Introduction

For centuries, French theological and philosophical culture had seen various heterodoxies diversely come, go, or modify what people came to believe. There was one heterodoxy more extreme, however, than all the others: atheism. If it were compelling, then virtually all ultimate beliefs about the world and the human place in it would have to change. Leading educators, theologians, and philosophers of early-modern France, across confessional lines, had sought to label such atheism as so manifestly absurd that only a perversity of the will, overcoming reason and evidence, could account for it. Nonetheless, the Christian learned world always had contained "the atheist" as an interlocutor and as a polemical foil, and its engagement and use of the hypothetical atheist were major parts of its intellectual life. In the decades between the death of Descartes and the discovery of explicitly and assertively atheistic clandestine manuscripts, that interlocutor found real voice. My life's work has been to understand this complex phenomenon.

The seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were a period of the most explicit competition among often mutually exclusive systems of thinking about and explaining the objects of human knowledge and experience. The most fundamental assumptions about reality were in dispute in the emerging Republic of Letters. Christendom – and, in our particular case, Catholic France – was educating its population in unprecedented numbers, creating a learned world that would change, often radically, the intellectual and material life of the culture that produced it. All of the intellectual phenomena described in this work occurred in relationship to and with consequences for the extraordinary growth in the number of schools. All reflected and affected the art and craft of printing. All stimulated and fed the hunger for scholarly books, for translations into the vernacular, and for learned journals. All provided avid readers with new windows onto the minds of others. All transpired amid the increasing division and diversification of intellectual roles,

a development playing havoc with the presumptive authority of traditional theologians and professors.

This book is simultaneously part of an effort to explain, in terms of its intellectual content, the emergence of an initially minor current of atheism and, in so doing, to portray the singular educated culture from which it emerged. Atheism, as a concept, was not underground, but, as a set of ideas, was part of the very mental furniture of the Christian learned world. By the end of the seventeenth century, orthodox France had produced, from its own libraries, book trade, translations, commentaries, institutions, and disputes, the extreme heterodoxies that would threaten its but recently strengthened intellectual and legal hegemony. If there is a meta-thesis in my work, it is a reserved one: The more one knows of early-modern French learned culture, the more one understands the enormity of its unintended role in the generation of the possibility, then reality, of actual atheism. There indeed may be many ways to view this awesome or appalling (take your pick) development, but I wish to convince you that the great error would be to ignore, minimize, or in any way fail to grasp the actual underlying active forces of educated early-modern France. Its behaviors and contexts are the focus in this volume.

To answer the question of how an orthodox culture generated its own philosophical antithesis, this study proceeds by immersion in and examination of the manifest dynamics, the inherited sources, the references, the debates, the dilemmas, the rhetorical techniques, and the conceptual options of learned France in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. I have chosen to read what they read at their universities, to study the texts, ancient and modern, that were their common property, to understand their cunning polemical reviews of each other's works, and to examine their contestations and the resonance of those contestations. I have worked my hardest to understand how they thought. Phenomena that are demonstrably common and pervasive in this historical period not only explain, but overexplain and overdetermine one circumscribed but qualitatively significant effect of that culture's intellectual life: the emergence of atheistic thought. Once familiar with those agencies, sources, options and phenomena, one wonders less at the emergence of atheism than at how circumscribed it remained.

We have learned not always to believe the self-image of which any culture convinces itself. That historical skepticism is indispensable concerning the self-image that the vibrant theistic culture of the French seventeenth century communicated to its readers and, by yet another unintended consequence, to its historians. With a few exceptions, French thinkers argued that there was universal consent to belief in God, but its own analyses of the past and of other minds in other cultures revealed its own frequent qualifications and often negations of that thesis. It claimed to find atheism unthinkable, but, in fact, it did not. In an earlier work, I examined the culture's ubiquitous claim that only "the fool" could deny the existence of God and that there could not be actual speculative atheists. I examined, also, the drama and the consequences of the

learned world's own full-blown rhetorical objections to those proofs in its own dialectical method of demonstration; its avid awareness of an orthodox classical scholarship on the rejection of such proofs among the ancients; its growing sense (right or wrong) of widespread atheism in the world beyond Europe; and, above all, the mutual refutation of each philosophical camp's proofs of God by all other camps in a mutual fratricide of philosophical theology.[1]

