

## ABSTRACT

BRYAN, JOSEPH DANIEL. The Creation of a Radical System: Baron d'Holbach's *Système de la Nature* and the Enlightenment in Tension. (Under the direction of Dr. K. Steven Vincent).

Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789) was an important figure in the Enlightenment and has been a permanent fixture in Enlightenment scholarship throughout the twentieth century. Yet, while this scholarship has generally recognized d'Holbach's role in the Enlightenment, he is cited more often for his salon (*la Synagogue d'Holbach, la coterie holbachique*) than for his thought. This traditional account of d'Holbach is being challenged by more recent scholars who assert the primacy of a "Radical Enlightenment" over and above that of a moderate and counter Enlightenment. They regard d'Holbach as the capstone of an intellectual movement that had exhausted its novelty, but they have failed to provide the detailed analysis that would substantiate this claim. I believe that d'Holbach's *magnum opus* *Système de la Nature* combines intellectual traditions in a manner that goes beyond the traditional and current studies of the Enlightenment. An investigation of this work will not only serve to expose the varieties of thought on which d'Holbach based his system, but also show how d'Holbach constructed his system with scientific and philosophical ideas and a specific argumentative strategy. This analysis will show that totalizing syntheses of the Enlightenment have rarely accounted for the tension and diversity of eighteenth-century thought.

The Creation of a Radical System: Baron d'Holbach's *Système de la Nature*  
and the Enlightenment in Tension.

by  
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## DEDICATION

To my parents,  
who have been parents and friends at all the appropriate times.

## BIOGRAPHY

Joseph D. Bryan was born in Henderson, N. C. He attended the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, graduating in December of 2003 with a degree in History. In August of 2005, he began a seemingly interminable journey for a terminal M. A. at N. C. State University, which he attained in 2008. In the fall of 2008, he will enter the Ph.D. program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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## Introduction

Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789) was an important figure in the Enlightenment and has been a permanent fixture in Enlightenment scholarship throughout the twentieth century. Yet, while this scholarship has generally recognized d'Holbach's role in the Enlightenment, he is cited more often for his salon (*la Synagogue d'Holbach*, *la coterie holbachique*) than for his thought. When his actual writings are discussed, it is generally to quote the critiques by Voltaire and Goethe or to decry d'Holbach's lack of novelty. R. J. White suggests that "The content of his atheism, best represented in *Le Système de la Nature*, could have been set down on a single sheet of notepaper."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, after suggesting that "*Le Système* had an immense popularity *de choc*," White remarks that "the Baron's books never mattered much."<sup>2</sup> Louis Dupré is even more direct: "The author [of *Système de la Nature*] combines a naïve reductionism and a simplistic determinism with an impressive erudition and an occasionally incisive critique of established positions."<sup>3</sup> Paul Hazard largely concurs: "It must not be supposed that the Baron was a genius, or that there was anything strikingly original about his ideas; he appropriated them from others left and right."<sup>4</sup>

This traditional account of d'Holbach is being challenged by two scholars who assert the primacy of a "Radical Enlightenment" over and above that of a moderate and counter Enlightenment. In *The Radical Enlightenment*, Margaret Jacob argues that "The continuity between the pantheism of Toland and Rousset and the materialism of d'Holbach should be emphasized."<sup>5</sup> More recently, in his new work *Enlightenment Contested*, Jonathan Israel finds that "From an early stage, then, French radical thought leaned towards a hylozoic materialism which was later to culminate in Diderot and

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<sup>1</sup> R. J. White, *The Anti-Philosophers: A Study of the Philosophes in Eighteenth-Century France* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1970), 140.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 138, 141

<sup>3</sup> Louis Dupré, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 32.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Hazard, *European Thought in the Eighteenth Century: From Montesquieu to Lessing*, trans. J. Lewis May from *La Pensée Européenne au XVIIIème Siècle: De Montesquieu à Lessing* (Cleveland, OH: Meridian Books, 1963, orig. pub. Paris: Boivin, 1946), 125.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons, and Republicans* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), 262.

d'Holbach.”<sup>6</sup> Both Israel and Jacob, in their respective works, do not find d'Holbach to be the apex of radical thought, but its culmination. Unfortunately, both historians end their studies in the middle of the eighteenth century and do not substantiate their claims with an examination of d'Holbach's texts. Jacob and Israel have re-centered Enlightenment scholarship on a group of thinkers that they have labeled the “Radical Enlightenment,” instead of the usual Locke, Newton, and Voltaire axis. But their studies of post-1750 thinkers, particularly d'Holbach, have suffered from the power of Hazard's thesis that the explosion of ideas occurred before 1715. They regard d'Holbach as the capstone of an intellectual movement that had exhausted its novelty, but they have failed to provide the detailed analysis that would substantiate this claim.

In juxtaposing the quotes of Jacob and Israel with those of White, Dupré, and Hazard, I have intimated the positive and negative evaluations of d'Holbach. To Israel and Jacob, d'Holbach is positively unoriginal because his work was the culmination of a radical tradition originating in the latter-quarter of the seventeenth century. White, Dupré, and Hazard depict d'Holbach more negatively as the man who regurgitated the thought of others. The two different treatments of d'Holbach signify two different approaches to the Enlightenment. The first approach views the Enlightenment as a unified group of thinkers based upon a similar method or a similar goal. The second approach (that of Jacob and Israel) views the Enlightenment in tension with itself and categorizes Enlightenment thinkers into three groups. The first approach either marginalizes d'Holbach, belittles his intellectual acumen, or attempts to make his work fit into a particular scheme. Jacob and Israel, whose approach rightfully gets at the inherent tension of the Enlightenment, but who put forward opposing theses about this tension, use d'Holbach as an instantiation of their views. Although Jacob and Israel's approach is more profitable than those of the first approach, d'Holbach's abilities as a writer and thinker is still not explored. I believe that if we use d'Holbach as a lens with which to view the Enlightenment, we see a different picture than those depicted above.

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<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1650-1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 742.



I shall argue in this thesis that d'Holbach's *Système de la Nature* combines intellectual traditions in a manner that goes beyond both approaches to the Enlightenment. An investigation of this work will not only serve to expose the diverse strands of thought on which d'Holbach based his system, but also show how d'Holbach constructed his system with scientific and philosophical ideas and a specific argumentative strategy. D'Holbach *was* the capstone of an extended intellectual tradition as Jacob and Israel have found, but the more fascinating story is how d'Holbach used the ideas and theories of his predecessors and contemporaries to construct a unique system. D'Holbach is an important figure in the Enlightenment, and *Système de la Nature* is an important eighteenth-century text. D'Holbach uses science in *Système de la Nature* to bolster a materialist philosophy that represents an important element in Enlightenment thought, an element that is too often marginalized. This will be the theme of my third chapter.

In the first chapter, I will outline the historiography of the Enlightenment in order to show how d'Holbach, along with his fellow materialists La Mettrie and Helvétius, have been treated. I will also analyze the themes of these works to explain why and how d'Holbach was often marginalized or presented on the periphery. In the second chapter, I will present an extended summary of *Système de la Nature* to lay the groundwork for the interpretive third chapter. I hope to show that the treatment of d'Holbach's *Système de la Nature* in Enlightenment historiography is wrongly premised on the assumption that his atheism and materialism are mere repetitions or retrogressions. *Système de la Nature* is a rich resource for any summary of Enlightenment thought and is a complex expression of scientific ideas and argumentative procedures. This analysis will show that totalizing syntheses of the Enlightenment can rarely account for the tension and diversity of eighteenth-century thought.

## Chapter One

### **D'Holbach & Enlightenment Historiography**

*We are now asked to imagine marching along arm in arm under a might banner with LUMIÈRES on one side and ENLIGHTENMENT on the other such disparate figures as Fénelon and Meslier, Montesquieu and Dubos, Voltaire and Morelly, Mably and Quesnay, La Mettrie and Rousseau, Mercier and Sade. It is asking rather too much*  
John Lough<sup>7</sup>

In *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, Roger Chartier posed the question: “Did the Revolution Construct the Enlightenment?”<sup>8</sup> He answered in the affirmative stating that “In one sense, then, it was the Revolution that ‘made’ the books, and not the other way around, since it was the Revolution that gave a premonitory and programmatic meaning to certain works, constituted, after the fact, as its origin.”<sup>9</sup> In a similar way, many historians of the Enlightenment in the twentieth century have created a canon of thinkers that reflect their own historical context as much as that of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This has often led to the marginalization of thinkers who did not share the same *l’esprit philosophique* or whose writings did not agree with the purportedly uniform program of the *philosophes*. Ira O. Wade is rightly skeptical of this method: “It is not easy to describe in detail the formation and development of the French Enlightenment. What causes a certain embarrassment is the problem of coherence and consistency and, to some extent, of continuity.”<sup>10</sup>

D'Holbach, in particular, has suffered from the tendency to assert a unified Enlightenment that overcame its internal differences. In what follows, I will examine two different trends in the historiography of the Enlightenment and how d'Holbach has been depicted. The first approach has sought to understand the Enlightenment as a group of thinkers united by either a similar methodology or a similar goal. In these analyses,

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<sup>7</sup> John Lough, “Reflections on ‘Enlightenment’ and ‘Lumières,’” *The British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 8 (1985): 14.

<sup>8</sup> Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Enlightenment*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 87.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>10</sup> Ira O. Wade, *The Structure and Form of the French Enlightenment*, vol. II (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 262.

put forward by Carl Becker, Paul Hazard (in *La Crise de la Conscience Européenne*), Ernst Cassirer, Peter Gay, and Ira Wade, d'Holbach and the other infamous French Materialists La Mettrie and Helvétius are marginalized or unjustly made to fit a particular scheme. The second approach, of Paul Hazard (in *La Pensée Européenne au XVIIIème Siècle*), Margaret Jacob, and Jonathan Israel, has attempted to understand the Enlightenment by examining its internal tensions. Hazard viewed the Enlightenment as doomed to failure because of the differences between thinkers. Jacob and Israel advanced two interpretations of the Enlightenment that categorized thinkers into groups at odds with each other. The second way of analyzing the Enlightenment is more fruitful, but still forces the authors to separate and categorize thinkers by often loose criteria. In both approaches, d'Holbach is unanalyzed, marginalized, or presented as the culmination of a century of thought, rather than seen as a thinker who advanced a unique system of nature.

### **Unifying the Enlightenment**

Although Carl Becker's *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* is half the size of Paul Hazard's *La Crise de la Conscience Européenne*, it provoked twice as much controversy.<sup>11</sup> Written only three years apart, the differences between Hazard and Becker's texts are fundamental and irreconcilable. They express contrary views on the origins of the Enlightenment, the unity of the Enlightenment, and, a central concern for Becker, the motives of the philosophers. Whereas Becker saw the Enlightenment as a secular imitation of the medieval *Weltanschauung*, Hazard presented the Enlightenment as a direct product of the intellectual crisis of 1680-1715 (what we may call the early Enlightenment), which itself was the direct product of the Renaissance. Hazard's oft-quoted remark that "virtually all those ideas which were called revolutionary round about 1760, or, for the matter of that, 1789, were already current as early as 1680,"<sup>12</sup> has served as a foundation for Enlightenment studies. On the other hand, Becker's philosophers forged a lexicon consisting of nature, natural law,

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<sup>11</sup> Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932). Paul Hazard, *The European Mind: 1680-1715*, trans. J. Lewis May from *La Crise de la Conscience Européenne* (Cleveland, OH: Meridian Books, 1963, orig. pub. Paris: Boivin, 1935).

<sup>12</sup> Hazard, *The European Mind*, xviii.

perfectibility, posterity, reason, etc., which were a mere substitution of “more up-to-date materials”<sup>13</sup> for the heavenly city of previous thinkers. The end result, according to Becker, was a parallel with the thought of medieval philosophers: faith and devotion, not to a transcendental being, but rather to reason and nature.

Both Hazard and Becker sought to unify the Enlightenment, but offered opposing generalizations. Hazard widened his scope to observe a diversity of opinions while maintaining the critical application of reason as his unifying criterion. His thinkers professed multifarious ethical doctrines, political creeds, and forms of Christian devotion, or none at all, yet they were united in their belief in the rigorous application of reason. Conversely, Becker narrowed the field of philosophers in a way that covered up the diversity of thought. He claimed that one of the consequences of following reason to its logical conclusion was the materialistic and atheistic philosophies of La Mettrie, d’Holbach, and Helvétius, “a little huddled company of rationalistic *enragés*,”<sup>14</sup> who must be dissociated from the central Enlightenment. Becker also exposed the disparity between Montesquieu’s historical findings that advocated a relativistic appreciation of the differences in humanity and the “constant and universal principles of human nature” that his philosophers desired.<sup>15</sup> Thus, Becker excluded two important streams of Enlightenment thought simply because they did not fit his schema. His search for unity within the program of the eighteenth-century philosophers led directly to the marginalization of La Mettrie, d’Holbach, Helvétius, and even Montesquieu. In Hazard’s more capacious early Enlightenment, Toland, Bayle, Locke, and Leibniz exist side by side and exemplify the uniting element of critical reason.

Writing at the same time as Becker and Hazard, Ernst Cassirer sought to understand the Enlightenment in terms of its “characteristic depth rather than its breadth,” and to present its thought “in the light of the unity of its conceptual origin and of its

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<sup>13</sup> Becker, *The Heavenly City*, 31.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

underlying principle.”<sup>16</sup> Cassirer’s analysis is deep and penetrating, but it rests on a fundamental claim of epistemological unity. He applied d’Alembert’s distinction between the seventeenth-century *esprit de système* and the eighteenth-century *esprit systématique* to highlight the extension of reason and philosophy as active and expansive tools not confined to deductive systems based on *a priori* axioms. This application of reason was connected with the analytic method of Galileo and Newton which sought to reduce phenomena, through experimental and empirical data, to their most bare forms and build upward from sturdy foundations. Within this epistemological framework, as Johnson Kent Wright notes, Cassirer’s “narrative form is, of course, a familiar one: the dialectical development from an initial state of undifferentiated unity to one of rupture and fragmentation, in order to arrive at an end-state in which unity has been restored in a higher, ‘differentiated’ state.”<sup>17</sup> Cassirer’s grand structure rests on this dialectical motion whereby one who is not moving forward is expelled. For instance, Cassirer considered the works of La Mettrie and d’Holbach as “special cases [that] exemplify a retrogression into that dogmatic mode of thinking which the leading scientific minds of the eighteenth century oppose and endeavor to eliminate.”<sup>18</sup> It was d’Alembert who represented the scientific sentiments of the *Encyclopédie*, which was of a distinctly Newtonian flavor. Helvétius and Condillac put forward a methodology that was characteristic of the eighteenth century, though “it would be erroneous to consider the fundamental viewpoint represented by Helvétius as typical of the content of the

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<sup>16</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove from *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951, orig. pub. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1932), v.

<sup>17</sup> Johnson Kent Wright, “‘A Bright Clear Mirror’: Cassirer’s *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*,” in *What’s Left of Enlightenment? A Postmodern Question*, eds. Keith Michael Baker and Peter Reill, 71-101 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 89. He continues: “As for the content of the form, the prior state is always some variety of Cartesianism, whose certainty is then shaken or destroyed by a species of ‘analytic’ or ‘psychological’ thought, most often English in inspiration, whose ‘problems then find their solution in the emergence of ‘synthetic’ or ‘transcendental’ philosophy—the privilege, of course, of German thinkers above all.”

<sup>18</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, 55. For an opposing opinion, among many, see White, *The Anti-Philosophers: A Study of the Philosophes in Eighteenth-Century France*. White contends that La Mettrie, Helvétius, and d’Holbach were themselves *philosophes* whose role “...was not to originate new ideas but to translate the ideas of the previous century,” (11). Cassirer would agree with White’s quote, though not the inclusion of the three materialists.

philosophy of the Enlightenment...and it is equally erroneous to regard it as typical of the thought of the French Encyclopaedists.”<sup>19</sup>

As with Becker, Cassirer’s attempt to unify the Enlightenment under an epistemological and dialectical framework is accomplished at the expense of certain thinkers and scientific approaches. John Herman Randall, Jr., in commenting on Cassirer’s work on Renaissance thought, states:

On the one hand, he tries to introduce a unity into a mass of divergent currents of thought by constructing a synthesis in terms of a characteristic ‘style’ or ‘ideal type’ of thinking. On the other, he finds unification in terms of the new problems forced on men—forced primarily, in his interpretation, by the advance of scientific knowledge and the new conceptions of truth to which that advance leads.<sup>20</sup>

This characterization can be extended to *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*. Cassirer’s construction of an Enlightenment “style” becomes exclusionary, and often dismissive. D’Holbach was a “fanatical theorizer” and “*The System of Nature* played a relatively unimportant part in the general development of Diderot’s thought.”<sup>21</sup> But assuredly, Diderot was not the only audience. In downgrading the importance of La Mettrie and d’Holbach, Cassirer dismisses the study of physiology and medicine. He considered the core of materialism to be in ethics rather than in metaphysics or natural philosophy. Yet, when combined with his claim that the founders of materialism “banished” mathematics and mathematical physics in favor of biology and general physiology, it is not surprising that Cassirer gave short shrift to both the materialists and the life sciences.<sup>22</sup> For Cassirer, d’Holbach and the French Materialists served as foils to his dialectical movement of reason.

Three decades after Cassirer’s work, Peter Gay wrote *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (1966 and 1969). Like Cassirer, Becker, and Hazard, Gay sought to unify

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<sup>19</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, 27.

<sup>20</sup> John Herman Randall, Jr., “Cassirer’s Theory of History as Illustrated in his treatment of Renaissance Thought,” in *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp, 691-728 (Evanston: IL: 1949), 726. For a comparison of Hazard and Cassirer, see Herbert Diekmann, “An Interpretation of the Eighteenth Century,” in *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. XV, no. 4 (1954): 295-311.

<sup>21</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, 134 and 72.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 66-69. We may also look strangely upon Cassirer’s statement that “Spinoza seems hardly to have had any direct influence on eighteenth century thought” (187) not simply because of the important role now played by Spinoza in Israel’s work, but because Spinoza was rightfully seen as influential in Hazard’s work three years later.

the Enlightenment. Unlike Cassirer and Becker, however, Gay attempted to fashion a thesis around a larger group of Enlightenment thinkers that included d'Holbach. Three ideas characterize Gay's work. First, the philosophes used their classical learning to criticize their more recent Christian heritage, while, in the process, dissociating themselves from the ancients. Renaissance thought, the rise of scientific investigation, and the philosophers of the seventeenth century contributed to the emancipation from both the ancient and Christian traditions, and sparked Gay's second overarching idea, the "recovery of nerve." Gay defined the "recovery of nerve" as a penetrating and pervasive intellectual power felt by educated Europeans, bolstered by the perceived certainties of science, and aimed at an extension of freedom rather than a timid fear of change.<sup>23</sup> Finally, Gay considered the philosophes to be united by the more or less common experience of "the dialectical interplay of their appeal to antiquity, their tension with Christianity, and their pursuit of modernity."<sup>24</sup> From these three characteristics, Gay depicted the philosophes as purveyors of secularism, freedom, and toleration—the roots of modernity.

*The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* was influential in drawing attention to the importance of medicine to eighteenth-century thought and connecting the Newtonian method with the growth of the social sciences and science of man (human nature).<sup>25</sup> Gay's presentation of the philosophes as a stormy, philosophic family, "a single army with a single banner,"<sup>26</sup> though generally correct, suffers from two weaknesses. First, Gay overstates the connections among the philosophes and only emphasizes the more

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<sup>23</sup> Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, vol. I, *The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977, orig. pub. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1966). Vol. II, *The Science of Freedom* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1969), 3. *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* is a bold, daring, and complex work. For a more in depth summary and critique than the one presented here, see James A. Leith, "Peter Gay's Enlightenment," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 5, No. 1 (Autumn, 1971): 157-171.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 8. It was the philosophes recognition that they were doing something distinctly modern that contributed to their dissociation from the ancients.

<sup>25</sup> See the essays by Roy Porter, Roger Smith, and David Carrithers in *Inventing Human Science: Eighteenth-Century Domains*, eds. Christopher Fox, Roy Porter, and Robert Wokler (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1995). See also, Peter Gay, "The Enlightenment as Medicine and as Cure," in *The Age of the Enlightenment: Studies Presented to Theodore Besterman*, ed. W. H. Barber, 375-386 (Edinburgh: St. Andrews University Publications, 1967).

<sup>26</sup> Gay, *The Enlightenment*, vol. I, 7-8.

well-known thinkers. He sets up a hierarchy of command—captains, lieutenants, and privates—in which “the dozen odd captains of the movement, whose names must bulk large in any history of the European mind, were abetted by a host of lieutenants [Mably, Marmontel, Raynal, Mendelssohn, etc.], [and] beyond them were the privates of the movement, the hangers-on, consumers, and distributors rather than producers of ideas.”<sup>27</sup> Gay admits that the “lieutenants” had a considerable reputation in the eighteenth-century, but he concentrates on the “captains.” This approach not only limits the contextual value of Gay’s professed unity, but assumes a chain of command among eighteenth-century thinkers that historians such as Robert Darnton have since argued against.<sup>28</sup>

To accomplish his goal of showing the Enlightenment to be a unified, secular movement that grew increasingly radical, and this is the second weakness, Gay creates the labels “secular fideism,” “Epicurean Stoicism,” and “bellicose naturalism” to envelop the multiplicity of Enlightenment thought. Gay attempts to conflate a variety of thought, various degrees of irreligious writings, and often contrasting socio-political views by using these different “-isms” and hybrid terms.<sup>29</sup> To take naturalism for example, Gay wants to use this term, or “bellicose naturalism,” interchangeably with “criticism” to understand the ways in which the philosophes not only disenchanting the universe, but also applied a critical method to all aspects of the world. Naturalism should not, however, according to Gay, “be equated with skepticism or atheism. These two modes of thought are the most extreme consequences to which the atrophy of mythical thinking can lead, and they dominated most of the philosophes in the second half of the eighteenth century, but the deists of the earlier generation were just as critical, just as disenchanting, as their radical successors.”<sup>30</sup> Although Gay recognizes the differences between eighteenth-century thinkers, he uses the term naturalism to bridge the gap. It seems that Gay applies naturalism as a modern appellate with which to bring together the philosophes, rather

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., vol. I, 18-19. Gay does not name any of the captains, and he does not offer an opinion why they “must bulk large in any history of the European mind.”

<sup>28</sup> Robert Darnton, “The High Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature,” in *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime*, 1-40 (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1982).

<sup>29</sup> By focusing on the “captains,” Gay misses much of the actual radical thought of the Enlightenment. For instance, the socio-political philosophies of Voltaire, Hume, and d’Holbach are relatively tame compared to those of abbé Mably or Guillaume-Joseph Saige.

<sup>30</sup> Gay, *The Enlightenment*, vol. I, 148.



than naturalism as understood contextually. In the eighteenth century, naturalism was a divisive term. It was synonymous with skepticism, atheism, materialism, Spinozism, etc. D'Holbach, in fact, used it to define his own unique system that was ridiculed by Voltaire, Abbé Bergier, Melchior Grimm, and a host of other thinkers.

By concentrating on the “captains” of the Enlightenment and depicting their similarities through often misleading terminology, Gay has difficulty accounting for the diversity of thought. D'Holbach, for instance, is at once an insider of the “little flock” because “They opposed what he opposed,” and an outsider because “while they agreed with him about what was false, they were by no means as certain as he was about what was true.”<sup>31</sup> In fact,

It is not necessary to rehearse these writings [d'Holbach's works] at length; they sound in long stretches as though they had been written by Collins or Hume or Voltaire—and in a certain sense, of course, they had. They belong to a prolific family of antireligious diatribes designed to unmask Christianity... and construct a naturalistic philosophy based on the recognition of the eternal laws of nature.<sup>32</sup>

Gay not only confines d'Holbach to the larger philosophic goal of disabling Christianity, but also reduces the complexity of his *Système de la Nature* to a few irreligious and broadly scientific points. Gay does not give us any real sense of d'Holbach's philosophy or literary engagement with his intellectual context. He reduces the differences between the philosophes in order to emphasize a pervasive secularism. This reduction does not contribute to an understanding of the multivalent character of the eighteenth century. Gay's thesis—as Keith Michael Baker properly summarizes: “What Hume and Condorcet had in common, or Holbach and Lessing, was the consciousness of modernity in a premodern society, a sense of their identity as moderns which proved more potent than any individual differences in program, politics, or philosophy”<sup>33</sup>—is by no means incorrect. Like the earlier theses of Becker, Hazard, and Cassirer, however, Gay misrepresents the internal dynamics of Enlightenment thought because he overlooks its diversity.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., vol. I, 401.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., vol. I, 399-400.

