Bodies of Thought

Science, Religion, and the Soul
in the Early Enlightenment

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Preface

In 1845 Karl Marx included in *The Holy Family* a chapter on eighteenth-century French materialism. Following Charles Renouvier's history of philosophy, he described how materialism developed in England in the seventeenth century and was transformed into an atheistic philosophy: 'Hobbes had shattered the theistic prejudices of Baconian materialism: Collins, Dodwell, Coward, Hartley, Priestley similarly shattered the last theological bars that still hemmed in Locke's sensationalism'.[1] In this book we shall meet all of these names (some of whom are probably totally unknown to the modern reader) together with many others, and it will become clear how mistaken this interpretation was. Eighteenth-century materialism has mostly been studied as part of a history of irreligious thought emphasizing campaigning atheistic syntheses like *Système de la nature* (1770), the main eighteenth-century work of materialistic propaganda. Today it is less likely to be seen as a stage in the development of dialectical materialism than as an aspect of the 'radical Enlightenment' or for its contribution to the thought of the marquis de Sade, or occasionally as part of the prehistory of neuroscience. The present work takes a very different tack, attempting as far as possible to avoid teleological pitfalls. It studies the debate on the soul (the crucial question for a materialistic interpretation of humans) from the late seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century in the terms of the period and investigates its political, theological, and scientific ramifications, trying to take religious concerns seriously rather than dismissing unorthodox expressions of belief as mere masks for irreligion. A secular conception of humans is seen to emerge not only from a radical onslaught on religion but also from difficulties raised by sincere if unorthodox believers. This book, which has been a long time in gestation, is the result of cumulative research extending over a long period and my increasing awareness of the complexity and multi-faceted nature of the early Enlightenment. After studying for many years irreligious and materialistic thought and the writings of those who challenged basic Christian doctrines about the immortal soul, often from an atheistic standpoint similar to my own, I came to realize that these questions needed to be situated in a wider context, paying more attention to not only medical but also theological concerns and the unintended consequences of doctrinal disputes. This research revealed the forgotten aspects of the English side of the story. It also led me to question certain assumptions about the Enlightenment(s) and plead for a more nuanced understanding of the complex currents of thought in this period. The first result is this book, which makes no attempt to define or situate an Enlightenment, radical or otherwise, or to stake

[1] Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, ch. 6, 3.d.

a claim for the centrality of a particular person or country, but tries to turn the spotlight on some less visible facets of the period. It questions certain claims about different types of Enlightenment and the sometimes arbitrary way in which battle lines have been drawn up. In the course of my study of the emergence of a secular conception of humans I shall rescue from obscurity a certain number of people who aroused passion and general vilification from their contemporaries. They have as a result disappeared so far below the historical horizon that when the author of a recent attempt to reconcile religious belief in a soul with the findings of modern neuroscience provides a brief historical survey of philosophical and theological positions, she seems totally unaware of any of these writings or their relevence to her preoccupations.[2] I hope it will be clear how my study of this question central to thinking about human nature resonates with contemporary preoccupations; it should throw light on modern debates about religion and human nature as much because of the different terms in which concerns were expressed as because of the similarity of those concerns.

I owe several, often intangible, debts to a wide range of people. My thanks go to Sarah Hutton, Marian Hobson, Mariana Saad, Nicholas Cronk, Michel Baridon, Knud Haakonssen, Gianni Goggi, Marie Leca-Tsiomis, Dominique Boury, Stefano Brogi, Miguel Benitez, William Lamont, Rachel Hammersley, François-Joseph Ruggiu, Barbara Villez, Michel Cordillot. I learned a lot from Olivier Bloch's seminar on the history of materialism at Paris 1 University (now continued by Jean Salem) and from the group he founded on clandestine manuscripts, from which developed the annual meetings at Paris 12 University organized by Geneviève Artigas-Menant. Some of the ideas developed here were first presented there. I also have fond memories of the stimulating three-year collective study of Diderot's *Rêve de d'Alembert*, organized by Jean-Claude Bourdin, Colas Duflo, Annie Ibrahim, and Sophie Audidière. And this book bears traces of my discussions with Roselyne Rey, whose early death did not prevent her making an invaluable contribution to the study of eighteenth-century medicine. Finally, I would like to thank the Conseil scientifique of Paris 8 University for according me a six-month sabbatical leave which made all the difference.

[2] Murphy, 'Human Nature: Historical, Scientific, and Religious Issues'.

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1
Introduction

In his recent work on human nature the psychologist Steven Pinker lists the elements of what he calls the 'official theory' concerning human nature; he calls them 'The Blank Slate', 'The Ghost in the Machine', and 'The Noble Savage', all inherited according to him from the Enlightenment. While admitting the gradual undermining of this trilogy, he claims that there is 'one wall standing', which he sets out to demolish. According to him, it 'divides matter from mind, the material from the spiritual, the physical from the mental, biology from culture, nature from society, and the sciences from the social sciences, humanities and arts'.[1] Some neurobiologists, however, see a number of enlightened thinkers as precursors of their own attempts to break down this wall and point to explanations, admittedly rudimentary, of human behaviour and intelligence in terms of the workings of the material brain.[2] In addition, Antonio Damasio has identified in Spinoza's philosophy elements of his own approach to feeling, studied in terms of brain functioning, in structuring intelligence.[3] The present work looks at some of these attempts to break down the wall between matter and mind and explain human nature by the physical workings of the body. It studies an important debate which took place in a series of interconnected episodes, essentially in Britain (mainly England), France, and the French-speaking community in the Dutch Republic,[4] in the period loosely termed the early Enlightenment. In this period, characterized by the investigation of physical nature, rehabilitation of the body, and celebration of sensuality, a new view of human nature was emerging, inextricably linked to thinking about the soul. Although the debate studied here centred around the existence of an immaterial and immortal soul, it is striking that several of the arguments used were the same as those Pinker ascribes to his opponents today, even if they were couched in very different terms. I am not claiming that those who figure here had insights into or 'prefigured' the discoveries of neuroscience. But the similarities do indicate that the debate around the soul in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries bears more affinities

[1] Pinker, *The Blank Slate*, 31.
[2] Changeux, *L'Homme neuronal*; Jeannerod, *Le Cerveau-machine*; Edelman, *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire*.
[3] Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza*.
[4] The debate also resonated in Germany among some of those studied by Mulsow, *Moderne aus dem Untergrund*.

than one might think with discussions on the mind today and that its study has more than purely antiquarian interest. It also provides a new understanding of the whole period by setting some of its main concerns in a new light. The central preoccupation with human nature, or the 'science of man'—which Hume in the Introduction to *A Treatise of Human Nature* called 'the only solid foundation for the other sciences'[5]—presupposed a concern with complex and dangerous scientific and theological issues, which have tended to be ignored in works on the period. By bringing these neglected issues to the foreground, this study argues for their importance and takes issue with certain influential interpretations of the Enlightenment. It will show that materialism was a spectre haunting any reflection on human nature in the eighteenth century, and one that was taken seriously. Scholarly neglect of the theological and scientific (mainly medical) issues involved in thinking about human nature has to some extent skewed our understanding of the period. An analysis of debates on the soul demonstrates that materialism was not necessarily fuelled by atheism or even deism, but was also an unintended consequence of certain, admittedly unorthodox, Christian beliefs. Doctrinal disputes within Christianity were at least as important as the onslaught on Christianity in producing free thought and ultimately atheistic arguments.

The crucial moment of the controversy with which this work begins, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, was sparked off by the works of various heterodox writers and thinkers whose explanations of human intellectual activity dispensed with a separate immaterial soul. Although this speculation was not new, it took on a particular vigour and importance in those years. After a relatively high-profile polemic in England at the turn of the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, it again came to the forefront of the intellectual scene with the eighteenth-century French materialists. This disparate group has long been recognized as important, but it has usually been studied in the context of irreligious thought or the long-term history of materialism, and its place in an ongoing international debate has attracted insufficient attention. As I shall show, the emergence of materialistic speculation in eighteenth-century France cannot be properly understood without a knowledge of speculation across the Channel. The roots of this speculation were as much in theological debate within Christianity as in antireligious thought, but in the course of their transmission to France, the arguments became part of an assault on all religion, sometimes going as far as open atheism. The present study, rather than being comparative, is concerned with what is called 'cultural transfer',[6] with how ideas cross frontiers and are transformed by their interaction with the conditions in a different culture. Instead of pinpointing 'influences', it looks at how far the debate in England, the issues aired there, and the agendas of those who transmitted them interacted

[5] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, xx.
[6] See Espagne, *Les Transferts culturels franco-allemands*.

with the climate and the preoccupations across the Channel to produce a radical and subversive new synthesis. This book therefore looks at the various facets of speculation on human nature and the soul from the late seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century, in a way which has not been hitherto attempted. At its centre are individuals who, even if largely forgotten in the mainstream of history, posed important questions which agitated minds because they corresponded to contemporary preoccupations.[7] When not totally ignored, their works have tended to be minimized, circumscribed within the context of Locke's influence, or seen solely from the viewpoint of the atheistic materialism which emerged in France. I shall look afresh at what these eighteenth-century writers were trying to do and the implications of the issues they raised, and show how the debate which is the subject of this book fed directly into the early nineteenth-century 'science of man'. This in turn influenced many aspects of later thought and has profound implications for much contemporary thinking about human nature. Despite these modern echoes I have resisted the temptation to present issues in today's terms. This book is also an attempt to write a type of intellectual history that breaks with more habitual ways of studying the sort of issues discussed here. It aims to bring out the presuppositions and mental categories that underpinned the arguments. Aspects of this subject have been discussed by historians of ideas, philosophy, political thought and political history, religious history and theology, science and medicine . . . It is a truism to say that rigid disciplinary distinctions were unknown at the period under study and can preclude a proper understanding of the issues and their implications, which traverse disciplinary frontiers and historiographical traditions. That is why (and to pre-empt criticism from specialists in each of these fields) I shall here try to situate my study in relation to various relevant historiographical traditions. But first we need to consider the 'Enlightenment', which has been the subject of critiques, often directed at its supposed view of human nature and at the French materialists, seen to epitomize its antireligious character.[8] So a discussion of this label is unavoidable and needs to be got out of the way before we go any further.

