

# Lecture

(5.3.2020, 17-18:30h)

## The origins of atheism in the early modern period and the Enlightenment

– Winfried Schröder –

The denial of an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good creator of the universe, i. e. atheism as a *philosophical* stance (in demarcation from heterodoxy, anticlericalism, anti-Christian views or blasphemy) raises several issues which historians of philosophy have not yet unanimously resolved. Opinions over its origin in the history of European thought diverge widely. According to influential scholars (Minois; Whitmarsh) there has been a continuous tradition of philosophical atheism since classical antiquity. Others (Buckley; Hyman) regard atheism as a much younger phenomenon, which appeared only in the heyday of the Enlightenment with Diderot and d'Holbach. An equally controversial question concerns the factors that contributed to the emergence of atheism. There is no consensus on the role played by deism (the attack on the Bible or revelation in general), scepticism / pyrrhonism, the rise of natural science (which made theism explanatorily superfluous), or a political agenda (which aimed at abolishing Christianity and its institutions understood as pillars of repressive political dominance esp. of the *ancien régime*).

These questions will be addressed on the basis of 17th- and 18th-century sources which were discovered and made available during the last decades (see the edition series by McKenna, Mori/Mothu and Schröder) but have largely been neglected by contemporary anglophone scholars (with the notable exception of Jonathan Israel): the corpus of the so-called *littérature clandestine*, texts distributed illegally in the 'literary underground' of the 17th and 18th century (McKenna/Mothu; Paganini). These include the earliest atheist treatise known, the anonymous *Theophrastus redivivus* [1659], the writings of the first identifiable atheist, Matthias Knutzen [1674], the flagships of the Radical Enlightenment, the two treatises *Traité des trois imposteurs* and *De tribus impostoribus* (both late 17th c.) as well as attacks on theism employing sophisticated epistemological and proof-theoretical arguments (e.g. in the anonymous *Symbolum sapientiae*).

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Anonymus: *Theophrastus redivivus*, ed. Guido Canziani / Gianni Paganini. Florence 1981.

Anonymus: *Symbolum sapientiae*, ed. Guido Canziani / Winfried Schröder / Francisco Socas. Milan 2000.

Anonymus [Johann Joachim Müller]: *De tribus impostoribus*, ed. W. Schröder. Stuttgart 1999.

Anonymus: *Traité des trois imposteurs*, ed. Winfried Schröder. Hamburg 1994.

Bloch, Olivier (ed.): *Le matérialisme du XVIIIe siècle et la littérature clandestine*. Paris 1982.

Buckley, Michael J.: *At the origins of modern atheism* [1987]. 2<sup>nd</sup> New Haven et al. 2010.

Hyman, Gavin: *A short history of atheism*. London 2010.

Hyman, Gavin: *Atheism in modern history*, in: Michael Martin (ed.): *The Cambridge companion to atheism*. Cambridge 2007, 27-46.

Israel, Jonathan: *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the making of modernity, 1650-1750*. Oxford 2001.

- Israel, Jonathan: *Enlightenment contested. Philosophy, modernity, and the emancipation of man, 1670-1752*. Oxford 2006.
- Knutzen, Matthias: *Schriften und Materialien*, ed. Winfried Schröder. Stuttgart 2010.
- McKenna, Antony (ed.): *Libre pensée et littérature clandestine*. Paris / Oxford 1993ff.
- McKenna, Antony / Mothu, Alain (eds.): *La philosophie clandestine à l'âge classique*. Oxford / Paris 1996.
- Minois, Georges: *Histoire de l'athéisme. Les incroyants dans le monde occidental des origines à nos jours*. Paris 1998.
- Mori, Gianluca: *L'ateismo dei moderni. Filosofia e negazione di Dio da Spinoza a d'Holbach*. Rom: Carocci 2016.
- Mori, Gianluca / Mothu, Alain (eds.): *Philosophes sans dieu. Textes athées clandestins du XVIIIe siècle*. Paris 2005.
- Paganini, Gianni: *Introduzione alle filosofie clandestine*. Roma / Bari 2008.
- Schröder, Winfried: *Ursprünge des Atheismus [1998]*. Stuttgart 2012.
- Schröder, Winfried (ed.): *Philosophische Clandestina der deutschen Aufklärung*. Stuttgart 1994ff.
- Whitmarsh, Tim: *Battling the gods: the struggle against religion in ancient Greece and Rome*. London 2015.
- Winiarczyk, Marek: *Diagoras of Melos: a contribution to the history of Ancient Atheism; translated from Polish by Witold Zbirohowski-Kościa*. Berlin / Boston 2016.

## Workshop

(6.3.2020, 11-12:30h)

The sceptical tradition and the origins of atheism: the *Symbolum sapientiae*

– Winfried Schröder –

The anonymous late 17th-century *Symbolum Sapientiae* is one of the most elaborate philosophical treatises of the *littérature clandestine*, “perhaps the intellectually most formidable text” of early atheism (Israel, *Enlightenment contested*, p. 168). Most importantly, the *Symbolum* displays a specimen of a variety of atheism hitherto unknown. Drawing upon arguments deriving from the skeptical (pyrrhonian) tradition, its author rejects theism – instead of dogmatically denying the existence of God – on the basis of careful methodological reflection. The relevant sections of the text will be provided in Latin and English.

Anonymus: *Cymbalum mundi sive Symbolum sapientiae*, ed. Guido Canziani, Winfried Schröder and Francisco Socas, Milan, Franco Angeli, 2000.

Anonymus: *Symbolum Sapientiae* (Wien, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, cod. 11539). *La clave de la sabiduría (Un tratado clandestino del siglo XVII)*. Edición bilingüe de Francisco Socas, Huelva, Universidad de Huelva, 2015 [Exemplaria classica, 6].