<sup>33</sup> K. M. Baker, “Review of *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, vol. II *The Science of Freedom*,” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 75, No. 5 (June, 1970): 1413.

The last grand synthesis of the Enlightenment as a unified project was undertaken by Ira O. Wade. Wade began his assessment of the Enlightenment with *The Intellectual Origins of the French Enlightenment* (1971). Here, he outlined his plan to uncover “the reality of the Enlightenment: its origins, its development into an organic something, its consequences.”<sup>34</sup> Although Wade was unsatisfied with the approaches of Hazard, Cassirer, Mornet, Gay, and others because they only attended to certain facets of Enlightenment thought, he still sought to understand the Enlightenment as a unified whole. Wade’s plan, however, rested on an expectation of unity rather than the reality.

Wade saw in the totality of the Enlightenment an organic, inner reality characterized by the shift from *esprit philosophique* to *esprit révolutionnaire* in the seven categories of life: religious; political; economic; aesthetic; scientific; moral; and the life of the self. The inner unity of the Enlightenment was expressed in the transition from the philosophical to the revolutionary mentality. Wade premised this transition on the belief that action is a direct result of thought; thus, civilization is a product of ideas. He affirmed that history

*ought* to possess some sort of lucidity: we *ought* to be able to trace the relationship between thought and action given an expanse of time, a movement of ideas, a group of contributors to the movement, a body of ideas, a series of events, and a set of results...In short, it *ought* to be possible to trace the origins of the Enlightenment, to see them organize themselves into a body of thought and action, and to follow the consequences.<sup>35</sup>

This last statement points to one of the problems of Wade’s work. Wade often traces the development of ideas as if they are generated through pure textual interaction or simply an abstract medium. His analytical method sounds promising, but many of his chapters turn into summaries of different thinkers’ ideas. Wade applies the notion of organic unity to the Enlightenment as a whole and to the thought of Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, and the *Encyclopédie*, but isolates individual thinkers to represent the transition from *esprit philosophique* to *esprit révolutionnaire*. This operation confuses the reader and assumes that there existed an unintended unity among eighteenth-century thinkers. As the seven categories of life were restructured, as Wade describes in Part II,

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<sup>34</sup> Ira O. Wade, *The Intellectual Origins of the French Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), x.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, xxi. Italics mine.

vol. I, “The sum total of these discrete philosophies is what constitutes the philosophy of the *Encyclopédie* around 1765.”<sup>36</sup> Wade goes on to label this the *esprit encyclopédique*, but confesses that “There are still many gaps in our knowledge about the organic quality and the interrelationships of these separate philosophies.”<sup>37</sup> Even supposing that these gaps were clarified, Robert M. Isherwood poses the right question: “Moreover, if we accept the proposition that the unity of the Enlightenment is based on the principle that thought is the basis of action, is it possible to contend that the philosophes wanted the same action?”<sup>38</sup>

This is the precise problem that one finds in Wade’s chapter “Holbach, Voltaire, and the Debate on Atheism.” D’Holbach and Voltaire put forward two diametrically opposed views of society and religion, but Wade, like Gay, sees in their restructuring of Christianity a similarity. More than that, Wade uses Voltaire (primarily), Diderot, and Rousseau as the measuring sticks with which to gauge d’Holbach’s philosophy. According to Wade, the “reduction of the universe to matter and movement...as the focal point around which the whole materialism and atheism were built” was invented by Diderot.<sup>39</sup> Wade also suspects that d’Holbach wrote *Système de la Nature* solely to convert Voltaire! Moreover, Wade finds that Voltaire’s theism, Rousseau’s pantheism, and Diderot’s naturalism were in d’Holbach’s head while publishing some clandestine manuscripts, but provides no reason that this statement is important. He acknowledges the “similarities” in the religious thinking of Diderot, Rousseau, and Voltaire, suggests that they diverged fundamentally in their conclusions, identifies the close connection

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<sup>36</sup> Wade, *The Structure and Form*, vol. II, 400.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. II, 400.

<sup>38</sup> Robert M. Isherwood, “Review of *The Structure and Form of the French Enlightenment*,” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 84, No. 4 (October, 1979): 1064.

<sup>39</sup> Wade, *The Structure and Form*, vol. II, 304. This egregiously false statement is overshadowed by the inconsistent and puzzling statement expressed on page 320: *Système de la Nature* “grows out of the clandestine deistic movements of the first half of the century which itself had grown out of Spinoza’s *Tractatus*. The movement had been embraced by Voltaire who, with Mme. du Châtelet, had made Cirey its center, and we know now that both had dabbled in its clandestinity. But it had also been embraced by Diderot and Rousseau. How it was taken over by these two is still not very clear, but we do know that each used it differently.” It seems strange that someone who dabbled in the clandestine enterprise could have simultaneously been at the center of its operation. It is also unusual for someone to assert that two thinkers embraced the clandestine operation, but in unknown ways.

between d'Holbach and Diderot's thought, but somehow in the end seeks to understand the Enlightenment as an organic whole.

Wade's overarching agenda of getting to the vital core of the Enlightenment has no expression in his chapter on d'Holbach. In fact, the chapter reads like an independent essay on *Système de la Nature* and d'Holbach's relationship to Voltaire and, though more slight, Diderot.<sup>40</sup> Although it is unique for an historian to undertake an exposition of *Système de la Nature* within the context of a larger synthesis on the Enlightenment, Wade's tone is one of derision. He is at his best when merely summarizing d'Holbach's thought, though his exposition is guided only by a narrative flow and not an explicit arrangement of d'Holbach's systematic presentation. This chapter is meant as a means to understand the shift from *esprit philosophique* to *esprit révolutionnaire*; however, it reads as a mocking exposition of how things can go wrong when one deviates from the philosophical path of Voltaire.

In ways similar to Cassirer, Becker, Gay, and Hazard, Wade wrote about the Enlightenment as one unit of thought and thinkers despite any dissonance. The attempts to unify the Enlightenment under an overarching epistemological, secular, or philosophical framework have inevitably marginalized the diverse elements of the Enlightenment. D'Holbach's thought was defined by his unadulterated, though unexamined, materialism and atheism, which was always at the radical extreme of Enlightenment thought. Wade mentions d'Holbach multiple times for various reasons, but we never get a sense of the materials that d'Holbach used to construct *Système de la Nature*. Even when the Enlightenment is approached from its internal tensions and radical proponents, d'Holbach is still a specter.

### **The Enlightenment in Tension**

This section deals with Paul Hazard's *European Thought in the Eighteenth Century* and the works by Margaret Jacob and Jonathan Israel on the Radical Enlightenment. These three writers share a common concern that the Enlightenment

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<sup>40</sup> Wade wrongly states that "D'Holbach accepts Diderot's analysis in the *Réfutation* [d'*Helvétius*] which tended to make the mind the center of the total nervous system." Diderot's *Réfutation* was published in 1773, three years after *Système de la Nature*.

cannot be viewed as a monolithic, intellectually cohesive group of thinkers. Hazard's work acts as a bridge between the previous approach and the approach described here because he saw the inherent tensions among the eighteenth-century thinkers as sabotaging their common goal. Jacob and Israel's more recent approaches have defined the Enlightenment through its radical thinkers. Both explore the tension between radical and moderate thinkers. Jacob, however, is more circumspect. She confines the Radical Enlightenment to a smaller group of thinkers located in the Dutch Republic who opposed the moderate Newtonian hegemony in England, and who were inspired primarily by the republican tradition of seventeenth-century England. For her, d'Holbach shared a similar pantheistic materialism with the radicals, but professed different socio-political beliefs. Israel, on the other hand, sees the Radical Enlightenment as a coherent group of thinkers inspired by Spinoza. He finds the Radical Enlightenment to be a cohesive unit from the late seventeenth century to the mid-eighteenth century. Israel writes about d'Holbach as if he blindly followed the program of the Radical Enlightenment. Although Jacob and Israel differ fundamentally, their approaches, combined with that of Hazard, share the view that the Enlightenment must be viewed as diverse and internally combative.

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Paul Hazard followed *La Crise de la Conscience Européenne* with the posthumously published *European Thought in the Eighteenth Century*. Here, he combined Becker's metaphor of the construction of a secular city on earth with Cassirer's dialectical movement in which the eighteenth-century effervescence of ideas moved from a critique of the Christian worldview to a more productive structure of belief based upon nature and reason. This structure, however, was doomed to fail because of the insidious inconsistencies and contradictory elements within the "brotherhood."<sup>41</sup> As in *La Crise*, Hazard posited a unity in diversity in that the brotherhood was "inspired by a common purpose...[though] Each of them will want to find a truer truth, a better truth than his neighbour's, which he will decline to accept."<sup>42</sup> Although Hazard suggested in his previous work that the early Enlightenment was responsible for most of the ideas of the

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<sup>41</sup> Hazard, *European Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, 282.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 282.

Enlightenment, he does not attempt to analyze at any length the connections between the two time periods.

Hazard's approach to the thinkers of the eighteenth century allowed him to deal with d'Holbach and La Mettrie as participants in the effusion of ideas rather than onlookers. Although d'Holbach is still depicted as a radical extremist "afflicted with the same monomania,"<sup>43</sup> his ideas on virtue, natural inequality, and the development of civil society are taken seriously alongside his role as leader of a coterie and irreligious thinker. La Mettrie, similarly, is not dismissed by Hazard as the author of the audacious *L'homme machine*; he is connected to the larger issues of natural history as a scientific discipline, the scientific foundation of mid-century materialism, and the increasing importance of the *médecin-philosophe*. Helvétius, on the other hand, is only accorded a small role in Hazard's work. He is only mentioned peripherally when discussing another thinker or social network. Despite Hazard's relative neglect of Helvétius, *European Thought in the Eighteenth Century* offered a much more inclusive vision of the Enlightenment than the work of Cassirer or Becker. Yet, Hazard understood that the *theoretically* flawless plans of "those building experts...[were] brought to nought, not by any hostile intervention from without, but by the operation of some inherent defect within."<sup>44</sup> The "inherent defects within" would crystallize in the categories created by Jacob and Israel.

In 1981, Margaret Jacob invented the category and term "Radical Enlightenment" in her work *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons, and Republicans*.<sup>45</sup> *The Radical Enlightenment* was written as a sequel to her 1976 work *The Newtonians and the English Revolution, 1689-1720* in which she outlined the relationship of Newtonianism to the social, political, and religious ideology of the Whigs in England.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 126. Hazard is even more disdainful of d'Holbach on the previous page: "It must not be supposed that the Baron was a genius, or that there was anything strikingly original about his ideas; he appropriated them from others left and right. His prose was as stodgy as dough, and when he attempted the grand style, the result was mere bombast."

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 279.

<sup>45</sup> Charles Taylor also uses "Radical Enlightenment" to define a category of thinkers. He refers primarily to the work of Diderot, d'Holbach, Helvétius, and Bentham, and describes the ways in which they subverted the traditions of Augustinianism and Providential Deism to establish an ethical belief based on reason, nature, and utility. Taylor does not recognize Jacob's work on the Radical Enlightenment. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), Chapter 19.

Jacob exposes the radical opponents of Newtonian physico-theology and the Whig establishment in *The Radical Enlightenment*, and she takes the reader through a diverse social and intellectual world of English and French *émigrés* converging on the Dutch Republic.<sup>46</sup> Jacob's Radical Enlightenment opposed Newtonian deism and constitutional monarchy with pantheism, materialism, and republicanism. She contends that it was through the agency of Freemasonry, an attempt at establishing a secular religion of nature, that the views of the Radicals found expression. Her protagonists—John Toland, Prosper Marchand, Anthony Collins, Jean Rousset de Missy, Bernard Picart, Charles Levier—were political propagandists, literary journalists, and minor philosophers whose correspondences and clandestine manuscripts Jacob uses to implicate them in a Masonic group called the Knights of Jubilation. Although many pantheists, materialists, and republicans were Freemasons, there is not an implicit causal link between the two. The Radicals were an international group that coalesced around the social institution of Freemasonry and, since “Freemasonry was a *potentially* dangerous institution capable of housing republicans and pantheists and of nurturing their fantasies for social equality and political reform,”<sup>47</sup> Jacob rewrites the history of the early Enlightenment through the formation of this radical institution.

The Radical Enlightenment was inspired by the new strains of republican thought that emerged from the English Revolution of the mid-1600s (Harrington and Hobbes, stripped of his royalism) as well as the naturalistic view of the universe growing in tandem with the Scientific Revolution. The moderate, Newtonian faction capitalized on the mechanical philosophy of nature to uphold a stratified, divinely-dependent society. They conceived the material order to be “moved by spiritual forces outside of matter [and maintained] by a providential creator.”<sup>48</sup> The Radicals, on the contrary, blended the new mechanical philosophy with the Cartesian notion that the world is only matter and motion,

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<sup>46</sup> For a detailed review of *The Radical Enlightenment*, and one that contests much of her evidence for Freemasonry, see G. C. Gibbs' review in *The British Journal for the History of Science*, vol. 17, no. 1 (March, 1984): 67-81. Also helpful for historiographical context, see Siep Stuurman “Pathways to the Enlightenment: from Paul Hazard to Jonathan Israel,” *History Workshop Journal*, Issue 54 (2002): 227-235.

<sup>47</sup> Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*, 225. Italics mine. Cornerstone Book Publishers released a second revised edition of this work in 2006 with a new preface and certain authorial revisions and additions to the text.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

and with the tradition of Renaissance Naturalism that forged a “vitalistic and pantheistic conception of nature and [an] aggressively irreligious and mocking tone.”<sup>49</sup> Their pantheistic materialism argued for the autonomy of nature and forces inherent in matter, largely influenced by Giordano Bruno, Lucilo Vanini, and Spinoza. They also embraced a form of Spinozist determinism that justified a civil, secular ethical code based on the rational, necessary pursuit of the “good.” This confluence of intellectual thought came to a head with Toland’s *Pantheisticon* (1720), which gave ritualistic expression to a religion of nature.

According to Jacob, “Before there was a High Enlightenment in Europe...best represented in the writings of the Baron d’Holbach and his atheistic friends, there was a Radical Enlightenment.”<sup>50</sup> Jacob titles her epilogue, “New Paths to the High Enlightenment.” She peppers *The Radical Enlightenment* with references to d’Holbach in order to demonstrate the influence of the seventeenth century and the Radical Enlightenment on his writings. Philosophically, Jacob finds that “the continuity between the pantheism of Toland and Rousset and the materialism of d’Holbach should be emphasised.”<sup>51</sup> As will be shown below, d’Holbach was heavily influenced by Toland’s *Letters to Serena* (1704), which he translated, and, like Toland, d’Holbach constructed a civil code from his metaphysical views. Moreover, while recognizing that d’Holbach’s works were crafted from a multitude of thinkers, Jacob gives primacy to “that English legacy [which] appears to be vital and to have been learned from young English radicals when they and d’Holbach were students at Leiden.”<sup>52</sup> Jacob rightfully acknowledges that d’Holbach was not a republican and that many members of *la coterie d’Holbach* opted for a preservation of the financial and social life of the *ancien régime*. Although Toland, Rousset, La Mettrie, and d’Holbach all agreed on the need for secularization in all aspects of society, they forged different political views from their different political contexts. Thus, Jacob asserts the tension inherent in the Enlightenment and recognizes that different socio-political contexts produced varieties of radical and moderate thought. In

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 263.



the Preface to the Second Edition of *The Radical Enlightenment*, Jacob highlights her own insistence on historical context in contrast Jonathan Israel's *Radical Enlightenment* (2001): "He sees Descartes and Spinoza as progenitors of the crisis that threatened orthodoxy; I see them as part of the story that must be understood contextually."<sup>53</sup>

Israel's *Radical Enlightenment* and *Enlightenment Contested* (2006) build upon the structure laid by Hazard, Cassirer, and Jacob. More so than Hazard, Israel pushes back the origins of the High Enlightenment into the mid-seventeenth century and, like Cassirer, views the Enlightenment as guided by an abstract, philosophical logic that exists on a meta-historical level.<sup>54</sup> In addition, matching Jacob's thesis, Israel argues that the Dutch Republic was the crucible in which the Radical Enlightenment was formed, and he describes a triangular battle between the Radical Enlightenment, Moderate Enlightenment, and Counter Enlightenment. Yet, Israel overextends his categorization and often misrepresents thinkers in order to fit them into his scheme.

In both works, Israel emphasizes the international character of the European Enlightenment "as a single highly integrated intellectual and cultural movement, displaying differences in timing, no doubt, but for the most part preoccupied not only with the same intellectual problems but often even the very same books and insights everywhere from Portugal to Russia and from Ireland to Sicily."<sup>55</sup> *Radical Enlightenment* itself is primarily concerned with outlining the dissemination and influence of Spinoza's systematic philosophy. Israel focuses on the impact Spinoza's thought had on his "radical" adherents and his moderate and traditionalist detractors. *Enlightenment Contested* further examines this three-way struggle, but shifts the focus from the Dutch Republic to France, where the Radical Enlightenment overtook the moderate Enlightenment's influence. Although Jacob and Israel largely agree on the

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<sup>53</sup> Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*, Second Revised Edition, vi.

<sup>54</sup> This thought is taken from Anthony J. La Vopa's review of *Enlightenment Contested* forthcoming in *Isis*. Harvey Chisick agrees with La Vopa's view in his own forthcoming review of Israel's work in *European Legacy*. For insightful reviews of *Radical Enlightenment* see Anthony J. La Vopa and Margaret C. Jacob's separate reviews in *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (June 2003): 387-393; Stuurman, "Pathways to the Enlightenment: from Paul Hazard to Jonathan Israel;" and, J. B. Shank's review in *H-France Review*, vol. 2, no. 26 (March, 2002) <http://www.h-france.net/vol2reviews/shank.html>

<sup>55</sup> Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), v.

existence of a Radical Enlightenment, its tenets, and its geographical birth, they disagree on its foundations and the extent of its influence. Nevertheless, the broader implications of their incompatible views can be found in their refocusing of Enlightenment studies on the heretofore marginalized characters of the Enlightenment and the tension in eighteenth-century thought.

Israel dismisses Hobbes and Descartes as the progenitors of the Radical Enlightenment and points toward Spinoza as the “supreme philosophical bogeyman of Early Enlightenment Europe.”<sup>56</sup> Two specific, though lengthy quotes, will help to engage Israel at the crux of his argument. First, Israel reveals the value of Spinoza’s thought in his coherent philosophical system:

Spinoza’s prime contribution to the evolution of early modern Naturalism, fatalism, and irreligion...was his ability to integrate within a single coherent or ostensibly coherent system, the chief elements of ancient, modern, and oriental ‘atheism.’ No one else in early modern times did this, or anything comparable, and it is primarily the unity, cohesion, and compelling power of his system, his ability to connect major elements of previous ‘atheistic’ thought into an unbroken chain of reasoning, rather than the novelty or force of any of his constituent concepts which explains his centrality in the evolution of the whole Radical Enlightenment.<sup>57</sup>

The power of Spinoza’s rational system led to the diffusion and acceptance of his philosophy *in toto* by the radicals and provided not only the foundation for the Radical Enlightenment, but also a “package of basic concepts and values” that Israel neatly summarizes as the essential values of modernity:

(1) adoption of philosophical (mathematical-historical) reason as the only and exclusive criterion of what is true; (2) rejection of all supernatural agency, magic, disembodied spirits, and divine providence; (3) equality of all mankind (racial and sexual); (4) secular ‘universalism’ in ethics anchored in equality and chiefly stressing equity, justice, and charity; (5) comprehensive toleration and freedom of thought based on independent critical thinking; (6) personal liberty of lifestyle and sexual conduct between consenting adults, safeguarding the dignity and freedom of the unmarried and homosexuals; (7) freedom of expression, political criticism, and the press, in the public sphere; (8) democratic republicanism as the most legitimate form of politics. This then is the essence of ‘philosophical modernity’ and this crucial core cannot usefully be linked to any one ‘national,’ linguistic, religious, or subcultural context.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>58</sup> Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 866.

Two problems emerge from Israel's appraisal of Spinoza as the fountainhead of the Radical Enlightenment and his assertion that our modern, democratic values were enunciated by Spinoza and his radical followers. First, Israel does not distinguish between causality and similarity in asserting Spinoza's influence in a broad array of texts. He reads texts with a mindset pre-determined to find traces of Spinozism in the works of over seventy thinkers. When he cannot locate overt Spinozism, however, Israel either attaches the label "crypto-Spinozist" to a thinker in order to indicate his indirect allegiance to the Radical Enlightenment, or he categorizes a thinker as a Spinozist according to the label used by an opponent.<sup>59</sup> Second, Israel uses what Anthony La Vopa calls "package logic," or philosophical rather than historical logic. Israel's affirmed presentist stance is most evident in attributing to the Radical Enlightenment the eight cardinal points of a modern, free, and democratic society cited above. His avowed belief that Spinoza's immutable and irrefutable system "furnished the philosophical matrix...of the entire radical wing of the European Enlightenment"<sup>60</sup> is most egregious in his assumption that a thinker's adherence to one or more of the radical criteria leads inexorably to an acceptance of all eight. As La Vopa states: "That is why Israel is often so confident in attributing principles to 'radical thinkers' that their texts do not exhibit."<sup>61</sup>

The final section of *Enlightenment Contested*, "Part VI: Radical *Philosophes*," is well-grounded in historical context, though Israel's package logic becomes increasingly evident. He traces the emergence of the Radical Enlightenment in France during the

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<sup>59</sup> For example, in discussing Benoît de Maillet (1656-1738), author of *Sentimens des philosophes sur la nature de l'âme* and *Telliamed*, Israel states: "He may not have been a Spinozist in any precise sense of the term; nevertheless, he certainly counted among the large number of Early Enlightenment French *Spinosistes* as the category was used then, that is as a thinker who envisages the universe, as the Jesuit *Mémoires de Trévoux* explained in 1749...as something that creates and 'perpetuates itself' without the intervention of any external 'cause intelligente et supérieure' and wholly devoid of immaterial beings and substances." *Enlightenment Contested*, 737. In *Locke and French Materialism* (1991), John Yolton traces the implications of Locke's idea of "thinking matter" through his opponents and adherents, but does not allow denunciations to become an attribution of a particular mode of thought. Curiously, Locke was thought by many eighteenth-century opponents and followers to facilitate materialism as well as a radical political position; however, for Israel, Locke is one of the mainsprings of the Moderate Enlightenment. The implication here is that Israel builds a way out of his thesis by focusing on either the overt Spinozism of a thinker or the assumed Spinozism as determined by an oppositional group. Yolton, *Locke and French Materialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

<sup>60</sup> Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 159.

<sup>61</sup> Forthcoming review in *Isis*, 5.

Regency of Philippe d'Orléans through the controversies over La Mettrie's *L'Homme Machine* (1747), Montesquieu's *L'Esprit des lois* (1748), the initial furor over the *Encyclopédie*, and the scientific disputes triggered by Buffon's *Histoire naturelle*. Israel analyzes the role of Voltaire as arbiter between the Counter-Enlightenment and moderate Lockean-Newtonian Enlightenment to establish an *entente* between the two with which to squeeze the burgeoning Radical Enlightenment out of existence. The Moderate Enlightenment consolidated power from 1732-1745, but Voltaire himself, as the mouthpiece and celebrity of the Moderate Enlightenment, was forced to cede power to the radicals because of the intolerable outcry by the Jesuits, Sorbonne, and Parlement over the *Encyclopédie* and the de Prades affair. Thus, to summarize an intriguing chapter, "For Voltaire and Montesquieu, the anti-encyclopédistes were the very acme of unreason, intolerance, and unjust persecution. Hence, Voltaire and the providential Deist centre bloc were pushed by the logic of events and circumstances into a marriage of convenience with the radical stream, from which circumstances prevented them from ever subsequently extricating themselves on a public level."<sup>62</sup>

Despite the exciting narration of political, religious, and philosophical intrigue, and the eventual triumph of the Radical Enlightenment, Israel continues to evaluate the thought of many members of the Radical Enlightenment through what Jacob calls a "largely idealist methodology."<sup>63</sup> Throughout the sixth part of *Enlightenment Contested*, Israel narrows the package of Spinozism to metaphysical monism and hylozoism with a nod toward ethics. There is virtually no discussion of socio-political matters and all of the clandestine manuscripts of the period 1670-1730 are connected by their materialism and anti-Christian stance. This is not an untrue assertion; however, the fact that much of Part VI revolves around these concepts, as well as chapter twenty eight on "Men, Animals, Plants, and Fossils: French Hylozoic *Matérialisme* before Diderot," suggests

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<sup>62</sup> Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 857.