Formal proof of God, however, was only one part of the equation, and not the most consequential in terms of intellectual life, because theistic culture was committed to the view that the conjectural atheist would believe that the fact and behavior of the natural world were explicable without reference to God. It insisted, we shall see, that such categorical naturalism was a perspective easily rendered absurd by the merest consideration of the qualities of matter and of the structures and behavior of the observable world, but absolute naturalism was a specter that haunted its considerations both of the ancients and of its very own philosophical polemics.

The behavior of the intellectual community we examine here may be linked by other scholars to any number of explanatory models or variables (or geographies) deemed crucial by the intellectual community of the present, models and variables that are beyond my own scope. The goal of my inquiry is limited but still capacious. The specter of naturalism in its particular early-modern form, whatever cultural, social, or psychological factors attended its circulation and agency, had a specific ideational content. I wish to know that content, the occasions from which it arose, and the reverberations it elicited. Such content was derived primarily from inherited classical texts, from Christian analyses and histories of ancient philosophy, and from the remarkable creative destruction wrought by a Christian philosophical community that was engaged in an ongoing *reductio ad absurdum* of each other's perspectives, in this case, in an internecine *reductio ad naturalismum*. That is the goal of this inquiry, and this objective is always and only historical.

Occasionally, I question other historians, where it is unavoidable or serves a particularly useful purpose. The historiographic theses of today, however, if history itself is any guide, will be forgotten before too long. My hope is that the empirical and analytic work here will be of value to all sides of both today's and tomorrow's considerations. I offer certain perspectives without the goal of settling differences among historians. It simply is the case that crucial issues of naturalism and divine transcendence or immanence were demonstrably read through the prism of supposed knowledge of ancient thought. It is simply the case that questions of categorical naturalism often associated by many moderns with Spinoza, or Hobbes, or Bayle demonstrably were far more often

[1] Alan Charles Kors, *Atheism in France, 1650–1729: The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), henceforth *Disbelief. The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief* has been reissued in paperback, in the Princeton Legacy Library series (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

associated by the early moderns in France with considerations of Malebranche. Orthodox culture in France was at war with itself, and it is not surprising that this created spaces in which radically different thinking materialized. As we shall see, the ravages occasioned by bitter and unrelenting debate, by the unparalleled dissemination of ancient texts, by classical scholarship, and by a palpable philosophical tension and recrimination were major agencies of conceptual challenge and change.

Despite the surface self-confidence of theistic learned culture, "the atheist," we shall see again and again, was always present within it. Whatever our other interests or theoretical commitments, we cannot reach or understand the phenomenon of early-modern unbelief in France without knowing the vitality and impasses of early-modern French believers, who were, after all, the educators, commentators, and most discussed voices of their time and place. French readers, of course, encountered and considered vast numbers of works not produced in France, and when such works actually enter their orbit – which is often – those works, ancient and contemporaneous, in Latin or in French translation, directly or in the learned journals, become part of our subject.

In this work, I examine the theistic learned world, the "problem" of naturalism in orthodox thought, and the potent forces, in context, that this problem unleashed. In my forthcoming work, *Epicureans and Atheists in France, 1650–1729* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), I address the thinkers and thoughts that came to fill the fissures that those forces created.

1

From Nature to God

The specter always had been absolute naturalism, the elimination of God and the supranatural from an understanding of the reality in which humanity found itself. This was, for most believers of the early-modern world, the worst error that a mind could make. The culture debated, often paradoxically, the precise roles of intellect and will in any effort to deny a God above the sensible order.[1] Whatever their diverse and often self-contradictory understandings of the source and possible sincerity of that denial, however, they generally agreed on its ultimate *philosophical* form: For the atheist, the world existed, persisted, and proceeded by its own forces of matter-in-motion, without creation, design, dependence, or governance by any being that transcended the natural order, that is, without relationship of any kind to an independent God.

