science was not religion, but the Aristotelian worldview. Some could not tell the difference, because much of theology, at least for Catholics, was based on the writings of Thomas Aquinas,

which were in turn based on the philosophy of Aristotle; so, any threat to Aristotle was a threat to sound theology. But many scientists could tell the difference and found their scientific views compatible with a simpler, less dogmatic Christianity than the one Aquinas had offered. Rather than fitting their science and theology into a single, coherent, all-encompassing system, they viewed science and religion as “two Books,” each with its own doctrines and methods, and a minimal amount of overlap. Such was the view of Robert Boyle.

Boyle, perhaps more than any other seventeenth century figure, worried about the effects of the new science upon religious beliefs. It is instructive to note that his main concern was not so much the threat of scientific discoveries for the perceived truth of religion, but rather the “scientific attitude” which the large number of such discoveries brought about. In his *Excellency of Theology* (1674), Boyle addresses scientists in an attempt to show them why theology is still worthy of study and, indeed, why it is immensely greater in value than experimental science. He denounces system building in science, having spent his own illustrious scientific career content with making numerous individual, concrete discoveries, such as the law of gases which bears his name. Without a totalizing system, science cannot be a threat to religion. He also denounces the unjustified pride he finds rampant among natural scientists, as well as their endless quest for worldly fame through novel discoveries. In the *Excellency and Grounds of the Mechanical Hypothesis* (1674), Boyle addresses the compatibility of scientific and religious claims, which he sums up as follows:

the universe being once framed by God, and the laws of motion being settled and all upheld by his incessant concourse and general providence, the phenomena of the world thus constituted are physically produced by the mechanical affections of the parts of matter, and how they operate upon one another according to mechanical laws.³³

Boyle left a large endowment to the Royal Society for a lecture series (which is ongoing to this day) devoted to the compatibility of science and religion.

14. Skepticism and biblical criticism

Kors's *Atheism in France* has been criticized in the literature for not giving enough of a role to the rediscovery of ancient skepticism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the rise of atheism in the period. The story of the rise of Pyrrhonian skepticism in modern Europe, and its relation to the religious thought of the age, has been most fully related by Richard Popkin in *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle*.³⁴ Popkin's thesis is that theological disputes in the time of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation centered on a religious variation of an issue at the heart of skepticism, namely the criterion of truth. Protestants objected to the Roman Catholic tradition of authority, especially that of the Pope, as the criterion of a proper reading of Scripture, and offered in its stead the “way of examination,” which involved an individual reading of Scripture guided by conscience and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Catholics argued that the way of examination, considered as a criterion of what one ought to believe about Scripture, was utterly unreliable and could only lead to as many interpretations of Scripture as there were readers of it. Just as this debate was raging over the criterion of faith, the skeptical works of Sextus Empiricus were slowly being rediscovered

and translated into modern languages, providing both sides of this theological debate with sophisticated machinery to debunk their opponent's arguments about the proper criterion.

In Popkin's view, these disputes were accompanied by a rise in fideism, the view that faith, unaided by human reason, is the sole means of arriving at religious truth. The skeptical arguments against any and every rationally grounded criterion of faith were found devastating, and so advocating a blind faith was, for most, the surest escape from the Pyrrhonians' sting. One of the virtues of Popkin's book is that it challenged the long-held belief that skepticism and atheism were interchangeable terms. In Popkin's view, both fideism and atheism are arbitrary choices, complete *non sequiturs*, once skepticism is accepted: "Complete scepticism is a two-way street, from which one can exit either into the 'reasonableness' of the Enlightenment or the blind faith of the fideist. In either case, the sceptical argument would be the same."³⁵ It appears that many in the seventeenth century took the fideist road, whereas the eighteenth century opted for the atheist one. An important element in this shift surely owes something to the application of skeptical arguments to a critical reading of the Bible in the mid- to late seventeenth century.