<sup>63</sup> Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Revised Edition, vi. In Israel's words: "Nevertheless, the major examples [of clandestine manuscripts] circulating in Paris in the 1720s and 1730s shared *most* of their ultimate aims and *are best viewed* as a single, intellectual, cultural, and political project despite their obvious divergences in style and inspiration," *Enlightenment Contested*, 734. The italics are mine and are used to indicate the high level of interpretation that Israel gives to his subject matter. As indicated by La Vopa, Israel's flat reading of texts precludes "the dense interplay of content and form, thought and representation" so integral to a thorough understanding of a text's meaning.

that the philosophical package of metaphysical, irreligious, and socio-political tenets described above may not be the case as the eighteenth century progressed. In fact, Israel himself recognizes that “The heavily preponderant tendency in the lead texts, then, is emphatically towards an atheistic materialism and determinism,” and that it is this “unifying Spinozist narrative” that allows him to draw conclusions about socio-political beliefs that may or may not be there.

Israel clumsily lumps the complex figure of Buffon into the Radical Enlightenment based upon his “systematic materialism” that was “not necessarily a monist system” and his firm anti-Voltairean, anti-Newtonian stance.<sup>64</sup> The categories that Israel has established force him to make unnecessary distinctions based upon limited criteria in order to draw out his tenuous thesis. Buffon, for instance, is a radical because he is not a moderate. Consequently, Israel uses his categories to understand the differences in Enlightenment thought, but assumes all thinkers must fall into one of the three. Whereas the first historiographical approach forced unity onto the entire Enlightenment, Israel forces unity into his three categories that are supposed to exhibit the tension in Enlightenment thought.

Where in all of this does d’Holbach fit? Neither Israel nor Jacob take up the task of analyzing d’Holbach’s works because he wrote after mid-century, the end point of their histories. However, like Jacob, Israel makes assertions about d’Holbach from which we may draw conclusions about his role in Israel’s conception of the Radical Enlightenment. Throughout *Radical Enlightenment* and *Enlightenment Contested*, Israel mentions d’Holbach twenty times. D’Holbach’s *Système de la Nature* is only quoted from twice, both times in *Radical Enlightenment*,<sup>65</sup> and d’Holbach’s name is usually

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<sup>64</sup> Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 748. For an insightful discussion of Buffon’s contribution to Enlightenment vitalism in opposition to the mechanical theories of Descartes, Newton, Leibniz, Boerhaave, and Linnaeus, see Peter Hanns Reill, *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2005). John Pappas tracks three conflicting, contemporary views of Buffon in “Buffon matérialiste? Les critiques de Berthier, Feller et les *Nouvelles ecclésiastiques*,” in *Être Matérialiste à l’âge des Lumières: Hommage offert à Roland Desné*, eds. Béatrice Fink and Gerhard Stenger, 233-250 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999).

<sup>65</sup> On page 354, Israel cites d’Holbach’s view that the “discussion of substance leaves only two alternatives: either God is Nature, as Spinoza maintains, or else the motive force of Nature, as [Noël] Aubert [de Versé] asserts.” Also, on page 521, Israel invokes d’Holbach’s opinion that Newton was an adept scientist, but immature philosopher, theologian, and politician.

mentioned in passing as either influenced by a particular thinker, the late seventeenth century in general, or as the endpoint of the Radical Enlightenment. Israel comments that “From an early stage, then, French radical thought leaned towards a hylozoic materialism which was later to culminate in Diderot and d’Holbach.”<sup>66</sup> He also cites d’Holbach as one of many “out-and-out intellectual rebels of the Radical Enlightenment” who “openly opposed tyranny, intolerance, credulity, superstition, and ecclesiastical sway...but also the moderate mainstream of Locke, Newton, and Voltaire.”<sup>67</sup> It seems that the reader is to assume that d’Holbach’s philosophy marches in step with that of the Radical Enlightenment.

Israel’s description of d’Holbach’s place in the Enlightenment and the impact of the early Radical Enlightenment on the High Enlightenment is equivalent to Jacob’s except on the point of philosophical influence. Unlike the cast of characters researched by Jacob, the “late seventeenth-century European radical trends” that influenced d’Holbach, as well as La Mettrie, Diderot, and Helvétius, were articulated by Spinoza, Bayle, Fontenelle, and a host of clandestine manuscripts.<sup>68</sup> There was virtually no break between the philosophical ferment of the late seventeenth century and the High Enlightenment. As Israel remarks, “the real influence of Locke, Newton, Clarke, Toland, and Collins on the formation of the French radical ideas was exceedingly slight.” He continues in emphatic fashion: “Grasping that this influence was very limited, moreover, is essential to a proper understanding of the basic intellectual mechanisms generating the French High Enlightenment.”<sup>69</sup> This assertion is not grounded in textual evidence and, as I will show below, *Système de la Nature* was heavily influenced by Toland and Newton. Although Israel and Jacob both create a Radical Enlightenment, endow it with certain systematic principles, and acknowledge the late seventeenth century as the intellectual crucible that produced the foundations for the eighteenth-century effusion of ideas, they differ at the most fundamental level. By defining the Enlightenment in terms of its radical ideas and inner turmoil, Jacob and Israel recast marginalized characters to starring

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<sup>66</sup> Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 742.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>68</sup> Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 518.

<sup>69</sup> Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 716.

roles; yet, d'Holbach, while recognized as a part of the story, is only accorded a momentary appearance.

In sum, the last century of Enlightenment scholarship has expanded our knowledge of the diversity of thought during the eighteenth century and widened our scope to include a long list of characters who contributed to the intellectual atmosphere of the Enlightenment. Becker, Cassirer, Gay, Wade, and Hazard contributed long-lasting theories about seventeenth and eighteenth-century thought that are still useful; yet, in seeking to unify the Enlightenment (Hazard to a lesser degree), they ignore the conflict that characterized the Enlightenment. When approaching the Enlightenment from the point of view of one of its most radical thinkers, d'Holbach, one can see clearly how distorting this approach is. More recently, Jacob and Israel have reframed the historiography of the Enlightenment in order to deal with the antagonism and incompatibility of ideas. To do this, they have approached the Enlightenment from the previously marginalized angle of radical thought. Still, d'Holbach's work goes without analysis. Though it is certainly true that d'Holbach was not the most novel or stylistic writer, nor was his work well-received among the citizens or *philosophes*, *Système de la Nature* was widely read. In the following chapter, I will briefly place *Système de la Nature* in its contemporary social context to show the reactions of a few thinkers before summarizing in depth the contents of the work itself. This will provide the necessary groundwork for the interpretive third chapter.

## **Chapter Two**

### ***Système de la Nature***

In 1771, a year after the publication of *Système de la Nature*, Abbé Bergier penned a vehement critique of d'Holbach's *magnum opus* entitled *Examen du matérialisme, ou Réfutation du Système de la nature*. Bergier packed two volumes with a repetitious, yet blistering, attack on d'Holbach's "persistent illogicalities" and transformed his "high-flying language into plain statements that could be rationally judged."<sup>70</sup> Having exposed d'Holbach's innumerable logical errors, Bergier, as a professed Catholic and Cartesian dualist, concluded by stating: "We do not hesitate to repeat the observations made at the close of our first volume, that the *Système de la nature*, far from favoring the progress of unbelief, is perhaps the decisive blow to disconcert its projects; and that the monstrous errors brought together in this work are the fairest trophies that philosophy could have raised to the glory of religion."<sup>71</sup> Bergier was convinced that d'Holbach's failure to argue soundly was enough to halt the growth of unbelief. As a pious member of the Catholic church, Abbé Bergier took seriously the threat that d'Holbach's work posed and fought d'Holbach on his own ground.

Voltaire and Melchior Grimm lamented d'Holbach's lack of style. Voltaire bemoaned d'Holbach's dry and prolix prose, and relegated his work to the valueless *genre ennuyeux*. Grimm agreed: "I find no other danger in them [d'Holbach's work] than that of boredom: all of it becomes exceedingly repetitious. The earth keeps on turning and the impact of the most daring opinions equals zero."<sup>72</sup> Voltaire was initially confounded by the furor over *Système de la Nature* and, thus, treated it glibly. He had been attempting to forge a bond between his deistic camp and the radical materialists. As the "Moderate" Enlightenment's luminary, he was unsettled by the audacity of the

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<sup>70</sup> R. R. Palmer, *Catholics and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-Century France* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1939), 217. Alan Charles Kors writes about Bergier and the ironic fact that he was often a guest at d'Holbach's home. *D'Holbach's Coterie: An Enlightenment in Paris* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), 113-117.

<sup>71</sup> Palmer, *Catholics and Unbelievers*, 217-218.

<sup>72</sup> Dupré, *The Enlightenment*, 33-34.



radicals and their unwillingness to compromise. As a consequence, d'Holbach's *Système* led Voltaire to exclaim: "Voilà une guerre civile entre les incrédules."<sup>73</sup>

Grimm, on the other hand, was a stalwart member of *la coterie holbachique* and was not the only member to disapprove of d'Holbach's *Système*. Alan Kors has shown that *la coterie holbachique* was not bound by atheism and that a spectrum of opinions pervaded the intimate conversations. Much of d'Holbach's work was forged in the company of thinkers such as Jean François Marmontel, Charles-George Le Roy, Abbé Ferdinando Galiani, Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Suard, and, most importantly, Jacques André Naigeon, and Denis Diderot. Yet, Kors substantiates Morellet's assertion in his *Mémoires* that "d'Holbach's role as an author never was discussed in the coterie and never was a matter of overt advice or concern."<sup>74</sup> D'Holbach published all of his works anonymously or pseudonymously and, though the members of the coterie suspected his hand in many translations and anti-religious texts, Kors finds that the subject of his authorship was never discussed.

Although many members of *la coterie holbachique* collaborated on different texts, there was no unified effort among all of its members, and only J. A. Naigeon and Diderot worked intimately with d'Holbach. This led to the theory propounded in H. Meister's "Article nécrologique sur d'Holbach," and "A la Mémoire de D. Diderot," and Bachaumont's *Mémoires secrets*, that Diderot not only had a hand in d'Holbach's work, but inserted his own pages and chapters into *Système de la Nature*.<sup>75</sup> Writing in 1954, Virgil W. Topazio attacked this notion on a number of chronological and anecdotal grounds. He argued that d'Holbach wrote in a specific style, with a specific form of

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<sup>73</sup> John Pappas, "Voltaire et la guerre civile philosophique," *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, vol. 61 (October-December, 1961): 545.

<sup>74</sup> Kors, *D'Holbach's Coterie*, 83.

<sup>75</sup> Virgil W. Topazio, "Diderot's Supposed Contribution of D'Holbach's Works," *PMLA*, vol. 69, No. 1 (March, 1954): 173. Ann Thomson has recently suggested that *Système de la Nature* was a collaborative enterprise in "Informal Networks," in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, vol. 1, ed. Knud Haakonsen, 121-136 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). In discussing the gatherings at d'Holbach's home, she states: "What is certain is that a hard core of members of this group...were responsible for the publication of a number of atheistic works...as well as other collective compositions such as the *Système de la Nature*" (128). Furthermore, "the works they [d'Holbach's coterie] distributed were more aggressively materialist, in particular the collective *Système de la Nature*, which relaunched the discussion on materialism in the 1770s" (132). Thomson does not substantiate her assertion that *Système de la Nature* was a "collective composition" with any evidence.

repetition and methodicalness that Diderot abhorred. Kors agrees with Topazio that Diderot “could not have aided d’Holbach stylistically on all his works” because Diderot himself labeled d’Holbach’s prose “too lengthy, flat and diffuse, and complained that it is fatiguing, it is boring, and it makes a book fall from one’s own hands.”<sup>76</sup> Moreover, Naigeon found that d’Holbach had a deep erudition independent of Diderot: “on peut dire avec autant de vérité qu’il n’y a pas un seul des hommes illustres que je viens de nommer à qui il [d’Holbach] n’ait appris [pas] beaucoup de choses utiles, & dont, sous plusieurs rapports, il n’ait aggrandi [pas] & multiplié les idées.”<sup>77</sup>

*Système de la Nature* was d’Holbach’s personal “battering ram”<sup>78</sup> whose ideas were brewed in both the social setting of *la coterie holbachique* and the longstanding tradition of radical thought extending back through Thomas Hobbes to the ancient world. In *La Religion de Voltaire* (1969), René Pomeau labeled d’Holbach’s work “la bombe du *Système de la Nature*.”<sup>79</sup> It produced as vehement and fiery a reaction from European thinkers as La Mettrie’s work. D’Holbach envisioned *Système de la nature, ou Des Lois du monde physique et du monde moral* as a large scale project that would carry the reader from the attraction/repulsion of atomic matter through the social interaction of humans. He claimed that “From whence it may be seen, that the same necessity which regulates the physical, also regulates the moral world, in which everything is in consequence submitted to fatality.”<sup>80</sup> Contrary to Cassirer’s negative appraisal of *esprit de système*, it is precisely this systematic thinking that gives d’Holbach’s work its power and appeal. It is the recognition that there are two *mondes*, both inseparable from the laws of nature, which will allow d’Holbach to create an entire system that obviates any supernatural activity and reflect a century’s worth of radical and moderate thought (as will be shown in the following chapter).

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<sup>76</sup> Kors, *D’Holbach’s Coterie*, 84-85.

<sup>77</sup> Topazio, “Diderot’s Contribution,” 186.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>79</sup> Cited in Pappas, “Voltaire et la guerre,” 544.

<sup>80</sup> Baron d’Holbach. *The System of Nature, or, Laws of the Moraland Physical World*. trans. H. D. Robinson. New York: Burt Franklin, 1970 (originally published in English, 1868), 102. I will also use the French edition in places where I find translation errors. *Système de la Nature*, ed. Josiane Boulad-Ayoub. (Paris: Librairie-Arthème-Fayard, 1990).

A quick glance at the table of contents for *Système de la Nature* reveals the structure of d'Holbach's system and reads like a list of issues that permeated seventeenth and eighteenth-century thought.<sup>81</sup> The first volume of *Système* is primarily concerned with revealing the fundamental structure of nature as matter in motion, the immutable laws of nature, and man's place in nature. D'Holbach builds the *Système* from the ground up and constructs a vision of nature before identifying man as completely affected by, or embodying, nature. From "Of Nature," "Of Motion, and its Origin," d'Holbach works his way to "Of Man: of his Distinction into Moral and Physical: of his origin," and "Of Man's true interest, or of the Ideas he forms to himself of Happiness.—Man cannot be happy without virtue." D'Holbach's intentions, however, are not merely to understand nature and man's place in it, but to construct a socio-political and moral framework from the absolute and determined laws of nature. The second volume considers the origins of poly- and mono-theism, metaphysical systems based on theology, and the socio-political errors stemming from the Christian religion. For example: "Of the confused and contradictory Ideas of Theology," "Of theism or Deism: of the System of Optimism; and of Final Causes," and "Theological Notions cannot be the basis of Morality. Comparison between Theological Morality and Natural Morality. Theology prejudicial to the Progress of the Human Mind." After constructing the world of nature and describing its effects on man's actions, d'Holbach sought to disprove the existing physico-theological views held by philosophers, clergymen, and political leaders, and examine why he could answer "yes" to the question "Is Atheism compatible with Morality?" As Wade puts it: "D'Holbach really offers the system of nature as a choice. The former systems have been in error, he says, because they have produced all sorts of ills. His system is, he thinks, more useful."<sup>82</sup> Since, as d'Holbach proclaims in the opening line of the *Système*, "The source of man's unhappiness is his ignorance of Nature,"<sup>83</sup> it is worth beginning with his conception of nature before detailing his views of man as a natural being, *le monde moral* of society and politics, and religion.

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<sup>81</sup> See Appendix I.

<sup>82</sup> Wade, *The Structure and Form of the French Enlightenment*, vol. II, 306.

<sup>83</sup> d'Holbach, *The System of Nature*, viii. Further quotes from *System* in this chapter will be parenthetically documented by the page number.

## NATURE

Nature is not merely the visible world. It is “that vast assemblage of everything that exists...an uninterrupted succession of causes and effects” (15). Nature “is the assemblage of all the beings, and consequently, of all the motion of which we have a knowledge, as well as of many others of which we know nothing because they have not yet become accessible to our senses” (16). Nature, thus, commands epistemological modesty. “The idea of Nature [not only] necessarily includes that of motion,” (19) but is, in fact, coeval with the invariable laws of motion. Nature is the sum of all parts in which “each being is an individual, who, in the great family, executes the necessary task assigned to him” (32). Nature does not operate teleologically, but “is an active, living whole, whose parts necessarily concur, and that without their own knowledge, to maintain activity, life, and existence. Nature acts and exists necessarily: all that she contains necessarily conspires to perpetuate her active existence” (33). The laws of nature are constant and fixed; everything is determined. Therefore, nature is morally neutral. Nature is “entirely destitute of goodness or malice, [following] only necessary and immutable laws;” (13) nevertheless, it is in nature that man finds virtue, happiness, and emancipation from tyranny. Nature rewards those who adhere to her decrees and exacts “the most cruel infirmities” (335) on those who disobey her. All told, nature is both a mechanical and deterministic system, as well as an active, pulsating, organic whole that is infinite in scope.<sup>84</sup>

D’Holbach essentially substitutes *Natura, sive Natura* for Spinoza’s Latin epigram equating God with nature, *Deus, sive Natura*. Nature is its own cause. It is synonymous with, and operates through, matter in motion. Nature is one long chain of cause and effect produced by the incessant motion of matter. D’Holbach describes motion as “an effect by which a body either changes, or has a tendency to change its position: that is to say, by which it successively corresponds with different parts of space,

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<sup>84</sup> Despite his proclamation that statements such as “Nature produces such or such an effect” or “Nature demands that man should pursue his own happiness” do not indicate an “intention of personifying that nature, which is purely an abstract being,” d’Holbach’s language and grammar betray his sentiments and are an egregious form of what Becker termed denaturing god and deifying nature. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*, 63

or changes its relative distance to other bodies” (16). He disclaims the notion of *spontaneous motion* because the movement of one particle starts a chain reaction that is virtually unending. Motion is either *simple* or *compound*, single or multiple, and can be imperceptible. D’Holbach resurrects the term *nisus* to illustrate “the incessant efforts one body is making on another, but which, notwithstanding, appear, to our superficial observation, to enjoy the most perfect repose” (18).<sup>85</sup> Matter is active, inherently motive, and propelled by the gravitational forces of attraction and repulsion.<sup>86</sup> Nature is self-contained, acting through the invariable laws of motion which combine, separate, and recombine matter to form life in the universe.

D’Holbach summarizes his metaphysics as such: “that matter always existed; that it moves by virtue of its essence [existence]; that all the phenomena of Nature is ascribable to the diversified motion of the variety of matter she contains; and which, like the phenix [sic], is continually regenerating out of her own ashes” (23). The diversified motion of the variety of matter explains the multiplicity of life. Matter is heterogeneous, and, though matter of the same essence is combined by the law of attraction to form substantive bodies, no two individuals of the same species are exactly alike. D’Holbach defines *essence* as the particular, individual nature of a being, and as “that which constitutes a being such as it is; the whole of the properties, or qualities, by which it acts as it does” (16). All matter shares the properties of extent, divisibility, impenetrability, figure, and mobility and from which comes density, color, and ponderosity. Matter is also disposed to six modes of action: attraction, repulsion, sympathy, antipathy, affinity, and relations (29). As a result of the properties, qualities, and modes of action of matter, for example, solids “receive into their composition a great number of homogenous, similar, and analogous particles, disposed to unite themselves,” (29) water and oil do not

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<sup>85</sup> The *Oxford Latin Dictionary* defines *nisus* in three ways: 1) The action of resting one’s weight on the ground, planting one’s steps, or sim. 2) A strong muscular effort, act of straining. b-pressure (of natural forces, etc.). c-(in general) an endeavour, striving. 3) The action of pressing forwards, advance (in the face of obstacles, etc.). b-(of things) a tendency, thrust (in a certain direction). *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. P. G. W. Hare (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1180.

<sup>86</sup> D’Holbach will use Newton’s theory of gravity to depict inherent motion in matter and expose the insufficiency of attributing motion to an external cause: “Natural philosophers, and Newton himself, have considered the cause of gravitation to be inexplicable; yet it appears that it may be deduced from the motion of matter by which bodies are diversely determined” (20).

combine, and fire possesses the peculiar ability to communicate heat and light. The unifying principle, again, is matter and motion; therefore, “as soon as we know the general laws of beings, and their action, we have only to decompose and to analyze them, in order to discover those of which they are combined” (29). D’Holbach, thus, levels the Great Chain of Being. Man no longer exists on an hierarchical pole between the angels and animal kingdom, but on an horizontal plane of increasing organization.<sup>87</sup> Since nature is not teleological and only operates through the laws of motion, according to d’Holbach, “we see an uninterrupted progression, a perpetual chain of motion and combination, from which is produced beings, that only differ from each other by the variety of their elementary matter: and by numerous combinations of these elements spring modes of action and existence, diversified to infinity” (27).

Any attempt to label d’Holbach’s conception of nature pantheistic, mechanistic, materialistic, or naturalistic is equivalent to saying that it is all or none. The mechanical and invariable laws of motion are inherent in an organic and invigorated nature that is solely responsible (in a reductionist, not personified, way) for the diversity of life. The three orders of nature—mineral, vegetable, and animal—are simply different combinations of matter that operate in a manner determined by their particular essences. They are forged from the four elements, or mixed bodies—fire, air, water, and earth—which themselves act differently according to their material condition:

Elementary fire appears to be in nature the principle of activity...Earth appears to be the principle of solidity in bodies...Water is a medium, to facilitate the combination of bodies, into which it enters itself as a constituent part. Air is a fluid...to furnish the other elements with the space requisite to exercise their motion, and which is, moreover, found proper to combine with them (23).

The uninterrupted circle of life and death begins with intrinsically motive particles of matter forming into the four elements, which constantly coalesce and separate to form the three orders of nature. The constitution of aggregate masses is never stable because

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<sup>87</sup> The Great Chain of Being is succinctly summarized by Diana Donald: “The creation, with all its astonishing variety of living forms, was imagined as an ordered sequence which descended from God and His angels through man—placed at the point of junction of the spiritual and material worlds—to the animal kingdom, and finally to vegetables, minerals and, beyond these again, to nothingness.” “Introduction: Conceptions of Order in the Eighteenth Century—Their Scope and Their Frailties” in *Ordering the World in the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Diana Donald and Frank O’Gorman, 1-23 (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 4.

matter itself is always in motion, but may be prolonged or shortened according to the maintenance of the interior of bodies or the ever-changing material environment. Thus, d'Holbach's system is predicated on a necessary chain of cause and effect that is purely material and accessible to a reasonable mind. *Chance* is an empty term. *Order* and *confusion* in the universe, contrary to their supernatural implications, are relative terms connoting stasis and change respectively. In a body, "order is the chain of action, the series of motion proper to constitute it what it is, and to maintain it in its actual state. Order, relatively to the whole of nature, is the concatenation of causes and effects necessary to her active existence, and to the maintaining her eternally together" (34). Again, d'Holbach's nature *is* mechanical because predictable and perfunctory. Yet, it is not "that we are *only* a sort of machine, *only* marionettes moved by the hand of a blind power," as Frederick the Great found in his criticism of *Système de la Nature*.<sup>88</sup> Man and nature are charged with vital qualities as well.

### **Man as Nature**

In d'Holbach's one-substance world, man can be nothing more than an aggregation of matter. He is purely physical, "connected to universal nature, and submitted to the necessary and immutable laws that she imposes on all the beings she contains, according to their peculiar essence or to the respective properties with which, without consulting them, she endows each particular species" (88). Thus, man embodies nature; he is a microcosm to her macrocosm and his actions may only be known by first understanding nature. Although man has a peculiar essence, his moral world arises from his physiological constitution, which links both to the physical laws of nature:

It is nature that elaborates, that combines the elements of which he must be composed.—It is nature that gives him his being, his tendency, his peculiar mode of action.—It is nature that develops him, expands him, strengthens him, and preserves him for a season...It is nature, that in his journey through life, strews on the road those objects, those events, those adventures, that modify him in a variety of ways, and give him impulses which are sometimes agreeable and beneficial, at others prejudicial and disagreeable...It is nature, who, when he has finished his career, conducts him to undergo the constant, the universal law, from the operation of which nothing is exempted (41-42).

