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The Enlightenment: John Messlier

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THE ENLIGHTENMENT: JOHN MESSLIER

Today many exceptions seem obvious relevant to the historic advance of secularism from the Renaissance to the Reformation followed by the Enlightenment. However, a basic transition seems to have sustained itself over many decades in the modern recovery of religious disbelief ultimately derivative of pre-Socratic philosophy consolidated by Aristotle. For example, the two years of 1610-1611 seem to have set the stage for all three of the later historic epochs, the Renaissance followed by the Reformation and Enlightenment. The King James translation of the Bible in 1611 might have been a major achievement of the English Reformation just preceding Milton, but Shakespeare's final play, "The Tempest," produced the same year, effectively brought the English Renaissance to a close as suggested by its secular wording, "What's past is prologue," "Oh brave new world," and, most tellingly, "We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep" as opposed to the promise of heavenly infinitude. Similarly, Ben Jonson's stage satire "The Alchemist," first produced in 1610, invoked a level of skepticism that both anticipated and exceeded the conventions of Restoration comedy that followed.

On the other hand, two unfortunate young Englishmen, Bartholomew Legate and Edward Wightman, were actually burned at the stake in 1611 for espousing Unitarian views. Their shared executions apparently terminated this medieval practice in Great Britain, but in doing so they nevertheless exemplified the most repulsive aspect of the Reformation obviously connected with the Inquisition just a few centuries earlier. Not more than a century later, a remarkable example of historic simultaneity

occurred in the American colonies, when Jonathan Edwards and Benjamin Franklin lived as contemporaries but with values and opinions radically different from each other. With vigorous righteousness, Edwards renewed the witchcraft trials of the Reformation on American soil at roughly the same time as Franklin promoted a variety of secular issues typical of the Enlightenment—from democratic governance to the invention of electricity. In effect Edwards primarily addressed religious concerns in light of rigorous puritanism whereas Franklin featured innovations expressive of a strictly secular perspective.

In France, Pyrrhonism and Academic skepticism, the two principal modes of skepticism inspired by classical sources, more or less took root as a clandestine secular tradition throughout the seventeenth century, while a more confrontational hostility to religion gathered momentum that culminated with the deist trend in both England and France. It has been estimated that as many as a hundred manuscripts were in circulation in France advocating the deist cause as early as the turn of the eighteenth century. This might have occurred as a two-decade lag compared to the deist trend in England, but with essentially the same collective purpose in opposition to Biblical authority. Catholicism continued to prevail in France as promoted by experienced priests, but the Bible's textual validity apart from the role of the Church became a serious matter for debate by French deists as well as sympathizers in England. Spinoza initiated this task in continental Europe, and England's assortment of deists pursued the cause inspired by the writings of Blount, Toland, and Collins. For if the Bible itself was vulnerable to challenge based on its many contradictions and inaccuracies, an entire millennium of scholastic philosophy could also be rejected.

In effect a tectonic shift in collective ideology seems to have occurred based a deist rejection of numerous orthodox Christian

assumptions. As promised in his first book, *Against the Academics*, St. Augustine had long since initiated scholastic philosophy as much as anything to dispense with the secular transgressions of classical philosophy that had yet to be eradicated except for Plato's doctrine. Similarly, Christianity itself could be challenged in later centuries because of the fallibility of Biblical information beyond minor textual adjustments. Just as Augustine's scholarship had played a substantial role in consolidating the collective rejection of secular philosophy, the likelihood of flaws in the Bible encouraged the resurrection of secular philosophy at odds with religious demands. For if the Bible could be shown to have contained a large variety of probable historical inaccuracies, many centuries of scholastic effort rooted in Biblical assumptions could be dismissed on a similar basis.

In effect the deist trend in France emerged as an underground movement just a few years after its earlier breakthrough in England. Within the second decade of the eighteenth century, the anonymous text *Le Militaire philosophe, ou difficultés sur la religion, proposes au Malebranche, prêtre de l'Oratoire* was circulated to challenge the likelihood of Christ's miracles as well as transubstantiation, the Apocrypha, and various Christian practices similar to those of pagan religion. As early as 1722, N. Fréret published a *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe* that also featured the resemblance between Christianity and contemporary pagan religions. Between 1722 and 1740, C. Dumarsais published *Analyse de la religion chrétienne* to point out discrepancies between the Old and New Testaments as well as rejecting the validity of various miracles and prophecies attributed to Christ. At about the same time, Lévêque de Burigny published *Examen critique des apologistes de la religion chrétienne* to explore in depth the divergent beliefs of early Christian sects as well as a random assortment of miracles and prophecies.¹ All of these authors were deists in the sense that they continued to accept the notion of a single all-powerful God,

but most of them questioned the final validity of the Bible as well as various aspects of Christian doctrine relevant to God's final authority. They did not go as far as Spinoza's pantheism in identifying God with the universe itself, but they did concur with his critique of the Old Testament in his *Treatise on Religion and Political Philosophy*, and they extended his skepticism to the New Testament as well.