The "unholy trinity" (as Popkin calls them) of early Bible criticism consisted of Thomas Hobbes, Isaac La Peyrère, and Spinoza. Hobbes is usually credited in this regard with being the first to deny outright the authorship of the entire Pentateuch by Moses. The relevant text is *Leviathan*, part 3, chapter 33, "Of the Number, Antiquity, Scope, Authority, and Interpreters of the Books of the Holy Scripture," wherein Hobbes provides several concrete texts which Moses could not possibly have written. Foremost among them is Deuteronomy 34: 6, which states that nobody is aware of the location of Moses's sepulcher at the time the text is being written. Hobbes notes the obvious, which is that Moses could not have lived to speak of his own burial place in this way, and then makes the less obvious, though no less compelling point, that a prophecy concerning the lost location of his own tomb would be a strange prophecy indeed for Moses to make. Denying the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch was tantamount at the time to denying the divine inspiration of the text and opened the door to a new degree of religious skepticism.

Isaac La Peyrère (1596–1676) was infamous for his book, the *Prae-Adamite*, which called into question the historical accuracy of several anthropological claims of the Bible, especially that Adam was the first man, and then that all the people on earth descended from Noah and the other survivors of the great flood. The notorious "pre-Adamites" were postulated by La Peyrère mainly on account of then-recent contact made with other, non-European cultures, especially the Mexicans and Chinese, who had strong evidence to support their claim that they descended from a race of people dating further back than biblical times. La Peyrère's ideas were widely opposed by philosophers and theologians of many stripes, and he eventually abjured before Pope Alexander VII in 1657. By then, however, his ideas were well known and had been read by many, including Spinoza.

As we have seen, Cartesian philosophy had been feared as a system necessarily leading to atheism, and in Spinoza's use of that system, many believed they had their proof. In the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, the Cartesian method of doubt is applied to Scripture, with a consequent elimination of most of it: "I hold that the method of interpreting Scripture is no different from the method of interpreting Nature, and is in fact in complete accord with it."³⁶ Spinoza argues that prophecy is based on imagination and not

reason, and that what the biblical prophets set down contains no cognitive content beyond what is attainable by the natural light. Moreover, God did not force the minds of the prophets in order that they would grasp His truth perfectly, but adapted His revelation to their various prejudices and ignorance. Hence the many factual errors in the Bible, which Spinoza, following La Peyrère, points out. The holy book therefore becomes a human work like any other. It gets worse, however, for Spinoza argues at length that the text we possess is very unlikely to be the text as it was revealed to the prophets on account of the accumulated errors of copyists, and more importantly, on account of the evolution of Hebrew and Greek orthography. Whether or not Spinoza was an atheist has always been a charged question, but the potential usefulness of the *Tractatus* for the atheist cause cannot be disputed.

15. Conclusion

Our conclusion is largely a negative one, namely that the emergence of atheism in the early modern period was not dictated as the result of rational argument. This is not to say, however, that philosophical argument had no role to play. On the contrary, we have seen that philosophical arguments, concepts, distinctions, and so forth were repeatedly seized upon as vehicles, even pretexts, for heterodox views of every sort that were arrived at independently. Our citation of the case of Stephen Dedalus at the outset reflects the view of the seventeenth century Pyrrhonians that both theism and atheism are rationally unconstrained choices, not unlike Kierkegaard's leap of faith. Why choose, then, one way or the other? Believers of one sort would appeal to grace, others of another sort to circumstance, or as Berkeley disparagingly put it, to taste.

The struggle between faith and reason is intelligible only within a totalizing worldview such as the Scholastic Aristotelianism that was overthrown in the seventeenth century. The struggle continued only to the extent that there has been a replacement for it, but every subsequent rival has failed – the Enlightenment itself, Marxism, scientism, and so on. Another upshot of our study is that the apparent opposition between faith and reason has been overcome, not in favor of one over the other, but as a noncontest between separate realms, the character of which is beyond the scope of this chapter, but which has already been alluded to previously in the treatment of Boyle, who articulated such a view. But if this drift is at all plausible, then it should be no surprise to still find both theists and atheists on the contemporary scene, and, because the history of the opposition is so poorly appreciated, a debate, sometimes no less bitter than in previous times, between them.

