Introduction

The religious and theological debates that most sharply divided early-modern French culture were not over ultimate issues of whether or not we inhabit a nature created and governed by an omnipotent, omniscient, and transcendent God. There were controversies that were far more contemporaneously fervent and that drew in almost every Christian author in France: Catholicism or Protestantism; views of sin, grace, and the role of sacrament; Jansenists and their multitude of powerful critics. Nonetheless, the emergence of atheism was qualitatively unlike any of these phenomena: It challenged the culture's deepest beliefs about the world and the place of human beings within it, and if it were true, all of the other matters would be extraneous.

The atheist was always a presence in Christian theistic learning. To prove God formally, one had to posit or create, and overcome, the objections of "the atheist," confront the dilemmas passed on by prior apologists, and defend oneself against the contemporaneous critics of one's demonstrations. In a prior work, I looked at the culture's claims that theoretical atheism was impossible and unthinkable and that disbelief in God could only be an act of will, not intellect. Beneath (and perhaps, in part, because of) the nominal self-confidence of Christian theologians, philosophers, and savants, early-modern thinkers articulated and analyzed the arguments that the atheist might pose. They did this in their own texts, in accounts and analyses of the ancients, and in accounts of the thinking of other minds encountered in other places. Further, each of the main philosophical camps competing to be the (recognized and rewarded) natural voice of Christian understanding theatrically sought to reduce each other's camps to impotence before the would-be atheist, rehearsing, if one adds them together, how such an atheist would reply triumphantly to any and all demonstrations of God's existence. Atheism, even if they did not believe that anyone could hold such a view sincerely, was wholly thinkable to them.[1]

[1] Alan Charles Kors, *Atheism in France, 1650–1729: The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

The hypothetical atheist had a second burden, beyond rejecting demonstrations of the existence of God. How could one account for the very fact, the behavior, and the complexity of the natural (let alone the animate) world without reference to God? Here, too, as I sought to show in a quite recent work, the reiterated assurance of almost all of the theologians, philosophers, and savants – that the existence, phenomena, and fitness of nature manifestly depended upon God – was simultaneously almost universal and almost always under threat. The bookshelves of the learned abounded in texts of the ancients and of the Church Fathers (explicating and generally condemning the ancients) that sought to portray pre-Christian thought as so benighted that it either rejected the impossibility of nature without there having been an act of God's will or ignored the categorical distinction between nature and God. Further, as they had done in dismissing each other's demonstrations of God, each philosophical school – Aristotelian, Cartesian, and Malebranchist – sought to reduce the other to impotence against the categorical naturalist who believed in the self-sufficiency of nature. Indeed, each camp sought to show how and why, from the premises of the other's metaphysics and physics, one ought to reach, if logically consistent, atheistic conclusions. (Indeed, when they read Spinoza, they read him through the prisms both of ancient philosophy and of their own contemporaneous debates.) To argue that, given nature, only one's own philosophy entailed recognition of God was *not* to reassure those seeking natural certainty. Early-modern French authors, editors, and translators offered copious lessons, with approbation and privilege, on how to think atheistically. The learned journals gave these lessons great resonance.[2]

The most naturalistic philosophy of all among the ancients, Epicureanism, had been a vivid part of the Christian inheritance. Epicurean thinking, in works widely read in early-modern France, was explained in a wide variety of still popular ancient texts and in the writings of the Church Fathers. It also was the source of commonplace objections – easily overcome, almost everyone believed – to proof of nature's dependence upon God. It had its own major voice, read in early-modern France with ever more frequency and now also in the vernacular: Lucretius, whose *De rerum natura* was pored over from a great variety of perspectives (some purely literary, some ethical, and some philosophical) and with a great diversity of agendas. The flourishing of early-modern classical scholarship disseminated Epicurean views of nature and the gods yet more widely.