Varieties of Enlightenment(s)

The renewal of Enlightenment studies has led historians to nuance the sweep of works like Peter Gay's classic synthesis, which concentrated on a relatively small group of anti-Christian Philosophes.[9] A more complex picture has emerged,

[7] The most complete discussion, with a useful bibliography, is Berman, 'Die Debatte über die Seele'.

[8] For an amusing summary of their contradictions see Wokler, 'The Enlightenment Project and its Critics'.

[9] Gay, *The Enlightenment, an Interpretation*.

accompanied by a sort of new orthodoxy. A 'High Enlightenment', in the term popularized by Robert Darnton, is often said to embody an 'Enlightenment Project', opposed to the 'Radical Enlightenment', beginning much earlier, in or before the period which used to be called the 'Frühaufklärung' or Paul Hazard's 'crise de la conscience europeéenne'.[10] This 'Radical Enlightenment' is said to be materialistic or pantheistic, and republican or even democratic. In contrast, the High Enlightenment is seen as less radical and at least partly driven by the concern of a new type of intellectual to find a place within the establishment. In addition, while the so-called High Enlightenment is still seen to centre in France, the earlier manifestations of the enlightened spirit occurred largely elsewhere, essentially in England and Holland. Other work has tried to rescue the Enlightenment from its French monopoly and posit the existence of different Enlightenments, while most recently John Robertson has forcefully made the case for one Enlightenment.[11] This is not the place to go into the minefield of debate about the Enlightenment, variously characterized as seeing the birth of modernity, totalitarianism, or imperialism. It is nevertheless worth looking briefly at the question of an English Enlightenment and at the period of the early Enlightenment, which has too often been ignored, misrepresented, or seen through the prism of the later eighteenth century. England (unlike Scotland in the second half of the eighteenth century) has long presented a problem for students of the Enlightenment, to the extent that John Pocock has called it a 'blind spot' in the historiography of the Enlightenment.[12] It has been difficult to know whether English thinkers (whose role in forming many of the ideas which flowered in France in the eighteenth century has long been recognized) should be excluded from the Enlightenment and classified under the heading 'pre-Enlightenment' or considered as precursors, or whether a specifically English Enlightenment should be identified. Roy Porter's book *Enlightenment* dealt with this 'English Enlightenment', despite his dissatisfaction with the term. He followed Pocock in preferring to speak of 'enlightenment' or 'enlightenments' rather than 'the Enlightenment'. He admitted that 'if the Enlightenment's defining features are taken to be atheism, republicanism and materialism', then an English Enlightenment must be a misnomer; but he pointed out that few French philosophes, not to mention those of other nationalities, were 'devoted democrats, materialists or atheists'.[13] He was of course right, and his presentation of the alternatives, only slightly caricatured, shows what is wrong with many characterizations of the Enlightenment. His

[10] Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*; Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*; Secrétan, Dagron, and Bove, *Qu'est-ce que les Lumières 'radicales'?*; Hazard, *La Crise de la conscience européenne*.

[11] Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment*.

[12] 'Clergy and Commerce. The Conservative Enlightenment in England', 528. Roy Porter takes this remark as the starting point for his discussion of the Enlightenment in Britain (see following note).

[13] Porter, *Enlightenment*, 9–10.

book provides a better mapping of the 'contacts and circuits of literati and their listeners' and reflects the current interest in wider issues and material aspects of culture and its circulation. It paints a less schematic view of the period, concentrating less on particular ideas or ideology than on a transformation of social being.[14] My interest in a particular intellectual debate, and specifically in the much-decried materialism up to and including the French variety, might seem to be swimming against this current, although it does have a certain amount in common with Porter's last book, which dealt briefly with some of the issues discussed here.[15] We shall see that monolithic categorizations of enlightened discourse are misleading and that the lines of battle were not as clear-cut or the different camps as internally united as has often been supposed. Porter specifically refused to take sides in the debate on the 'English Enlightenment', preferring to describe its practices, but this debate is particularly relevant to the theme of the present work. In view of the general understanding of the Enlightenment as embodying the rise of secularism or 'modern paganism', to use Peter Gay's phrase, the relationship between the Church and enlightened ideas in England has been particularly contentious. There are those who see the English Enlightenment as an essentially conservative movement, not opposed to the Church. As Jonathan Clark puts it, ' "enlightenment" found a home *within* the Christian churches', which echoes the remarks of other scholars who also argue that the anti-Christian French Enlightenment is not representative of even events in France as a whole.[16] Although his interpretation is, in Porter's words, 'highly idiosyncratic', it shows the importance of religious debate in the period and helps us to see the wider issues. Despite his superficial treatment of the freethinkers as a closely knit group, Clark warns us against categorizing those who opposed the Establishment as necessarily democrats, insisting on the religious nature of their opposition.

Pocock has also argued against the view of 'The Enlightenment' represented by the French Philosophes and has defended a multiplicity of enlightenments. He has posited a specific, more conservative, English Enlightenment, 'intimately bound up with the special, indeed unique character of the Church of England', whose embodiment he sees in Edward Gibbon. Pocock's study of Gibbon is presented as 'an attempt to reshape the geography and definition of Enlightenment' in such a way as to find a place for Gibbon in it.[17] The greater interest shown in 'rational dissent' has also provided a deeper understanding of the complex

[14] Since Porter's ch. on 'The Enlightenment in England', in Porter and Teich, *The Enlightenment in National Context*, an English Enlightenment has become more generally recognized.

[15] Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason*. His earlier 'Bodies of Thought' discussed the history of the body.

[16] Clark, *English Society 1660–1832*, 28; see also Gilley, 'Christianity and Enlightenment: An Historical Survey', 104: 'in England, Scotland, Germany, Holland and English North America, "enlightenment" found a home *within* the Christian churches'.

[17] Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion,* i, 8, 9.

relationship between Enlightenment and religion in Britain.[18] There is now more study of the interaction as well as the opposition between religion and the French Enlightenment too. Going beyond an interest in Pierre Bayle, who has always been seen as an ambiguous figure, more attention is being paid to other exiled French Protestants and to more 'enlightened' theologians.[19] Nevertheless, the link between the Philosophes and Jansenism has been less explored.[20] While there is clearly a need for a more diversified view of (the) Enlightenment, for the present study the category of Enlightenment itself is not a particularly useful starting-point. On the one hand it tends, consciously or unconsciously, to invite comparisons with a paradigmatic French Enlightenment, and on the other it encourages the search for a unifying theme or outlook, excluding those who do not conform to it. While not going as far as those who would banish the word, I do not feel that the label is always helpful, except perhaps to define a chronological period. In saying this, I am obviously taking issue with John Robertson's 'case for the Enlightenment'. It will become clear in the course of this work that I approach the vital question of human nature from a completely different angle. While Epicureanism and the writings of Pierre Bayle figure largely here, as they do in Robertson's book, my map of the period bears few similarities with his. This is not only because I am dealing with England, Holland, and France rather than Scotland and Naples. I make no claim that the heterodox English writers who denied an immaterial soul and were condemned by various theologians including the 'enlightened' 'latitudinarian' Newtonians of the Boyle lectures[21] formed part of an English Enlightenment; nor do I claim that they opposed or prepared for the Enlightenment. I want to show how their writings are rooted in a precise context and to understand the implications of their claims. It is not, I believe, helpful to situate them in relation to the English or French Enlightenment, nor is the label 'Radical Enlightenment' more useful. Writings on the 'English Enlightenment', in their authors' eagerness to defend a more conservative, less antireligious enlightenment, often present a view of heterodox thought that tends towards caricature, ignoring its complexities and the extent to which it interacted with the defence of orthodoxy.[22]

Although there are studies of individual figures of the early English Enlightenment, there are surprisingly few books that study English heterodox thought

[18] Haakonssen, *Enlightenment and Religion*.