In his pivotal two-volume *History of Freethought*, published in 1936, J.M. Robertson devoted eight pages of small print to list all the French publications he could find relevant to freethought inclusive of deism and atheism through the entire eighteenth century.² Aside from their contents, the numerical momentum of the published texts that remain available today in the French language suggests an obvious rise and fall of this remarkable hundred-year trend:

1700-1709	5
1710-1719	5
1720-1729	3
1730-1739	11
1740-1749	13
1750-1759	25
1760-1769	44
1770-1779	25
1780-1789	15
1790-1799	7

The definitive pattern of growth and decline disclosed by these numbers compiled by Robertson indicates modest activity during the first three decades, a doubling during the next two decades followed by an unprecedented and seemingly inexplicable surge over the following three decades, and finally an obvious relapse to earlier levels over the final two decades. Exactly why? As in the

history of English deism that had already come to the fore at the beginning of the century, at least a dozen secular publications by French iconoclasts seem to have been in wide circulation during this period. The trend would seem to have reached its peak by the 1760s, at least a decade and a half preceding the American Revolution, and, significantly, all the major French secularists during this period died at least half a decade preceding the 1789 French Revolution. In retrospect, the pivotal figure who seems to have been the most responsible in having initiated this major transitional phase was Jean Meslier, an obscure French priest who only declared his radical atheistic stance upon his death.

JEAN MESLIER

As an otherwise inconspicuous Catholic village priest, Jean Meslier (1664-1729?), effectively promoted an uncompromising version of atheism based on the radical assumption that no God whatsoever exists that exercises ultimate authority pertaining to human destiny as well as the physical universe as a whole. Many centuries earlier, classical Greek atheists had maintained this stance on a similar basis as documented in my recently published history, *An Archaeology of Disbelief*. Perhaps a half dozen Greek philosophers shared this conviction, and during the Middle Ages more than a thousand years later a large number of so-called heretics were burned at the stake for their impiety in adhering to comparable assumptions. Later, during the Renaissance, Spinoza's pantheism served as a major departure from Christian orthodoxy, and such English figures as Thomas Kidd, Christopher Marlowe, Sir Walter Raleigh, and the Earl of Rochester were also justifiably suspected of atheism. These individuals seem to have freely expressed their doubts at least in private conversations among themselves and their friends, but there is no evidence of their commitment to impiety in their published writings. A few such as both Collins and Tindal among English deists even seem to have

been willing to identify themselves as atheists now and again, if in fact this disclosure a couple hundred years later is based on hearsay evidence rather than published secular arguments.³

Meslier accordingly took a major step forward by having introduced an entirely new and more credible secular perspective. A generation younger than Bayle, he was outspoken in his posthumous rejection of the God concept and entirely willing to explain why despite his status as a provincial village priest who had suppressed his opinion for his entire life. Upon his suicide, he seems to have carefully left on his kitchen table three identical copies of his elongated atheist text bearing the title, *Testament: Memoir of the Thoughts and Sentiments of Jean Meslier*, all of them having been composed in his meticulous handwriting. At least one of them—and probably more—somehow escaped destruction, unlike Tindal's final text that was earlier destroyed by the Bishop of London before it could be published. The destiny of Meslier's many arguments was more fortunate, especially since copies sooner or later fell into the hands of Voltaire and the rest of the philosophes linked with the French Enlightenment.

Meslier began his *Testament* by profusely apologizing to his parishioners for his life-long hypocrisy as an atheist in the guise of a Christian priest, and then he launched into a thorough rejection of Christian orthodoxy mixed with his indignation against the local aristocracy committed to Christian prerogatives. Contrary to received opinion it was not Diderot but Meslier who first declared the wish, "that all the rulers of the earth and all the nobles be hanged and strangled with the guts of priests."⁴ Today, his pronouncements continue to be no less striking than at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Unlike Bayle and most other English deists, he took pains to make his ideas entirely clear, but after his death. Of course his posthumous reputation would entail both social disgrace and certain damnation if his secret atheistic vision turned out to be wrong, but he accepted the risk, and in

retrospect his choice seems to have been entirely justified in light of modern scientific evidence. In any case, his friends were able to bury his body quickly enough in an unmarked grave, his books somehow escaped destruction, and his future destiny occurred as predicted in his book's final words:

I already take almost no part in what is done in the world. The dead, whom I am about to join, no longer worry about anything, they no longer take part in anything, and they no longer care about anything. So, I will finish this with nothing. I am hardly more than nothing and soon I will be nothing."⁵

And true enough, one suspects, except for the substantial impact of his remarkable manuscript in future years.