Some philosophers, for diverse reasons, wished to embrace Epicurean atomistic physics without what they saw as Epicurean categorical naturalism and denial of divine providence. Pierre Gassendi – priest, and canon then provost of the Cathédrale Saint-Jérome de Digne – was deemed both pious and an advocate of atomism, but his Christian Epicureanism came to pose a problematic set of

[2] Alan Charles Kors, *Naturalism and Unbelief in France, 1650–1729* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

difficulties later in the seventeenth century. Among self-proclaimed Epicureans, Guillaume Lamy, in particular, docteur-régent and professor of anatomy at the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Paris, offered an unabashed celebration of the superiority of Epicureanism over both Aristotelian and Cartesian philosophies. He applied this categorical naturalism to the study of human beings themselves, occasioning public debates and published exchanges in which he defended himself with exceptional vigor and assertiveness. With a few fideistic disclaimers, he published his work with the approval of his Faculty and with the permission of royal censors. The central lesson of his work was that, in terms of natural knowledge, we studied the world and found no evidence of divine mind or natural dependence upon God.

Doubt about God's goodness based on the sufferings and injustices of the world – the stuff of faith put to the test throughout the whole of the Christian era, then and now – was not a system of philosophy or a *Weltanschauung*. For such doubt, or any doubt about the reality of God, to become more than an ephemeral experience, it required a way of thinking about reality. Atheists were few. "Chance" seemed an absurd explanation of the world to most minds, and "chance," Christian thinkers argued, was the alternative to God as the cause of things. When those atheists emerged, however, they did so precisely from within Christian intellectual life, framing questions as Christian thinkers and scholars had framed them, and, unsurprisingly, speaking the conceptual language that they inherited from their teachers and from the works pervasive in their milieux. The atheist had been a constant virtual presence in Christian thought. Now, the atheist, heir to the debates, philosophical fratricide, scholarship, and texts of a thoroughly theistic domain, was unmistakably real. This work then, in addition to seeking to overdetermine the emergence of atheism, is also, perhaps above all, a study of the learned world of early-modern France.

The appearance of atheism in Christian France is so striking, seemingly such a notable discontinuity, that it has attracted, we shall see, a copious and (more than) talented group of contemporary students. These researchers and specialists have been, on the whole, particularly drawn to what came to be known as "the clandestine manuscripts," hand-copied texts that circulated in the early-modern world and found their way into private collections (most now in public libraries). This work continues the argument that the content of those "*clandestins*" was not original, but was primarily an embrace of themes ubiquitous in the texts, debates, scholarship, and learned journals of the orthodox world. Orthodoxy begat heterodoxy from its own substance, which is not, to say the least, startling. Atheism was an eclectic synthesis, in positive form, of ideas ubiquitous in the theistically orthodox world.

This work also, in its final chapter, will seek to exclude for demonstrable cause some works that outstanding scholars have placed in the category of evident atheism. Having done so, we shall explore the thought of explicit, emphatic, positive atheists. If I have done my work well, one should see what

is most often the case: In intellectual history, understanding intellectual context and convergence is the heart of understanding how and why.

The dates of this work, 1650–1729, are not arbitrary. 1650 marks the death of Descartes and the beginning of intense debate between Cartesians and their critics, debates with consequences that participants could not have foreseen. 1729 marks the discovery of the "Testament" of the recently deceased Jean Meslier, a Catholic priest, country curé, reader of orthodox works, and, to state it in its mildest terms, committed and ardent atheist. The ultimate purpose of my scholarly life's work has been to make the fact of a Meslier historically comprehensible.

The perspective of this work, thus, is purely historical as opposed to philosophical or theological. In all of my academic undertakings, I have sought to give honest voice to the widest array of thinkers. Tendentiousness is the cardinal sin of an historian. My deepest wish is that the intellectual life of early-modern France should become more understandable, in its patterns and in its diverse specifics, to readers of all interests and persuasions.