[19] See Häseler and McKenna, *La Vie intellectuelle aux refuges protestants*; Albertan-Coppola and McKenna, *Christianisme et Lumières*, although many articles are more concerned to reconcile 'enlightenment' and 'anti-enlightenment'.

[20] See Cottret, *Jansénismes et Lumières*. On possible links between Jansenism and aspects of La Mettrie's materialism see Thomson, *Materialism and Society*, 60–9.

[21] See Jacob, *The Newtonians and the English Revolution 1689–1720*.

[22] Pocock writes of 'an Enlightenment which made the mind the object of its own self-worship' as 'a new form of enthusiasm', remarking: 'even Locke had been interested in the possibility that matter might think, and materialism was a possible source of enthusiasm' (*Barbarism and Religion,* i, 69). See below, p. 19.

as a whole. John Redwood's *Reason, Ridicule and Religion*, subtitled *The Age of Enlightenment in England 1660–1750*, was for a long time the only one. Despite a certain lack of reliability, it does bring out the importance and many-faceted nature of theological disputes. Redwood's brief evocation of the debate on the soul is, however, rather idiosyncratic, situated as it is in a chapter entitled 'Witches, Apparitions and Revelations'.[23] More recently, Justin Champion's *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken* has provided a new perspective on the period. Champion agrees with Clark's emphasis on the continuing importance of religion in the eighteenth century in England, but he is interested in the antireligious Enlightenment. He studies the 'assault on Christianity' launched by those he characterizes as 'a group of like-minded Republicans', who could constitute an English Enlightenment closer to the 'Radical Enlightenment' discussed below. His work is an examination of 'how the Freethinkers set out to challenge the sanctity of the Church', although he insists that 'the radical programme was not to destroy religion, but to deprive the corrupt Christian priesthood of all independent political power'.[24] My study is in many ways parallel to Champion's, to the extent that I am dealing with some of the same people on the English side of the Channel (in particular Toland, who figures prominently in Champion's account) and discussing what many churchmen felt to be an 'assault on Christianity'. But my subject, revolving around questions which are in some ways more narrowly theological rather than historical or institutional, lies outside the scope of his study. The accusations of priestcraft and imposture made by many freethinkers—and which are an important theme of the notorious *Traité des trois imposteurs*—are naturally of particular concern to Champion and have provided a focus for many discussions of free thought in both England and France in this period. But this focus has perhaps obscured the closely related but more complex debate on the soul and divine providence. These beliefs were essential components of Christian teaching which exercised both theologians and heterodox writers of the time. To deny an immaterial soul and divine providence fatally undermined the Christian religion and was seen as the equivalent of atheism. But as we shall see, those who did so were not necessarily launching an attack, concerted or otherwise, on Christian doctrines and we cannot dismiss out of hand their stated aim of returning to a purer form of Christianity. As John Gascoigne has pointed out, English anticlericalism in the eighteenth century (although he excludes the few 'deists') 'rarely extended to an attack on the principle of an established Church or to a general assault on Christianity. Indeed, English anticlericals often regarded themselves as the defenders of Protestant Christianity against the popish tendencies of some of the clergy.'[25] Looked at from this perspective, the heterodox 'assault' appears less as the concerted action

[23] Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule and Religion*, 140–4.

[24] Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken*, 7, 9, 24.

[25] Gascoigne, *Cambridge in the Age of the Enlightenment,* 18. See also Goldie, 'Priestcraft and the Birth of Whiggism'. For a useful reminder of the seventeenth-century discussion of a minimal religion see Lagrée, *La Raison ardente*.

of a tightly-knit group than as a wider questioning of certain doctrines in the name of true Christianity and in the light of scientific developments. Instead of two coherent opposing camps we can identify a range of opinions. This blurring of boundaries is also brought out in certain studies of the theologico-political confrontations in England from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century.[26]

Although Champion's book deals exclusively with England, it opens with the French *Traité des trois imposteurs*, a text in many ways at the heart of discussions of the 'Radical Enlightenment', a relatively recent label with a complex history. Nearly 100 years ago Gustave Lanson's research in library collections revealed the existence of a large number of more or less clandestine early eighteenth-century treatises questioning fundamental aspects of Christian teachings. Their study was pioneered by Ira Wade and John S. Spink, whose still useful works brought the importance and variety of heterodox erudition to the attention of specialists.[27] Since the 1980s their original work has been developed and expanded, revealing even further the diverse philosophical inspiration for these texts.[28] Attention has concentrated on French works, by far the most numerous, although English and Dutch influences are recognized, and the role of Dutch circles in their diffusion has been studied.[29] The circumstances of their composition and authorship and the details of their diffusion are still patchily understood, but there are valuable studies of the most notorious works and their history.[30] Much of this study was carried out in relative isolation from Margaret Jacob's work, which led to the adoption of the label 'Radical Enlightenment'. Her book, which derived partly from the important research of Franco Venturi,[31] concerned certain of the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century English freethinkers, some of whom, like John Toland or Anthony Collins, are known to have played a role in French thinking. The

[26] In particular Lund, *The Margins of Orthodoxy.*

[27] Lanson, 'Questions diverses sur l'esprit philosophique en France avant 1700'; Wade, *The Clandestine Organisation and Diffusion of Philosophic Ideas in France*; Spink, *French Free-Thought from Gassendi to Voltaire*.

[28] See Bloch, *Le Matérialisme du* XVIII*e siècle et la littérature clandestine*; Benitez, 'Matériaux pour un inventaire des manuscrits philosophiques clandestins des* XVII*e et* XVIII*e siècles' and *La Face cachée des Lumières.* The group studying clandestine manuscripts, founded by O. Bloch, now publishes *La Lettre clandestine*.

[29] See Berkvens-Stevelinck, *Prosper Marchand: la vie et l'œuvre (1678–1756)*; Almagor, *Pierre Des Maizeaux (1673–1745)*; Berkvens-Stevelinck, Bots, Hoftijzer, and Lankhorst, *Le Magasin de l'univers*.

[30] In particular the *Traité des trois imposteurs*; see also Berti, Charles-Daubert, and Popkin, *Heterodoxy, Spinozism, and Free Thought in Early-Eighteenth-Century Europe*, and Charles-Daubert, *Le 'Traité des trois imposteurs Let 'Esprit de Spinosa*; also the editions of *Theophrastus redivivus*, *L'Examen de la religion*, and *Parité de la vie et de la mort*. I shall draw on this research in my discussion of the spread of materialistic ideas.

[31] Venturi, *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment*.

fact that these English thinkers have often been lumped together as 'English deists'[32] has not helped a clear understanding of their work or motivations, and the label has encouraged a non-useful debate about the extent to which they were or were not deists, in view of the widespread accusations of atheism made against them at the time.[33] Toland's links with continental freethinking and political activity has put him at the heart of arguments about the Radical Enlightenment. John Toland, 'first and foremost a politician' according to Champion,[34] was an activist for the radical Whigs and republished the most important of the seventeenth-century republicans' works. He also wrote *Pantheisticon* (1720), purporting to be the liturgy of a Europe-wide pantheistic sect. All of this has seemed to justify seeing clandestine activity in this period as the work of a coherent group centred around Toland and diffused by Dutch publishers, whose aim was to spread an ideology labelled pantheistic and republican. This Radical Enlightenment is said to constitute a coherent body of thought linked to the open materialism of d'Holbach in the later eighteenth century. Margaret Jacob's influential interpretation, while doing much to stimulate new thinking, has been widely criticized, and her claim that the *Traité des trois imposteurs* originated with a supposedly Masonic group in Holland to which Toland was linked has been shown to be flawed.[35] But it still provides the basis for much understanding of heterodox debate in this period, particularly concerning the soul, which the present book challenges in several ways. The reader may be surprised that Masonic lodges do not figure more largely here, in view of claims concerning their role in spreading enlightened and antireligious ideas.[36] While the link between Freemasonry and deism has often been pointed out, so has the Trinitarian zeal of James Anderson, author of the *Constitutions* of the Grand Lodge of England;[37] in addition, questioning the immortality of the soul was not consistent with Masonic ideals. The complex issue of Freemasonry in this period and its different religious and political tendencies—which were more varied, particularly in the British Isles, than is often declared, being frequently conservative and even linked to Jacobitism[38]—is outside the scope of the present work.

[32] Sullivan's chapter 'The Elusiveness of Deism' (ch. 7) in *John Toland and the Deist controversy* shows the ambiguity of the term; Herrick, *The Radical Rhetoric of the English Deists*, 24, admits difficulty defining it.

[33] Berman argues that Collins was an atheist: *A History of Atheism in Britain from Hobbes to Russell*. See below, pp. 17–18.

[34] Champion, *Republican Learning*, 6.