Copies of Meslier's text apparently circulated among an expanding readership for three decades before Voltaire provided a modified version of its argument within a simpler arrangement without fully disclosing Meslier's uncompromising commitment to secular analysis as well as his own mounting indignation against the oppressive role of the aristocracy seemingly justified by orthodox religion. In 1761 Voltaire published a truncated version roughly half the length of the original text with the addition of the subtitle *Extrait des Sentiments de Jean Meslier*. In retrospect he seems to have wanted to provide a reasoned deist manifesto that formulated a secular stance more aggressive than his own relatively moderate version. In any case, both versions of Meslier's text apparently benefitted from a wide circulation.

A decade later, in 1772, the most controversial atheist at the time (who successfully kept his identity unknown throughout his life), Baron d'Holbach, published Meslier's entire manuscript in an entirely new edition with the title *Le Bons Sens*. Moreover,

D'Holbach fully restored and featured all atheistic passages but excluded the social and political critique. In one format or another the text seems to have circulated throughout later years, and in 1864, more or less a century afterwards, a complete but flawed 3-volume version was published as *Le Testament de Jean Meslier*. Only in the eighteen-seventies did a couple of accurate French editions become available of the complete text first intended by Meslier.⁶ And Anna Knoop finally translated Voltaire's truncated version into English in 1878, thus becoming Meslier's received standard edition among English and American freethinkers until Michael Shreve's "modern" translation of the complete original text as late as 2009, published by Prometheus Books.

Along with major organizational differences, the thematic and stylistic differences between Meslier's full text and Voltaire's partial version are so distinct that the two can and ought to be treated as essentially different books, both of them fully worth the effort. Meslier had organized 97 chapters arbitrarily divided into nine topic areas relevant to religion in general inclusive of Christian doctrine and practices, whereas Voltaire's version had expanded the organization to 206 more or less aphoristic chapters in somewhat random order. Meslier's original version as translated by Shreve featured elongated and somewhat repetitious analysis laced with cautious indignation, whereas Voltaire's version translated by Knoop offered a more aphoristic response steeped in aristocratic contempt. Also, many of Meslier's argumentative sentences seem to have been enlarged to almost a couple paragraphs in length, as opposed to Voltaire's sentences which tended to be more aphoristic with a sophisticated and relatively impatient audience in mind. Both authors were entirely disdainful of religious orthodoxy, but Meslier's stance can be characterized as sustained argument vigorously rooted in outright disbelief as opposed to Voltaire's relentless scorn.

It should be emphasized, however, that the most significant difference between the two texts was that Meslier wrote as an outspoken atheist whereas Voltaire carefully provided what could be interpreted as a deistic revision of Meslier's intended argument. In Voltaire's text as translated by Knoop, the Hebraic version of God promoted by Christians was described as an evil authority without disclosing the even more radical alternative intended by Meslier that no God whatsoever exists. In effect, Voltaire quoted Meslier to criticize the god concept held by "Christ cultists," but without conceding that no god at all existed in Meslier's opinion. By implication, if God could possess eternal existence, why not the universe itself without God. Voltaire also mentioned the choice of individuals driven to the verge of atheism by what seemed the cruelty of an angry God:

The priests have made of God such a malicious, ferocious being, so ready to be vexed, that there are few men in the world who do not wish at the bottom of their hearts that this God did not exist.⁷

Voltaire neglected to mention that this radical possibility had already been taken into account by Meslier himself.

Meslier postponed his effort to make his atheism plain until the inception of his third chapter at least in the Shreve translation, with two previous chapters having served as long introductory essays that provided a broad secular perspective as suggested by the following passages:

Know, then, my friends, that everything that is spouted and practiced in the world for the cult and adoration of gods is nothing but errors, abuses, illusions, and impostures. All the laws and orders that are issued in the name and authority of God or the gods are really only human

inventions, just as all the beautiful celebratory pageants and sacrifices and divine services and all the other superstitious practices of religion and devotion that are done in their honor.

. . . And what I say here in general about the vanity and falsity of the religions of the world, I do not say only about the foreign and pagan religions, which you already regard as false, but I say it also about your Christian religion because, in fact, it is no less vain or less false than any other. I could say, in a way, that it is even more vain and more false than any other, because there is, perhaps, none so ridiculous or so absurd in its principles and principal points than this one, and none so opposed to Nature itself and good judgment.⁸

Arguably, Meslier was simplistic in his critique of religion as having been the creation of “shrewd and crafty politicians” rather than a collective practice of an entire population that is derivative of tribal custom preceding early and modern civilization as later confirmed by the numerous findings of modern anthropologists and archaeologists beginning with Edward Tylor and Robert Lowie. Then again, Meslier’s argument was quite specific relevant to both ancient and modern civilization, when “crafty politicians” had little difficulty putting “crude old culture” to work in support of their seemingly justifiable leadership. Not surprisingly, Meslier suggested that the pursuit of military conquest almost inevitably depends on religion’s intensification to justify this collective imposition.⁹ Also, he almost incidentally suggested that the most warlike nations are too often the most religious.