1

Reading Epicurus

The Epicurean tradition had reached the learned world of seventeenth-century France in a great diversity of forms and by a great diversity of means. It was known by classical, Patristic, Scholastic, and contemporaneous citations, paraphrases, commentaries, and explications; by commonplace caricature; by frequent pedagogical reference to its significance as one of the major "schools" of ancient thought, for purposes both of erudition and of refutation from Christian perspectives; and by its own preserved texts – above all, Lucretius's *De rerum natura*.

Epicureanism was filtered through a variety of prisms. Those who viewed it as irreligion and atheism often wrote of it as the *ne plus ultra* of pagan disbelief, but it was not the case that everyone saw it in such a light. Some early-modern orthodox minds found Epicurean atomism quite benign, judging it to be above all a philosophy of physics or of ethics, or both, with an incidental and curious theology somehow appended to it. Tocsins and reassurances about the Epicurean tradition, paradoxically, reinforced each other. The more frequently certain thinkers presented the system as a kind of madness that no reasonable mind could embrace, the more it seemed harmless and scholarly to other savants to explicate Epicureanism calmly. The more frequently certain thinkers calmly explicated Epicureanism, the more alarmed other minds became, and the more urgent it seemed to them to defend orthodox culture against the Epicurean temptation.

On the whole, however, most seventeenth-century commentators claimed to see the Epicurean doctrine as a patently absurd system, with its atoms, its void, its plurality of worlds, its material soul, its indifferent gods, and either its denial of order or its belief that what we termed "order" could be, in some sense, the product of chance. For such commentators – and their numbers were legion – Epicureanism was far more an example of the fanciful and benighted thought of the pre-Christian past than a substantial menace to any orthodox

certainties. A focus on the heterodox potential of Epicurus should not distort the historical reality of his often quite prosaic role in Christian learning. For every author who stood in horror or fascination before Epicurean thought, there were many theologians and philosophers who treated it simply as a convenient *locus classicus* of objections that the human mind had framed against providence.

In general, the learned Christian world was confident that it definitively had overcome Epicurus countless times. From the time of its first dissemination until the seventeenth century (and beyond), Epicurean philosophy derived no small notoriety from what its critics described as the libertinism of its eudaemonic ethics, its particular form of equating virtue and happiness. In brief, Latin translators (following Lucretius himself) almost always had rendered the pleasure that Epicurus advocated (Ἡδονή, that is, *hēdonē*, from which "hedonism," with much change of meaning) as "*voluptas*," a sensual "voluptuousness" quite distinct from the earthly satisfactions of "*felicitas*" and from the purposeful delight of "*delectatio*," let alone from the blessedness of that "*beatitudo*" found in union with God. Since among the gods, Hēdonē was the daughter of Eros, much as Voluptas, for the Romans, was the daughter of Cupid and Psyche ("cupidity" faring little better than "hedonism" in some moral circles), the translation made original sense, and, indeed, the critics of Epicurean philosophy long had identified Epicurean "happiness" as debauchery.

Nonetheless, for many interpreters across the ages, the Epicurean notion of *voluptas* should not be read as a celebration of sensual pleasure but rather as a plea for the pleasures to be taken from calm of mind and the absence of bodily pain. Such readers found the notoriety attached to Epicurus absurd, and based, they believed, upon a fatal misreading of Epicurean moral teaching.[1] To others, however, the title "Epicurean" conjured every image of a self-indulgent and bestial gluttony, lust, and sensuality; in short, of a boundless concupiscence. Most savants seemed to recognize that Epicurus's goal of happiness in fact entailed self-control and the abatement of the passions, but many a debate about *voluptas*, *felicitas*, and *beatitudo* could be carried on with reference to presumed Epicurean ethical doctrine.

