



PROJECT MUSE®

---

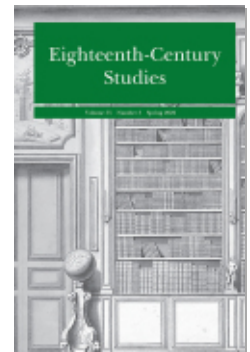
*Positive Atheism: Bayle, Meslier, d'Holbach, Diderot* by  
Charles Devellennes (review)

Lloyd Strickland

*Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Volume 55, Number 3, Spring 2022, pp. 413-415  
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ecs.2022.0032>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/852306>

---

wider historical context. Likewise, we do not find out much about the enemies of this type of modernity. How did they frame their arguments? How did they think of the reality of the political order that was crumbling? What did it mean to be beyond the pale of “rationalism and enlightenment” for them?

Ethan Menchinger’s book is a necessary read for all the students and researchers of Ottoman history. However, it should ideally be read together with more recent work on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Islamic intellectualism, perhaps especially Ahmad S. Dallal’s *Islam Without Europe: Traditions of Reform in Eighteenth-Century Islamic Thought* (2018) and Khaled el-Rouayheb’s *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb* (2015). Together, these books offer a rounded view on the intellectual and religious changes in the Ottoman Empire before the full-blown European impact of the nineteenth century.

LLOYD STRICKLAND, *Manchester Metropolitan University*

---

**Charles Develennes, *Positive Atheism: Bayle, Meslier, d’Holbach, Diderot* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2021). Pp. 240. \$105 cloth.**

How best to study the development of modern atheism? In *Positive Atheism*, Charles Develennes argues that while others have sought to do so from the perspective of those who accused others of atheism, there is instead “an obvious alternative that has at least equal validity and coherence: starting with the atheists” (3). Accordingly, this book offers a study of eighteenth-century atheism from the perspective of atheists themselves. Or rather, from the perspective of four thinkers who took atheism to be a positive doctrine in its own right, with important social, ethical, and political implications. These implications are the beating heart of this book.

*Positive Atheism* consists of an introduction followed by five chapters. Each of the first four chapters is devoted to one of the four thinkers named in the book’s subtitle—Pierre Bayle, Jean Meslier, Baron d’Holbach, and Denis Diderot—while the final chapter concerns the state of atheism in France in 1789. Chapter 1 begins with Bayle’s oft-made argument that since moral action stems from the passions rather than principles, it is possible for there to be virtuous atheists. That belief, coupled with his assertion that people should be free to follow their consciences, even if their consciences are wrong, culminates in a doctrine of toleration towards all, including atheists, even under the most extreme of provocations. Chapter 2 examines the atheist system of Meslier, and the “form of radical politics” (63) built thereon, specifically, his call to overthrow the tyranny and domination of both the church and the political rulers in favor of a more egalitarian society. Chapter 3 carefully maps out both the “virtue utilitarian” (117) ethical theory that d’Holbach derives from his materialist ontology and his attendant vision of political and legal structures capable of attaining the goal of material well-being for all. Chapter 4 begins with Diderot’s religious journey from deism to skepticism about both theism and atheism, before turning to his political thought, in particular his social contract theory, his push for reforms to promote greater equality, and his desire to subject church to state.

The book is perhaps best characterized as an apology for the aforementioned four apologists of atheism, with Devellennes keen to present in as charitable light as possible the different visions of society painted by these apologists (though he does also point out some obvious weaknesses along the way, such as d'Holbach's under-motivated belief in natural justice, where virtue and vice are naturally rewarded and punished). As such, it is a successful work, as clear and rich in detail as it is erudite.

In terms of reservations, I shall mention two. First, the title of the book, *Positive Atheism*, is apt to lead a potential reader to think that its focus will be squarely on the active denial of God, which is how the term "positive atheism" is normally understood, as Devellennes himself notes early on (7). However, as should be clear enough from the brief account of the first four chapters given above, the focus of the book is more on the social, ethical, and political implications of atheism than the actual rejection of God *per se*. The apparent discrepancy between book title and book content is removed halfway through the introduction, where Devellennes explains that he is recasting "positive atheism" as not merely a denial of God "but as a potentially independent mode of thought, seeking self-mastery and autonomy" (12). So construed, it becomes clear why so much space in the book is devoted to the social, ethical, and political thought of the four protagonists named in the title. But of course, one needs to have already started reading the book to know that Devellennes is operating with this novel understanding of "positive atheism." Those who base their expectations of a book's content on its title might well expect a greater focus on the four protagonists' actual denial of God than is to be found here.