In any case, Meslier was clearly an uncompromising atheist. In Chapter 59 he insisted in italics, “*That there is no God,*” and he repeated this categorical insistence in chapters 73, 74, 93, and 94. His atheism was everywhere evident in his original text, whether

declared or not, and it took exceptional talent on Voltaire's part in softening its analysis to suggest a somewhat conciliatory deist rejection of orthodox religious beliefs and practices.

Meslier primarily justified his loose argument of *Testament* by proposing eight atheistic "proofs" each of which demonstrates that religion and Christianity in particular are in all respects entirely susceptible to "errors, illusion, and imposture." His first proof served to concede that all religions have played justified roles in their hostility to oppressive political authority. His second proof thereupon questioned the excessive reliance on doctored scriptures and religion's similarity to pagan miracles. The third proof similarly questioned the validity of visions, sacrifices, and divine revelations typical of all religious belief. The fourth featured the obvious inaccuracy of Old and New Testament prophecies as well as the dependence on allegorical interpretation to justify factual deficiencies. The fifth specifically examined Christian concepts of original sin, the holy trinity, the incarnation of God, the concept of transubstantiation, the paradoxical existence of hell created by a presumably loving God, and the excessive level of commitment emphasized in the character and teachings of Christ. The sixth proof, obviously an extension of the first, challenged the use of to ensure the secular authority of royalty and the aristocracy. The seventh emphasized the falsity of Christian ontology, and finally the eighth attacked the notion of an immortal soul in light of an essentially Lockean version of human psychology anticipated by Aristotle.

In his second proof, Meslier more specifically rejected the validity of miracles by exploring in depth all the Old and New Testament examples, then compared them to the almost countless miracles featured by other religions to prove their own unique authenticity, many of them having occurred preceding the New Testament and even earlier than the Old Testament. The pagan

miracles of different societies turned out to be very similar--if not the same--raising the issue how so many different religions could have obtained tangible verification of the singular authority of their particular creeds. Meslier goes on to cite the ancient Jewish historian Josephus to the effect that dependence on miracles actually “depreciates” a belief and “makes it suspect,” as also insisted much later by Gabriel Naudé, “. . . we do not have to bother refuting them because they are self negating easily enough by their own absurdities.”¹⁰ Later, Meslier uses Naudé’s quotation of Agobard, the bishop of Lyon in 833 to the effect “that there is now nothing too absurd or ridiculous for Christians to believe more easily than the pagans ever did in their errors and idolatries.”¹¹ Meslier argues that this susceptibility also applies to Christ’s miracles. Concluding--

. . . Since it would be a very great stupidity to put faith now in the so-called miracles of paganism, so likewise is it a very great stupidity to put faith in those of Christianity, seeing that they both come from the same principle of errors, illusions, lies, and impostures.¹²

Paradoxically, as suggested by Josephus, the validity of a religion might be judged by its dependence on stories of miracles and divine intervention. The more excessive the needed credulity, the greater the risk of fraud, and with Christianity obviously vulnerable to this particular consideration.

In any case, it is the seventh proof—from chapter 59 to 86 (pp. 341-530)--that provides the core of Meslier’s philosophical argument extending from his deterministic explanation of the physical universe to his insistence on the pursuit of a secular ethics presumably superior to the submissive obedience of “Christ-cultists” and “god-cultists” in general. As proposed by such ancient philosophers as Melissus, Parmenides, and Aristotle in his

later works upon cosmology, Meslier also insists that the physical universe has existed forever without any beginning and therefore without having been created by God: “. . . There is no more reason to say that the world and everything in the world was created by God than to say that they have always been of themselves and that they were formed and arranged of themselves in the state they are in, matter having been of itself for all eternity . . .”¹³ In other words, if it is possible that God’s manifestation can be infinite— with no beginning, no end--why not the universe itself devoid of its creation by God? And if nothing whatsoever has ever been created *ex nihilo* on this basis, the need for a creator becomes redundant, so the infinite god-concept in turn becomes no less redundant at least to that extent.¹⁴ Meslier did not verbalize this extra step, but his assumption encouraged such speculation, for example by Nietzsche a hundred fifty years later.

The overall size of the universe, Meslier insisted, is no less infinite than its duration. It lacks any kind of an outer edge imposed by God on either a spatial or temporal basis. Moreover, he argued, a spiritual God without physical extension is very likely incapable of creating the infinite extension of the universe. In other words, “What has no extension cannot have created extension, which is necessarily infinite.”¹⁵ Once again the *a priori* existence of an infinite universe in and of itself makes more sense than the concept of a God who supposedly preceded this universe and still exists in an eternal realm of His own beyond it. Simply enough, if God can be infinite, why cannot the universe itself be without a God. Moreover, the identity of such a God unavoidably defies the truism that “what always remains the same, always does the same.”¹⁶ If this is true, and if God exists, such an infinite being has very likely created countless alternative cosmic realms additional to the universe we inhabit. Moreover, if God’s role was in having created the universe in its entirety, this presumed authority becomes totally redundant if the universe has been

eternal without having been created by any kind of God. For if God can be eternal, why not the universe itself without any need for God? All in all, Meslier, argued--