For some readers, however, in numbers impossible to discern, the particular *frisson* of Epicurean philosophy – its thrill and its horror – arose from its unabashed denial of providence. Scholars, disputants, and dialecticians might well argue that objections to providence in general, entailing the attribution of causal agency to chance, were logically absurd and dependent upon an incoherent hypothesis. Nonetheless, as noted, shepherds of human souls within Christendom always had recognized that, in practice, doubts about providence in the minds of a suffering humanity were the great occasions of doubts about

[1] Even among the Church Fathers, there was a remarkable spectrum of opinion about Epicurus, and he had admirers among the Patristics: See the deeply intriguing and well-documented article by R.P. Jungkuntz, "Christian Approval of Epicureanism," *Church History* 31, 1962, 279–93.

the existence of God.[2] Lucien Febvre was correct to note that there is a vast difference, indeed, between, on the one hand, an ephemeral cry of despair about the ways of the world, and, on the other, a substantive philosophical position.[3] Nonetheless, for any Christian mind that could imagine (or experience) the uniting of such a cry of despair to the weight of Epicurean objections to providence, the prospect was quite dreadful.

The Epicureans of tradition and text – preserved, studied, and widely commented upon in the intellectual inheritance of the Christian West – had argued against providence on the grounds that the gods were too blessed to be concerned with the world. In one sense, that was a theological argument – about the nature of divine being – that Christian theologians did not find particularly difficult to resolve: Indifference, not the exercise of dominion, was the contradiction of divine perfection. In another sense, it was a philosophical argument that touched the heart of categorical naturalism: Did the phenomena of the world truly testify to a perfect being's providential governance? Epicureanism, as a set of texts and commonplace positions, was an object of study and commentary in the early-modern West, and, as such, it exposed all serious students to a perspective from which a human being might gaze upon the whole of the world and find no evidence of divine mind or wisdom in its being, arrangement, and operations. Learned orthodox culture preserved and gave lessons on – however much it identified it as pagan folly and error – the ultimate heterodoxy: The world did not have final purpose or meaning because it was the product of unintelligent and uncaring chance. When "ephemeral doubt" sought philosophical footing, and when proofs of the existence of God no longer seemed universally compelling, there always was available the Epicurean temptation: to see no divine order, to think of this world as random and purposeless, and to seek to explain all of nature without reference to God.

What was Epicurean thought doing in the midst of an orthodox French Christian culture? Most simply put, Epicureanism was a part of its inheritance. Whatever the weight that individual thinkers might or might not place on the naturalist themes of Epicurean thought, the fact remains that Epicureanism was a standard and widely explicated point of reference in early-modern France. This was so both because the erudite knew it to have been an essential school of ancient philosophy and because learned orthodoxy believed it to be essentially noninfectious. Orthodox Christian culture could read and discuss "the gods" of Greek and Roman "mythology" with a sense of polytheism as a deformed theology that posed no real dangers to educated Christian readers. Similarly, on the whole, it could contemplate and encounter Epicureanism with

[2] See Kors, *Disbelief*, passim, and especially 52–53, 63–65, 193–94, 345–49.
[3] Ibid., 8–9. For an extended discussion of the problem of evil, see Kors, *Naturalism*, Chapter 5.

a sense of it as an odd and irreligious philosophy that posed few threats to the educated Christian.

Further, of course, early-modern Christian savants, professors, and doctors felt no need whatsoever to shrink from objection, analysis, and disputation. They were thoroughly armed, they believed, against illogic and falsehood, possessing a truth against which error could not prevail and in the presence of which the weakness of error was manifest. Whatever protection by censorship and censure they offered the ignorant and unlearned within their culture, they themselves reveled in the scholarly and disputational role, and they refused to leave major systems of thought unexamined or, if deemed unorthodox, unrefuted. Epicureanism was a heterodox presence in early-modern France, but that presence derived above all else from the inheritance, curiosity, and self-confidence of the orthodox community.