From its own theological perspectives, the Christian learned world of early-modern France believed that many peoples and faiths, uninformed by true revelation and bereft of logical coherence, had misconceived God, often grossly, assigning Him plurality, for example, or imperfect human traits. That, however, was another story, of "ignorance," "superstition," "confusion," or simply "brutishness." God as God, they believed, even in the profound misconceptions of pagan or other benighted religions, stood in *some* relationship to nature, in terms of creation, or design, or governance, and in *some* relationship of independent eminence and power over it. Viewed from the side of nature, which was, Christian minds believed, our only perspective absent revelation, grace, or faith, even the most confused theistic perspective saw a natural order dependent upon some superior entity or entities for some aspect of its existence, essence, attributes, or ways. To deny that, to believe that nature alone – uncreated, undesigned, ungoverned, unsurpassed, self-active, and independent – was

[1] On early-modern French discussions of the roles of intellect and will in the etiology of atheism, see Kors, *Disbelief*, 18–109.

all that there was and all that humanity needed to know, was to be, literally, *a*-theistic, without belief in God.

The term "naturalism" is problematic and ambiguous. It is used diversely across (and within) centuries both in ordinary language and in fields such as philosophy, psychology, aesthetics, and the history of ideas or culture. The multiple meanings and nuances of its root, "nature," only heighten its equivocal status: It can mean "essence," "purpose," "statistical norm," "the universe," "disposition," "things created by God" (rather than by the creatures), "material bodies," "the sensible," and so on. Its ambiguity is apparent even in the terms to which the adjective, "natural," stands in opposition: natural as opposed to the artificial or social, to the perverse, to the unusual, to the supranatural and spiritual (as in demonological or angelic causes), and, indeed, to the supranatural and divine (as in particular providence and miracle, or acts of grace, or Revelation). These usages all are related, but in less than obvious or consistent ways.

Even before the seventeenth century further complicated all uses of the word "nature," the critically influential *Commentarii collegii Conimbricensis* on Aristotle noted, simply concerning the *Physics*, "the manifold meanings of 'nature,' " whose diversity of significations threatened to impede clear thought: that which creates; that which makes something uniquely what it is; the sum of created things; innate propensity; that which makes the actual from the potential; the generative principle; and, as they believed Aristotle most clearly intended his meaning in the *Physics*, the principle and cause of an entity's motion and rest (exclusive of prior and external causes and principles).[2]

What matters here, however, is not the term itself, but, rather, the phenomenon this work will identify by it: in early-modern philosophical and theological use, the limitation of reality (and of our knowledge of reality) to matter-in-motion conceived of as wholly independent of any superior being for its original and continued existence, its activity, and its ways and forms of being. That was the "naturalism," either as cause or consequence, which Christian learned culture found antithetical to belief in God.

As noted tangentially in *Atheism in France, 1650–1729: The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief*, such naturalism, narrowly understood as the most explicit statement of the ability to dispense with God in understanding nature and nature's ways, was a not infrequent formulation by orthodox culture of what atheism might be.[3] It will become clear in this present study, however, that many of the most important early-modern debates on questions of creation, providence, ontology, souls, motion, and even fideism also related essentially or polemically to the specter of naturalism, because they touched, dramatically, issues of

[2] *Commentarii in octo libros physicorum Aristotelis* (Coimbra, 1592), l.II.c.1.q.1.art.1. and q.2.art.1.

[3] See Kors, *Disbelief*, 48, 59, 71–74, 101, 107, 167, 171, 201, 219–22, 227–29, 233, 243, 270, 367.

knowledge about a realm of being that was beyond "mere" nature. The capacity to demonstrate the existence of God and to overcome the objections of "the atheist" was a formal requirement of any truly Catholic natural philosophy (a requirement acknowledged, despite the greater toleration of fideism, by most early-modern Protestant thought as well).[4] In the same manner, the capacity to recognize ultimate dependence upon God was an obligation of systems of natural explanation acknowledged by virtually all thinkers who deemed themselves Christian or, indeed, theistic. It was good to advance the human understanding of the natural world in natural terms; it was folly, blindness, and wickedness, however, to do so in a manner that limited such understanding to nature alone, or, worse yet, that suggested that purely natural agencies sufficed to account for the existence, conservation, order, and activity of the world.