Again to say that this being [God] is everywhere in its immensity although it is found nowhere and to say, nevertheless, that it has no parts that correspond to the different parts of all this immense space that it contains, but that it is all entire everywhere because of its immensity and all entire in each part of this immense space because of the simplicity and indivisibility of its nature--this is pushing the absurdities over the line, it is saying and making things up that are not only the most impossible but also the most absurd and ridiculous that one could imagine.¹⁷

Also essential to Meslier's materialist teleology was his insistence that "being and matter are the same thing." More specifically, he argued, being (i.e. existence) is the "substantial" manifestation of everything while the manner of being is the "formal" aspect of everything. Today, his more or less Cartesian distinction seems primitive compared to the principles of relativity and quantum mechanics suggested a few decades ago by Einstein and others. However, there is no difficulty in extending his definition of matter to the composition of the universe as both an energy field and an infinite aggregate of particles as demonstrated by the alternative theories of light by Newton and Huygens, also by the ancient theories of atomism first suggested by Democritus as compared to the infinite physical extension featured by Aristotle and Melissus. For if the basic "stuff" of the universe consists of a multitude of particles comprising an energy field, Meslier's definition seems entirely defensible even today.

Meslier did take into account Democritus' notion of atoms that had been revived for modern use a few decades earlier by

Gassendi, “that matter exists and can be divided into an infinite number of parts that you can, if you want, call atoms; and it is sure that the parts of matter actually move.” Two paragraphs later, Meslier added, “So, it is much more appropriate to attribute to matter itself the force that it has to move than to vainly and needlessly be burdened with so many insurmountable difficulties searching outside it for a false principle of its movement.”¹⁸ In other words, nature’s extraordinary harmony is entirely the product of natural laws arranged and modified by determinate physical control:

Natural reason proves that everything that is most beautiful, most perfect, and most wonderful in nature can be made by the natural laws of movement alone and by the different configurations of the parts of matter variously arranged, united, and modified or combined in all kinds of beings that make what we call the world.¹⁹

Without exception, all these presumed miracles derive from the “moving force of matter alone” rather than anthropomorphic intelligence, and this materialist force necessarily involves chance and fortune rather than divine intelligence:

To say that all these things are conducted in their movements and in the production of their effects by a supreme intelligence is a pure illusion and a pure fiction of the human mind and is not based on any true reason, since we clearly see that all this can be done naturally by the moving force of matter alone, which moves itself and acts blindly everywhere without knowing what it is doing or why it is doing it.²⁰

In a later chapter Meslier once again featured the connection between nature's beauty and the dynamics between mass and force in nature:

It is also clear and evident that all these different effects or works that we see in Nature are made by the movement of matter and by the different assemblies, unions, and modifications of its parts. . . . And since this movement of matter can only come from matter itself . . ., and since this union and division of matter is only a natural result of its movement and of the regular or irregular movement of its parts, it follows that the formation itself of all these beautiful and admirable works of nature does not at all demonstrate or prove the existence of an infinitely perfect God.²¹

And just a page later:

Is it not possible that all this multitude of parts always moves in this way without being mixed up and running into one another, joining, binding, stopping, and attaching together in many kinds of ways and so starting to compose all these different works that we see in Nature, which could then be perfected and strengthened by the continuation of the same movements that started to produce them.²²

Meslier went on to insist that water, fire, smoke, plants, animals, and all productions of nature can be explained on this basis-- pretty much as Bacon had suggested a century earlier.

Meslier also seems to have anticipated the link between atomism and the issue of force—now described as energy—by means of an explanation that anticipated future investigation of sub-atomic behavior.²³ He rejected the “first mover” suppositions of creationists as “false principles,” though of course today's Big

Bang theory more or less seems to confirm these suppositions. He did concede that God could have performed an event comparable to the “big bang” in order to set the stage for the entire process that has followed at all levels of existence. Then again, he argued that it seemed more likely this occurrence took place without the involvement of any kind of God.

As earlier suggested, Meslier’s analysis can be further expanded based on the likelihood that countless universes do exist in a more inclusive plenum, all of which first manifest themselves through the inception of big bangs dominated by force (or energy) and much later culminate as black holes of concentrated matter a hundred billion years later, give or take a few thousand. Relative to the cosmos in its entirety, each universe is little more than an enormous surge of energy that consolidates, then turns to ash in a vast realm of other such flashes that rise and fall in a comparable manner. Here the anthropomorphic god-concept becomes, if anything a personification too miniscule to explain the vast cosmic dynamics that occur on what might seem an inconceivable scale.