[35] Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*; see also Berti, '*L'Esprit de Spinosa*'; Berkvens-Stevelinck, '*Les Chevaliers de la jubilation*: maçonnerie ou libertinage?'; and Sullivan, *John Toland*, 201–3.

[36] Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment*.

[37] Clarke, 'The Change from Christianity to Deism in Freemasonry'.

[38] Money, 'Freemasonry and the Fabric of Loyalism in Hanoverian England'.

An alternative reading of the Radical Enlightenment has been provided more recently by Jonathan Israel, who nevertheless agrees with Margaret Jacob as to its politically radical nature. Retaining an understanding of the Enlightenment which, while much wider in sweep, is not so very different from that traditionally held, he claims that:

> Whereas before 1650 practically everyone disputed and wrote about confessional differences, subsequently, by the 1680s, it began to be noted by French, German, Dutch, and English writers that confessional conflict, previously at the centre, was increasingly receding to secondary status and that the main issue now was the escalating contest between faith and incredulity.[39]

According to him, 'no other period of European history displays such a profound and decisive shift towards rationalization and secularization at every level as the few decades before Voltaire'.[40] He sees two rival wings of this European Enlightenment: the moderate mainstream seeking a synthesis of old and new, and the Radical Enlightenment, which, according to him, 'sought to sweep away existing structures entirely'.[41] Israel self-consciously shifts the emphasis away from the French Enlightenment and to a large extent claims Holland was the origin of Enlightenment rather than England, making Spinoza its central figure and inspiration (the 'intellectual backbone') of its radical thought. While his work provides much information on the neglected Dutch dimension of the period, its exclusive claims for Spinoza's centrality also distort the picture by over-correcting it.[42] As an essay in reinterpreting the Enlightenment, this work and its sequel[43] constitute a tour de force and, like Margaret Jacob's work, are a welcome attempt to transcend national barriers and look at the Republic of Letters as an international phenomenon. Israel is certainly right in saying that to understand this phenomenon correctly one must look beyond France, or even England and France, and he has made an important contribution to our understanding of this European phenomenon. However, many of the people we shall meet in this present study figure only in passing in his work, if at all. While those who argued against an immaterial soul were certainly on the side of heterodoxy, a detailed analysis will show that the lines of demarcation were not as clear-cut as these historians suppose. One cannot lump all heterodox thinkers together in the camp of incredulity. It is precisely the virtue of an analysis of a particular problem like the one attempted here that it can bring out this greater complexity, which is not always possible in a work that aims at a large-scale reinterpretation. The present book looks at the same period from

[39] Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 4.
[40] *Radical Enlightenment*, 6.
[41] *Radical Enlightenment*, 11.
[42] On the Dutch Radical Enlightenment, see also Van Bunge, *From Stevin to Spinoza*, 149–62 and *The Early Enlightenment in the Dutch Republic,* 1–16.
[43] Israel, *Enlightenment Contested.*

a perspective which is at once narrower and wider: narrower because instead of attempting a general interpretation of the Enlightenment or even of irreligious thought, it takes a particular issue in essentially two countries; wider because it integrates into the picture both the intellectual debate and the conditions and controversies that informed it, in the theological and scientific as well as the political spheres.

An element common to interpretations of the Radical Enlightenment is the claim that it was politically radical or republican. This is vital to Jacob's argument and is reaffirmed by Israel, for whom it 'characteristically combined immense reverence for science, and for mathematical logic, with some form of non-providential deism, if not outright materialism and atheism along with unmistakably republican, even democratic tendencies'.[44] The two figures seen as being at the heart of these alternative visions of the Radical Enlightenment, Toland and Spinoza, both linked heterodox religious ideas to a politically radical stance. This made them more attractive than Hobbes to those who questioned authoritarian government. However, Toland's stance was very different from that of the mid-seventeenth-century republicans whose works he republished and on occasion rewrote to bring them into line with the outlook of his own day. It was even further from that of the Levellers, Diggers, and radical sectaries.[45] In addition, those who espoused aspects of the philosophy of either Spinoza or Toland, even their criticism of priestcraft, did not necessarily adopt a republican (and even less a democratic) political agenda. It has been suggested that a nature in which God has been dethroned and matter possesses its own motive force provides the basis for a more egalitarian outlook.[46] As we shall see, such claims are too sweeping. The possible political implications of the debate we shall be looking at need to be carefully investigated, particularly as it arose in England in a charged and complex period of political controversy and struggle. Clark, who argues that political opposition in this period had its roots in religious heterodoxy, denies that it implied a democratic position. According to him, Toland was accused of being republican, 'not because he was a leveller but because he was an anticleric'.[47] Champion, on the other hand, emphasizes the continuity of the radical anticlericalism of the 1690s with the revolutionary traditions of the 1640s and 1650s.[48] The political implications of religious and philosophical principles are not always easy to unravel and the period after 1689 needs to be studied with caution. We should also be wary of transposing English preoccupations to France, while resisting the temptation to interpret

[44] Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 12.

[45] See Worden, 'The Revolution and the English Republican Tradition' and *Roundhead Reputations*; also Wootton, 'The Republican Tradition: From Commonwealth to Common Sense'.

[46] Rogers, *The Matter of Revolution*, links the 'vitalist moment' of Harvey, Marvell, Milton, and Margaret Cavendish with egalitarian and 'liberal' political positions.

[47] Clark, *English Society*, 319 f, 342.

[48] Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft*, 24.

eighteenth-century French thinkers through the distorting lens of the French Revolution. This study will show that the link between religious and political positions is by no means as simple as has been claimed, even in the late eighteenth century. Generalizations are particularly dangerous and interpretations need to be made with caution.

Part of the problem has been that the political situation tends to be discussed in isolation from specifically theological debates: the religious dimension being limited to the question of the Church as an institution. There is much literature on the politically agitated post-Revolution period in England with which this book begins. There are detailed studies of the High and Low Church parties and the political factions linked to them, and of religious questions like toleration and occasional conformity or the Convocation issue. The admittedly less high-profile debate on the soul—which was nevertheless raised in both Convocation and Parliament and produced numerous publications—is completely absent from these studies.[49] When one attempts to understand how theological issues such as this one were intertwined with these contemporary sociopolitical disputes, the water becomes muddied. In her pioneering study of the Boyle lectures (discussed in the next chapter), Margaret Jacob presents the latitudinarian theologians who used Newtonian science to defend Christianity against the freethinkers as being motivated by essentially political aims: 'The ordered, providentially guided, mathematically regulated universe of Newton gave a model for a stable and prosperous polity, ruled by the self-interest of men'. As it enabled them to combat atheism, 'the new mechanical philosophy from its very inception possessed social and political significance'; 'the latitudinarians adapted Christianity to a market society by transforming it into a natural religion which would serve the needs of self-interest and make them compatible with the dictates of providence'. It was this synthesis which, according to her, was rejected by the deists, freethinkers, and atheists.[50] While the study of the 'social uses of science'[51] is now widely accepted, this particular interpretation has been criticized for its oversimplification, by both historians of science[52] and those who argue that greater attention should be paid to theological arguments and their seriousness. A study of different opinions among churchmen shows that the Church of England's defenders had much more diversified views. For Brian Young, 'even allowing for a coherence behind the ideas of latitudinarianism which the term does not actually possess, Jacob's identification of Newtonian apologetics with Whig politics invites refutation'.[53] The present work, while looking at the political importance of the debates under scrutiny, pays equal attention to theological arguments and their presuppositions.

[49] Holmes, *Politics, Religion and Society in England 1679–1742*, 181–215; Rose, *England in the 1690s*; Kenyon, *Revolution Principles*; Harris, *Politics under the Later Stuarts.*

[50] Jacob, *The Newtonians and the English Revolution*, 18, 23, 51, 69–70.

[51] Shapin, 'Social Uses of Science'.

[52] Hunter, 'Science and Heterodoxy: An Early Modern Problem Reconsidered'.

[53] Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England*, 86.