The importance and diffusion of the problem of naturalism was guaranteed by the priority assigned to it in the most influential of all medieval *Summae*. In his *Summa theologiae*, Saint Thomas Aquinas, after establishing the desirability of philosophical demonstration of God, had identified only two essential and general objections to the actual enterprise of proving that God existed: the presence of evil,[5] and the sufficiency of natural explanation. He gave voice to the second objection in these terms:

> Moreover, if a few causes fully account for some effect, one does not seek additional causes. Now, it appears that everything that we observe in this world can be explained fully by other causes, without positing a God. Thus, the effects of nature are explained by natural causes and the effects of artifice are explained by human reason and will. Therefore, there is no need to assume that a God exists.[6]

Aquinas clearly had no problem with parsimonious explanation per se, so the heart of that objection was its second claim: "it appears that everything that we observe in this world can be explained fully by other causes." If *that* were true, the atheist could say, why posit a God? As the anti-Scholastic Jean de Launoy gleefully reminded his seventeenth-century audience, early Scholasticism itself, and Aristotelianism in general, had been condemned by diverse official theological bodies from the thirteenth century on for having given too much to nature.[7] Indeed, in 1277, the University of Paris had condemned as incompatible with the faith 219 propositions allegedly advanced

[4] On the problem of demonstration and fideism, see ibid., 110–31, and also 64–65, 71, 73, 105–07, 221, 233, 243–44, 266–68, 346–49, 368–77.

[5] On the problem of evil, see ibid., 30, 51, 63–65, 68, 95, 107, 338, 348–49, and below, Chapter 5.

[6] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* Ia.q.2.art.3, in Jean Nicolai, O.P., ed., *Summa theologica S. Thomae Aquinatis…*,1 vol. [in folio] (Paris, 1663). See also, for further references to works by Aquinas, Jean Nicolai, et al., eds., *Sancti Thomae Aquinatis, … Opera omnia …*, 23 vols. (Paris, 1660 [Societatem Bibliopolarum, edn.]), which also appeared in that same year in a 20-vol. Paris edition.

[7] Jean de Launoy, *De varia Aristotelis in academia parisiensi fortuna* (Paris, 1653 [there is also an edn. (n.p., n.d.), that may have preceded this]; 2nd edn. (The Hague, 1656); 3rd edn. (Paris, 1662); 4th edn. (Wittenberg, 1720). There were many printings of the Paris editions.

in the faculty of philosophy by Masters of Arts deemed to be excessively influenced by Aristotle, Avicenna, and Averroes, or, at the least, by certain professors excessively influenced by them. The theologians placed among these propositions several that they believed denied the creation of the universe and attributed to nature alone powers of motion and activity that could not, in fact, be explained without reference to God and incorporeal being.[8] The heroes and villains of charges and counter-charges of excessive naturalism might change, but the "problem" was always paramount in assessing belief. In the generation of late sixteenth-century commentators who so influenced the Catholic educators of the seventeenth century, the Jesuit Vazquez had argued that God permitted magic precisely to rescue atheists from their folly by the evidence of supranatural agencies.[9] Although the context had altered radically, three generations later the "Cambridge Platonists" (the term was not early modern) were arguing that sorcery and enchantments served the purpose of establishing an evidence of supranaturalism sufficient to defeat atheism.[10] Henry More, the initial admirer and later harsh critic of Descartes, identified the beliefs of naturalism in familiar terms. First, nothing transcended or existed independently of "Nature" or "Worldly Matter" in any way. Second, "matter in motion" depended on nothing for its existence, conservation, or motion. Third, matter in motion, "of itself," could account for the formation of plants and animals, and, indeed, for thought, memory, and imagination. In short, "nothing more divine exists in the world than matter." Such belief, More indicated, was the foundation of atheism, and it was this "rash deceit" that natural philosophy must overcome in order to secure belief in God.[11]