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<sup>88</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, 71. Italics mine.

Man's debt to nature is endless. His life is circumscribed by the environment in which nature has placed him, the matter with which she has formed him, and the sensibility with which he registers the external world.

Since man only differs from plants, minerals, and other animals by his unique, material organization, d'Holbach concludes that the capacity to feel, to interpret sense data and be moved by it, is a product of the organization of matter.<sup>89</sup> D'Holbach describes the faculty of feeling as "a particular manner of being moved peculiar to certain organs of animated bodies, occasioned by the presence of a material object that acts upon these organs, and which transmits the impulse or shock to the brain" (53). The ability to sense is part of man's essence and analogous to the properties of gravity, magnetism, and electricity found in other bodies of nature. Consequently, d'Holbach bases an epistemological and psychological system on sense experience.<sup>90</sup> "In fact," d'Holbach comments, "it is never but through our senses that beings are known to us, or produce ideas in us, it is only as a result of movements imprinted on our body, that our brain is altered or our soul thinks, wills, & acts."<sup>91</sup> D'Holbach exalts *a posteriori* demonstrations over *a priori* reasoning to solidify the singular importance and existence of nature and her laws, and in order to invalidate the claims of dualists to have access to an immaterial, transcendent, or innate knowledge. The focus remains on matter and motion; those to which the senses owe their impulsion. The epistemological value of experience and sense data is paramount and universal, but is only operative according to the material body itself. The five senses are not isolated receptors of sensual data. They are part of a vast internal network of solids and fluids, fibers and organs that report to a centralized

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<sup>89</sup> In contrast to those who believe sensibility, like motion, is inherent in matter (54).

<sup>90</sup> D'Holbach follows in the tradition of the oft-cited Latin phrase, attributed to Aristotle, *Nihil est in intellectu quod prius non fuerit in sensu* (Nothing in the intellect which is not first in the senses). Quote from Yolton, *Locke and French Materialism*, 105.

<sup>91</sup> Quoted in John C. O'Neal, *The Authority of Experience: Sensationist Theory in the French Enlightenment* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 199. D'Holbach seldomly uses the term "soul," but when he does, it is to demonstrate the soul's materiality or to connote the power of feeling throughout the body. For instance: "Let us then be contented to know that the soul moves itself, modifies itself, in consequence of material causes...[from whence we may conclude] that all its operations, all its faculties, prove that it is itself *material*" (59). Furthermore, as Thomas Hankins states: "In essence, [the materialists] distributed the soul throughout matter in order to get rid of it." *Science and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 127.



location: the brain. The physiological constitution of man determines his ability to receive and digest sense data and, when combined with the environment and circumstances of an individual, creates a dualistic picture of interior and exterior phenomena that decide man's fate.

*Système de la Nature* is founded on the physiology of the body and is replete with the medical terminology of the eighteenth century.<sup>92</sup> Exterior sense data is received through the senses and carried from the spot of reception, through the nerves, to the brain. The nerves are dispersed throughout the body, but coalesce in "that intestine [which] is the true seat of feeling" (54).<sup>93</sup> The nervous system communicates all sensations to the brain, which sends a message back through the nerves communicating movement and action. D'Holbach defines sensation as "the shock given to the organs," perception as "the shock propagated to the brain," and an idea as "the image of the object to which the sensation and perception is to be ascribed" (56). Therefore, if the senses are not moved, there can be neither sensations, perceptions, nor ideas. Moreover, the mental faculties—thought, reflection, memory, imagination, judgment, will, action—are "modes of existence, or determinate manners of acting which result from the peculiar organization of the body" (53) and are only activated by sensory impulsion. D'Holbach finds thought to be a cerebral activity in which the brain perceives modifications from sense data and reflection is the faculty "of considering the changes which take place in [the brain]...[and] the power to fall back upon itself" (57). Memory, imagination, and judgment are equally cerebral and mechanical activities in which the brain renews, combines, and compares the modifications that it has received. D'Holbach establishes a material chain of cause and effect within the body based on the proper functioning of the brain and the nerves.

Although the nervous system allows the body to communicate within itself, it can only function as well as its organs. The solids (organs), fluids, blood, fibres, nerves, and bones must maintain a certain delicacy, texture, and balance to preserve man, but also to

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<sup>92</sup> D'Holbach recognized natural philosophers, anatomists, and physicians as the true progenitors of knowledge and felt that they should be the ones to teach moralists, legislators, and sovereigns (52).

<sup>93</sup> D'Holbach uses the analogy of a spider suspended in his web to illustrate the role of the brain and nerves. This analogy is well-known to contemporary historians through Diderot's *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* written, though not published, a year before *Système de la nature*.

receive and transmit information. An imbalance of water, for instance, “enervates him, relaxes the fibres, and impedes the necessary action of the other elements” (25). The human body is “so complicated a machine...in which all the parts are contiguous to the brain” (55) that mind/body interconnectivity is self-evident in d’Holbach’s monism. Any dysfunction in the body’s interior affects the brain. This is also true of “The very nourishment he takes, the quality of the air he respire, the climate he inhabits, the education he receives, the ideas that are presented to him, [and] the opinions he imbibes...” (61). The two-way traffic of external and internal stimuli form each individual’s temperament and capacity for intellectual function.

D’Holbach defines temperament as “the habitual state in which [each individual] finds the fluids and the solids of which his body is composed” (61). He maintains the Hippocratic and Galenic terminology of man’s temperament as sanguine, bilious, phlegmatic, and choleric. Again, the temperaments and passions of man are based on the balance of fluids. The passions are a consequence of one’s temperament and depend on the “motion of attraction and repulsion of which [an individual] is rendered susceptible by nature” (72). Man’s temperament is “the result of a combination, in which the elements or principles are balanced with such precision, that no one passion predominates over another, or carries into his machine more disorder than its neighbor” (75). Fundamentally, each individual possesses a different physiological constitution, which creates a diversified social and moral world. The ability to receive sense data, transmit it to the brain, process it, and communicate it back to the body is contingent on the quality of man’s internal and external organs. Yet, environmental conditions and individual circumstances play an equally important role in the development of man’s morality and social interaction.

### **Morality, Society, and Politics<sup>94</sup>**

In d’Holbach’s full title, *Système de la Nature, ou Des Lois du monde physique et du monde moral*, the system of nature is not only equated with the physical laws of nature,

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<sup>94</sup> D’Holbach writes at length on these topics in *Système social, ou Principes naturels de la Morale & de la Politique avec un Examen de l’Influence du Gouvernement sur les Moeurs* (1773), *Politique naturelle, ou Discours sur les vrais principes du gouvernement* (1773), and *La Morale universelle, ou Les Devoirs de l’homme fondés sur sa nature* (1776).

but with a set of moral laws as well. D'Holbach does not envision an abstract or epiphenomenal system of ethics or morality that exists external to nature or inherently as a mental faculty in man. Morality is as physical as the laws of gravitation, though conditioned by the individuality of organization. "The moral man," d'Holbach writes, "is nothing more than this physical being considered under a certain point of view...[and] with relation to some of his modes of action, arising out of his particular organization" (11). Although no two beings are constructed exactly alike, man is impelled in all of his actions toward happiness and the preservation of his being. According to d'Holbach's conception of matter and motion, "to exist, is to experience the motion peculiar to a determinate essence: to preserve this existence, is to give and receive that motion from which results the maintenance of its existence:--it is to attract matter suitable to corroborate its being,--to avoid that by which it may be either endangered or enfeebled" (30). D'Holbach uses the Newtonian term *self-gravitation*, as opposed to self-love, to refer to man's tendency to preserve his being. Concurrently, *attraction* and *repulsion* are responsible for motivating organized beings toward their happiness and preservation.

D'Holbach's morality is based on the pleasure/pain principle or, the invariable law of motion "that a sensible body must naturally seek pleasure and avoid pain" (17). The impulses of repulsion and attraction propel man away from pain and toward pleasure. In the same way that natural philosophers use the terms attraction and repulsion to describe the forces inherent in matter, d'Holbach defines *interest* as "the object to which each individual, according to his temperament and his own peculiar ideas, attaches his welfare," (141) and is, therefore, necessarily propelled. To d'Holbach, an innate moral instinct or moral sentiment is insensible and unintelligible. Man's physiological and environmental complexities have produced these deceptive ideas of man's moral capacity. Instinct, for example, "is only the effect of some want of the body, the consequence of some attraction, or some repulsion, in man or animals" (81).<sup>95</sup> Instinct equals interest and

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<sup>95</sup> Habit is also confused with man's nature. D'Holbach describes habit as a mode of existence in "which [man's] organs, as well interior as exterior, contract by the frequent reiteration of the same motion, from when results the faculty of performing these actions with promptitude and facility" (67). The physical and moral aspects of habit can be explained experientially with no recourse to spirituality or innate moral faculties.

interest, “or the desire of happiness, is the only real motive of all his actions; this interest depends upon his natural organization, his wants, his acquired ideas, the habits he has contracted” (141). Experience is as responsible for each individual’s morality as his material organization. Consequently, morality, “is nothing more than the science of the relations between beings living together in society” (308). “Morals is a science of facts” (80) and would be a vain science “if it did not incontestably prove to man that *his interest consists in being virtuous*” (142).

The variety of moralities founded upon the diversity of individual organizations suggests a physiological inequality among men. D’Holbach builds society and social interaction upon the principle that “If all men were equal in their bodily powers, in their mental talents, they would not have any occasion for each other” (60). Natural inequality is the support that mankind needs to form a society in which all individuals are necessary to each other. For this reason, d’Holbach constructs a system of morality that evaluates and judges actions according to their usefulness to society. D’Holbach defines virtue as “every thing that is truly and constantly useful to the individuals of the human race living together in society” and vice as “every thing that is injurious to them” (66). Thus, man’s true interest in being virtuous is to “occupy his actions with the welfare of his fellows, and by their utility, merit their esteem, their kindness, and their assistance” (143). D’Holbach constructs a normative principle (man’s interest *should* consist in being virtuous) on the basis of a multitude of natural, individual moralities that must be made to conform to society’s interests overall. However, insidious politicians, deceptive priests, and the power of habit, custom, and tradition have combined to separate man from his natural morality.<sup>96</sup> D’Holbach emphasizes the role of education and a proper political structure to show mankind the natural principles of morality, social interaction, and virtue.

D’Holbach’s concentration on physiological organization as a determining principle in man’s life is modified by the social environment in which an individual finds himself. He is born into a family and a climate not of his choosing and it is his parents, predominantly, that mold him to be virtuous or wicked. D’Holbach defines *education* as

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<sup>96</sup> D’Holbach states: “It is thus that religious and political errors [sic] have changed the fair face of nature into a valley of tears” (156).

the “art of making man contract early in life, that is to say, when his organs are extremely flexible, the habits, the opinions, and the modes of existence adopted by the society in which he is placed” (68). Consistent with d’Holbach’s sensationalist epistemology, “Man is wicked, not because he is born so, but because he is rendered so” (132). In order to build a virtuous society, man must be educated by reason and the dictates of experience so that habit will solidify his virtuous disposition. Although parents have the most important role throughout the course of a child’s education, society bears a large portion of responsibility. The experiential data—laws, habits, public opinion—fed into the human machine reflects the behavior that is approved or disapproved in society. Remorse, for instance, is a sentiment created by experience. It can only be activated in a society which proves “that the wicked man is odious to all those upon whom his actions have any influence...[because] it is ever the judgment of his fellow man that man is obliged necessarily to regard” (108-109). In d’Holbach’s opinion, an unjust society is one that punishes a man “to whom it has neither given an education, nor honest principles; whom it has not enabled to contract habits necessary to the maintenance of society” (106).

Equally important as education and the influence of society is politics. D’Holbach does not espouse a clear position on the form of government that he preferred, but defined *politics* largely as “the art of regulating the passions of man, and of directing them to the welfare of society” (69).<sup>97</sup> All governments are created to preserve the welfare of society and, depending on the form of government a society allows, should conform to the natural interests of man. Society is an aggregate of families and individuals “assembled from a reciprocity of interest in order that they may satisfy with greater facility their reciprocal wants” (69). Members of society must choose representatives to interpret the general will, from which we get *laws*. Laws ensure equitable access to *liberty*, *property*, and *security*, “those advantages for which man originally associated” (70) as well as the assurance of a meritocratic society. *Rights*, as d’Holbach states, “are every thing which society, by equitable laws, permits each

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<sup>97</sup> Both Leonard Krieger and Everett C. Ladd, Jr. capture d’Holbach’s political position well. See Krieger, *An Essay on the Theory of Enlightened Despotism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 69 and Ladd, “Helvétius and D’Holbach: ‘La moralisation de la politique,’” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 23, No. 2 (April, 1962): 227.

individual to do for his own peculiar felicity,” though limited by the effects on society and other individuals (70). D’Holbach also advocates a system of checks and balances and a division of powers to prevent the abuse of power concentrated in the hands of one ruler. Therefore, all men, including the sovereign, are subject to the laws, which “experience has shown capable of restraining or annihilating the impulse passions give to man’s will” (104). D’Holbach specifically says “impulse” because he feels that passions are essential when concomitant with the good of society. Passions and desires are natural in man and those recalcitrant individuals whose constitutions are incorrigible would be excluded from society. Whether socially disordered or under the rule of a tyrannical leader, “The body politic,” like the body of man, “when in a state of insanity, cannot act more consistently with reason than one of its members whose brain is disturbed by madness” (108).

D’Holbach invests a substantial amount in his idealization of society and politics because they can and should be based on the firmest of foundations, nature. For him, the exterior sense data that man receives is as important as the interior organs and temperament given to him by nature. Thus, a society is only as virtuous and honorable as its members and its leaders. To continue the metaphor of the body politic,

In a well constituted society, the government, the laws, education, example, would all conspire to prove to the citizen that the nation of which he forms a part is a whole that cannot be happy, that cannot subsist without virtue; experience would, at each step, convince him that the welfare of its parts can only result from that of the whole body (143).

If this were the case, if an enlightened government and rational citizenry founded their laws and interaction on the nature of man, then there would be no need for spiritual fictions or supernatural falsehoods to regulate man’s actions.

### **Religion**

The second volume of *Système de la Nature* is devoted entirely to religion, theological systems, and the ubiquity of religious morality in Western civilization. D’Holbach constructs his discussion of religion on the edifice of nature expounded in the first volume. For d’Holbach, there is no immaterial soul, no afterlife, no divine right of kings, no innate moral sense, and no free will. Our world is no more than matter in

motion from which we understand the physical interaction of matter through sense data impressed upon us. An immaterial god is absurd because “a substance destitute of extent or of the properties of matter cannot make itself felt by us, nor consequently give us perceptions or ideas” (223). Moreover, theologians who insist that “their God, who is not matter, penetrates that which is matter” (214) only conflate god and matter, thus, creating an unnecessary, immaterial substance devoid of sense. This is d’Holbach’s primary criticism of Samuel Clarke, Descartes, Malebranche, and Newton.<sup>98</sup> One cannot conceive of a perfect, spiritual being without a subject represented to our senses. D’Holbach also uncovers the language of Spinozism in the works of Descartes and Malebranche. Both philosophers find nature and god to be coequal. Descartes declares that god is “a power which applies itself successively to the parts of the universe” and Malebranche asserts that “the universe is only an emanation from God; that we see every thing in God; that every thing which we see is only God” (226). As a consequence, d’Holbach reduces the metaphysical systems of Descartes and Malebranche to monist materialism and accuses theologians of fashioning an unintelligible god from the characteristics of nature.

In order to understand the origins of man’s conception of god and the way in which priests have utilized religion to subjugate mankind, d’Holbach rationally reconstructs an historical age of pre-civilized man and traces the development of religion to his own era. Ignorance of natural laws and fear of natural disasters produced the first notion of a god or gods. It was psychological weakness that led man to endeavor “by prostration, by sacrifices, by prayers, to disarm the anger of these imaginary beings to which his trepidation had given birth” (167). D’Holbach is noticeably sympathetic to those who created gods out of the elements of nature. Although the creation and worship of gods is illusory under any format, d’Holbach respects the emphasis on material beings and suggests that it is only those in civilized societies with excessive leisure time who have created, disputed, and harnessed themselves to a being of their own imagination.

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<sup>98</sup> D’Holbach is particularly harsh on Newton, referring to him as “a slave to the prejudices of his fancy...[and as] no more than an infant, when he quits physics and demonstrations, to lose himself in the imaginary regions of theology” (227). To d’Holbach, Newton’s god is the quintessential despotic, eternal, and unnecessary god.

D'Holbach recurs to the ancients in order to find a worldview concomitant with his own perception of nature and her laws. Much like Edward Gibbon, who commemorated the death of ancient civilization and described the unfortunate "triumph of barbarism and religion" in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*,<sup>99</sup> d'Holbach idolizes antiquity and looks favorably on "those famous sages, those legislators, those priests, those conquerors, who were the instructors of infant nations, [who] adored active nature, or the great whole considered relatively to its different operations or qualities" (178).

Monotheist interpretations of the world supplanted polytheism and the personification of nature found in antiquity. This transition was carried out by metaphysicians and theologians who separated nature from her peculiar energies, labeled "God" the mover of nature, and, thus, offered an immaterial, spiritual being in place of the empirically verifiable qualities of nature. God quickly became anthropomorphized. Priests and theologians invested god with the qualities of man, which, according to d'Holbach, can only be material; hence, an inherent contradiction in the features of god.<sup>100</sup> Nevertheless, god was qualified as omnipotent, omniscient, wise, and just. A world of rebellious angels and demons was created to account for evil, a story of pre/post-lapsarian man was manufactured to account for sin and grace, and an afterlife and free will were constructed to exonerate god from responsibility and accountability for man's actions. Priests and theologians enshrouded god in mystery and set themselves up as interpreters of his will. They colluded with sovereigns and invested princes with the power of divine right. This power corrupted leaders and, together, priests and princes tyrannized and exploited mankind. "The most religious sovereign," d'Holbach writes, "...believed it to be a sacred duty to tyrannise [sic] over thought, to overwhelm and to crush the enemies of his priests, whom he always believed to be the enemies of his own authority" (270). Priests imbued kings with legitimation, but secured their own position vis-à-vis political power through the weight of public opinion, which they could wield

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<sup>99</sup> Becker, *Heavenly City*, 118.

<sup>100</sup> D'Holbach suggests that no two humans have the same conception of god: "Each man makes to himself a God in particular, after his own peculiar temperament, his natural dispositions, his imagination, more or less exalted, his individual circumstances, the prejudices he has received, and the mode in which he is affected at different times" (246).



against the sovereign in turbulent times. Thus, d'Holbach attributes man's separation from nature, his deplorable socio-moral condition, and unfounded faith in an abstract being as a ruse perpetrated by priests and implemented by princes.

Unlike Voltaire and Samuel Clarke, d'Holbach does not believe that society benefits from a belief in god. The duplicity of priests and sovereigns, as well as the contradictory and idiosyncratic ideas people hold of their deity, renders religion an unsuitable foundation for society. Theological notions are contrary to sound morals and sound politics because "they change sovereigns into mischievous, restless, and jealous Divinities; they make of subjects envious and wicked slaves, who by the assistance of some futile ceremonies...imagine themselves amply compensated for the evil which they commit against each other" (272).<sup>101</sup> Atheists especially have been demonized for centuries by those duped by priests and by those whose power rests on a docile and believing public. D'Holbach rehabilitates the atheist as a "man who destroys chimeras prejudicial to the human species, in order to reconduct men back to nature, to experience, and to reason" (300). The atheist is a "disciple of nature" and, unlike the Christian, it is the atheist who is truly pious. D'Holbach finds a lack of piety in those who "deceive men, in the name of a God, whom we make use of as a pretext for our unworthy passions" and redirects the label "pious" toward the atheist who serves his country, is useful to his fellow-creatures, religiously observes the laws of nature, and who is "humane, equitable, and benevolent" (302). Essentially, d'Holbach reduces the tenets of religion to a set of secular principals that seeks to achieve the same treatment of men as religion itself proclaims. The atheist and the zealot act from the same basic, natural motivations. D'Holbach's conception of an atheist as a disciple of nature neither renders morality baseless nor promotes profligacy. "Whether there exists a God, or whether he exists not," d'Holbach states, "our duties will be the same; and our nature, if consulted, will prove, *that vice is an evil, and that virtue is a real and substantial good*" (310). Unlike

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<sup>101</sup> D'Holbach finds consolation in the words of Francis Bacon: "Atheism leaves a man to sense, to philosophy, to natural piety, to laws, to reputation; all which may be guides to an outward moral virtue, though religion were not; but superstition dismounts all these, and erecteth an absolute monarchy in the minds of men." Francis Bacon, "Of Superstition," (1625) in *Selected Writings of Francis Bacon*, intro. Hugh G. Dick (New York: Random House, Inc., 1955), 47. D'Holbach, *The System of Nature*, 309, 311.

superstition, which “furnishes its disciples with a thousand pretexts for committing evil without remorse,” (311) atheism does not produce any new vices in man.

D’Holbach combines the rhetorical strategy of redefining the terms of his enemies with a strategy resembling the Socratic method. In order to expose the irrationality of belief, the contradictory views of god held by men, and to implicate mankind in the perpetuation of religious systems, d’Holbach often uses a series of rhetorical questions to expand on specific points. For instance, in discussing the absurdity of prayer, d’Holbach asks: “In this case, can we suppose that a God so wise, so just, so intelligent, will change his plan for us?...Will our vain cries and the most fervent supplications, prevent our country from being unhappy when it shall be devastated by an ambitious conqueror, or governed by tyrants who oppress it?” (249). D’Holbach also questions the utility of belief in a contradictory god: “Were it not better to depend on destiny or on fatality, than on an intelligence so irrational as to punish his creatures for the little intelligence and understanding which he has been pleased to give them?” (263). Finally, in a passage reminiscent of Hume,<sup>102</sup> d’Holbach poses these questions: “God, or the necessary being, of which question is here made, does he not find obstacles to the execution of his projects? Is he willing that evil should be committed, or can he not prevent it?...[can God] avoid to will that which he willeth, and not do that which he doeth?” (215-216). *Système de la Nature* is replete with this rhetorical strategy. Having put forward his system of nature, d’Holbach uses this strategy to lead the reader to a more logical foundation that does not require belief or faith. Religious belief is the ultimate opponent of d’Holbach and the “disciples of nature,” but by putting forward a logical, empirical, and material system, d’Holbach hoped to eventually replace spiritualism with naturalism in all aspects of man’s existence.

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In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the true author of *Système de la Nature* was still not well-known. William Hazlitt, in his 1805 work *An Essay on the Principles*

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<sup>102</sup> In *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Philo asks: “Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?” David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and the Posthumous Essays*, ed. and intro. Richard Popkin (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), 63.

of *Human Action*, unaccountably attributed the text to Mirabeau.<sup>103</sup> Much like Goethe, d'Holbach's work prompted a negative reaction in Hazlitt. Inspired to disprove d'Holbach's system, Hazlitt eschewed the "selfish and mechanical picture of the mind" and pursued a philosophy of "disinterestedness" that equated self-love with disinterested benevolence.<sup>104</sup> By 1815, however, d'Holbach was recognized as the author of *Système de la Nature* by Benjamin Constant in *Principles of Politics Applicable to all Representative Governments*. Constant's reaction is worth quoting at length:

I have often found myself stricken by sadness and astonishment while reading the famous *System of Nature*. That lengthy frenzy of an old man to close off any future before him; that inexplicable thirst for destruction, that blind and almost cruel hatred for a gentle and consoling idea, seemed to me a bizarre delirium. But I could always understand it by recalling the dangers by which authority had surrounded that writer. In all ages the reflections of irreligious men have been harassed: they have never had the time or the liberty to consider at leisure their own opinion. It has always been for them a property of which men wished to rob them. They thought less of going deeper into it than of justifying or defending it. Only leave them in peace. They will be astonished at their own victory. The agitation of the struggle, the anxiety to reconquer, the right of inquiry, all these causes of exaltation, will no longer sustain them. Their imagination, thus far preoccupied with success, will return idle and deserted upon itself... Who does not feel that, had not incredulity encountered intolerance, the discouragements of this system would have acted upon the souls of its supporters, and kept them at least in apathy and silence.<sup>105</sup>

Constant excuses d'Holbach's delirious ravings because the author of *Système de la Nature* wrote under the most intolerable and oppressive circumstances. Although arguing for two different points, Constant and Abbé Bergier agree that d'Holbach's work is awful. Whereas Abbé Bergier sees *Système de la Nature* as a threat to religion, Constant points to d'Holbach's work as an egregious example of the kind of literature produced in a

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<sup>103</sup> D'Holbach appropriated the pseudonym of his recently deceased friend Jean Baptiste de Mirabaud (1675-1760) for the title page of *Système de la nature*. Yet, Mirabeau and Mirabaud were two different people.