It tries to understand how far they coloured political positions in this period and 'to take seriously many of the religious and philosophical options available to thoughtful men and women in eighteenth-century England, and to allow for the considerable influences of political and social pressure which were felt on such thought without presuming an indissolubly determinist link to hold between them'.[54] At the same time the theological preoccupations which still played an extremely important role in the early eighteenth century will be situated in the wider context. A recent book dealing with a question closely linked to my subject adopts a very different approach from mine. It analyses all aspects of the debate about death, the soul, the afterlife, and resurrection in the period 1650–1750, including briefly works by some of the English writers studied here.[55] While taking in wider theological issues than those I am considering it confines the narrative to these debates and does not investigate the wider ramifications of the questions evoked. As such, it provides a useful complement to my study from a different standpoint, attempting a different sort of analysis. An approach similar to mine is adopted in an article by Young dealing with the same issues in the 1770s.[56]

Science and Religion

Part of the wider context concerns science, already referred to in connection with the way Newtonian science and Lockean principles were used to defend natural theology. This brings us to the link between theological, political, and scientific preoccupations.[57] I look more specifically at the way certain developments, notably in physiology, were used to defend a conception of humans which broke with religious orthodoxy. This subject falls beyond the pale of the usual interests of historians of science, who have tended to concentrate on those 'canonical' thinkers seen to have contributed to scientific progress; in the words of Margaret Osler, 'historians of science have sometimes succumbed to the Whiggish tendency to understand the history of science as the unfolding of ideas by the force of their own internal logic',[58] and, I might add, as a constant progress towards a greater understanding of nature. The distorted image that this historiography can give of the past is increasingly recognized and has led in recent years to reappraisals of the Scientific Revolution, accompanied by an interest in lesser figures and a move 'towards the contextualization of problems and solutions in specific intellectual polities'. Certain historians show a greater 'sensitivity to categories produced by

[54] Young, *Religion and Enlightenment*, 6.
[55] Almond, *Heaven and Hell in Enlightenment England*.
[56] Young, 'The Soul-Sleeping System'.
[57] See Kroll, Ashcroft, and Zagorin, *Philosophy, Science and Religion in England, 1640–1700.*
[58] Osler, *Rethinking the Scientific Revolution*, 6.

the actors themselves',[59] as is attempted here. However, it is an area strewn with pitfalls for the unwary. The relationship between scientific developments and beliefs and the debate on the soul is complex, is difficult to evaluate with precision, and has rarely been the concern of historians of science. Such discussions that do exist have often tended to be simplistic. The prevailing interpretation of this period was, for a long time, that a mechanistic explanation of the universe in terms of matter in motion and the laws governing it, which can be described in mathematical terms, opened the way for a materialistic, even atheistic, view of the world. This leaves no place for those who attempted to elaborate a materialistic explanation of humans using 'vitalistic' conceptions or equating the soul with life. For Thomas Hall, Descartes's separation of life from soul 'signals the close of a long series of conceptual and semantic cross-connections between the two beginning in Greece where one word, psyche, meant both'. In this view, Julien Offray de La Mettrie's materialistic physiology stands in direct line of descent from Descartes, by way of Herman Boerhaave's iatromechanism; although older elements are found in *L'Histoire naturelle de l'âme*, his subsequent rejection of them 'cleared the way for a more straightforwardly materialist-mechanist outlook'.[60] La Mettrie's materialistic explanation of humans, taken to represent eighteenth-century views, thus springs more or less directly from seventeenth-century mechanism.[61] I shall argue that such a view is mistaken. In general, as Keith Hutchison puts it: 'The mechanical philosophers' adoption of a "barren" conception of matter thus appears as one of the principal stages in a more or less continuing process of secularization, which led from Renaissance naturalism to the Enlightenment'.[62] Hutchison is one of those who provides a different interpretation, showing that the mechanical philosophy's new conception of matter made God necessary to explain the world.[63] We shall see that the link between the mechanical philosophy and materialistic explanations is more complex than has been thought, as is that between science and religion.[64]

This raises the question of secularization, another vexed issue, and something that is notoriously hard to define or to reach agreement on. In addition, much of the work on the subject comes from sociology and does not deal with the same issues. John Sommerville prefers to call the secularization of belief, mentality, or thought the decline of religious belief rather than secularization 'pure and

[59] Westman and Lindberg, *Reappraisals of the Scientific Revolution*, pp. xix, xx.

[60] Hall, *Ideas of Life and Matter*, i, 257; ii, 46–8. See also Easlea, *Witch Hunting, Magic and the New Philosophy*; the section on Hobbes is entitled 'From Mechanistic Theism to Materialistic Atheism' (pp. 154–8).

[61] See Porter, 'Medical Science and Human Science in the Enlightenment', 58.

[62] Hutchison, 'Supernaturalism and the Mechanical Philosophy', 297.

[63] Osler, *Divine Will and the Mechanical Philosophy*; Shapin insists on the importance of mechanical philosophy for natural theology (*The Scientific Revolution*, 142 ff).

[64] See Brooke, *Science and Religion*, and 'The Superiority of Nature's Art? Vitalism, Natural Theology and the Rise of Organic Chemistry', in *Thinking about Matter*, iv; Hunter, 'Science and Heterodoxy'; Ashworth, 'Christianity and the Mechanistic Universe'.

simple'.[65] At first sight, the attempts to elaborate a purely material view of humans and deny an immaterial immortal soul might seem to constitute a paradigmatic case of an emerging secular view of humans freed from religious doctrines and constraints. It would seem to correspond to Peter Burke's use of the term to mean 'the process of change from the interpretation of reality in essentially supernatural, other-wordly terms to its interpretation in terms which are essentially natural and focused on the world'.[66] This is no doubt the case for the mid-eighteenth-century French materialist thinkers discussed in Chapter 6 below. However, one should not ignore John Hedley Brooke's warnings concerning the complexity of interactions between science and religion.[67] The religious origins of the views defended by the late seventeenth-century English materialists, to be discussed in Chapter 4, remind us that we need to keep an open mind on these interactions and avoid the temptation to see an uninterrupted process of secularization at work. In his study of seventeenth-century Christian mortalism, Norman T. Burns points out the error of scholars who have mistaken this heresy 'for a contribution to the secularization of English life and thought that would culminate in Deism by the end of the century'.[68] In addition, if we follow Sommerville's study, we need to be much more circumspect concerning the forces at work in this period. We need to ask how far the use of science in debates on the soul is the result of the wider secularization of society and government and how far it constitutes the impetus for it. Sommerville's position does not contradict Clark's, for he sees the importance of debates about religion as evidence of secularization by differentiation, accompanied by the disappearance of any power that the Church had possessed. Thus he can affirm both that by 1700 'we have seen many of the marks of completed secularization' and that in 1700 'religion was very much in the thoughts of English men and women'.[69] These statements, together with his emphasis on the relatively late secularization of thought, are relevant to the subject of this book, and his analysis can help us to understand the reaction of theologians to the debate on the soul and its impact within the Church of England. As can Blair Worden's reminder that what was seen by many late seventeenth-century Englishmen as the rise of irreligion due to 'the challenge posed by what was variously called epicureanism, Socinianism, deism, atheism' can be interpreted in a different way. These positions can be seen not as a refutation of religion but as an impulse to rescue it from clericalism, 'priestcraft', dogmatism, superstition, and fanaticism; as he says, 'there is also a sense in which they were meant to be a second Reformation'.[70] Such an

[65] Sommerville, *The Secularization of Early Modern England*, 5.
[66] Burke, 'Religion and Secularisation', 294.
[67] Brooke, *Science and Religion*, esp. chs. 1 and 2, although he also oversimplifies the question of materialism (pp. 171–80).
[68] Burns, *Christian Mortalism from Tyndale to Milton*, 3.
[69] Sommerville, *Secularization*, 122 ff, 186.
[70] Worden, 'The Question of Secularization', 27–8.

interpretation also helps to explain how the different situations in England and France influenced attitudes and arguments as well as the public profile of debates about the soul and human nature.

The interaction of science and religion is particularly present in recent research on the hitherto relatively neglected history of medicine in this period. As Osler remarks, medicine together with the biological sciences in general never fitted into the received historiography of the Scientific Revolution.[71] Recent studies of medicine in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries pay particular attention to the link between medicine and religion.[72] The soul was part of the common ground between medicine and religion, and with changes in natural philosophy and religious doctrine came changes in how these two domains saw this 'central issue'.[73] The relationship between medicine and the debate on the soul in seventeenth-century England has been discusssed by John Henry, who demonstrates the difference between medically inspired monism and 'the more familiar monism of mechanist materialists' and considers that Henry More's and Ralph Cudworth's criticisms of medical theorizing were exceptional. One of the questions I shall be addressing is precisely this connection. We shall see how far Henry's conclusion—'that More and Cudworth were right to regard medical theory as heralding "the rising sun of atheism" '[74]—is borne out and how the relationship between medicine and religion differed in England and France; also whether the distinction he makes between medical and non-medical materialism is valid. This historian is one of the few who have discussed the question; despite a certain interest in Thomas Willis,[75] the link between physiology and discussion of the mind in this period has been relatively neglected by historians of science,[76] and these writings on the mind have not generally interested historians of psychology or psychiatry.[77] According to Gary Hatfield, in one of the few studies devoted to the question, 'whig' histories of psychology as now generally understood tend to ignore developments before the late nineteenth century.[78] French historians, on the other hand, look to the end of the eighteenth century for

[71] Osler, *Rethinking the Scientific Revolution*, 20.

[72] See French and Wear, *The Medical Revolution of the Seventeenth Century*. Its companion vol., Cunningham and French, *The Medical Enlightenment of the Eighteenth Century*, addresses the wider question of medicine and enlightenment.

[73] See French and Wear, *The Medical Revolution of the Seventeenth Century*, 2–3.