Devellennes' novel understanding of "positive atheism" also helps to explain his choice of thinkers. He notes early on that of his selected four thinkers, "only two are outright atheists (in the sense that they self-identify as such)" (2), namely Meslier and d'Holbach. The other two, Bayle and Diderot, are included not because they were atheists, or at any rate self-identified as atheists, but because they considered atheism to be a positive doctrine, despite apparently not subscribing to it themselves. This is defensible enough, and I am sympathetic with Devellennes' decision not to impose labels on Bayle and Diderot that they were not willing to place on themselves. However—and this is my second reservation—in the handling of Diderot there is a marked inconsistency which is never adequately explained. In chapter 4, Devellennes argues that while many scholars have portrayed Diderot as an atheist, such a label is inadequate, in that "Diderot remains sceptical of both theistic and atheistic positions throughout his life, and that while he often leans towards atheism, he never quite dismisses some theories about the existence of God" (157). Specifically, Diderot leaves open what Devellennes terms "a hylozoist conception of the universe" (162), in which the material universe is seen as one great living organism, which can be identified as God. Throughout chapter 4, we are told that Diderot returns again and again to this idea, never quite endorsing it, but never once ruling it out either. That, coupled with a lack of explicit self-identification as an atheist, is sufficient for Devellennes to avoid imposing the label of atheist on Diderot. Nothing controversial so far, at least to my mind. Yet in chapter 5, within the space of a single paragraph, Devellennes asserts no fewer than four times that Diderot was an atheist. Hence we find references to "his atheism" (twice), "his own atheism" (once), and the description of Diderot as "an atheist" (all four quotations from 190). After having been told and shown how difficult it is to categorize Diderot's religiosity (or lack thereof), to find it categorized so emphatically as it is in this one paragraph is somewhat jarring.

Needless to say, as reservations go, these are quite minor, and Devellennes' book is overall a fine study of how four eighteenth-century thinkers could envisage atheism as not merely a simple rejection of the divine, but as a coherent worldview in its own right and the source of positive social change.

MATTHEW MASON, *Brigham Young University*

---

Dennis C. Rasmussen, *Fears of a Setting Sun: The Disillusionment of America's Founders* (Princeton Univ. Press, 2021). Pp. 288; 1 b/w illus. \$29.95 cloth.

This is an effective study of the political anxieties of leading Founders George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson. Those anxieties centered, Rasmussen shows, on the experimental nature of the American republic in its early years—far from some foreordained triumph, these men understood the United States as a fragile endeavor in republican government that could go wrong at any time. In their pessimistic moments, all of the above subjects of his biographical profiles judged that it had in fact gone wrong.

Rasmussen offers a portrait of the more optimistic James Madison, who preserved his faith in the experiment until his death in 1836, as “the proverbial exception that proves the rule” (4). His inclusion bolsters Rasmussen's argument, specifically his contention that the other Founders' disillusion was a function in part of their boundless hopes for the United States as the keystone in the story of human liberty. Madison “had lower expectations than most of the other founders regarding what was politically possible,” and this, plus his pragmatism, proved a recipe for keeping the faith (219).

Specialists in the political history of the early republic will likely find very little to quarrel with in this volume, but that highlights some of the limits of its historiographical contribution. Rasmussen wrote it because he “was surprised to find that no one had” explored the Founders' disappointments “in a systematic way,” at monograph-length (ix). He is building largely on longstanding insights from key passages in Gordon Wood's 1969 classic, *The Creation of the American Republic*, so in that sense it is indeed true that Rasmussen is contributing the first book-length treatment of this theme. But one question that at least this reviewer did not find answered by reading it is whether the scholarly literature needed a full monograph, rather than, say, an article-length exploration. It is true that examining this relatively wide range of personalities within the pantheon of Founders works to the advantage of Rasmussen's argument that these fears for the future of the republic were widely shared among that group, not just the preserve of cranks like Adams or Hamilton. But by cutting back on illustrative material and some redundant passages, this argument could have been made in a substantial article or book chapter.

Academic scholars are almost the only ones to read these genres, however, and the book seems by its nature not to be aimed primarily at them. While it is based on solid research in the published papers of its subjects, the book offers no new archival insights or bold theses that specialists will find surprising or strongly arguable. While Rasmussen engages with historical scholarship in a competent