<sup>104</sup> William Hazlitt, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action and Some Remarks on the Systems of Hartley and Helvétius* (1805), intro. John R. Nabholz (Gainesville, Florida: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1969), vii, 133-134.

<sup>105</sup> Benjamin Constant, *Principles of Politics Applicable to all Representative Governments* in *Constant: Political Writings*, trans. and ed. Biancamaria Fontana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 280-281. Constant's labeling of d'Holbach an "old man" seems to have derived from d'Holbach's own statement in the Preface to *Système de la Nature*: "In conclusion:--Warned by old age and weak limbs that death is fast approaching, the author protests most solemnly that, in his labours, his sole object has been to promote the happiness of his fellow creatures" (x). D'Holbach did not die until 1789, so it seems that this statement may have been a deceit that corresponded to his anonymity.

socio-political environment of enforced religious homogeneity and no freedom of the press in order to advocate religious liberty during the tumultuous Napoleonic era.

D'Holbach understood that his work would not be appreciated in his lifetime, or quickly thereafter, and explicitly stated that the philosopher should write for posterity: "The man who writes, must neither fix his eyes upon the time in which he lives...He must speak to the human species...[and] if he has told truth, the ages that shall follow will render justice to his efforts" (325). Habit, custom, education, temperament, and physiological organization all conspire to halt the immediate implementation of new ideas. D'Holbach, in a mocking tone, places into the mouth of a religious devotee what he saw as a standard reaction to his system: "Do not deprive me of my charming phantom; I shall not find my illusions so sweet in a severe and rigid necessity, in a blind and inanimate matter, in a nature destitute of intelligence and feeling" (251). Indeed, this was the reaction of many who denounced *Système de la Nature* as materialistic, fatalistic, and purely self-interested.

*Système de la Nature* was, in fact, all of these things. Throughout the course of the work, d'Holbach labels his system interchangeably materialism, naturalism, fatalism, pantheism, and atheism. In opposition to "the doctrine of the spirituality of the soul [which] has rendered morals a conjectural science," d'Holbach asserts that "morals and politics would be equally enabled to draw from *materialism* advantages which the dogma of spirituality can never supply" (61-62). D'Holbach laments that "the principles of *naturalism* will be adopted only by a small number of thinkers" (326) because of the power held by the religious tradition. Moreover, d'Holbach dedicates two chapters to fatalism and one chapter to pantheism.<sup>106</sup> According to d'Holbach, "*Fatality*, is the

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<sup>106</sup> Chapter XI (Of the System of Man's Free Agency) and Chapter XII (An Examination of the Opinion which pretends that the System of Fatalism is Dangerous) of Volume I and Chapter IV (Of Pantheism, or of the Natural Ideas of Divinity) of Volume two are dedicated to fatalism and pantheism. Pantheism is a tricky concept in *Système de la Nature*. D'Holbach only uses the term once, which is in the title of the chapter itself, and understands it broadly as the pre-Christian belief that God and nature were one as indicated on page nineteen above. On page two-hundred thirty-seven, d'Holbach states: "Such was, as we have seen, that Jupiter, who was originally designed to represent in the theology of the ancients the ethereal matter which penetrates, give activity, and vivifies all the bodies of which nature is the assemblage." See Miguel Benítez, "Un atelier immense sans artisan intérieur? Le panthéisme dans Le *Système de la Nature*," and Alan Charles Kors, "Les Résonances des débats du XVII siècle dans la pensée

eternal, the immutable, the necessary order, established in nature; or the indispensable connexion [sic] of causes that act with the effects they operate” (102). To d’Holbach, fatalism is not only the logical answer to the question of free will, as an extension of his materialism and naturalism, but represents the interconnectivity of man to man and man to nature. Man has no control over the particles that make up his body, the environment in which he is born, or the fact that he operates under the same physical laws of nature as other animate and inanimate matter. D’Holbach bases his ethical and social principles on this doctrine of fatalism. Once man understands that he acts in a determined manner regardless of a supererogatory god, he will then see that “A rational education, honest habits, wise systems, equitable laws, rewards uprightly distributed, [and] punishments justly inflicted, will render man virtuous” (104). Therefore, the plethora of “-isms” that many contemporary detractors used to denigrate the work of radicals throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries becomes indistinguishable in d’Holbach’s *Système de la Nature*.

As we will see, there was not one single influence on *Système de la Nature*. D’Holbach culled from a wide variety of sources, including John Toland and Isaac Newton, and *Système de la Nature* itself represents a totalizing system built upon what d’Holbach saw as one fundamental axiom. D’Holbach used an array of scientific examples to fortify his system, but also argued for his system by undercutting his opposition.

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du baron d’Holbach,” in *Matérialistes français du XVIIIe siècle: La Mettrie, Helvétius, d’Holbach*, ed. Yves Charles Zarka, 269-306 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2006).

### **Chapter Three**

#### **(Re) Constructing *Système de la Nature***

The concept of influence is premised on the idea that A, the earlier author, “influences” B, the later one. It makes A appear as the active agent and B as the passive recipient. In real history, however, it is the other way around: A is gone and B is doing something, namely writing a text using arguments, concepts, and vocabularies from a variety of previous texts, one of these being A’s.

Siep Stuurman<sup>107</sup>

Attempting to track influence and inspiration in historical texts is a dizzying enterprise that often leads to presentism, anachronism, or historical error. The historian can be easily seduced into tracing influence at the level of abstraction, assuming that a thinker participates in a synoptic discussion of unit ideas, as A. O. Lovejoy emphasized and Jonathan Israel has displayed, or that an author’s intention and heritage is easily discernible because of the intellectual resemblances between his/her ideas and those of another. In order to properly reconstruct the intellectual lineage and strands of thought that informed the thought of an historical figure, it is not only necessary to understand the author himself, his goal in writing, and his intended use of other thinkers’ writings, but also the channels by which he became aware of the thought that he used. Of course, historians are now well aware of the pitfalls of drawing influence from the mere appearance of a certain author’s work in the library of another and the often false assumption that the interpretation of an author’s work was unequivocal and universal; yet, determining influence is still an attractive and productive task.

With that said, I hope to avoid these ahistorical consequences in sketching out some of the influences on d’Holbach’s *Système de la Nature* and the particular strategies he used to construct his system. I prefer to think less in terms of influence and more in terms of the way d’Holbach used the thought of others. D’Holbach cited thinkers such as John Toland, Baruch Spinoza, and Isaac Newton within his work, thus giving us some

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<sup>107</sup> Siep Stuurman, “The Canon of the History of Political Thought: Its Critique and a Proposed Alternative,” *History and Theory*, vol. 39, no. 2 (May, 2000): 160. The methodological position of this chapter was not originally inspired by Stuurman’s words, but has certainly benefited from them.

guidelines, but he combines different aspects of their ideas in ways that they may not have intended in order to formulate a new perspective. In places where he does not make his attributions obvious, it will be necessary to use what we know about his previous work to uncover a more complex story in *Système de la Nature*. Through this examination, I will show that the radical thought of the High Enlightenment is not reducible to the Radical Enlightenment, as Jonathan Israel would have it, nor is it solely a product of Newtonian methodology as Cassirer and others have suggested.<sup>108</sup>

D'Holbach does not shy away from naming his adversaries and noting his allies. In two separate chapters, he discusses Samuel Clarke's proofs of the existence of God and engages the theology of Descartes, Malebranche, and Newton. D'Holbach's primary objective is to reveal the deep fissures that split the adherents of the Christian religion, demonstrate "that theology, in supposing a God who gives motion to nature...has done no more than multiply beings, or rather has only personified the principle of mobility inherent in matter,"<sup>109</sup> and to show that the systems of Descartes, Malebranche, and Newton are essentially materialist or Spinozist. We see the names of Pierre Bayle, Lord Shaftesbury, Bernard Mandeville, Joseph Needham, George Berkeley, John Locke, Baron de Montesquieu and a plethora of ancient philosophers and writers in *Système de la Nature*. D'Holbach also alludes to the work of Gottfried Leibniz, Julien Offray de la Mettrie, Adam Smith, Georges-Louis Buffon, Thomas Willis, G. E. Stahl, Hermann Boerhaave, and Albrecht von Haller. This list is not exhaustive, but indicates d'Holbach's extensive knowledge of recent scientific developments, the history of philosophy, and major writers of the eighteenth century. Moreover, although every citation and allusion does not necessitate a lengthy exposition, it is important to ponder d'Holbach's intention in engaging with the thoughts or particular ideas of the thinkers invoked in *Système de la Nature*.

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<sup>108</sup> For example, Isaiah Berlin states: "If the model that dominated the seventeenth century was mathematical, it is the mechanical model, more particularly that of the Newtonian system, that is everywhere imitated in the century that followed." *The Age of the Enlightenment: The Eighteenth Century Philosophers* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1957), 14.

<sup>109</sup> D'Holbach, *The System of Nature*, 224.

Uncovering the influences on d'Holbach has been a fundamental method of writing d'Holbach's history. In 1942, Pierre Naville wrote *D'Holbach et la philosophie scientifique au XVIII siècle*, in which he provided an in depth biography of d'Holbach and an examination of his major works. Naville titled the second part of his work "Matrices" and sought to identify both the larger intellectual landscape in which d'Holbach worked and the more incisive influences on d'Holbach's *oeuvre*. He concluded that there were five fundamental *matrices*: la littérature matérialiste clandestine du début du XVIII siècle; Offray de la Mettrie; Boulanger; les chimistes et mineralogists Allemands; and la philosophie Anglaise. Naville's treatment of d'Holbach is thorough and insightful, though we will need to broaden his portrayal of the influences on d'Holbach to the ways in which d'Holbach interacted with some thinkers and used certain argumentative strategies.

Both Virgil W. Topazio and W. H. Wickwar treat d'Holbach as a product of the English deists, whose work he had translated, and find that he was not necessarily an original thinker. Topazio limits his analysis to d'Holbach's moral philosophy (though it is nearly impossible to understand any of d'Holbach's thought in a less than holistic manner) and finds that "he propounded a clearly defined secular ethic that represented a logical progression from the natural religion which the English and French deists of the seventeenth century had substituted for revealed religion."<sup>110</sup> Wickwar investigates d'Holbach's life and the breadth of his philosophy to paint a more inclusive portrait of d'Holbach's work. D'Holbach was not the first atheist to consider the universe as a materialistic and mechanistic system nor was he the first to view nature as "a welter of material bodies for ever in movement." In fact, "he added little but the enthusiasm of a prophet and a convert and the naïf arguments of an eighteenth-century chemist who believed that earth, air, fire, and water were material elements, that nerves were electric fluid, and that fermentation—according to recent microscopical observations by a British Jesuit [Joseph Needham]—was a chemical process by which inanimate matter blossomed

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<sup>110</sup> Virgil W. Topazio, *D'Holbach's Moral Philosophy: its background and development* (Geneve: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1956), 9.



into life.”<sup>111</sup> Both Topazio and Wickwar produced insightful studies on d’Holbach, but tended to assume influence simply by the resemblance of ideas.<sup>112</sup>

Contrary to the approach taken by Topazio, Wickwar, and Naville, I will not rewrite the intellectual history of the eighteenth century in order to understand *Système de la Nature*, but vice versa. D’Holbach was obviously a product of Hobbes, Locke, Spinoza, Newton, La Mettrie, Diderot, and many others, but the more fascinating story is how d’Holbach used their ideas and the thinkers themselves. D’Holbach created a system at a time when *esprit de système* was not only condemned, but equated with theological metaphysics. In what follows, I will briefly place d’Holbach within the eighteenth-century discussion over abstract systems and identify the two major approaches that he takes to construct his system. First, d’Holbach co-opts ideas from Toland, Newton, Stahl, Rouelle, Needham, and Hobbes to build a foundation. D’Holbach acknowledges in many places the origins of these ideas, but he refashions them to suit his own purpose. Second, d’Holbach argues for his system by separating Newton the natural philosopher from the Newton of Newtonianism. He dissects Samuel Clarke’s proofs of the existence of God to further highlight the true Newton from the physico-theological system set up in his name. Throughout *Système de la Nature*, d’Holbach also capitalizes on the popularity of the ancients in order to show how Christianity separated man from nature and set up an immaterial, anthropomorphic being as sovereign of the universe. He points toward Spinoza’s philosophy as equivalent to the pantheistic conception of nature conceived by the ancients in order to show the inconsistency of Christian metaphysics. I will focus on the manner in which d’Holbach credits other thinkers, but also extrapolate in a few places from d’Holbach’s intellectual development. Since this is the background for *Système de la Nature*, I will begin here.

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<sup>111</sup> W. H. Wickwar, *Baron d’Holbach: A Prelude to the French Revolution* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1935), 148.

<sup>112</sup> For instance, after listing a few of Hobbes’ opinions, Topazio states: “These are all evident in the philosophy of d’Holbach and play an important part in the formation of his moral code. The number of Hobbes’ works in d’Holbach’s library would indicate a direct influence.” (33). Topazio may not be wrong, but the certainty with which he expounds this view assumes a linear causality from Hobbes to d’Holbach.

## Intellectual Development

D'Holbach's education and intellectual development is well-known, but is key to understanding *Système de la Nature*. Pierre Naville provides a lengthy description of d'Holbach's life and Alan Kors' *D'Holbach's Coterie* offers an extensive analysis of the intellectual companionship in which d'Holbach surrounded himself.<sup>113</sup> Therefore, I will limit myself to a few comments on d'Holbach's education, participation in the *Encyclopédie*, and literary career before the publication of *Système de la Nature*.

D'Holbach studied at the University of Leyden where the Chevalier Jaucourt, La Mettrie, Albrecht von Haller, and many others were educated. It was here that he formed friendships with three Englishmen: the poet Akenside, from whom he would later translate *Plaisirs de l'Imagination*; the politician William Dowdeswell; and his life-long friend John Wilkes. Leyden was not only "l'Université la plus avancée et la plus libre de l'Europe,"<sup>114</sup> but was also internationally renowned for the medical and chemical legacies left by Hermann Boerhaave and François Sylvius de la Boë. At Leyden, d'Holbach gained an appreciation for the ancient Greek and Roman writers and was influenced, according to Naville, by the liberal doctrines of the young Englishmen. Naville suggests that the experience of being in Holland during the War of Austrian Succession hastened "singulièrement l'évolution morale et intellectuelle du jeune étudiant" and, upon arriving in Paris, "L'Université de Leyde n'avait pas fait de lui qu'un esprit libre, mais aussi un esprit instruit, et bien instruit."<sup>115</sup>

Throughout the 1750s and 1760s, d'Holbach was a prolific contributor to the *Encyclopédie* and translated numerous German metallurgical, chemical, and mineralogical works to French.<sup>116</sup> D'Holbach wrote approximately four hundred entries

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<sup>113</sup> Aram Vartanian offers a succinct and instructive article on d'Holbach in the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*, 468-469, ed. Charles Coulston Gillispie (New York: Scribner, 1981).

<sup>114</sup> Pierre Naville, *D'Holbach and la philosophie scientifique au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Édition Gallimard, 1967, nouvelle édition revue et augmentée from 1942), 29. Much of Naville's section titled "Études à Leyde. Premières amitiés anglaises" (28-29) is taken from Wickwar's *Baron d'Holbach*, 18-19.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 30, 34.

<sup>116</sup> For d'Holbach's contribution to the *Encyclopédie*, see John Lough, *Essays on the Encyclopédie of Diderot and D'Alembert* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 111-230. Rhoda Rappaport, "Baron d'Holbach's campaign for German (and Swedish) Science," *Studies on Voltaire & the Eighteenth Century*, 323 (1994): 225-246. Max Pearson Cushing provides a brief summary of d'Holbach's translation of German texts in *Baron d'Holbach: A Study of Eighteenth Century Radicalism in France*

of varying length for the *Encyclopédie* earning him the gratitude of the editors who noted how much they owed “to a person whose native language is German and who is deeply versed in questions of mineralogy, metallurgy, and physics...but he has insisted that his name shall remain unknown: this it is that prevents our acquainting the public with the name of this philosopher-citizen who cultivates science with disinterestedness.”<sup>117</sup> D’Holbach wrote extensive articles on fossils, glaciers, the sea, mountains, stones, strata, earthquakes, volcanoes, mines, metallurgy, and even thirty articles on the constitution of the Holy Roman Empire. During this time he translated scientific works from G. E. Stahl, J. F. Henckel, C. E. Gellert, J. G. Wallerius, J. C. Orschall, and J. G. Lehmann (an alternative to Buffon’s natural history). As a consequence of his labors, d’Holbach was made a member of the Academies of Berlin, Petersburg, and Mannheim. Naville sees in d’Holbach’s work for the *Encyclopédie* and his active life as a translator a burgeoning view of the world as a chemical machine. “D’Holbach, curieux de chimie, de métallurgie, de géologie,” notes Naville, “c’est déjà d’Holbach philosophe, critique du dogme Chrétien, et meme moraliste. De la traduction de Henkel, de Gellert ou de Lehmann au *Système de la Nature*, la continuité est parfaite.”<sup>118</sup>

Perhaps the most important motivations for *Système de la Nature* came from his work editing, publishing, and transcribing some clandestine manuscripts as well as his reading and translating of English thinkers.<sup>119</sup> From 1761-1770, d’Holbach published his own irreligious works under various pseudonyms of dead Frenchmen, brought out the extant work of Nicolas Antoine Boulanger, *Recherches sur l’origine du despotisme oriental* and *L’antiquité dévoilée*, and, with the assistance of his close friend J. A. Naigeon, edited copies of the infamous clandestine manuscripts *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*, *Examen critique des apologists de la religion chrétienne*, and *Le Militaire*

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(Phd., Diss., Columbia University, 1914), 26-30. As does Pierre Naville, *D’Holbach and la philosophie scientifique*, 76, 185-201.

<sup>117</sup> Quoted in Wickwar, *Baron d’Holbach*, 47. D’Holbach would maintain anonymity in all of his writings, but certainly not the level of disinterestedness praised here.

<sup>118</sup> Naville, *D’Holbach and la philosophie scientifique*, 185.

<sup>119</sup> See J. Lough, “Essai de Bibliographie Critique des Publications du Baron d’Holbach,” *Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France*, xlv (1939): 215-234.

*philosophe*.<sup>120</sup> To *Le Militaire philosophe*, d'Holbach added a final section arguing that "toute religion factice est contraire à la morale ou lui est totalement inutile."<sup>121</sup> More important to the construction of *Système de la Nature* were d'Holbach's translations of various English writers. After an unimpressive trip to England in 1765, d'Holbach "ramena dans ses malles [l'influence inofficielle de la philosophie anglaise], c'était le vieux Hobbes, c'était Toland, c'étaient Collins, Woolston, Tindall, Trenchard, et, last but not least, David Hume."<sup>122</sup> D'Holbach translated at least one work from each of these thinkers. The two most salient were Toland's *Letters to Serena* (1704) and Hobbes' *Human Nature* from *The Elements of Law* (1640?), but he also translated two of Hume's essays, "Of the Immortality of the Soul" and "Of Suicide," which were only published posthumously in 1777.<sup>123</sup> Hobbes and Toland provided d'Holbach with the tools for a more demonstrable argument against the Christian worldview as well as a systematic structure.<sup>124</sup>

D'Holbach drew from a wealth of sources to build *Système de la Nature* as both an unassailable, scientifically-grounded system and a rhetorically-powerful argument. The sampling of his intellectual development serves to indicate the extent of d'Holbach's education. He would call upon this immense erudition to add weight and authority to many of his claims, while writing with a furious and frenetic motivation to substitute his

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<sup>120</sup> The *Lettre* is generally attributed to Nicolas Fréret before his death in 1749 and the original author of *Le Militaire philosophe* is unknown. Both works were published for the first time by d'Holbach and Naigeon in 1765 and 1767 respectively. For a detailed discussion of the two manuscripts' content and history see Ira O. Wade, *The Clandestine Organization and Diffusion of Philosophic Ideas in France from 1700-1750* (New York: Octagon Books, Inc, 1967, reprinted from the original 1938 edition by Princeton University Press) and Olivier Bloch, ed., *Le Matérialisme du XVIII Siècle et la Littérature Clandestine* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1982).

<sup>121</sup> Wickwar, *Baron d'Holbach*, 241; Wade, *The Clandestine Organization and Diffusion*, 45.

<sup>122</sup> Naville, *D'Holbach et la philosophie scientifique*, 204. Topazio, *D'Holbach's Moral Philosophy*, 21

<sup>123</sup> *Letters to Serena* was published as *Lettres philosophiques* in 1768 and Hobbes' work was published as *De la Nature humaine* in 1772.

<sup>124</sup> In France, Hobbes' work was known primarily through secondary sources and his thought seemed to have taken on the quality of an "-ism" before d'Holbach's translation. Leland Thielemann has suggested that Diderot's knowledge of Hobbes and the material for his article "Hobbisme" (1765) in the *Encyclopédie* derived from Johann Jacob Brucker's biography of and representative extracts from Hobbes in his *Historia critica philosophiae*. Thielemann, "Diderot and Hobbes," *Diderot Studies II*, eds. Otis E. Fellows and Norman L. Torrey, 221-277 (Syracuse, N. Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1952).

own philosophical and moral system for what he considered an oppressive, hypocritical, and illusory tradition.

### ***Système de la Nature* as a system**

Ernst Cassirer viewed the Enlightenment as a transformative enterprise armed with *l'esprit systématique* to combat *l'esprit de système*. "The true nature of Enlightenment thinking," Cassirer argues, "cannot be seen in its purest and clearest form where it is formulated into particular doctrines, axioms, and theorems; but rather where it is in process, where it is doubting and seeking, tearing down and building up."<sup>125</sup> D'Holbach's dogmatic mode of thinking signified to Cassirer a closed system of metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical proofs derived *a priori*. Cassirer is not incorrect in his assessment, but *Système de la Nature* was by no means limited to *l'esprit de système*.

Although d'Alembert originated the distinction so fundamental to Cassirer's work, Condillac formulated an intense argument against *a priori* and abstract systems in *A Treatise on Systems* (1749). A few of Condillac's statements will furnish a view of this work:

- 1) "...we fall into error merely because we reason about principles whose ideas we have not clearly distinguished."
- 2) "Thus, the first misuse of systems, which is the source of many others, is that we believe we are acquiring true knowledge when our thoughts only involve words with no definite meaning;"
- 3) "The only proper scientific principles are established facts."<sup>126</sup>

Condillac opposed metaphysical systems constructed with vague terminology or unscientific data, but he did not oppose the construction of a system. The metaphysicians rendered their own systems useless through imprecision and abstraction so that the only possible system is scientific.

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<sup>125</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, ix.

<sup>126</sup> Abbé de Condillac, *A Treatise on Systems*, in *Philosophical Writings of Etienne Bonnot, Abbé de Condillac*, trans. Franklin Philip with Harlan Lane (London and Hillsdale, N. J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1982), 122, 12, and 3. Condillac begins his treatise with this definition: "A system is nothing other than the arrangement of different parts of an art or science in an order in which they all lend each other support and in which the last ones are explained by the first ones. Parts that explain other parts are called principles, and the fewer principles a system has the more perfect it is. It is even desirable to reduce all principles to a single one." See also Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*.

D'Holbach assembled *Système de la Nature* with this distinction in mind. Throughout his work, d'Holbach uses the term “metaphysician” interchangeably with “theologian.” “It is to no purpose,” d'Holbach comments, “that the greatest metaphysicians have exhausted all their efforts to prove that God existed, to reconcile his incompatible attributes, or to reply to the most simple objections.”<sup>127</sup> D'Holbach, like Diderot, d'Alembert,<sup>128</sup> and Condillac, saw no value in the abstract systems purporting to deduce the universe and God from abstract principles, but he did find value in a system that begins with demonstrable principles. In fact, this is the major theme of *Système de la Nature*. The inherent motion of matter is his fundamental principle on which rests the principles of the forces of attraction/repulsion, physical and moral gravity, and self-interest. He spends a large amount of time demonstrating how the Christian worldview merely affixes an inconceivable and immaterial being to an otherwise natural system. D'Holbach understands his system as founded upon verifiable facts, does not claim to answer the question of first causes, and leaves room for the discovery of new phenomena as Condillac proposed. As a consequence, he provides multiple examples from chemistry and Needham's experiments to instantiate, and thus reinforce, his fundamental principle and asks: “Are we not justified, then, in concluding from these examples, that there may be an infinity of other combinations, with which we are unacquainted...?”<sup>129</sup>

According to Georges Leroux, d'Holbach followed the prescription laid out by Condillac in *A Treatise on Systems*, but in his understanding of a system (inspired by Hobbes' work, as shown below), and his desire to sweep Christianity out of existence, d'Holbach unwittingly exceeded the limits of Condillac's method and the epistemology of the *Encyclopédie*.<sup>130</sup> Condillac never intended for his work to provide the foundation for a system of nature; d'Holbach did. Condillac's view of an acceptable system was not only restricted to a specific field like medicine or chemistry, but would always remain

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<sup>127</sup> d'Holbach, *The System of Nature*, 210.