By emphasizing the authority of a God both perfect and all-powerful as explained by Meslier, creationists effectively accept the paradox that God is morally unassailable despite anything that “goes wrong” in light of His limitless authority. Perhaps resulting from France’s social crisis at the turn of the eighteenth century, Meslier insisted that a truly virtuous all-powerful God could not have permitted society and its institutions to have declined to such an extent--

Now, it is evident that the world is almost completely filled up with evils and miseries. The men here are all full of vices, errors, and viciousness; their governments are full of injustices and tyrannies. We see a torrent of vices and viciousness; discord and division reign almost everywhere.

The just and innocent are oppressed and groan almost everywhere; the poor are almost everywhere in death and suffering, without support and consolation.

On the other hand, we often see the vicious, impious and those most unworthy of living, nevertheless enjoy prosperity, delight and honors, and an abundance of all kinds of goods. . . . So it is evident that the world is almost everywhere filled up with nothing but evils, miseries, vices, viciousness, cheating, injustice, robbery, larceny, cruelty, tyranny, imposture, lies, discord, and confusion, it is a certain and evident proof that there is no infinitely good and wise being who is capable of bringing suitable relief and, consequently, there is no all-powerful being who is infinitely good and wise, as our Christ-cultists claim.²⁴

In Meslier's opinion the contradiction as described here is thus unsustainable, demonstrating the non-existence of God beyond Descartes' concept of a "malicious demon," not that Meslier seriously took into account this particular vision of supernatural authority:

By wanting to make [God] perfect and . . . to make him seem grand, admirable, and incomprehensible in all things and in all ways, they destroy him. And by wanting to strip him and relieve him of all imperfections and all real and imaginable qualities, they annihilate him and truly reduce him to nothing. Why do they not just honestly recognize and simply admit that he is nothing and does not exist, seeing that he really is nothing and really does not exist?²⁵

Paradoxically, Meslier suggested, god cultists end up proving nothing in their effort to explain everything. They actually engage in a collective delusion that Meslier described as shared psychosis:

“Believing that they become wiser in spiritualizing their God so finely, they become more insane than they were,” since “their so-called sovereign beatitude consisted only in an imaginary happiness and bliss and not in a real and true happiness and beatitude.”²⁶ Moreover, Meslier insisted, Christ-cultists try to explain away the multitude of “vices and viciousness in both men and beasts by emphasizing God’s status as an infinitely perfect being that permits evil to exist in order to obtain spiritual perfection. If a generous and loving God actually exists, Meslier suggested, “Would it not be a far greater good and far more worthy of the glory, honor, and pleasure of an all-powerful, infinitely perfect God to make all his creatures completely happy and perfect?” But of course such a God does not exist, so an elaborate lie becomes necessary to describe the role of a perfect God in charge of an imperfect universe.²⁷

According to Meslier, Christ-cultists and most other god-cultists primarily advocate the delusion of God’s supposed power to rectify Nature’s blatant disparities by rewarding its victims with eternal joy and punishing their persecutors with eternal punishment in hell—not to omit the possibility of a third realm, Purgatory, as a preliminary zone of punishment less horrific than hellfire. All three of these transcendent zones supposedly exist in an extraterrestrial domain totally inaccessible to mankind except upon dying. Meslier thus rejected this almost universal belief in an afterlife featured by most religions as “a kind of madness that often enough approaches fanaticism.”²⁸ Instead, he resorted to essentially the same argument as the ancient natural historian Pliny already proposed in the first century A.D.: “All men are in the same state from their last day onward as they were before their first day, and neither body nor mind possesses any sensation after death, any more than it did before birth.”²⁹ In Meslier’s words,

[After death} we will all return to the state we were in before we were born or before we existed, and just as at that time we thought about nothing, imagined nothing, and were nothing, so also after death we will think about nothing, feel nothing, and imagine nothing any more."³⁰

Moreover, we are already "experts" in death, having been devoid of life for countless centuries before they were born. After we die, we can expect to return to exactly the same limbo from whence we came, just as devoid of consciousness as before we were born. Surprisingly, Meslier quoted Ecclesiastes to confirm his assessment:

The dead know nothing and they wait for no reward; no feelings of hatred or love or any desire at all affect them and they take part no longer in all that is done in the world. Go, then, in peace and joy to enjoy the goods that you have! Drink and eat the fruits of your labor in peace and rejoice with your friends and loved ones; for, that is all the good you can hope for in life.³¹

In effect, live while you can, for when you're dead you will be truly lifeless--just as dead as all other creatures upon their life's cessation.

Meslier went on to ask how and why a God who puts so much emphasis upon virtue and obedience in mankind cannot "make itself sufficiently known to men. . . . For, if it makes itself sufficiently known, no one would be ignorant of, deny, and doubt its existence; and so, there would not be as many disputes as there are among men about its so-called existence."³² Why, in effect, did God intentionally confuse people able to recognize all the contradictions implicit in Christian belief when these were exactly the people the most deserving of acceptance in heaven? Meslier

complained, in fact, that, “. . . there is not any divinity [among modern societies] that makes itself or its intentions and will sufficiently known to men.”³³ The simple answer, Meslier proposes, is the fact that such a God simply does not exist.