Notes

- 1 James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London/New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 260.
- 2 Lucien Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*, trans. B. Gottlieb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
- 3 "The fool hath said in his heart, 'there is no God' "; Psalm 14: 1.
- 4 Gianluca Mori and Alain Mothu (eds.), *Philosophes sans Dieu: Textes athées clandestins du XVIIIè siècle* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2005).
- 5 AT VII 1–3; CSM II 3–4.
- 6 AT VII 21; CSM II 14.
- 7 AT VII 23; CSM II 15.
- 8 Pierre-Daniel Huet, *Against Cartesian Philosophy*, trans. Thomas M. Lennon (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2003), 172.

- 9 George Berkeley, *Theory of Vision Vindicated*, sec. 6.
- 10 AT VIII A 25; CSM I 210.
- 11 AT X 438; CSM I 56.
- 12 Thomas Hobbes, *Human Nature and De Corpore Politico*. Oxford World's Classics. Edited by J.C.A. Gaslin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), ch. 11, art. 4, 65.
- 13 Gianluca Mori, *Bayle Philosophe* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1999), 309.
- 14 For a critique of the kind of argument on which Mori bases his case, see Michael W. Hickson and Thomas M. Lennon, "The Real Significance of Bayle's Authorship of the *Avis*," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 17:1 (January 2009), 191–206.
- 15 For the best account of the question of Socinianism in Locke's work, including discussion and references for the aforementioned, see Nicholas Jolley, *Locke and Leibniz: A Study of the New Essays on Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), ch. 2.
- 16 Alan Charles Kors, *Atheism in France, 1650–1729: The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990). This is supposed to be volume one of two, but the second volume has yet to appear.
- 17 Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 2–3. The principal target of philosophical religion is the reliance of folk religion on imagination and tradition. This critique is already underway with Maimonides, according to them, and is sustained later by Descartes and Kant; pp. 112–14.
- 18 Halbertal and Margalit, ch. 1.
- 19 Halbertal and Margalit, p. 24.
- 20 Locke, John, *Epistola de tolerantia: A Letter on Toleration*, ed. R. Klibansky, trans. J. Gough (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 116–19. The Calvinist Pierre Jurieu took cupidity to be the source of the Socinians' false conception of God, and traced Catholics' idolatrous practices to "culpable unregulated passion"; pp. 231–33. *Des droits des deux souverains en matière de religion. . . .* (Rotterdam, 1687).
- 21 AT VII 371; CSM II 256.
- 22 For an instance of such anti-Catholic reason, see David-Augustin Brueys (1640–1723), *Réponse au livre de Mr. de Condom* (Geneva: chez Jean Pictet, 1681), 193–4.
- 23 *Continuation des pensées diverses*, cxx, in Pierre Bayle, *Oeuvres diverses* (OD) III (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1964–1982), 215a.
- 24 Pierre Bayle, *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 208–9; *Pensées diverses*, 170 (OD III, 108a).
- 25 AT VII 2; CSM II 3.
- 26 *On the Law of War and Peace* (1625), prologomena, quoted from J. B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 67–8.
- 27 Schneewind, *ibid.*
- 28 See *ibid.*, 275–9.
- 29 *Various Thoughts*, 220; *Pensées diverses sur la comète*, sec. 177 (OD III, 113b)
- 30 *Various Thoughts*, 221; *Pensées diverses*, sec. 178 (OD III, 114b).
- 31 Jacques Le Brun, *Le pur amour de Platon à Lacan* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2002), 107–16.
- 32 Molinos's condemnation is given in Pope Innocent XI's bull, *Caelestis Pastor*, of 3 September 1687, which can be found (in Latin) in appendix D of Paul Dudon, *Le Quiétiste Espagnol Michel Molinos (1628–1696)* (Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne, 1921), 292–9.
- 33 Robert Boyle, *Works* 8: 108, quoted from *The Excellencies of Robert Boyle*, edited by J. J. MacIntosh (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2008), 57.
- 34 Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- 35 *Ibid.*, 86.
- 36 Benedict de Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989), ch. 7, 141.

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