[74] Henry, 'The Matter of Souls: Medical Theory and Theology', 'Medicine and Pneumatology', and 'A Cambridge Platonist's Materialism'. See also Chs. 2 and 3 below.

[75] Canguilhem, *La formation du concepte de réflexe*; Frank, 'Thomas Willis and his Circle'; Wright, 'Locke, Willis and the Seventeenth-Century Epicurean Soul' and 'Metaphysics and Theology'.

[76] But see French, *Robert Whytt, the Soul and Medicine*, which includes a brief discussion of the early eighteenth-century debate.

[77] As George Rousseau points out, in this period there is no useful distinction to be made between psychology and psychiatry: 'Psychology', 144–5.

[78] Hatfield, 'Remaking the Science of Mind', 185 f.

the birth of psychiatry.[79] Hatfield emphasizes the need to reject the use of present standards to judge past materials, alhough his concern with the development of a discipline means that many of those mentioned in this book are ignored. While he cites the French materialists, including Diderot, La Mettrie, d'Holbach, and Helvétius, as exceptions to his generalization that 'psychological theorizing was only rarely pursued as part of an attempt to cast doubt on (or to secure) the existence of immaterial souls or their connection with things divine' and refers to 'the Christian apologetical approach' of certain early eighteenth-century English 'gentlemen and divines on the soul', he does not mention the works to which the latter were reacting, discussed here.[80] This brings us to another aspect of the way in which most historians have hitherto dealt with the issues or individual thinkers included in the present work. Certain categories and labels that have appeared in the discussion so far and have been passed over without comment need to be looked at before we go any further.

Labels

The heterodox thinkers who are the subject of this book have usually been designated as 'atheists', 'deists', 'materialists', or 'pantheists'. These labels raise a certain number of problems, which I have so far only referred to in passing, but we need to pay more attention to them and the philosophical positions they designate. It is hardly surprising that in studies of freethinkers there should be much talk of atheism and deism. Deism has frequently been said to characterize Britain as opposed to France, where atheism has been seen as more widespread; atheism has sometimes misleadingly been said to characterize the Philosophes, who were in fact more often than not deists. On the other hand, the type of materialism under discussion here, namely the denial of an immaterial immortal soul, was considered to be the equivalent of atheism as it entailed questioning divine providence. Much of the secondary literature therefore refers either to a vague group of deists, or to 'atheistic materialism'. The unsatisfactory nature of such general labels has led more recently to a certain number of not always enlightening discussions as to whether particular freethinkers were in fact deists or rather atheists, fuelled by the ambiguous statements of most British as well as French freethinkers. The ambiguity was often deliberate, dictated by the opprobrium or even danger involved in open atheism, and, as Roger Lund reminds us, contemporaries expended a lot of effort in deciphering their writings to

[79] See Swain, *Le Sujet de la folie*, which undermines Foucault's analysis of this period; also Baertschi, *Les Rapports de l'âme et du corps*; Rey, *Naissance et développement du vitalisme en France*; and Saad, 'Santé et maladie dans l'oeuvre de P. J. G. Cabanis'.

[80] Hatfield, 'Remaking the Science of Mind', 188, 196. Schaffer, 'States of Mind', deals essentially with the later eighteenth century.

uncover hidden atheism.[81] Modern critics have continued the same enterprise, often drawing on the work of Leo Strauss.[82] David Berman in particular has argued forcefully for the hidden atheism of several British freethinkers, relying on a Freudian interpretation of the repression of atheism without situating the thinkers in their historical context; following his lead a recent work on Anthony Collins is almost exclusively devoted to demonstrating that he was an atheist.[83] Heterodox works clearly need to be read with an eye for their coded messages intended for the initiated, in order to decipher their true meaning, intention, and possible impact at the time of writing.[84] Nevertheless, attaching labels which do not necessarily have the same meanings today as they did at the time can encourage misunderstanding of both the practical implications of certain philosophical positions and the precise import of contemporary accusations of atheism or deism. Michael Hunter's detailed discussion of 'the complex of associations summed up by the word atheism' brings out the implications of such accusations,[85] and in the introduction to a volume on early modern atheism he and David Wootton write: 'we would readily admit that it is neither helpful nor even feasible to attempt to concentrate exclusively on figures who were overtly atheistic according to a modern definition'. This is in part because of the conflation by contemporaries of atheism and deism, all of which renders this 'a particularly treacherous area of study'.[86] Contemporary reactions and accusations are of course important and have led some to conclude that true philosophical atheism was practically non-existent, being mainly a category constructed by theologians anxious about arguments which could encourage unbelief. Alan Kors's study of atheism in France from the mid-seventeenth century to the early eighteenth, while not denying the existence of atheists, is sympathetic to such a point of view and counters claims about the prevalence of atheism in France, arguing for 'the generation of disbelief by orthodox culture itself'.[87] Instead of attempting to stick labels on particular thinkers, my study will try to analyse the implications of their view of humans. As we shall see, the existence of a deity is not necessarily the main point at issue in their discussion of human beings.

The warning also applies to a third label which has been sometimes attached to materialistic thinkers of this period, who are said to defend 'materialistic pantheism' or 'pantheistic materialism'. The question of pantheism has particularly arisen in connection with John Toland and his description of a

[81] Lund, *The Margins of Orthodoxy*, 1–29.
[82] Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*.
[83] Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain*; Taranto, *Du déisme à l'athéisme*.
[84] This has been much studied in relation to French clandestine and 'libertin' literature; see Bloch, 'Du libertinage au matérialisme des Lumières', reprinted in *Matière à histoires*, 225–86.
[85] Hunter, 'Science and Heterodoxy', 456.
[86] Hunter and Wootton, *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, 2–3.
[87] Kors, *Atheism in France*, xiii; see also *D'Holbach's coterie*.

pantheistic religion whose devotees constituted a secret sect spread throughout Europe. According to Sullivan the word describes 'thoroughgoing materialists or deifiers of the physical universe' (such as Hobbes or Spinoza), who had previously been called atheists or deists.[88] The term is notoriously difficult to define precisely,[89] and discussion of its appropriateness can be sterile, as it distracts attention from the true implications and import of the actual writings. In addition, the word chosen to label writers not only reflects one's interpretation of their philosophical stance, but also has implications for what one sees as their wider aims. The connotations of pantheism lead Pocock to link atheism and 'enthusiasm' (or fanaticism), associated with Hobbes, as enemies of orthodoxy;[90] he writes of a ' "religion of reason", or worse still "of nature" ' which 'smacked of republicanism . . . and of enthusiasm'.[91] This study will address these assumptions and associations. It is interesting to note (without necessarily seeing a connection) that the English debate on the soul overlapped with the scandal caused in London in the first decade of the eighteenth century by the 'French Prophets', and the working out of French materialism was accompanied in the 1720s and early 1730s by the extraordinary spectacle presented by the 'miracles' and crucifixions of Jansenist 'convulsionnaires' in Saint-Médard Cemetery in Paris. The effect of these 'inspired' scenes was to encourage both scepticism about miracles and divine inspiration and reflection on the relation of mind and body, alongside medical attempts to explain possession.[92] These complex interactions between religious and political extremism, scientific advance, and secularism also resonate with modern preoccupations.

So far I have been using the word 'materialism' as if it were completely unproblematical, which is far from being the case, and this label needs to be scrutinized as well. It can generally be understood as the attempt to explain natural phenomena in terms of matter alone without recourse to an immaterial principle, although different uses of the term are also found.[93] Some historians prefer another word such as 'monism' or 'holism'.[94] The present work is not a history of materialism from the late seventeenth century to the mid-eighteenth (however useful such a work might be) but an analysis of the debate concerning the human soul and attempts to account for human activity in terms of matter; this is only part of the general explanation of the universe in material

[88] Sullivan, *John Toland*, 209. On Toland see also Giuntini, *Panteismo e ideologia repubblicana*.

[89] See Thomson, 'Pantheism'.

[90] Pocock, 'Within the Margins: The Definitions of Orthodoxy', 43.

[91] Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History*, 234.

[92] See Schwartz, *Knaves, Fools, Madmen, and that Subtile Effluvium*.

[93] See Bloch, *Le matérialisme*. Schofield, *Mechanism and Materialism*, deals with the legacy of Newtonianism.