In his fifth proof Meslier actually went so far as to ridicule Christ as an ignorant impostor, “a nobody who had no talent, no mind, no learning, no skill, and who was appropriately despised in the world.” Moreover, he argued that those who believe in Christ “ascribe divinity to a fool, a madman, a wretched fanatic, and a miserable scoundrel.”³⁴ Meslier instead praised the accuracy of contemporaries who described Christ as having been possessed by a demon.³⁵ Moreover, he ridicules Christ’s pretension that he himself was the one and only son of God destined to rule Jews eternally.³⁶ If the god-concept was totally misguided because there is no God—His identity has always been entirely mythical, and it could only have been hopelessly delusional in predicting, for example, that his disciples could observe him “coming down from the sky with his angels, full of glory and power, with the majesty to judge [i.e. to govern].”³⁷ No less delusional, Meslier added, was Christ’s promise to his disciples that they would soon join him by “sit [ting] on a dozen thrones to judge” and that all those who abandoned their families to follow him would thereby achieve eternal life—in other words go to heaven.³⁸ Surprisingly, Meslier neglected to mention Christ’s prediction of Judgment Day³⁹ when he would actually sit at the side of God in the task of consigning almost the entirety of mankind to eternal hellfire. Also relevant, Meslier suggested, was Christ’s assertion, “I am the way: I am truth and I am life; no one comes to the Father except by me.”⁴⁰ Here Christ declared in effect that access to heaven was only possible through belief in his unique role as the Son of God. On Judgment Day all individuals unable to accept Christ’s unique holy status would be consigned to hell by God, a fate that would supposedly occur within a single lifetime of Christ’s warning.

Again, Meslier insisted, if the god-concept was defunct, all of this prophetic wisdom could also be discounted.

In his eighth and final proof, Meslier challenged the concept of the soul. According to orthodox believers, the relationship between physical anatomy and the incorporeal soul necessarily converges in the human mind, effectively confirming the belief in God's final authority in spiritual matters. Needless to say, Meslier vigorously rejected this rationale, especially as articulated by Descartes and Malebranche, both of whom refused to accept the secular definition "that matter is capable of thinking, willing, feeling, desiring and loving, or hating, etc." on the assumption that all these mental functions transcend the physical dimensions of length, width, and depth.⁴¹ In Meslier's opinion, the key oversight of these and others identified as Cartesians was their failure to recognize that "the modifications alone of matter produce all our thoughts, knowledge, and sensations."⁴² This distinction enabled Meslier to extend the principle of consciousness to animals as well as humanity:

. . . It is not in any measurable extension or in any external shape of matter that the knowledge and sensations of men and beasts consist, but in the various internal movement, agitations, and modifications that matter has in men and beasts.⁴³

Meslier also extended this principle to all processes of thought, specifically listing desire, love, hate, joy, sadness, pleasure, pain, fear, and hope, and he proposed that this mental capacity is more advanced in some than in others: "These modifications consist in the faculty or facility that some living beings have to think and reason; and this faculty or facility is greater, i.e., clearer and freer, in some more than others."⁴⁴

As explained by Meslier, the mind derives from “subtle, restless matter,” and upon death it loses its capacity to sustain these modifications. Meslier quotes Montaigne to the effect that “all thoughts, judgments and alterations of our bodies . . . are continual,” and explains more specifically, “that the soul is not a spiritual, intelligent and sentient substance in itself and it is not a substance different from matter.”⁴⁵ Instead, it is entirely derivative of matter but at a more intricate level:

What we call “our soul” can be nothing else but a portion of the finest, subtlest, and most restless matter of our body, which is mixed up and modified in a certain way with another, cruder matter with which it composes an organic body and by its constant restlessness gives it life, movement, and sentiment.⁴⁶

And exactly so. For it turns out that Meslier’s words “agitation” and “modifications of matter” far better describe the biological activity that takes place with the occurrence of thought than the less functional dynamics of spiritual transcendence. If brain cells can be identified as “matter,” and if the interaction among these material brain cells can be identified as an intricate process of neural “modification,” then Meslier’s materialist definition of mind (hence soul) is far more relevant to thought than the Platonic notion of spiritual transcendence.