<sup>128</sup> For Diderot and d'Alembert's uncertain position on our ability to formulate systems of nature or human cognition, see David Adams, “The *Système figuré des connaissances humaines* and the Structure of Knowledge in the *Encyclopédie*,” in *Ordering the World in the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Diana Donald and Frank O'Gorman, 190-215 (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>130</sup> Georges Leroux, “Systèmes métaphysiques et système de la nature. De Condillac à d'Holbach,” *Corpus, revue de philosophie*, 22/23 (1992).

partial. D'Holbach's claim to have found the spring of movement and life was an all-encompassing argument that exploded Condillac's limited conception of a system. Even with the knowledge of Condillac's position, D'Holbach proceeded to construct a system of nature based upon what he viewed as verifiable, replicable, and empirical facts. His monism and materialism required a general system that did not separate the moral from the physical, yet, in Leroux's words, "La conceptualisation d'un système général appartient donc tout autant à la philosophie de la nature de d'Holbach qu'aux présupposés et axiomes de la métaphysique qu'il veut évincer."<sup>131</sup>

Because he abstracted from the inherent motion of matter to the self-gravitation of man, D'Holbach's system was much closer to the metaphysicians that he despised than to the kind of system advocated by his fellow philosophes. He weaved an argumentative strategy into *Système de la Nature* to support his facts and to add a layer of logical consistency to bind the two together. This venture into metaphysical argumentation and extrapolation from specific scientific experiments appeared to many to be the kind of retrogressive work of the theologians. Nevertheless, d'Holbach wrote *Système de la Nature* to demonstrate how a natural system, one based on scientific principles approved by Condillac and activated by Newton, could answer the questions of the theologians and account for a social morality. In this way, *Système de la Nature* was as much a polemic as it was a system.

### **Constructing *Système de la Nature* from Ideas**

The first substantive footnote in *Système de la Nature* is an acknowledgement of Toland's philosophical achievement of showing the inherent motion of matter and serves as the basis of d'Holbach's physical and moral system. In the fourth and fifth sections of *Letters to Serena*,<sup>132</sup> Toland engaged Spinoza's monist philosophy and blasted the thinker for not demonstrating that motion is inherent in matter. Toland recognized Spinoza's contribution that the universe is made of one eternal, extended, and thinking

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>132</sup> Chapter four: "To a Gentleman in Holland, showing Spinoza's System of Philosophy to be without any Principle or Foundation;" and, Chapter five, "Motion essential to Matter; in Answer to some Remarks by a noble Friend on the Confutation of Spinoza."

substance and that this substance is one continuous being, but concluded that Spinoza's system was both groundless and non-experiential because he did not recognize a "Being to give [matter] Motion, to continue or to preserve it, if it has none of its own. He builds on all the common Notions about local Motion, without ever showing any Cause of it."<sup>133</sup> Fundamentally, Spinoza does not assert a primary cause with which to set matter in motion. Toland does: "I hold then that *Motion is essential to Matter*, that is to say, as inseparable from its Nature as Impenetrability or Extension, and that it ought to make a part of its Definition."<sup>134</sup> Since motion is inherent in matter, matter is eternally active and never at rest. There is no void and the events of the universe are one long chain of cause and effect. Moreover, Toland distinguishes between "Action," as the principle of motion (*Vis motrix*), and "all the particular or local Motions of Matter [as] the several Determinations of its general Action [or *Vis impressa*]."<sup>135</sup>

In the second chapter of *Système de la Nature*, "Du mouvement et de son origine," d'Holbach puts forth an explanation of motion as essential to the universe and matter as incapable of rest. The statements preceding his citation of Toland are worth quoting at length.

Every thing in the universe is in motion; the essence of matter is to act: if we consider its parts attentively, we shall discover that not a particle enjoys absolute repose. Those which appear to us to be without motion, are, in fact, only in relative or apparent rest; they experience such an imperceptible motion, and expose it so little on their surfaces, that we cannot perceive the changes they undergo.<sup>136</sup>

The footnote states: "This truth, which is still denied by many metaphysicians, has been conclusively established by the celebrated Toland, in a work which appeared in the beginning of the eighteenth century, entitled *Letters to Serena*."<sup>137</sup> At least three

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<sup>133</sup> John Toland, *Letters to Serena*, intro. Günter Gawlick. Faksimile-Neudruck der Ausgabe London 1704 (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Fromman Verlag, 1964), 139.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 158-159. See also, Stephen H. Daniel, *John Toland: His Methods, Manners, and Mind* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1984), chapter vii.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>136</sup> d'Holbach, *The System of Nature*, 18. The translator mistranslated the second phrase from "L'essence de la Nature est d'agir," pg. 51. The error is essentially inconsequential since we will see that the key word is *act* (d'agir).

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 18. According to Pierre Lurbe, the footnote itself was written by Naigeon "en forme d'hommage à Toland," with d'Holbach's approval. Lurbe, "Matière, Nature, Mouvement chez d'Holbach et Toland," *Dix-Huitième Siècle*, n° 24 (1992), 54. In what appears to be a dig at d'Holbach's



different “truths” present themselves in the block-quoted text above, so there is some uncertainty as to whether Toland is credited as having established all three or only one. Certainly, d’Holbach relied on Toland’s reasoning regarding the demonstration that our eyes may betray us in perceiving matter at rest and it is plausible that Toland settled the question in d’Holbach’s head of the inherent motion of matter; however, it seems that d’Holbach intended different qualities for matter beyond mere motion. He baldly states that “L’essence de la Nature est *d’agir*,” not simply to move. D’Holbach identified the importance of Toland’s remarks on the principle of inherent motion, but looked elsewhere for a principle that would serve to legitimate the aggregation of matter. This he would find in Newton. Before uncovering the role of Newtonian thought in *Système de la Nature*, however, d’Holbach’s confrontation with Toland’s text requires further explication.

Although d’Holbach was not totally dependent on Toland, the imprint of *Letters to Serena* is all over *Système de la Nature*. Both agree that motion is an inherent quality of matter and is responsible for the construction of bodies, sensory data, and our reception of this data. They also share a cosmology equivalent to Spinoza’s *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata*, a view of the universe as a plenum, extensive beliefs on the baneful effects of Christianity, and the opinion that “NO Parts of Matter are ty’d [sic] to any one Figure or Form, losing and changing their Figures and Forms continually.”<sup>138</sup> Moreover, there is a similarity in argumentative style as well. D’Holbach and Toland both appeal to experience as a scientific and common sense principle and experience as assisted by reason. Their examples are constructed from physical objects that recall the Newtonian treatment of the motion of bodies. For instance, in discussing the apparent rest of matter, Toland and d’Holbach use the example of a descending body:

A body that descends by Gravity or the stronger Impulse of other Bodys, as its own Impulse is stronger than the Determinations that yield to it on the way, is no less in Action that it is resisted from advancing further by the yet stronger Resistance of the Earth...<sup>139</sup>

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unsatisfactory translation, since Naigeon recorded his thoughts on this matter, Naigeon concludes his footnote: “...ceux qui entendent cette langue pourront le consulter en cas qu’il leur restât encore quelques doutes là-dessus.” See Kors, *D’Holbach’s Coterie*, 85-86.

<sup>138</sup> Toland, *Letters to Serena*, 189.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

And d'Holbach, invoking the term *nusus* as

the incessant efforts one body is making on another, but which, notwithstanding, appear, to our superficial observation, to enjoy the most perfect repose. A stone of five hundred weight seems at rest on the earth, nevertheless, it never ceases for an instant to press with force upon the earth, which resists or repulses it in its turn.<sup>140</sup>

The continuity of physical principles and experiential examples lends some credibility to the arguments of a Radical Enlightenment advanced by Jacob and Israel, but d'Holbach has to augment Toland's views in order to form a coherent foundation for his physical and moral system.

In an interesting comparison of the two thinkers, Pierre Lurbe takes as his task “préciser les limites de l'influence de Toland sur d'Holbach, et de mesurer ainsi l'écart qui sépare deux formes de matérialisme qui, pour être proches, n'en sont pas moins distinctes.”<sup>141</sup> Lurbe rightly points to their different conceptions of matter; d'Holbach views matter as heterogeneous and Toland as homogenous, which is a consequence of d'Holbach's view of nature as an abstract being and Toland's view of material bodies as the abstract beings. Therefore, according to Lurbe, “Faite d'individus, de corps divers, de matèreries varies, [for d'Holbach] la nature n'a aucune existence en soi; elle n'est que la somme, toute abstrait, des parties qui la composent. Or Toland avait un point de vue inverse.”<sup>142</sup> We may push Lurbe's point even further. D'Holbach is notorious for a lack of consistency and rigor in his terminology, especially with *matières* as Lurbe notes; however, “l'équivalence des deux termes [nature and matter] est bien posée dans le *Système de la Nature*.”<sup>143</sup> Thus, in our troubling statement above, “L'essence de la nature est d'agir,” where Lurbe highlights “nature” in order to show that “La référence à la matière, prise en un sens general, est plus rare dans le texte que la référence à la nature, meme si elle y figure bel et bien,”<sup>144</sup> we want to highlight “d'agir.” The English

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<sup>140</sup> d'Holbach, *The System of Nature*, 18.

<sup>141</sup> Lurbe, “Matière, Nature, Mouvement,” 54.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

translation, “the essence of matter is to act,” may not be true to the letter of d’Holbach’s text, but is true to the spirit.

This brings us back to Toland. It could be conceived that d’Holbach’s intention in using “d’agir” instead of “mouvoir” was a nod toward Toland’s use of the term “Action” as the general principle of motion inherent in matter; yet, it seems that d’Holbach’s use of “d’agir” represents his attribution to matter of multiple properties and forces. As we saw in the previous chapter, d’Holbach believed that matter possessed not only inherent motion, but also the powers of attraction and repulsion. These properties allowed him to explain the aggregation of bodies. Toland, on the other hand, cannot account for the creation of bodies. His principle of “Action” justifies monist materialism and solves the problem of a vacuum, but does not provide an adequate explanation for the organization of matter.<sup>145</sup> For this, d’Holbach will appeal to the ideas and the image of Newton.

In the preface to his mighty *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687), Newton wrote:

If only we could derive the other phenomena of nature from mechanical principles by the same kind of reasoning! For many things lead me to have a suspicion that all phenomena may depend on certain forces by which the particles of bodies, by causes not yet known, either are impelled toward one another and cohere in regular figures, or are repelled from one another and recede.<sup>146</sup>

Newton shifted the conception of mechanical philosophy from the investigation of the size and shape of corpuscles to forces inherent in and around matter. The concerns over the occult qualities and materialistic implications of Newton’s theory of gravity are well-

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<sup>145</sup> In his commentary on Toland’s cosmology, Stephen Daniel does not, and probably cannot, identify the organizing principle: “The universe could be understood either as the infinity of individuals realizable because of the essential action of matter or as the totality of individuals actually realized due to physical (local) motion...The universe can be considered either as an expression of action (i.e. as comprising the infinity of realizable individuals) or as the result of local motions of bodies (i.e. as comprising the totality of realized individuals).” *John Toland*, 207.

<sup>146</sup> Isaac Newton, *The Principia: Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, trans. I. Bernhard Cohen and Anne Whitman, Preceded by “A Guide to Newton’s *Principia*” by I. Bernhard Cohen (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1999), 382-383. For Newton’s attempt to eschew materialistic implications of his work, see Margaret C. Jacob, “John Toland and the Newtonian Ideology,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 32 (1969): 307-331; and, Howard Stein, “Newton’s Metaphysics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Newton*, eds. I. Bernhard Cohen and George E. Smith, 256-307 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

known; Toland, and even more so d'Holbach, instantiate the second concern. Although both thinkers viewed gravity as “not simply a law which governs the movement of bodies, [but as expressions of] the inherent motion of all bodies,”<sup>147</sup> Toland’s inability to account for the aggregation of matter is evident in the statement following his own quotation of Newton’s preface cited above: “What those particular Forces and Figures may be, with their Reasons and Degrees, none in the world is so well able to discover and reduce into an intelligible System, as the most excellent Author [Newton].”<sup>148</sup> D’Holbach attempted to do just that.

D’Holbach emphatically dismisses the natural philosophers, and Newton himself, who considered the cause of gravitation to be inexplicable. Gravity “may be deduced from the motion of matter by which bodies are diversely determined. Gravitation is only a mode of moving—a tendency towards a centre.”<sup>149</sup> Although d’Holbach is not explicit about the operative function of gravity, his analysis generally follows Newton’s “Proposition 7, Theorem 7” from Book III of the *Principia*: “Gravity exists in all bodies universally and is proportional to the quantity of matter in each.”<sup>150</sup> D’Holbach’s interpretation of gravity not only shatters the Aristotelian and Scholastic concept of a perfect celestial sphere, but also opposes the Newtonian view of inert matter actuated by a Divine push. D’Holbach supplements the Cartesian idea of a plenum and matter in motion with Newton’s theory of gravity and centripetal force to construct a view of the cosmos that followed logically from the work of his predecessors. In order to fill that cosmos with bodies, he capitalized on Newton’s model of attraction and repulsion (he also used chemical theories as well, which will be demonstrated below).

D’Holbach’s determinism is based on his notion that matter is not only inherently motive, but contains certain properties as well. The forces of attraction and repulsion that Newton was not prepared to assert became a scientific and analogical link between the physical and moral world. D’Holbach praises Descartes for suggesting that he could form the universe with only matter and motion, but sees in Newton the culmination of an

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<sup>147</sup> Jacob, “John Toland and the Newtonian Ideology,” 320.

<sup>148</sup> Toland, *Letters to Serena*, 234.

<sup>149</sup> d’Holbach, *The System of Nature*, 20.

<sup>150</sup> Newton, *Principia*, 810.

ancient principle: “This system of attraction and repulsion is very ancient, although it required a Newton to develop it.”<sup>151</sup> D’Holbach pivots *Système de la Nature* on the following theory: “It is thus, from the reciprocity of their attraction, that the primitive, imperceptible particles of matter which constitute bodies, become perceptible, and form compound substances, aggregate masses, by the union of similar and analogous matter, whose essences fit them to cohere.”<sup>152</sup> Matter is heterogeneous and the different combinations, proportions, and densities affect motion and action. From the various modifications and combinations of matter “result all physical and moral bodies; the properties and qualities of which are essentially different, with modes of action more or less complex.”<sup>153</sup> The modes of action—attraction, repulsion, sympathy, antipathy, affinities, relations—are found at every level of matter. Man, being one of the most complexly organized beings, experiences the same modes of action, though termed love, hatred, friendship, and aversion.

As indicated in the previous chapter, man is physically and analogically linked to the principles of matter. Not only does he experience the same modes of action as matter, but, as an organized material being, is subject to the material laws of gravity. According to universal and invariable laws, “heavy bodies fall, light bodies rise; analogous substances attract each other; beings tend to conserve themselves; man cherishes himself; loves that which he thinks advantageous, detests that which he has an idea may prove unfavourable [sic] to him.”<sup>154</sup> Not just man, but the tendency of all beings and matter is toward what moralists call “self-love” (*amour de soi*), what Newton called “inert force,” (*force d’inertie*) and what natural philosophers call “self-gravitation” (*gravitation sur soi*).<sup>155</sup> As matter is pulled inexorably toward a central point, so man is inherently driven to satisfy that which is central in him. D’Holbach prefers the term “self-gravitation” as a link between the physical and the moral world. The term encapsulates the power of Newtonian gravitation as well as the ethical insight that man is naturally a selfish creature.

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<sup>151</sup> d’Holbach, *The System of Nature*, 29.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 31

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

Therefore, as a determined mode, self-gravitation bridges the individuality and uniqueness of matter and organized bodies: “Every thing he does—every thing that passes within himself, are the effects of inert force—of self-gravitation—of the attractive or repulsive powers contained in his machine—of the tendency he has, in common with other beings, to his own individual preservation; in short, of that energy which is the common property of every being he beholds.”<sup>156</sup>

D’Holbach did not halt his presentation of the properties and complex accretion of matter with Newtonian gravitation and attraction. Through his work for the *Encyclopédie* and the many translations of German works, he was also well-versed in the literature on chemistry, metallurgy, and mineralogy, which added an extra layer of scientific demonstration and explanation to his system. Moreover, as a student at Leyden, it is certain that he imbibed something of the iatrochemical theories of Sylvius and iatromechanical theories of Boerhaave. The individual scientific fields that we know today were just beginning to separate into discrete units in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Many concepts were shared across disciplinary lines, which make identifying specific influences on d’Holbach more difficult. G. E. Stahl, Guillaume-François Rouelle, and Joseph Needham, however, loom large. Consequently, for this section, I will point out the ways in which d’Holbach used aspects of Stahl, Rouelle, and Needham’s works, as well as the language of chemistry.<sup>157</sup>

D’Holbach did not agree with Stahl’s immaterial *anima* as an *ens*, or real existing entity,<sup>158</sup> but did support his concept of phlogiston. In 1766, d’Holbach translated Stahl’s *Zufällige Gedancken...über den Streit von den sogenannten Sulpure* (*Traité du soufre*), which Thomas Hankins calls the clearest statement of Stahl’s phlogiston theory.<sup>159</sup> Stahl coined the term phlogiston from his mentor Johann Joachim Becher, who understood it to be the principle of combustion contained within objects, or fuel, rather than air. Both Stahl and Becher sought to understand the processes of

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>157</sup> See Rappaport, “Baron d’Holbach’s campaign,” for the interaction of chemistry, mineralogy, and metallurgy in d’Holbach’s articles for the *Encyclopédie* and his translations.

<sup>158</sup> Lester S. King, *The Philosophy of Medicine: The Early Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1978), 144.

<sup>159</sup> Hankins, *Science and the Enlightenment*, 95.

combustion, calcination, and respiration; d'Holbach did not shy away from these tasks, but viewed phlogiston as "that which in man yields him the most active life, furnishes him with the greatest energy, affords the greatest mobility to his frame, supplies the greatest spring to his organs...From these causes, which are entirely material, commonly result the dispositions of faculties called sensibility, wit, imagination, genius, vivacity, etc."<sup>160</sup> Always connecting the physical world of matter to the moral world of man, and always looking for scientifically valid principles to undergird his system, d'Holbach extrapolates from the chemical role of phlogiston to its activity in man. He saw phlogiston as a fiery principle that dissipates easily and must be constantly reacquired, in the form of aliments, by man to maintain a certain level of activity. Thus, man does not possess phlogiston as part of his inherent organization. Nevertheless, d'Holbach teeters between the analogy of phlogiston as a life-principle in man and its actual reality: "This igneous matter diminishes in his old age [and] totally dissipates at his death."<sup>161</sup>

The notion of fire as both an element and an instrument leads us to d'Holbach's account of the four elements.<sup>162</sup> Since Aristotle, earth, air, water, and fire had been the convenient classificatory scheme for matter. For Boerhaave, Stahl, Rouelle, and d'Holbach, fire was both an element and an instrument of chemical change. D'Holbach understood the quality of fire—heat—as the principle of life. Vivifying heat generates life and it is in the womb that the mother communicates "a portion of that fire with which she was herself animated, which circulated through her veins with her blood: it is from the aliments that have nourished him."<sup>163</sup> This qualitative fire is not pure fire. Neither Stahl nor d'Holbach believe that any bodies, including the elements, can be seen in their pure state. The most fundamental level of matter is not visible to the human eye, though

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<sup>160</sup> d'Holbach, *The System of Nature*, 62.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 63. Guillaume-François Rouelle identified Stahl's phlogiston with the ancient element "fire" rather than a principle of the earth. It is probable that d'Holbach used Rouelle's reinterpretation as he was well-acquainted with Rouelle. See Jan Golinski, "Chemistry" in *The Cambridge History of Science*, vol. 4, *Eighteenth-Century Science*, ed. Roy Porter, 377-396 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 387.

<sup>162</sup> For the idea of fire as an "element-instrument" see Rosaleen Love, "Herman Boerhaave and the Element-Instrument Concept of Fire," *Annals of Science*, vol. 31, no. 6 (1974): 547-559. Love applies the term "element-instrument theory" from R. Rappaport's article "Rouelle and Stahl—The Phlogistic Revolution in France," *Chymia*, vol. 7 (1961).

<sup>163</sup> d'Holbach, *The System of Nature*, 63.

it is not invisible or immaterial, and the four elements themselves are constantly in motion, separating and attracting, so that a state of purity is unrealizable. Nonetheless, bodies of accumulated matter are not formed from modifications of homogenous matter, but, following Stahl and Rouelle, are composed of various combinations of the four elements.<sup>164</sup> D'Holbach writes: "The element of fire, is visibly more active and more inconstant than that of earth. This is more solid and ponderous than fire, air, or water. According to the quality of the elements which enter the composition of bodies, these must act diversely, and their motion must in some measure partake the motion peculiar to each of their constituent parts."<sup>165</sup> Each of the four elements serve different functions in accumulated bodies and, in the three orders of nature envisioned by Stahl (mineral, plant, and animal), are in an eternal "transmigration, an exchange, a continual circulation in the particles of matter."<sup>166</sup>

D'Holbach supplements his metaphysical and physical notion of the inherent motion of matter and his holistic view of nature with the elements of the chemical theorists. Moreover, d'Holbach describes the relationship between matter and bodies "en termes d'affinité et d'analogie, et le mode de communication du mouvement fait l'objet d'une description où se télescopent curieusement la physique et la chimie."<sup>167</sup> He incorporates Newtonian gravity and attraction/repulsion into his system and uses the chemical language of affinity and analogue as well: "The communication of motion, or the medium of action, from one body to another, also follows certain and necessary laws: one being can only communicate motion to another by the affinity, by the resemblance, by the conformity, by the analogy, or by the point of contact which it has with that other being."<sup>168</sup> This chemical language does not belong exclusively to the communication of movement, but "when [matter] has analogy or affinity with these bodies, it must unite

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<sup>164</sup> D'Holbach is often inconsistent or terribly vague in the way he discusses matter and the composition of bodies. It seems that he indicates three different forms of matter: elementary, atomic matter; the four elements; and, the organized bodies of animals, plants, and minerals. See Lurbe's slightly different interpretation, "Matière, Nature, Mouvement," 57-59.

<sup>165</sup> d'Holbach, *The System of Nature*, 23.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 24. D'Holbach repeats the role of the four elements in the aggregation and function of the three orders of nature from pgs. 20-27.

<sup>167</sup> Lurbe, "Matière, Nature, Mouvement," 59.

<sup>168</sup> d'Holbach, *The System of Nature*, 18.



with them; when it has no point of analogy with them, it must be repulsed.”<sup>169</sup>

D’Holbach was as concerned with the physical aggregation of matter as he was with the chemical constitution of bodies. The term affinity allowed him to bridge this gap. Affinity was a nebulous concept in the eighteenth century. To many chemists, though certainly not everyone, it was the chemical equivalent of Newtonian attraction. At least, affinity was an investigative agenda used to understand chemical combinations, reactions, and dissolutions, and at most, it was viewed as an inherent property.<sup>170</sup> This explains the importance to d’Holbach of both Newton and the language of chemistry and indicates the extent to which he wants to ground his system in experimental and demonstrable principles. Furthermore, this is related to the historiographical dispute over the appearance of “affinity tables” in the eighteenth century. Some historians assert the influence of Newton’s philosophy of matter on chemical thinking, a product of Query 31 of the *Opticks*, while others find the prevalence of affinity tables in an independently growing chemical discipline linked to Stahl’s conceptual outlook.<sup>171</sup> No matter the outcome of the debate, d’Holbach infuses his system with Newtonian forces as well as chemical affinities.