Any appreciation of the heterodox influence and role of the Epicurean tradition, thus, or of an orthodox recoil from Epicurean themes, should be nuanced by (if not grounded in) an awareness of the large extent to which Epicurean thought was simply a common interlocutor in early-modern France and by how innocuous learned considerations of it seemed to most orthodox minds. Indeed, even for many thinkers fully sensitive to its irreligious content and implications, Epicurean thought nonetheless had edifying possibilities, above all in certain elements of its moral doctrines and of its natural explanations of natural phenomena. For example, in a sixteenth century fully prepared to repress heresy by all means necessary, the Jesuit Possevino had advised that the Epicurean Lucretius might be taught safely if one understood the proper cautions to employ and the proper uses to which he might be put:

> Lucretius, among the poets who wrote on natural things, is the most subtle and the most elegant, but he contains texts not to be exposed to adolescents, such as the invocation to Venus, and the eulogy of Epicurus in which he [seeks to] destroy the immortality of the soul, providence, and all religion, not to mention his absurd opinions on the attraction of atoms by the play of chance alone or on the plurality of worlds. If one explicates him, one must draw from the Greek poems of Gregory of Nazianzus or from the Latin poems of Boethius the true manner of thinking on these doctrines. On the other hand, I would not deny that one can explicate in Lucretius his disputations on contempt for death, the loss of love, the repression of the passions, the calming of the movements of the mind, the tranquility of the soul, [and on] sleep, the rising and setting of the stars, the eclipses of the sun and moon, nature and lightning, rainbows, the causes of illness, etc.[4]

Likewise, in the sixteenth century, Juan Luis Vives had not objected to teaching Epicurean thought, provided that it was not presented to "any boy inclined

[4] Cited in François de Dainville, S.J., *L'Education des Jésuites (XVIe–XVIIIe siècles)*, ed. Marie-Madeleine Compère (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1978), 182–83. (A very welcome compilation of Dainville's scattered articles.)

to impiety."[5] Some eminently respectable authors found much to admire in Epicurean ethical theory. In 1685, canon Cocquelin, "chancellor of the Church and of the University of Paris, canon of the aforesaid Church, [and] doctor of the Maison et Société du Sorbonne," provided the approbation for the publication of *La morale d'Epicure*, by the baron Des Coutures (who in the same year published a French translation of Lucretius's *De rerum natura*). The honored ecclesiastic and educator Cocquelin reminded readers that while only Christian grace could save their souls, it was edifying and justly humbling for Christians to see how far – and sometimes how much further than so many Christians – pagan philosophers had advanced in the practice of virtue, "aided by the lights of nature alone, and the force of reason alone." If this were true when it came to pagan savants, how much more "shame" should the Christian not feel when realizing that it was equally true concerning Epicurus, "who among the common passes for being the farthest removed from the true idea of virtue." Cocquelin noted in his approbation that his great predecessor Jean de Gerson, when chancellor of the University of Paris, had explained that tradition offered two portraits of Epicurus: first, and falsely, the infamous voluptuary; second, known to students of the ancients, the sage pagan who lacked only knowledge of the fall and of grace through Christ to complete his ethical virtues. Since the disciples of the great atomist also fell into those same two camps, Cocquelin concluded, it was doubly useful to the public to encounter Epicurus's actual moral wisdom.[6]

In his preface to his presentation of Epicurus's moral philosophy, Des Coutures conceded that Epicurus had held a very imperfect understanding of God, had believed the soul mortal, had limited all knowledge to that derived from the senses, and had argued for the eternity of the world. Des Coutures insisted, however, in mitigation of these errors, that the Christian knew divine truth about God, soul, and creation by grace, faith, and revelation, not by natural philosophy. Epicurus's arguments against providence indeed were palpably false and irreligious, since the order of the world could not conceivably be the product of chance, and his physical system was faulty, but independently of these, his ethical theories were austere and wise, as great Christians such as Saint Jerome, Gassendi, Gerson, and Cocquelin had noted.[7] Des Coutures embodied a broad current of seventeenth-century thinking about Epicurean philosophy: It posed no dangers to anyone with real faith, and it was an edifying encounter for anyone who wished to see how far both to and from truth an excellent mind might travel "without lights [of faith] amid the shadows."[8]

[5] Juan Luis Vives, *De tradendis disciplinis* III.5. I have used the English translation of Vives, *On Education: A Translation of the De tradendis disciplinis*, trans. Foster Watson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913).