Although the nuances of what counted as "naturalism" varied, this equation of atheism with natural explanation devoid of any reference to an intelligent, independent, and superior cause was a distinguishing and recurrent theme of dogmatic and polemical argument in the century that preceded the Enlightenment. This was true both in its inherited and in its original works. The revitalization of Thomistic studies brought Aquinas's "objection" to a vast audience of the learned.[12] The extraordinary editions and re-editions of Patristic sources led new generations of the educated to analyses such as that of

[8] Roland Hissette, *Enquête sur les 219 articles condamnés à Paris le 7 mars 1277* (Louvain: Publications Universitaires, 1977), passim. See, in particular, 143–60, 166–67, 182–84, 280–85.

[9] Cited by Gabriel Naudé, *Apologie pour les grands hommes soupçonnez de magie. Dernière édition* (Amsterdam, 1712) [first published in Paris, 1625], 378–79. The original title was *Apologie pour tous les grands personnages qui ont esté faussement soupçonnez de magie*.

[10] For a particularly vigorous assertion of the reality of sorcery, see Joseph Glanvill, *Sadducismus Triumphatus, Or full and plain Evidence concerning Witches and Apparitions … The Third Edition with Additions, the Advantages whereof … the Reader may understand out of Dr. H. More's account prefixed thereunto*, 3rd edn., 2 vols. (London, 1700). On the "Cambridge Platonists," see below, Conclusion.

[11] Henry More, *Opera omnia…* 2 vols. (London, 1674), II, 601.

[12] On the abundant republication of medieval scholastic texts in the seventeenth century, see Kors, *Disbelief*, 84–87.

Lactantius, who had decried those who "either do not know by whom the world was effected or [who] wished to persuade men that nothing was accomplished by the Divine Mind." The heart of their impudent disbelief, for Lactantius, was the claim "that nature was the mother of all things, as if they were saying that all things were born of their own accord." To speak of nature without God was without significance, however, "For nature, when divine providence and power are removed, is absolutely nothing."[13]

Pierre Charron, in 1595, identified for his many readers the five "causes" or "occasions" of atheism. Three were psychological or volitional (madness, impunity, and impatience). Two, however, were intellectual, and involved, in effect, the removal of God from our understanding of nature. The first was ignorance of the manifest governance of the world by God, from which one thought that things proceeded randomly ("*qu'il n'y a point de tout de Dieu, ni de maître gouverneur; mais que tout va comme il peut*"). The second was belief in the uninterrupted regularity and order of nature herself ("*perpetuus ordo et tenor natura*"), which led to men "who from seeing natural things going always and for so long in the same manner (from which they should infer and argue for an omniscient author), think that there is no master or superintendent, and even that things proceed of themselves always thus [*qui pour voir les choses naturelles aller toujours, et de si longtemps en même train (d'où elle devait tirer conjecture et argument d'un très-sage auteur) pense n'y avoir autre maître ou surintendant, sinon que d'elles-mêmes marchent toujours ainsi*]."[14]

Over a century later, the *Histoire des Ouvrages des Savans* cautioned against "certain people who imagine themselves to be able to explain everything by the laws of movement and mechanics, without having recourse to the wisdom and to the power of God, either for the creation or for the conservation of the Universe."[15] In 1684, the *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* discussed an erudite study published in Leipzig, *De naturalismo*. The reviewer shared the German author's analysis of "naturalism" into three types. There was "subtle naturalism," which denied the need for interior grace to achieve spirituality. There was "gross naturalism," which doubted the Christian revelation that

[13] Lactantius, *Divinae institutiones* III.28. The most commonly used of the many seventeenth-century Latin editions of Lactantius, after midcentury, was the *Lucii Coelii Lactantii Firmiani Opera quae extant* … (Lyon, 1660). There were also the Leiden editions of the *Opera* of 1652 and 1660. There also was a separate Latin edition, *Epitome institutionem divinarum*, Nicholas Le Nourry, ed. (Paris, 1712), and a French *Les institutions divines* …, trans. Drouet de Maupertuy (Avignon, 1710). In addition to the 1710 translation, there were five vernacular editions from the sixteenth century. I have used the English translation of Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes: Books I–VIII*, trans. Sister Mary Francis McDonald (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1964).