[94] See Kaitaro, *Diderot's Holism*; Braine, *The Human Person: Animal and Spirit*.

terms. The study of the history of materialism has brought to light a large number of ignored or neglected writings on the soul. The major work in this field is still Friedrich Lange's *History of Materialism*, written in the middle of the nineteenth century, which covers the period from Greek atomism up to Lange's own day; it has never been replaced despite the gradual refinement and extension of our knowledge since his publication.[95] Lange's immensely erudite work, discussing many thinkers who had been ignored by the history of philosophy, sought to establish lines of filiation in the various thinkers who defended a materialistic world view. He saw two different traditions in modern philosophy since the reappearance of materialism with the revival of science: one, idealistic, from Descartes through Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, and Fichte, to Schelling and Hegel; the other, originating in Bacon, continued through Hobbes and Locke to the French eighteenth-century materialists, and indirectly to the materialists of Lange's own day. For him this materialistic tradition was based on empiricism, opposed to Descartes's deductive method, and he emphasized the role of Gassendi and Hobbes in the renewal of materialism in the seventeenth century. His section on eighteenth-century materialism begins with a chapter on the influence of English materialism in France and Germany. However, given La Mettrie's self-proclaimed Cartesianism, Lange describes the role played by Cartesian mechanism in encouraging materialistic attitudes, mainly by extending the idea of animal-machines to humans. The prevailing orthodoxy long posited the existence of two opposing strands of materialism: one, sensualist, deriving from Locke and represented by Helvétius, led towards nineteenth-century socialism; the other, mechanistic, derived from Descartes and was represented notably by La Mettrie. This interpretation was given authority by the passage on eighteenth-century materialism in Marx's *Holy Family*, itself borrowed from Charles Renouvier's history of philosophy published in 1842.[96] Although this interpretation of materialism has not totally vanished, it is now generally recognized that it needs to be seriously revised and recent scholarship has emphasized the diversity of the philosophical traditions drawn on by materialistic interpretations of humans.[97] Studies of Diderot have also done much to bring out the complexity of eighteenth-century materialism, even if he is still often seen as a special case.[98] Nevertheless, materialism continues to be analysed mainly in terms of the influence of leading philosophical systems

[95] Lange, *History of Materialism and Criticism of its Present Importance*. Stimulus for new research came from the seminar on the history of materialism directed by Olivier Bloch from the 1970s, first at Paris 12 University and then at Paris I University.

[96] See Bloch, 'Marx, Renouvier et l'histoire du matérialisme', reprinted in Bloch, *Matière à histoires*, 384–441.

[97] See Bloch, 'Le Matérialisme des Lumières', and *Le Matérialisme du XVIIIe siècle et la littérature clandestine*.

[98] Belaval, 'Sur le matérialisme de Diderot'; Chouillet, *Diderot, poète de l'énergie*; Bourdin, *Diderot. Le matérialisme*; Tosel and Salem, 'Diderot, le matérialisme, la philosophie'.

which pushed certain thinkers towards a purely materialistic conception of the world. Historians refer to a 'mechanistic materialism' embodied in the seventeenth century by Hobbes and in the eighteenth by La Mettrie, or look at the influence of Locke's 'thinking matter' hypothesis. A parallel approach to the question of the soul and a material conception of humans within the history of philosophy is to view it from the perspective of the mind–body problem.[99] While my analysis draws on such work, its aim is to look at the issue from a different perspective. It would undoubtedly be possible to write a richer and more inclusive history of materialism as a philosophical hypothesis, embodied in a chain of thinkers from the Greek atomists to modern-day 'reductionists', but this would not necessarily help us to understand why certain hypotheses came to the fore or were the subject of fierce debate in a particular period, nor the specific form they took. There is also the danger that such a history ignores side alleys and apparent dead ends. While increasing numbers of historians of ideas, philosophy, or literature are now paying attention to writers long considered to be too minor to merit serious attention, they have not taken much notice of several of the people who figure prominently in the present work, despite the important role they arguably played.[100] The greater interest in minor figures has produced more detailed study of the French-language clandestine manuscripts that circulated for much of the eighteenth century, which has led in turn to greater concern with the material conditions of the production and circulation of heterodox ideas, linked to the history of the book and journalism.[101] While critical editions of particular texts and studies of particular figures have given a deeper understanding of the circumstances of their composition and publication,[102] much uncertainty and disagreement remain, in particular concerning arguably the most important work, *Traité des trois imposteurs*.[103] At the same time the study of the material culture of the Republic of Letters, which has contributed to a greater understanding of the circulation of books and ideas,[104] still too often remains separate from the study of the issues debated. While commercial imperatives, personal ambitions, or rivalries, and the hierarchies of the Republic

[99] Baertschi, *Les Rapports de l'âme et du corps*, which includes useful discussion of aspects of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century science.

[100] An exception is Ricuperati, 'Il problema della corporeità dell'anima dai libertini ai deisti'.

[101] See Benitez, *La face cachée des Lumières*; Canziani, *Filosofia e religione nella letteratura clandestina*; Sgard, *Dictionnaire de la presse*; McKenna and Mothu, *La Philosophie clandestine à l'âge classique*; Berti, Charles-Daubert, Popkin, *Heterodoxy, Spinozism, and Free Thought in Early-Eighteenth-Century Europe*; Van Bunge and Klever, *Disguised and Overt Spinozism around 1700*. Much new research can be found in *La Lettre clandestine*, published annually since 1992.

[102] In addition to the works already mentioned, see Meslier, *Œuvres complètes* and *L'Ame matérielle*. Also Venturi, *Saggi sull'Europa illuminista, i: Alberto Radicati di Passerano*; Sheridan, *Nicolas Lenglet Dufresnoy and the Literary Underworld of the Ancien Régime*; Carayol, *Thémiseul de Saint-Hyacinthe*; Brogi, *Il cerchio dell'universo*.

[103] See n. 30.

[104] There is a large and growing bibliography on this subject; for a useful introduction, see Bots and Waquet, *La République des Lettres*.

of Letters are certainly factors to be taken into account,[105] they need to be situated in a wider context. The real ideological and philosophical differences need to be taken seriously.

An Alternative View

The present work, which draws on research on this less visible Republic of Letters, also aims at providing a new understanding of it, going beyond my previous studies of the ideas and their circulation. It is an attempt to write a more inclusive history of moments in the debate on an issue which has implications for us today and which straddles the boundaries between 'radical' and 'moderate' enlightenments, thus providing a different map of the period. While many of the protagonists held 'radical' views on particular issues, it is impossible to discern a common ideology shared by a clearly defined group of people. My study does not start from a theoretical position concerning the relationship between intellectual debates and the society in which they take place, or about the particular ideological context of the period under study. My approach is obviously indebted to much work in intellectual history and the history of science and is inevitably marked by the ideological confrontations of my formative years; but rather than espousing one particular school, it has benefited from many different writings, mainly in English and French.[106] Theoretically, it is more in the nature of a *bricolage*, partly because of the diverse nature of the object under study. This book does not deal with the work of a particular author or a coherent theory, body of ideas, or discourse (however that is defined), or even an intellectual tradition, but with several linked moments in an ongoing debate. In addition, the subject impinges on various discourses and is not primarily concerned with political thought, the domain in which much reflection on intellectual history has taken place in the English-speaking world. Nor does the present work chart the emergence of a dominant discourse. Instead it follows moments in the defence of an interconnected series of beliefs which, while they came at one point to occupy an important place on the intellectual stage, have never been hegemonic. The type of intellectual history I am attempting to write starts from a concern to understand, as far as possible, a group of divergent works on a particular issue in the terms in which they were understood by the participants at the time. This means trying to grasp the implications and connotations for

[105] See for example Goldgar, *Impolite Learning.*

[106] I have deliberately chosen not to discuss the theoretical debates on intellectual history or the history of science, in order to avoid getting bogged down in abstract considerations and the need to take up a position in relation to, for example, Foucault or Skinner. As there may be a disparity between theoretical positions and actual practice and certain approaches which I have found partially useful have led to interpretations which seem to me unsatisfactory, I have restricted references to writings relevant to the issues under study.

the authors and their contemporaries by reconstructing as far as possible the circumstances of the debate. It is an attempt to recover the principal conditions in which the authors produced their texts and to which they were responding, the assumptions they shared with their contemporaries, and the constraints on their utterances. More than simply situating the ideas in their intellectual context, decoding the thought structures of the authors of particular texts, or alternatively seeing them as sociocultural artefacts, I am trying to understand the interaction between written works and their environment—or in other words, not only how works were influenced by the context in which they were written but their effect on events, in a situation in which the texts are part of the context. The debate is not studied from the point of view of our present concerns or the historiographical traditions that have grown up since, but as part of the preoccupations of the period. The aim is not primarily to elucidate a particular philosophy or to decide the true meaning of a particular author or text, or the 'influences' on them, but to understand the contours and implications (religious, political, philosophical . . .) of a certain number of interconnected works in relation to their age, without ignoring their relevance to modern preoccupations. While it was about what may appear today to be abstruse matters, the debate on the soul which is the subject of this study was not confined to intellectual circles or to the higher echelons of society. On the contrary, it apparently reflected the preoccupations of many ordinary people concerning the pressing and practical issues of their own faith and salvation. These were questions which interested wider society, in view of the centrality of religion, its propensity to arouse popular emotions, and the dangers that the ideas put forward seemed to imply for behaviour if they became widely accepted. Its reverberations therefore extended far beyond the individual authors immediately involved, who might be considered as 'losers', to the extent that the ideas they defended did not become dominant and have almost disappeared below the historical horizon or are discredited in many people's eyes. Nor did they clearly bring about changes; it is difficult, for example, to defend claims that the eighteenth-century French materialists prepared the French Revolution. One might wonder then why one should bother to study them. I would argue that it is precisely because the issue was seen at the time to be of profound importance, concerning as it did the way human beings understand themselves and their place in nature, with important implications for religion and politics. It led to violent reactions which managed to circumscribe these ideas to a minority or to discourage publication of them but could not prevent their wider reverberations. The discussion has continued up to the present day and has gradually and imperceptibly altered assumptions, so that certain of the arguments, while apparently rejected, in fact gradually entered mainstream thought. The eighteenth-century emphasis on sensibility and increasing awareness of the body and fleshly concerns are clearly connected to the materialistic arguments discussed here, which also lie behind much modern behaviour and thinking.