[6] Nicholas Cocquelin, "*Approbation*," in Jacques Parrain, baron Des Coutures, *La morale d'Epicure, avec des réflexions* (Paris, 1685), [4 pp., unpaginated].

[7] Des Coutures, *La morale d'Epicure*, "Préface" [i–xxix, unpaginated].

[8] Ibid., [xi–xii].

The Huguenot Jacques Du Rondel's *La vie d'Epicure* (1679) had gone even farther, presenting as its own Diogenes Laërtius's view of Epicurus's "ineffable piety … and … profound respect for the gods, which composed the most considerable portion of his virtue." For Du Rondel, Epicurus had added the unpredictable "declension," that is, swerve, of the atoms to Democritus's physical theory in order to save free will. Epicurus's great popularity had displeased other ancient philosophers, above all the Stoics, Du Rondel explained, and they jealously had slandered him, accusing this chaste and pious man of voluptuous depravity and irreligion. While Epicurus was wrong to believe that divine perfection was incompatible with governance in physics, he and Lucretius, Du Rondel insisted, both believed in gods who "concerned themselves" with the morality of the world, and there also had been sincere Christians who believed, however erroneously, that God exercised His providence only in matters of ethics and theology, not in physics.[9]

The poet Jean-François Sarasin, in a "Discours de morale" devoted to Epicurus (published in his *Nouvelles oeuvres* of 1674), attributed the fact that "Epicurus fell into public hatred" to the ignorance, prejudice, and hasty verdict of his judges. Criticism of his moral theories, Sarasin insisted, was based on appearances and the lives of his self-proclaimed followers, not on his actual life and work. His doctrine of *volupté* did not entail what we might now mean by a gross, sensual notion of *volupté*, but involved the search for inner calm and avoidance of pain by means of wisdom. Epicurus's moral doctrine entailed a "holy and severe *volupté*."[10] Other respectable authors admired Epicurean natural philosophy in general, whatever corrections were required of his theology. These currents of praise, of course, had been evident in and given significant impetus by Pierre Gassendi's effort of reconciling Epicurean philosophy and Christian theology.[11]

In short, if one eliminated the irreligious elements of Epicureanism, one was perfectly free to find great merit in Epicurus's philosophy per se. As the Minim monk, theologian, and natural philosopher Marin Mersenne had written to Rivetus in 1642 about Pierre Gassendi's revival of Epicurean atomism, "M. Gassendi powerfully refutes everything that is contrary to Christianity in the Epicurean Philosophy, and … he takes precautions. I believe that it will be one of the most accomplished works of the entire century."[12] By the latter decades of the seventeenth century, admiration of Epicurus was quite frequently and openly expressed. In 1694, Newton wrote that "The

[9] Jacques Du Rondel, *La vie d'Epicure* (Paris, 1679), 2–81. Du Rondel's status as a Huguenot author did not prevent this work from being published "avec permission du roy."

[10] Jean-François Sarasin, *Nouvelles oeuvres de Monsieur Sarazin*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1674), I, 1–178.

[11] Pierre Gassendi, *De vita, moribus et doctrina Epicuri* (Paris, 1647); *Animadversiones in libro X Diogenis Laertii* (Lyon, 1649); *Syntagma philosophiae Epicuri* (The Hague, 1659). On Gassendi, see below, Chapter 2.

[12] Cited in Michael R.G. Spiller, "*Concerning Natural Experimental Philosophie,*" *Meric Casaubon and the Royal Society* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1980), 89.