[14] Pierre Charron, *Les trois véritez*, in Pierre Charron, *Toutes les oeuvres* …, 2 vols. (Paris, 1635), II, 7–8.

[15] *Histoire des Ouvrages des Savans*, jan. 1702, 41. (Over the years, the spelling of the journal's title evolved from *Histoire des Ouvrages des Sçavans* to *Histoire des Ouvrages des Savans*. Catalogers vary in their choices.)

salvation is acquired by faith in Jesus Christ. Above all, there was "the grossest naturalism," which was "the impiety of those who recognize no other divinity than the world, or than matter."[16] It was this last form of naturalism, the learned culture believed, that expressed the positive intellectual form of atheism, positive, that is, in asserting some claim beyond simple denial of the existence of an independent, transcendent God. The self-sufficiency of nature, for that culture, was the logical obverse of denying God.

Reference to such naturalism, whether for purposes of explicating or refuting disbelief, or, for most, simply exposing its absurdity, was an early-modern Christian commonplace that transcended confessional divisions. Thus, Jean d'Espagne defined atheists as those who "know no other divinity than matter and form … or the law of nature, or nature itself."[17] Spizelius warned that a superficial natural philosophy could incline shallow thinkers to atheism by leading them to replace God by "nature as a productive cause."[18] Spanheim's examination of atheism explained that the atheist in search of "reasons" tried in vain to attribute all things, including complex organization, "to Matter and to the necessary laws of its Movement," asking us to believe that these explained all that we see. One risked assisting the unbeliever by attributing too much "to secondary causes," failing to see God's wisdom and providence in the natural order of things.[19] Kortholt's *De tribus impostoribus*, which piously borrowed a legendary impious title in order to denounce the "impiety" of Herbert of Cherbury, Hobbes, and Spinoza, identified "atheists" precisely as "naturalists" ("*atheos et naturalistas*"). All three philosophers may have used the word "God," Kortholt wrote, but by denying the supranatural and simply terming Nature "God," they revealed their atheism.[20] Pierre Bayle similarly insisted that "things," not "names," were significant, and that saying "god" did not make one a theist. If one simply termed divine that which was without immateriality, providence, and liberty, one was simply giving "to Nature the title of God."[21] As Isaac Jaquelot put it: "Everyone says that there is a God, but this great name often creates a dangerous equivocation: the person who speaks of God … [and] nonetheless has no other idea of the divinity but that of the matter of the universe."[22] As the *Bibliothèque Anglaise* insisted in 1717, quoting Richard Blackmore, nominal acknowledgment of the existence of God did

[16] *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres*, juin 1684, 340–49.
[17] Jean d'Espagne, *Les oeuvres de Jean Despagne* …, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1674), II, 20–21.
[18] Theophilus Spizelius, *De atheismi radice* (Augsburg, 1666), 46–57.
[19] Friedrich Spanheim, *L'Athée convaincu en quatre sermons sur les paroles du Pseaume XIV. Vers. I. 'l'Insensé a dit en son coeur, il n'y a point de Dieu'* … (Leiden, 1676), 232–49.
[20] Christian Kortholt, *De tribus impostoribus magnis* (Kiel, 1680), passim. The phrase "*atheos et naturalistas*" occurs in his conclusion, 224–26. A second edition of this work was published in 1700.
[21] Pierre Bayle, *Réponse aux questions d'un provincial*, in *Oeuvres diverses* … 4 vols. (The Hague, 1727–1731), III, pt. 2, 932–34.
[22] Isaac Jaquelot, *Dissertations sur l'existence de Dieu, où l'on démontre cette vérité par l'histoire universelle, par la réfutation d'Epicure et de Spinosa* … (The Hague, 1697), "Préface."