This study of the moments when a materialistic view of human nature was the subject of heated debate, in a society which was very different from ours, takes as its leitmotif the way in which theological and medical discussions were interrelated. Science and religion appear here not as antithetical views of the world but as different ways of approaching the same central questions, which in the period under study had to take acount of each other. The complexity of the debate has imposed a particular plan on the present work. While the overall structure is chronological, recounting a story that begins in late seventeenth-century England and finishes in mid-eighteenth-century France, the need for detailed analysis of both the moments of the debate and the issues involved has led me to separate out some of them. In addition, as the exchanges in different countries have to be looked at separately, a strict linear development is impossible. I have gone into some detail concerning the religious and political situation in late seventeenth-century England because here the debate was a public one determined by precise political and religious events; this was not the case for the French works discussed in both Chapters 5 and 6, which were stimulated by a wider range of circumstances over a longer period. My starting-point is a series of works published in England after the ending of the Licensing Act in 1695, beginning with Henry Layton's confidentially circulated works in the 1690s and continuing with Dr William Coward's books from *Second Thoughts on the Soul* in 1702 to *The Just Scrutiny* in 1706 and John Toland's *Letters to Serena* in 1704, and ending with the Henry Dodwell affair and its ramifications. The issue at stake in these books was the existence of a separate immaterial soul, denied by Layton, Coward, Toland, and Anthony Collins, but in view of the politico-religious implications of the question, the ensuing reverberations were far-reaching. Those involved included a large number of theologicans, polemicists, and political writers from all parts of the political spectrum, including the non-juror Henry Dodwell, the noted freethinker Anthony Collins, the theologian Samuel Clarke, the widely ridiculed financier, MP, and bankrupt John Asgill, and the High Church Tory propagandist Charles Leslie, as well as Jonathan Swift and Daniel Defoe, not to mention Leibniz in Hanover and John Locke. To understand the implications of these polemics requires a study of the charged political and theological climate in the two decades following the Glorious Revolution, with which the first chapter begins. Heterodox thought, in particular Socinianism, denunciations of 'priestcraft' and the campaign against unbelief, 'deism', and 'atheism' are linked to the crisis within the Church of England and political faction in the 1690s. The complex religious and political confrontations help to account for the emergence of the debate on the soul and show that the intentions of the authors of these particular heterodox texts have to be investigated carefully. They also have to be set against the intellectual traditions favouring materialistic strands of thought at the time, such as the revival of the Christian mortalist heresy from the mid-century in England, philosophical speculation on the soul, and apologetic literature. After

this presentation of the complex intellectual climate of late seventeenth-century England, emphasizing the interaction of philosophical and theological speculation and its link to political struggles, the following chapter deals with the relevant medical and physiological writing, in England and elsewhere, and its religious implications. It looks especially at William Harvey's writings on reproduction, Francis Glisson's conception of active matter, and Thomas Willis's study of the animal brain, and at some of the theological reactions to them which demonstrate the importance of medical speculation concerning active matter. Medical discussions of the interactions between mind and body, while used to support materialistic arguments, were in themselves insufficient as they were susceptible to various dualistic explanations.

The scene having been set, the fourth chapter is devoted to a detailed discussion of the works involved in the controversy over the human soul at the turn of the eighteenth century in England. As the writings of Henry Layton and William Coward, at the centre of this controversy, are hardly known at all today despite Coward being one of the freethinkers named by Jonathan Swift, this chapter devotes quite a lot of space to them, studying their possible motivations and implications of their works in the charged atmosphere of the day. The refutations Coward attracted and the polemic around his books are also discussed, as is the involvement of John Toland, Henry Dodwell, Samuel Clarke, and Anthony Collins. As the violence of these polemics subsided after the Hanoverian succession in 1714, this chapter does not take the study any further into the century, and Chapter 5 follows the trail of these ideas across the Channel. It looks at French-language periodicals published essentially by Huguenot journalists in Holland, semi-journalistic works by Thémiseul de Saint-Hyacinthe or the marquis d'Argens, and the clandestine philosophical treatises which circulated, often in manuscript form, from the early part of the century onwards. Also included is a discussion of some apparently isolated voices, like the village priest Jean Meslier and the exiled Italian republican Count Alberto Radicati di Passerano, who throw light on the link between theological and political radicalism. These lesser-known works rehearsed many of the arguments used to elaborate a material conception of human beings by the more high-profile French authors of the middle of the eighteenth century, which are the subject of the next chapter. The writers highlighted, who include both obscure thinkers and high-profile scientists like Maupertuis or Buffon, frequently knew each other personally. They seem to be conducting a debate which was the public face of private discussions often stimulated by the clandestine works analysed in the previous chapter. As their works have been the subject of several studies, this chapter concentrates on bringing out the most important elements of the mid-eighteenth-century attempts (mainly by Julien Offray de La Mettrie and Denis Diderot) to provide a purely material explanation of human beings and the difficulties involved. Their works are looked at in the context of eighteenth-century medical thought, with a re-examination of the teaching

of Hermann Boerhaave, the impact of new scientific discoveries such as the freshwater polyp, and the debate on generation. A comparison with David Hartley's contemporaneous book underlines the different emphases of the French and British debates and the different thrust of the French arguments, which became openly antireligious and even atheistic due partly to the limited possibilities for discussion or expression of religious unorthodoxy. This chapter also looks at the 'Spinozistic' theme of the determination of the will which runs through several clandestine materialistic texts, notably the *Traité des trois imposteurs* and La Mettrie's works, and continues in the later French materialistic writings as well as those of Hartley and later Joseph Priestley. Although my study ends with the emergence of material explanation of humans at centre stage with the scandalous mid-eighteenth-century French works, the final chapter indicates briefly the divergent currents that emerged in materialistic thinking and their impact in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This includes the confrontation with religious orthodoxy, the impact of materialism on political ideas and reformist thought, and the contribution of materialistic speculation to the 'natural history of mankind' and 'science of man'[107] which fed into reforming programmes and physical anthropology as well as psychology. The terms and nature of debate on human nature were determined by circumstances, which ensured that the arguments we shall be looking at here were mainly excluded from the mainstream of thought. They have as a result been ignored or misunderstood by historians even though they concerned a crucial preoccupation of the period. This study tries to demonstrate that the questions raised, despite their subversive nature, continued to exercise minds and play a role not only in polemical works such as the *Système de la nature*, but even for authors who rejected their irreligious connotations. Despite their neglect by historians and sometimes despite their authors' intentions, these speculations contributed gradually and unobtrusively to the elaboration of a secular conception of humans in different fields. They are crucial to an understanding of later developments, however far removed the preoccupations of late seventeenth-century thinkers may at first sight seem from those of nineteenth- or twentieth-century scientists. But I am not telling a story of increasing enlightenment or secularization, the decline in a religious and rise of a scientific and/or secular conception of humans, or the gradual spread of 'enlightened' ideas among a wider public. As we can still see today, interactions between religion and science are more complex than is often supposed and an increase in scientific knowledge does not necessarily accompany greater scepticism or a decline in religious belief. This book is intended as a contribution to a better understanding of how views of human nature have changed by looking at attempts to defend a materialistic conception of humans, the conditions in

[107] There is no overall study of *l'histoire naturelle de l'homme*; Williams distinguishes it from the medical science of man in the nineteenth century (*The Physical and the Moral*, 18), but in the later eighteenth century the distinction was not so clear-cut and materialism fed into both.

which these attempts were made, and their implications. It may also help to explain why they have been ignored or misunderstood and why the thinkers discussed here remained a marginal group in the historiography, even as many aspects of the view they defended gradually became absorbed for most practical purposes into the outlook of the very people who rejected it. Primarily, however, this book provides a new interpretation of the period which can be designated, somewhat arbitrarily, as the 'early Enlightenment'. It shows how the 'science of man' developed in this period out of a complex interaction of politico-religious circumstances and theological and scientific preoccupations. The confrontations which marked these years did not mean that the lines of combat were clearly drawn between science and religion, orthodoxy and heterodoxy. I am arguing for a more complex reading of the intellectual history of the time, which can only be achieved by attempting to understand it in its own terms rather than sticking labels on it. And that understanding may help us to approach some of the intellectual confrontations of our own day.