*Système de la Nature* contains numerous references to fermentation, putrefaction, and mixed bodies. D’Holbach uses many examples from chemistry to highlight specific points in his text. To illustrate that motion can be instantly engendered between mixed bodies, d’Holbach states: “If filings of iron, sulphur, and water be mixed together, these bodies thus capacitated to act on each other, are heated by degrees, and ultimately produce a violent combustion.”<sup>172</sup> D’Holbach took no more important idea from Stahl than the following methodological point: “Il faut ‘s’occuper de la composition et de la

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>170</sup> See Mi Gyung Kim, *Affinity, That Elusive Dream* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2003).

<sup>171</sup> Golinski, “Chemistry,” 385-386. Richard Westfall unsurprisingly argues that “Newton’s 31<sup>st</sup> Query was the primary influence behind the study of affinities which played a leading role in chemistry early in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and helped to prepare the way for Lavoisier.” Westfall, *The Construction of Modern Science: Mechanisms and Mechanics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977, first published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 1971), 81.

<sup>172</sup> d’Holbach, *The System of Nature*, 20.

decomposition des corps pour connaître leur vraie nature.”<sup>173</sup> D’Holbach also drew on the experiments of Joseph Needham to evidentialize the inherent properties of matter. According to d’Holbach, Needham’s microscopic observations confirm the following statement: “If flour be wetted with water, and the mixture closed up, it will be found, after some little lapse of time, by the aid of a microscope, to have produced organized beings that enjoy life, of which the water and the flour were believed incapable.”<sup>174</sup>

D’Holbach used the scientific findings of Needham, a Catholic priest, to prove his philosophical axiom that matter moves by its own interior impulse.<sup>175</sup> Like Needham, d’Holbach wanted to demonstrate that spontaneous (equivocal) generation was a fanciful explanation for the emergence of life and did not result from observing and reflecting on the operations of nature. D’Holbach, however, had confused two of Needham’s experiments and drawn a seemingly illogical analogy from the formation of tiny organisms out of flour and water to the production of humans: “Reasoning from analogy, the production of a man, independent of the normal means, would not be more marvelous than that of an insect with flour and water. *Fermentation* and *putrefaction* evidently produce living animals.”<sup>176</sup> D’Holbach used Needham’s experiments to promote materialism in a way which Needham abhorred. In the eighteenth-century debates over the activity of matter, generation, and the proper morality to be drawn from the new philosophy, d’Holbach attempted to turn the experiments of a man who had devoted his entire career to refashioning a religious morality from biological data into an adherent and supporter of monist materialism. This was intimately bound with his use of

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<sup>173</sup> Quoted from d’Holbach’s translation of Stahl, *Traité du soufre*, in Naville, *D’Holbach et la philosophie scientifique*, 192.

<sup>174</sup> d’Holbach, *The System of Nature*, 20.

<sup>175</sup> In the *Correspondance Littéraire*, Voltaire exhibits his disdain for d’Holbach’s system and Needham in one statement: “mais le comble de l’impertinence est d’avoir fondé un système tout entier sur une fausse expérience faite par un jésuite irlandais [Needham] qu’on a pris pour un philosophe.” Letter from Ferney, September 26, 1770, *Correspondance Littéraire, Philosophique et Critique* par Grimm, Diderot, Raynal, Meister, etc., ed. Maurice Tourneux, tome 9 (Paris: Garnier Frères, Libraires-Éditeurs, 1879), 168. Needham was neither Irish nor a Jesuit.

<sup>176</sup> d’Holbach, *The System of Nature*, 20. Italics mine. See Shirley A. Roe, “Metaphysics and materialism: Needham’s response to d’Holbach,” *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 284 (1991) for the three-way interaction of Voltaire, d’Holbach, and Needham primarily from Needham’s view.

phlogiston, the four elements, fire as an instrument and element, and the notion of affinity to account for the organization of bodies and the operations of nature.

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Before concluding this section, the role of Thomas Hobbes in d'Holbach's work must be accounted for. Topazio and Wickwar agree that d'Holbach owed the most to Hobbes. According to Wickwar, all of Hobbes' work had been translated into French, except *Human Nature*, which d'Holbach himself translated in 1772, and Diderot had completed the article "Hobbisme" for the *Encyclopédie* in 1765. There are two problems concerning d'Holbach's use of Hobbes in *Système de la Nature*. The first is a problem of chronology. According to Leland Thielemann, Diderot's article was an abridged translation from Johann Jacob Brucker's *Historia critica philosophiae*, not from the primary source itself.<sup>177</sup> Moreover, Topazio cites *The Moral and political works of Thomas Hobbes*, published in London in 1750, as appearing in d'Holbach's library; again, not a primary source.<sup>178</sup> Although d'Holbach seems to have possessed a copy of *Human Nature*, brought over from England in 1765, he did not publish his translation until 1772. Are we to conclude that, prior to 1770, both Diderot and d'Holbach formed their opinion of Hobbes from representative extracts or some other filter? Chronologically speaking, there is some room to doubt the total influence of Hobbes on d'Holbach if this is the case.

The second problem follows from the first. The similarity between d'Holbach and Hobbes' work is unquestionable; however, over a century separates the two, in which time Hobbes' views had been modified, extended, reduced, and incorporated into other philosophies. It is more than possible that d'Holbach was well-aware of Hobbes' philosophy in some skeletal or adulterated form and imbibed many of Hobbes' tenets through innumerable channels. For example, d'Holbach gives primacy to the psychology of self-interest that could have come from Helvétius' *De l'esprit* (1759), not Hobbes. Consequently, I will not point to every area in which d'Holbach's work resembles that of Hobbes and will limit myself to three areas: a rudimentary construction of the similarities

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<sup>177</sup> Thielemann, "Diderot and Hobbes," 228. See also, Wade, *The Structure and Form of the French Enlightenment*, v. 1 57-61.

<sup>178</sup> Topazio, *D'Holbach's Moral Philosophy*, 14.

noted by previous historians; an examination of the places in *Système de la Nature* that d'Holbach cites Hobbes; and, finally, a frequently unnoticed aspect of Hobbes' work that influenced d'Holbach: the confidence in a system.

Topazio holds Hobbes responsible for the following views in d'Holbach: sensationalist epistemology; psychology of self-interest; pleasure/pain principle; the view that man strives inexorably for his own preservation (an important attribute of Spinoza's system as well); the relativity of morals; the primacy of the human passions; bitter opposition to the clergy and papacy; civil laws as restraints; and determinism. D'Holbach disagrees with some of Hobbes' political beliefs, but essentially, supplements Hobbes' work with bits and pieces of Locke, Bayle, Collins, Toland, Diderot, and Helvétius. Some of these views may have been original to Hobbes, but could not have come to d'Holbach unfiltered.

Wickwar locates the importance of Hobbes for d'Holbach in Hobbes' "mechanistic and deterministic explanation of human knowledge and behavior...[in that he identified] ideas with the impressions made on the senses, and thought with the mechanical association of these ideas in the brain."<sup>179</sup> He lists similar influences as those of Topazio, but also fails to demonstrate any direct influence. Wickwar views d'Holbach's "stress on human diversity [as] more than an echo of Hobbes' truism that individuals differ as widely in temperament as in physiognomy."<sup>180</sup> Granted, this principle was set forth in Hobbes' *Human Nature*, which was probably in d'Holbach's head while writing *Système de la Nature*. The context, however, is much more complicated. D'Holbach could be referring to Leibniz's "principle of the identity of indiscernibles" or a similar principle found in La Mettrie. In fact, after stressing the uniqueness of individuals of the same species, d'Holbach states: "This truth was well understood by the profound and subtle Leibnitz."<sup>181</sup> Wickwar rightly notes the implications of this view for d'Holbach's social theory, but unnecessarily invokes Hobbes. The appropriate context is the ongoing argument about the natural equality of

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<sup>179</sup> Wickwar, *Baron d'Holbach*, 149.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>181</sup> d'Holbach, *The System of Nature*, 22, footnote. Leibniz's principle can be found in section nine of *Monadology*.

man, advocated by Helvétius and Rousseau, and opposed by La Mettrie, Diderot, and d'Holbach. The point here is to show that while Hobbes may have had an influence on d'Holbach, one must be circumspect in drawing causality from similarity, no matter what we know of d'Holbach's library. For this reason, I shall explore the ways d'Holbach uses Hobbes' name in *Système de la Nature* rather than note the resemblance of ideas.<sup>182</sup>

Hobbes' name appears eleven times in *Système de la Nature*, most indicating direct quotations. D'Holbach places Hobbes beside Spinoza and Vanini as those that reject the God of modern mythology in order to prove that contemporary atheists exist, and to show that the contemporary conception of atheism would convict the early Christian apologist and writer Tertullian of atheism.<sup>183</sup> Moreover, to show that atheism is compatible with morality, d'Holbach points out that neither Hobbes nor Spinoza had incited any violence or upheaval in contrast to the disputes of Gomar and d'Arminius in Holland and the religious fanaticism of the English Civil War.<sup>184</sup> He blames "the horrors produced in England by fanaticism, which cost Charles I his head," for Hobbes' atheism. He cites the indignation that Hobbes' felt toward priests (spiritual tyrants) for his "principles so favourable to the absolute power of kings."<sup>185</sup> D'Holbach does not follow Hobbes' royalism and does not agree that the state of nature is a state of war.<sup>186</sup> Yet, d'Holbach sees in Hobbes, as well as Spinoza, an example of the virtuous atheist made famous by Pierre Bayle. Here is a man who recognized the limits of human understanding as well as the psychology of motivation and human interaction, but who

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<sup>182</sup> This method does not assert that citations and footnotes are the only key to unlocking the thought process behind the construction of a text. Nor is it a way to avoid the entangling webs of intertextual dialogue and literary allusion. D'Holbach does not offer the multiple layers of style exhibited by Diderot, Hume, or Bayle because his message is generally straightforward. My method is used here because *Système de la Nature* is dense with ideas and the reduction of d'Holbach's work to an imitation of Hobbes' belies the complexity of d'Holbach's thought. It is a way to approach the text directly through the eyes of d'Holbach, rather than relying on the probable connection of ideas and influence, and, as has been shown above and will be shown below, forces the reader to understand *why* and *how* d'Holbach uses Hobbes, not just *that* he uses him.

<sup>183</sup> d'Holbach, *The System of Nature*, 303, footnote.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 312.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 314, footnote. D'Holbach fails to note Hobbes' allegiance to a form of divine right theory.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 131, footnote. D'Holbach follows up this assertion with a statement based on his (Hobbesian?) view of interest: "If men are so ready to injure one another, it is only because every thing conspires to give them different interests."

was demonized and threatened because of the overzealous enthusiasm produced by religion.<sup>187</sup> D'Holbach's rehabilitation of Hobbes was in line with Diderot's attempt, in the *Encyclopédie* article "Hobbisme," "to show that whatever might be thought of Hobbes' materialistic philosophy, the philosopher's personal life had been above reproach, and that even so famous a Churchman as Père [Marin] Mersenne had paid glowing tribute both to Hobbes' talent and his moral conduct."<sup>188</sup>

D'Holbach further leans on Hobbes' philosophy and pessimism. He invokes Hobbes to answer a theological quandary that he often uses: if God "be in nature, I can only see matter in motion...If this agent is exterior to nature, I have then no longer any idea of the place which he occupies." In *Leviathan*, chapter forty-six, Hobbes states: "The world is corporeal...Each portion of a body, is a body, and has these same dimensions: consequently, each part of the universe is a body, and that which is not a body, is no part of the universe; but as the universe is every thing, that which does not make a part of it, is nothing, and can be no part."<sup>189</sup> In this vein, d'Holbach cites the third chapter of *Leviathan* to supplement his view that men attribute properties to God that they are incapable of understanding: "Whatsoever we imagine, is finite. Therefore there is no idea, or conception of any thing we call infinite."<sup>190</sup> In two places, d'Holbach uses Hobbes' wisdom to argue for the limits of human understanding of the material world.

Although not a pessimist himself, d'Holbach utilizes Hobbes' pessimism to expose man's faults: "Hobbes says, that if men found their interest in it, they would doubt the truth of Euclid's *Elements*."<sup>191</sup> To explain the continued acceptance of a future life, d'Holbach quotes: "We believe that that which is, will always be, and that the same causes will have the same effects."<sup>192</sup> Hobbes sees the failure of mankind to overcome habit, custom, and tradition as interminable, but not so for d'Holbach. He felt that man

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<sup>187</sup> An alternate reading would suggest that a tolerant and equitable religion would not produce atheistic systems; however, d'Holbach argues that it does and we should therefore supplant a superstitious, fanatical, immoral system with one based on the laws of nature.

<sup>188</sup> Thielemann, "Diderot and Hobbes," 228-229.

<sup>189</sup> d'Holbach, *The System of Nature*, 233.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 192. The English translation used here extends Hobbes' passage further than d'Holbach.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 124.

could learn from experience since “It is by a pure mechanism that may be explained the phenomena of habit, as well physical as moral.”<sup>193</sup> This quote headed a paragraph at the end of which was a citation from Hobbes’ *Human Nature*: “‘It is the nature of all corporeal beings, who have been frequently moved in the same manner, to continually receive a greater aptitude, or to produce the same motions with more facility.’ It is this which constitutes habit as well in morals as in physics.”<sup>194</sup> It is here that we arrive at what I interpret to be Hobbes’ most precious influence on d’Holbach: the belief in a system.

Hobbes’ mechanistic and deterministic system incorporated all aspects of the universe from the motion of matter to the socio-political life of man. D’Holbach wrote *Système de la Nature* under the same principle that the laws of the physical world were identical to those of the moral world if one took the time to investigate nature. Hobbes haunts d’Holbach’s text in its structure and form. D’Holbach proceeds in *Système de la Nature* from definition to definition and builds his system from one key principle through its corollaries in much the same way as Hobbes. What J. C. A. Gaskins said of Hobbes’ system may well be said of d’Holbach’s: “The outcome of all this is to attach personal ethics on to psychology, psychology on to physiology, and physiology, via an account of sense perception, on to the physics of motion.”<sup>195</sup> The “body politic” made famous by Hobbes became for d’Holbach more than an analogical and metaphorical tool. Moreover, to speak metaphorically, the antidote for a poisoned body politic is truth. “Besides, we shall say with Hobbes,” writes d’Holbach, “‘We cannot do men any harm by proposing our ideas to them; the worst mode is to leave them in doubt and dispute; indeed, are they not so already?’”<sup>196</sup> D’Holbach’s goal throughout *Système de la Nature* was to show the inconsistency and inadequacy of the Christian system and oppose it to his own simpler, more natural system. He incorporated and transformed ideas from Toland, Newton, Stahl, Rouelle, and Needham, but derived the structure and courage from Hobbes.

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>195</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Human Nature and De Corpore Politico*, ed. and intro. J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), xxix.

<sup>196</sup> d’Holbach, *The System of Nature*, 325.

### Constructing *Système de la Nature* from Arguments

It is important to remember the impact of Newtonian science on d'Holbach's *Système de la Nature*; however, d'Holbach also uses Newton in a rhetorical manner to bolster his work. This is intimately connected to another rhetorical procedure, the exaltation of the ancients. D'Holbach implicates Newton in the pressing goal of freeing civilization from the oppressive hands of Christianity and political tyrants. He harkens back to the philosophies of ancient Greece and Rome to indicate the existence of an intellectual dark age precipitated by Christianity and draws an historical line from the pantheism of the ancients to that of Spinoza. Moreover, d'Holbach directly confronts Samuel Clarke, a devout propagandist of Newtonian physico-theology, and opposes his own more empirical and economical system to that of Clarke's.

Newton's work became Newtonianism not long after the publication of the *Principia*. From his powerful achievements in science and natural philosophy, Samuel Clarke, Richard Bentley, William Whiston, William Derham, Newton himself, and many others found evidence to support a "supernatural being separate from nature...[with] the concomitant social assumption that the deity imposes order in nature and society, his function resembling that of the strong, but not arbitrary, monarch."<sup>197</sup> What came to be known as Newtonian physico-theology was used to solidify the socio-political power of the crown and the churches, but was also used to restrain irreligion and combat the philosophical systems of Hobbes, Spinoza, and Toland. Science and God were combined as a bulwark against atheism, deism, and social revolution. As Clarke explained, "there is no such thing as what men commonly call the course of nature, or the power of nature. [It] is nothing else but the will of God producing certain effects in a continued, regular, constant, and uniform manner."<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*, 87. See also Margaret C. Jacob, *The Newtonians and the English Revolution, 1689-1720* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1976); and Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 200-222, 344-364, and 751-781.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.



In France, Newtonian science was imported by the end of the seventeenth century and in constant conflict with Cartesianism and Leibnizianism.<sup>199</sup> Newtonianism did not take hold until Voltaire emerged as its torchbearer in the 1730s. In *Lettres philosophiques* (1734), Voltaire praised Newton's experimental, inductive method and his epistemological modesty. He also supported the extension of Newton's scientific principles into the area of theology by quoting two statements of Newton: "I have discovered a new property of matter, one of the secrets of the Creator;" and "Attraction on the contrary is a real thing...The cause of this cause is in the mind of God."<sup>200</sup> In 1738, Voltaire solidified Newtonian physico-theology in his *Éléments de la philosophie de Newton*, which was met with little disapproval from the ecclesiastical or court establishment. Voltaire capitalized on the "liberalizing tendency in current Jesuit intellectual policy" to develop the Lockean and Newtonian synthesis into a larger Catholic philosophical world-view and, thus, situate himself at the center of French intellectual life.<sup>201</sup> The usurpation of Newtonian science by theologians, and even Voltaire himself, prompted d'Holbach to action.

In *Système de la Nature*, D'Holbach recognized the differences between Newton as a natural philosopher and Newtonianism as a socio-political and theological doctrine. He maintained this duality, but, as a rhetorical strategy, made the bifurcation more rigid. D'Holbach positions Newton the natural philosopher as both the pioneer of physics and enemy of prejudice. For many centuries, natural philosophers viewed the heavens and its planetary bodies as propelled by external and chimerical causes, "until the immortal Newton demonstrated that it was the effect of the gravitation of these celestial bodies towards each other."<sup>202</sup> Moreover, "the uninformed are seldom tempted to examine the effects which are familiar to them, or to recur to first principles...it requires a Newton to

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<sup>199</sup> See J. B. Shank, "Before Voltaire: Newtonianism and the Origins of the Enlightenment in France, 1687-1734" (unpublished Standord University doctoral thesis, 2000).

<sup>200</sup> Voltaire, *Lettres philosophiques*, trans. and intro. Leonard Tancock as *Letters on England* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1980), 80-81. In discussing Arianism, Newton's professed belief, Voltaire sarcastically commented: "Is it not amusing that Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, writers nobody can read have founded sects that divide up Europe, that the ignorant Mahomet has given a religion to Asia and Africa, but Newton, Clarke, Locke, Leclerc, the greatest thinkers and finest writers of their age, have hardly managed to establish a little flock, and even that dwindles day by day?", 43.

<sup>201</sup> Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 756.

<sup>202</sup> d'Holbach, *The System of Nature*, 19-20.

feel that the descent of heavy bodies is a phenomenon worthy his whole, his most serious attention.”<sup>203</sup> D’Holbach further describes Newton as a “profound experimental philosopher” with whom he allies himself in order to suggest that “whenever we see a cause act, we look upon its effects as natural.”<sup>204</sup> In two separate places, d’Holbach also mentions Newton in order to praise him as an admirable historical figure, along with Corneille, Locke, Montesquieu, Shakespeare, and Harvey, and as an exemplar of Nature’s ability to create genius.<sup>205</sup> This, of course, is Newton the experimental and natural philosopher; the one who, like d’Holbach, seeks to understand the immutable and invariable laws of nature as they are presented to us through experience. Observation and reflection are the operative words for d’Holbach, and he implicates Newton in his grand scheme of returning man to nature.

There is also the Newton of Newtonianism; the Newton who put forward a specific view of an omnipotent God and inert matter. The immortal and sublime Newton, as d’Holbach often calls him, “whose extensive genius has unraveled nature and its laws...is no more than an infant when he quits physics and demonstration, to lose himself in the imaginary regions of theology.”<sup>206</sup> In the fifth chapter of the second volume, “Examination of the Proofs of the Existence of God given by Descartes, Malebranche, and Newton,” d’Holbach reduces both Descartes’ and Malebranche’s philosophy to either Spinozism or perplexing theology. Descartes and Malebranche either multiply beings unnecessarily, imply that God is nature (as an analog to the argument that the soul was a part of the body), or lose themselves in inexplicable and insensible puzzles concerning God’s role in the world. Newton the theologian is no better. In accordance with Newtonianism, “We see from thence that Newton, as well as the theologians, makes of his god...a monarch, a lord paramount, a despot...a powerful man; a prince, whose government takes for a model that which the kings of the earth sometimes exercise over

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 27-28.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., the first two places are 113 and 135. On page 233, d’Holbach comments: “we cannot doubt that nature is extremely powerful and very industrious...[yet] we no more understand how she has been capable of producing a stone or metal, than a head organized like that of Newton.”

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 227.

their subjects.”<sup>207</sup> D’Holbach draws specific parallels between the despotism of God and the despotism of the socio-political ideology of the Newtonians.

D’Holbach spends twice as much time on Newton than he does on Descartes and Malebranche, and he alternates quotations from Newton’s “General Scholium” at the end of the *Principia* with his own commentary. He primarily accuses Newton of “unintelligible rigamarole.” Newton anthropomorphizes god, physically and morally, and uses vague language such as “God is one...and he is the same for ever and every where, not only by his virtue alone, or his energy, but also by his substance.”<sup>208</sup> In order to avoid placing God in space—“he is not space nor duration, but he exists and is present (*adest*)”—d’Holbach claims that Newton is forced to use the term *adest*. Thus, Newton has abandoned experience, reason, nature, and his “ordinary sagacity,” to search for incalculable and imaginary causes. According to d’Holbach, Newton cannot bring forward clear and demonstrative evidence for the existence of God as he did for gravitation and attraction. In addition, the use of terms like “God, Spirit, [and] Intelligence...will do no more than redouble [our ignorance] by preventing us from seeking the natural causes of those effects which our visual faculties make us acquainted with.”<sup>209</sup> Yet, if evidence could be found for the existence of God, “the genius of Newton would, without doubt, have compassed it.”<sup>210</sup> Descartes and Malebranche merely provide a transparent covering to their systems, which are essentially conflations of god and nature, matter and motion. Newton, on the other hand, solved the puzzle of the physical laws of nature, but has been “a slave to the prejudices of his infancy.” D’Holbach, therefore, makes use of Newton the natural philosopher to bolster his system, while at the same time denigrates Newton the theologian as foundering upon the rocks of imagination.

D’Holbach also dedicates an entire chapter to a refutation of Newton’s disciple Samuel Clarke. In *A Demonstration on the Beings and Attributes of God* (1705), Clarke sought to prove from *a priori* and logical principles the existence and qualities of God.

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 229.

Clarke, who Voltaire called “a real reasoning machine,”<sup>211</sup> was no mere theologian. He had vehemently defended Newton’s philosophy and theology in an epistolary exchange with Leibniz and participated in the *vis viva* controversy with ‘s-Gravesande. A *Demonstration on the Beings and Attributes of God* influenced Jean Le Clerc, a leading intellectual in Amsterdam and friend of Locke, and served as the basis for Voltaire’s *Traité de métaphysique*.<sup>212</sup> Clarke was also featured in M. S. Saverin’s apology for philosophy, *Histoire de la Philosophie moderne* (1762), as a contributor to metaphysics.<sup>213</sup> Furthermore, as Alan Kors notes, one of d’Holbach’s frequent guests, J. B. A. Suard, argued frequently with d’Holbach utilizing “the principles of Clarke and Newton, which were his own.”<sup>214</sup> It is therefore obvious that Clarke was a major figure on both sides of the English Channel and that d’Holbach was very familiar with him.

D’Holbach begins his chapter, “Examination of the Proofs of the Existence of the Divinity, as given by Clarke,” by disproving the idea that our notions of the Divinity are innate, “that [this notion] is not anterior to his existence—that it is the production of time, acquired by communication with his own species—that, consequently, there was a period when it did not actually exist in him.”<sup>215</sup> D’Holbach briefly describes the history of the Divinity as an idea by crafty legislators used to subjugate the ignorant before launching into an attack on “metaphysicians,” Clarke being an egregious example, who argued endlessly and unintelligibly about the existence and characteristics of God. D’Holbach identifies twelve key propositions of Clarke (for example, “Something existed from all eternity” and “There has existed from eternity some one unchangeable and independent being”) with which to contrast his own views. For Clarke, God must be eternal, unchangeable, self-existent, substantially incomprehensible, infinite, omnipresent, omniscient, one, intelligent, free, infinitely wise, infinitely good, just, true, and an exemplar of moral perfections. D’Holbach counters by accusing Clarke of

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<sup>211</sup> Voltaire, *Letters on England*, 42.