What neither Descartes nor Meslier knew was the simple truth now taken for granted that the brain is very much a part of the body and that it functions based on an intricate interplay of electricity in transmission, in effect little more than an intricate neural process ultimately linked with magnetism. At the time, nobody had any idea of electricity’s essential role in mental behavior dependent on the human brain, roughly three pounds in weight, containing at least 15 to 33 billion neurons with up to

10,000 synaptic connections apiece all of which are more or less interconnected by a sufficient flow of electricity. For in fact numerous studies indicate the human brain includes as many as two hundred billion brain cells called neurons, each of which possesses countless dendritic spines that serve as filaments linked with other brain cells. Whatever the number, each of these brain cells transmit messages to others by means of an electrical circuit rendered possible by the metabolic interaction between oxygen and glycogen, both of which are delivered to the brain by means of blood carried by the arteries. As all students in freshman college physiology learn (myself included), neural interaction occurs and thinking becomes possible as long as blood delivers oxygen and glycogen to the brain. Once this delivery ceases, for example resulting from a stroke or heart attack, the mind terminates, often just about as quickly as a TV screen goes dark when it is turned off.

Afferent nerves deliver to the brain all the sense organ data needed to think and make choices and efferent nerves deliver the appropriate messages to the limbs that can do what is needed. This applies to walking, eating, and throwing stones, but also to emoting and thinking abstract thoughts. All consciousness is mental behavior effectively steered by the brain, even for creatures as primitive as worms and bedbugs, whose neural apparatus functions at a far more simple level. Granted many exceptions, the complexity of thought is more or less proportional to the number of brain cells brought into play on this basis. People might be better and more effectively endowed than other creatures, but this is entirely a matter of degree, and in all instances the brain's function is strictly connected with that of the body. For brain cells are necessarily comparable to other body cells in their structure and performance dependent on glycogen and oxygen. So, yes, Meslier's abstractions anticipated modern scientific findings with remarkable accuracy. Today, any scientific grant proposal to

measure the soul's ineffable manifestation in its departure from the human body once death occurs would be ruinous to the reputation of whoever ventures to submit such a proposal.

Meslier fully conceded human fallibility as the best and most defensible excuse for religion. In the simplest possible words he summed up the paradox of human nature with almost universal relevance, "People need to be ignorant of many truths and believe in many falsehoods."⁴⁷ So exactly what kind of an ethics did he propose to bridge the inevitable gap between believers and non-believers? One suspects he was willing to tolerate the freedom of compulsive believers to confirm their dependence on religion, but not at the expense of non-believers who reject the gratification provided by obvious misinformation. Honesty and human decency remained the most important traits to be cultivated in Meslier's opinion—more or less as featured by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. As the best and most appropriate human behavior instead of religion, Meslier accordingly in chap. 96, more or less his book's conclusion,

You will be happy if you follow the rules, maxims, and precepts of this only wise and true religion. But I dare say, although I am not prophet, that you and your descendants will always be miserable and unhappy as long as you follow any other religion than this. You and your descendants will always be miserable and unhappy as long as you suffer the domination of tyrants and the errors, abuses, and vain superstitions of the cult of the gods and their idols.⁴⁸

As Meslier fully expected, religion and patriotism have continued to thrive over the following centuries among the world's populace at large. Nevertheless, the possibility of human improvement does seem possible among the populace able and willing to enhance their circumstances on a truly objective basis. It was Meslier's

unique achievement that his manuscript released upon his suicide set the stage for a substantial breakthrough in secular idealism first in France during the Enlightenment, later elsewhere across the world.

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¹ Morehouse, 3-8; Wade, 529-30.

² Watts & Co., 1936, vol. 2, pp. 835-43.

³ See George Buckley's *Atheism in the English Renaissance*, Don Cameron Allen's *Doubt's Boundless Sea: Skepticism and Faith in the Renaissance*, and John Redwood's *Reason, Ridicule and Religion: the Age of Enlightenment in England, 1660-1750*

⁴ Shreve ed, p. 37.

⁵ 593.

⁶ Shreve, 25-26—see also the Preface by Onfrey, pp. 17-24.

⁷ Voltaire, 249.

⁸ p. 45.

⁹ pp. 326, 336-38.

¹⁰ 85.
¹¹ 127.
¹² 132.
¹³ 357.
¹⁴ pp. 370, 394.
¹⁵ 90-91.
¹⁶ 392
¹⁷ p. 397
¹⁸ 411
¹⁹ 463
²⁰ 469, 471
²¹ 495-6
²² 497
²³ 410-11
²⁴ 434
²⁵ 417
²⁶ pp. 424-25, 429
²⁷ 530
²⁸ 431
²⁹ Book. VI, LV, vol 1., p. 633
³⁰ p. 430]
³¹ Ecc. 9: 5-9
³² p. 446
³³ 446
³⁴ 204--see also chap. 33, pp. 209-15
³⁵ John 8:48, 52, 57, and 6.53-60
³⁶ John 3.16, 17--quoted by Meslier 207-8
³⁷ Matt 24.30-31
³⁸ Matt 19.28-29
³⁹ Matthew 24.29-34
⁴⁰ John 14.6
⁴¹ pp. 535-36
⁴² 540

⁴³ 554

⁴⁴ 556-57

⁴⁵ 547, 552

⁴⁶ 570

⁴⁷ p. 567

⁴⁸ 585-86