<sup>212</sup> See Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 751-780. Also, Wade, *The Structure and Form of the French Enlightenment*, vol. II, 314.

<sup>213</sup> Wade, *The Structure and Form of the French Enlightenment*, vol. I, 40-41.

<sup>214</sup> Quoted from *Essais de Mémoires sur M. Suard* (1820) by Mme. Suard in Kors, *D’Holbach’s Coterie*, 79.

<sup>215</sup> d’Holbach, *The System of Nature*, 208.

anthropomorphizing God, abjuring the only true form of knowledge—that which comes from the senses—and promotes his more economical view that nature and matter are eternal, self-existing, and require no supernatural or immaterial causes. Essentially, d'Holbach claims, “Every thing which Doctor Clarke, and all the modern theologians, tell us of their God, becomes, in some respects, sufficiently intelligible as soon as we apply it to nature and matter”<sup>216</sup>

D'Holbach does not put forward any new ideas in this chapter and much of his commentary is a regurgitation of other sections. Why, therefore, we might ask, engage Clarke and *A Demonstration* specifically? Ira Wade suggests that, generally speaking, d'Holbach wants to prove that “the deist God is useless, and the theist God derived therefrom is full of contradictions.” D'Holbach “is really fanatical against the idea of God[,]...is exasperated by the arguments of those who are obsessed in exactly the opposite ways,” and, more specifically, d'Holbach wants to demonstrate that universal consent is not proof of God's existence.<sup>217</sup> D'Holbach intended this chapter as a medium to place his views against those of a highly-touted Christian theologian. Samuel Clarke, however, was no mere theologian. As indicated above, Clarke was well-respected on both sides of the channel and carried Newtonian physics and theology like a trophy. D'Holbach's desire to challenge Clarke had as much to do with Clarke's theology as it had to do with Newton. D'Holbach embraced the persona of the natural philosopher and portrayed his system as the logical result of a proper empirical methodology. Employing Ockham's razor, he drew conclusions only from his own observations, and was epistemologically modest regarding first causes. This was the methodology of Newton the natural philosopher and D'Holbach was in this and the following chapter attempting to wrest this Newton from the hands of Clarke, Voltaire, and the Moderate Enlightenment (as Jacob and Israel would have it). Moreover, in concluding his rebuttal of Clarke, d'Holbach shows how his own system derives from Newton's: “From all eternity the particles of the universe have acted one upon the other...These particles must have combined in consequence of their analogy or relations, attracted and repelled each other,

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>217</sup> Wade, *The Structure and Form of the French Enlightenment*, vol. II, 310-314.

have acted and reacted, gravitated one upon the other, been united and dissolved, received their forms, and been changed by their continual collisions.”<sup>218</sup>

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In his two-volume *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, Peter Gay found the thinkers of the Enlightenment to be modern pagans directing their critical energy against their more recent ancestors, Christians. Gay expressed his thesis most succinctly through Voltaire’s Latin epigram: “Boerhaave is worth more than Hippocrates, Newton more than all antiquity, Tasso more than Homer; but glory to the first.”<sup>219</sup> The philosophes had self-consciously surpassed the ancients, but admired and respected them. They viewed themselves as “reenacting historic battles,” as part of “an age-old struggle between reason and unreason, a struggle that had been fought and lost in the ancient world and was now being fought again, this time with good prospects of success.”<sup>220</sup> D’Holbach was certainly antagonistic toward Christianity and well-versed in the ancients, writing to John Wilkes in 1746 that “la conversation [est] toujours captivante d’Horace, de Virgile, d’Homère et de tous nos nobles amis des Champs-Élysées.”<sup>221</sup> He also influenced Diderot to write *Essai sur la vie de Sénèque le philosophe...et sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron*, Naigeon to translate Epictetus and some works of Seneca, and the tutor of his children published a translation of Lucretius in 1768.<sup>222</sup> *Système de la Nature* fits rather nicely into Gay’s scheme and can be read as a running dialogue with the ancient Greeks and Romans. It is simultaneously a paean to the ancients and a denunciation of the pervasive influence of Christianity on European civilization.

D’Holbach revered Leucippus, Epicurus, Democritus, Empedocles, Cicero, Virgil, Ovid, cited many other authors, and professed an ambiguous relationship to Plato and Pythagoras. D’Holbach credits Empedocles, through the writings of Diogenes Laërtius, with asserting a system of attraction and repulsion that Newton would later develop.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> d’Holbach, *The System of Nature*, 224.

<sup>219</sup> Gay, *The Enlightenment*, vol. I, 31. In Latin, the epigram reads: “Boerhave utilior Hippocrate, Newton totà antiquitate, Tassus Homero; sed gloria primis.”

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>221</sup> Naville, *D’Holbach et la philosophie scientifique*, 29.

<sup>222</sup> Kors, *D’Holbach’s Coterie*, 87.

<sup>223</sup> d’Holbach, *The System of Nature*, 29.

Aristotle was wise enough to dispel Anaxagoras' expedient use of a Divine creation and governance to account for the empirically inexplicable, as well as to develop the foundation for a sensational epistemology in the following statement: "nothing enters the mind of man, but through the medium of his senses."<sup>224</sup> Moreover, Pythagoras, Empedocles, Plato, and other ancient philosophers keenly perceived that "nothing in nature is either born, or dies, according to the common acceptance of those terms."<sup>225</sup> D'Holbach saves much of his venom for Plato, whom he calls "the great creator of chimeras" for assuming the existence of invisible things. He continues, in his chapter on Samuel Clarke's proofs of the existence of God, to assert that, "with the exception of that of Democritus and Epicurus, [ancient philosophy, led by Pythagoras and Plato] was, for the most part, a true *Theosophy*."<sup>226</sup> As we will see, d'Holbach not only praised many ancient thinkers, but extracted from those to whom he was hostile certain points to counter the Christian worldview.

One of d'Holbach's major positions against Christianity was that the ancients had developed a cosmology more consistent with observation, reflection, reason, and nature. They adored active nature. "All the divinities of Paganism," d'Holbach states, "were nothing more than nature considered according to its different functions and under its different points of view."<sup>227</sup> D'Holbach cites Varro, Cicero, Pliny, and (though a Platonist) Apuleius as representatives of this view. Pan signified nature, the great assemblage of things, and the fable of his birth—coming out of Demogorgon at the same moment as his sisters, the Destinies—was "a fine method of expressing that the universe was the work of an unknown power, and that it was formed after the invariable relations, the eternal laws of necessity."<sup>228</sup> Pagans were essentially pantheists and revered the natural, material world. Instead of anthropomorphizing an immaterial god, and attributing qualities of perfection and infinity that humans are incapable of comprehending, they created metaphors and fables to represent "the great whole." "Here

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 38 and 79. D'Holbach also charges Aristotle with first discovering that the brain of a man was a twice as big as that of an ox (54).

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 219-220.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 178, footnote.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 179.

then,” according to d’Holbach, “was the great macrocosm...adored and deified by the philosophers of antiquity, whilst the uninformed stopped at the emblem under which this nature was depicted.”<sup>229</sup> Unlike the theologians and metaphysicians of Christianity, the ancients conceived a cosmology much closer to the tenets of nature. D’Holbach uses the popularity of the ancients in the eighteenth century to expose the unnatural and deceitful beliefs of Christianity and to ally the harmonious past with the foreseeable future.

D’Holbach also demonizes Christianity and its roots in classical civilization (primarily Plato and Pythagoras); however, he accentuates the negative elements in modern Christianity that were *not* found in those classical roots. Moreover, d’Holbach uses early Christian teachings against his modern Christian opponents. D’Holbach found Plato to be not only “the great creator of chimeras,” but to have furnished the language of European theologians. These theologians “have visibly been infected with the reveries of the Platonists, which evidently are no more than the result of obscure notions, and of...unintelligible metaphysics.”<sup>230</sup> In fact, the first doctors of the Christian Church drew from the Platonic notions of “spirituality, of incorporeal, and immaterial substances, of intellectual powers, etc.” to construct a theology.<sup>231</sup> Yet, to d’Holbach, there is something *sui generis* about modern theologians. Even those early Christian fathers, Tertullian and Seraphis, considered God to be corporeal. Neither Tertullian, Arnobius, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Saint Justin, nor Irenæus understood the soul to be anything but material. In addition, the doctrine of the immortality and immateriality of the soul was not accepted by the Epicureans, Pythagoreans, Stoics, Peripatetics, Academics, Seneca, Epictectus, and the author of Ecclesiastes. The Platonists themselves had no concept of future punishment because the immaterial soul was a portion of the Divinity.<sup>232</sup> Plato, as we have already seen, believed that nothing in nature is either born or dies, and, contrary to the Christian implications of his dualism, he also believed that “Matter and necessity are the same thing; this necessity is the mother of the world.”<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 219. D’Holbach also cites Proclus, Jamblicus, and Plotinus as Plato’s disciples.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 33, footnote.



Furthermore, the ancients, including Plato and Pythagoras (“no matter how heated their brains”), understood the term “spirit” to mean matter “of an extreme subtilty [sic]...as an ethereal substance...as igneous matter...[or] compared it to light.”<sup>234</sup>

The soul of the modern theologians, therefore, is a recent production of the imagination. Those opportunistic priests who did make the soul immaterial and supernatural were aided by Descartes. “The system of spirituality, such as it is admitted at this day,” d’Holbach states, “owes all its pretended proofs to Descartes. Although before him the soul had been considered spiritual, he was the first who established that ‘*that which thinks ought to be distinguished from matter*,’ from whence he concludes that the soul, or that which thinks in man, is a spirit—that is to say, a simple and indivisible substance.”<sup>235</sup> Consequently, even the dawn of Christianity still resembled a cosmology closer to that of the ancients. D’Holbach capitalizes on the growing distance between modern Christianity and its roots in ancient philosophy to demonstrate the irrational and fraudulent nature of modern Christianity. The progression of Christianity, the increasingly intimate ties between political leaders and the church, and the deepening metaphysical substratum have strengthened the hand of Christian theologians across the European continent.

Although d’Holbach often views the ancient religions as unnecessarily superstitious, he nevertheless believes that their form of worship and construction of the universe was more rational and in touch with nature than Christianity. “The atoms of Epicurus,” writes d’Holbach, “are, without doubt, causes much more real than the theological God.”<sup>236</sup> In two places, d’Holbach rationalizes the congruence of Christianity with fatalism, which is “nothing more than destiny, fatality, the *fatum* of the ancients.”<sup>237</sup> D’Holbach strives to show the areas in which the ancients are superior to eighteenth-century society, the ways in which Christians have subverted and erased the achievements of the ancients, and redefine the terms of these debates. Since atheism was essentially a crime in eighteenth-century Europe, d’Holbach invokes the venerable

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 51, footnote.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 300.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid. The first instance is in a footnote on page 100 and instance quoted is from page 216.

Socrates, “the adorer of a unique God, [who] was no more than an atheist in the eyes of the Athenian people.”<sup>238</sup> He also relates to his readers the fact that “the most learned natural philosophers of antiquity have been atheists, either openly or secretly; but their doctrine was always opposed by the superstition of the uninformed, and almost totally eclipsed by the fanatical and marvelous philosophy of Pythagoras, and above all by that of Plato.”<sup>239</sup> The same intolerant attitude exhibited in d’Holbach’s time was not unique; Christianity had nearly silenced its opposition for almost two centuries. Like d’Holbach, irreligious thinkers could take comfort in the progressive accumulation of scientific knowledge, as Fontenelle argued for in *Digression sur les anciens et les modernes* (1688).<sup>240</sup> D’Holbach implies that the advances in science both legitimated his own monist materialism and, at the same time, confirmed the principles put forward two thousand years earlier.

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In one last argumentative performance, d’Holbach uses Spinoza to get at pantheism as the natural idea of the divinity espoused by the ancients. D’Holbach admired Spinoza as one of the few moderns to engage rationally with the world and found Spinoza’s monism to be his unique contribution to philosophy as well as an instance of the ancient view of pantheism.

D’Holbach understands Spinoza’s system to be essentially monistic in that Spinoza allows only one substance and to be pantheistic (or Spinozistic) in that this one substance, God, is the universe. He quotes Spinoza’s fourteenth proposition in the *Ethics*: “There can be, or be conceived, no other substance but God.”<sup>241</sup> D’Holbach finds this proposition to mean that God is a material being, not external to matter, contained in nature, subject to nature’s laws, and is coeval with matter and motion. This corporeal being *is*, according to d’Holbach, no more than nature, which is no more than matter and motion, and which was the original divinized nature of the ancients before Christianity

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 305.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 304.

<sup>240</sup> Charles Frankel, *The Faith of Reason: The Idea of Progress in the French Enlightenment* (Columbia, N. Y.: King’s Crown Press, 1948), 104-105.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 214. D’Holbach cites the latin form: “Præter Deum neque dari neque concipi potest substantia.”

anthropomorphized motion and separated the universe into two separate spheres. D'Holbach explains this concept in the first two chapters of the second volume and praises the ancients for deifying nature and her energy that propels matter.

Pantheism is the natural idea of the Divinity conceived before Christianity, which explains why the term only appears in the title of the sixth chapter and not the text itself. As Miguel Benítez understands d'Holbach's view: "ce Dieu étant matière dans la matière, et par conséquent la nature même, cette doctrine s'apparente étroitement à celle des premiers sages, même si elle a été dénaturée par les théologiens du fait de la perte du sens de l'enseignement originaire."<sup>242</sup> The implication here is that Spinoza's monism is identical to the ancients; both divinize nature and matter. Consequently, d'Holbach comfortably labels Spinoza a "celebrated atheist" because he does not "separate the motive power from the universe [or] give it to a being placed out of the great whole, to a being of an essence totally inconceivable, and whose abode cannot be shown."<sup>243</sup> The "god of modern mythology, rejected by Vanini, Hobbes, Spinoza, and some others" is the "*concealed* motive-power of nature."<sup>244</sup>

We can now see more clearly how d'Holbach turns the thought of Descartes and Malebranche into Spinozism. D'Holbach quotes Descartes' view that God is "said to have extent but as we say of fire contained in a piece of iron, which has not, properly speaking, any other extension than that of the iron itself." This is a clear indication that there is no other God than nature, which is pure Spinozism. Descartes does not explain how God can exist by himself and he overturns the idea of the Creation because God could not have created something with which he is coexistent; therefore, Descartes is an atheist, a term coequal with Spinozist. Malebranche is also a partisan of Spinozism because he explains that "the universe is only an emanation from God...that all the action and every operation which takes place in all nature is himself; in a word, that God is every being, and the only being." This is the language of Spinoza and makes perfect sense when understood as such. Nevertheless, Malebranche extends his philosophy to

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<sup>242</sup> Benítez, "Un atelier immense sans artisan intérieur?" 274. Much of this paragraph is inspired by Benítez' analysis of what pantheism meant to d'Holbach.

<sup>243</sup> d'Holbach, *The System of Nature*, 214 and 304.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 303, footnote. Italics mine.

assert the role of faith in understanding the true existence of matter, bodies, and God himself. He attempts to reconcile the liberty of man with the motive power and “continued creation” (occasionalism) of God that would be better explained with his initial equation of God with nature.

For d’Holbach, Malebranche and Descartes resemble Spinoza because they fundamentally conflate God with nature.<sup>245</sup> Spinoza’s system, implied or not, is atheistic because he asserts one material substance that governs the universe. As a logical consequence, the pantheistic conception of nature adored by the ancients is refurbished, though hardly diminished, by Spinoza to a greater degree and Malebranche and Descartes to a lesser degree. Benítez argues: “Même s’il pose la question en termes de mots, il est evident que d’Holbach n’entend pas parler ici de la possibilité d’appeler l’univers indistinctement la nature ou Dieu, comme le font les panthéistes. Le Dieu théologique dont il est ici question n’a nulle réalité. Ou plutôt, comme d’Holbach s’est évertué à le démontrer, toute sa réalité, tout son être, est l’être de la nature.”<sup>246</sup> In agreement with his argument for the ancients, though more subtle, d’Holbach places Spinoza, Malebranche, and Descartes in line with ancient views of nature as the totality of the universe.

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I have shown how d’Holbach built his system from the bottom up through the principles of motion, attraction and repulsion, and their extension into the human being. Specifically, Toland, Newton, Stahl, Rouelle, Needham, and Hobbes provided d’Holbach with the equipment to construct *Système de la Nature*. D’Holbach also used a rhetorical and argumentative strategy to attack his opponents’ views. By distinguishing two different Newtons, he was able to show how Newton the natural philosopher, the empirical and epistemologically modest Newton, penetrated to the heart of nature’s laws and extracted the evidence from which d’Holbach could harness his system. Furthermore, d’Holbach was able to take back Newton the natural philosopher from the Newtonianism of Samuel Clarke as well as use the popularity of the ancients to point toward the failings

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<sup>245</sup> This stance opposes d’Holbach’s position that Descartes is responsible for dualism and shows both d’Holbach’s occasional inconsistency and the different ways Descartes’ philosophy can be read.

<sup>246</sup> Benítez, “Un atelier immense sans artisan intérieur?” 281.

of Christian modernity. I have tried to avoid depicting d'Holbach as a passive recipient of ideas and influences and have preferred to understand his use of other thinkers and their ideas in ways that these thinkers may not have intended. This way of approaching *Système de la Nature* attaches the importance of an idea to its intended use by d'Holbach and maintains the contextual relevance of his evidence and rhetoric.

### Conclusion

*Système de la Nature* can be viewed as a compendium of eighteenth-century philosophy, science, moral theory, and irreligious thought. It is true that by 1770 most of the ideas that went into d'Holbach's work had been enunciated, in published or clandestine form, but d'Holbach's integration of so many disparate ideas was unique and multifaceted. No one presentation of the Enlightenment—whether the Enlightenment in unity or in tension—in the historiography of this subject fully captures *Système de la Nature*. R. J. White's dismissive claim that d'Holbach's atheism could be recorded on a single sheet of paper misses the complexity of *Système de la Nature*. Ira Wade makes d'Holbach a part of the Enlightenment, but mainly as its radical expression of atheism. For Cassirer and Becker, d'Holbach's work is retroactive and essentially anomalous. Gay and Hazard do not marginalize d'Holbach, and tend to appreciate his thought, but do not devote many pages to explaining his philosophical positions. D'Holbach is not properly placed into the Enlightenment because these historians have sought to unify the Enlightenment through the thinkers' common goals and methods. In none of these assessments does d'Holbach appear to be an active thinker who constructed his system in an individualistic way. Nevertheless, *Système de la Nature* displays a vast erudition, a peculiar use of ideas, and, if read thoroughly, presents to the historian of the Enlightenment a panoply of ideas. This panoply helps us to understand the Enlightenment as a more diverse era of intellectual activity, rather than one uniform movement.

The works of Jacob and Israel view d'Holbach as the capstone of a fermentation and spread of materialistic ideas from the late seventeenth century, but do not examine his work. Jacob explores the tension between the Radical and moderate Enlightenment in a narrow fashion by limiting her categories to a small group of thinkers in the Dutch Republic during the first half of the eighteenth century. She is modest in her appraisal of the connection between d'Holbach and the Radical Enlightenment: "Certainly d'Holbach's political writings, although hostile to courts and the abuse of monarchical authority, should not be described as republican...D'Holbach's materialism obviously

had other roots, some of them in the life sciences, besides what he read in Toland.”<sup>247</sup> D’Holbach built his metaphysics and materialism from ideas provided by Toland and the Radical Enlightenment, but did not rely solely upon them. He used other implements and forged a socio-political philosophy that differed from the republicanism of the Radical Enlightenment.

Israel, on the other hand, extends the categories of Radical, Moderate, and Counter Enlightenment too far. Like Jacob, he sees the Enlightenment in tension with itself, but misrepresents the thought of many thinkers in order to make them fit his categories. Israel views d’Holbach as a sponge soaking up the ideas of the Radical Enlightenment and regurgitating them in step. Israel’s package logic, neatly summarized into eight cardinal principles, assumes that the radicals adhered to every point. This body of thought was put in place by Spinoza primarily, but spread by Bayle, Fontenelle, and a host of clandestine manuscripts. This does not accurately capture the thought of d’Holbach. Not only was d’Holbach heavily influenced by the English radicals Toland, Collins, and Tindal, but he was inspired by Hobbes’ work to create a physical and moral system. D’Holbach was not a republican, as Israel found the Radical Enlightenment to be, and he believed along with La Mettrie and Diderot that the physiological organization of humans allowed for a certain level of social and sexual stratification. He did not reject Newton’s natural philosophy, only the physico-theological system to which it was attached. When we use d’Holbach’s *Système de la Nature* to look backward at the Enlightenment, we get a different picture than that which Israel gives us.

The picture that we get is one of a creative thinker reshaping the scientific and philosophical ideas of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in order to stand a system beside that of Christianity. D’Holbach used the work of Toland, Stahl, Rouelle, Needham, and Newton to ground a system on scientific certainty. His fundamental axiom, derived from Condillac, was the inherent motion of matter. From this, he followed what he viewed to be a logical and empirical demonstration of the properties of matter, the organization of bodies, the centripetal force that guides bodies, and the lessons that should be drawn from nature of man’s interaction with man. D’Holbach was inspired

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<sup>247</sup> Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*, 262-263.

most by Hobbes to create a broad, materialistic system that connected the physical and the moral. D'Holbach also made an argument for his system by recalling the golden age of the classical era and by harnessing the power of Newtonian physics over and above that of Newtonian physico-theology as espoused by Samuel Clarke.

In *Système de la Nature*, d'Holbach takes on a wide variety of thinkers that I have not discussed. D'Holbach argues against the moral theories of Lord Shaftesbury, David Hume, and Adam Smith, who espoused an interior moral sense. Because their moral theories are not founded on experience, d'Holbach claims, these "moral philosophers ought to have concluded, that what is called *moral sentiment*, *moral instinct*, that is innate ideas of virtue, anterior to all experience of the good or bad effects resulting from its practice, are mere chimerical notions."<sup>248</sup> D'Holbach also disparages the ethical positions of Bernard Mandeville, a member of Israel's Radical Enlightenment, who shows in the *Fable of the Bees* that "vices have identified themselves with nations, and have become necessary to them," and La Mettrie (author of *L'homme machine* as d'Holbach says), who "has reasoned upon morality like a madman."<sup>249</sup> These statements are important because they not only show d'Holbach engaging the thought of his contemporaries, but also that d'Holbach disagreed with the ethical positions of Mandeville and La Mettrie, two fellow radicals.

An examination of *Système de la Nature*, like that performed here, also forces us to conclude that the many ways in which historians have categorized the thinkers of the Enlightenment are tenuous. From Wade's confusing effort and Cassirer's tendency to marginalize, to Israel's attempted distinction between a Radical, Moderate, and Counter Enlightenment, we are presented with a multiplicity of interpretations and angles that rival the diversity of the Enlightenment itself. I have considered two different ways in which historians have dealt with the Enlightenment. The first approach attempted to define the Enlightenment through the common goals or methods of its thinkers. The second approach sought to understand the Enlightenment through the tensions among its thinkers. In searching for unity, historians of the first approach marginalized certain

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<sup>248</sup> d'Holbach, *The System of Nature*, 80.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 310, footnote.



thinkers like d'Holbach who did not conform to a shared method or goal. Historians of the second approach rightly began their analyses with the competitive struggle within the Enlightenment. But, Israel particularly has forced thinkers into categories that their thought may not bear. In the case of d'Holbach, neither approach adequately situates him as an intellectual who reshaped the thought of his predecessors and contemporaries to create a total system of physical and moral activity.

When Anthony Grafton praised Israel for putting forward a "Grand Historical Thesis of the sort that historians once reveled in, but that has largely gone out of style,"<sup>250</sup> one wonders the price that Grafton is willing to pay in historical accuracy. At best, we can side with Norman Hampson's loose definition of the Enlightenment: "The movement was in a state of continual change...for the Enlightenment was less a body of doctrine than a number of shared premises from which men of different temperaments, placed in different situations, drew quite radically different conclusions."<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Anthony Grafton, "Review of *Radical Enlightenment*," *The Times Literary Supplement* (Nov. 9, 2001): 3.

<sup>251</sup> Norman Hampson, "The Enlightenment in France," in *The Enlightenment in National Context*, eds. Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich, 41-53 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 41.

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## **Appendix**

## **Appendix**

### *The System of Nature or Laws of the Moral and Physical World (1770)*

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