

RECENSIÓN

Marcelino Rodríguez Donís, *Materialismo y ateísmo. La filosofía de un libertino del siglo XVII*, Sevilla, Secretariado de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Sevilla, 2008.

More than sixty years ago, Lucien Febvre wrote that to ask if anyone in the sixteenth century was an atheist was “une question mal posée”.¹ What he meant was that people in that century did not have the words, syntax, and perspective to give the question meaning. It was an age in which people wanted so much to believe that they could not disbelieve, he wrote. And he was surely at least partly right: we, too, cannot even imagine some things that might become common knowledge in the future. Unfortunately, Febvre’s notion became the orthodoxy for many decades, and spilled over into interpretations of the seventeenth century. But by the seventeenth century, it was false. Too many scholars do not catch the change, because they limit themselves to the published texts of the period. But they are only the tip of the iceberg.

This volume brings back for our philosophical attention one of the great atheistical manuscripts of the seventeenth century, titled *Theophrastus redivivus*. Nothing is known about the author. The text was written in Latin in 1659, and there are only four known manuscripts. The first modern edition was published in 1981, but it has not been widely read because there is no complete translation into a vernacular European language.² The extensive paraphrasing in this volume will make its content accessible to many more

¹ Lucien Febvre, *La Problème de l’incroyance au XVIe siècle: le religion de Rabelais* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1942, 1968).

² *Theophrastus redivivus*, eds. Guido Canziani and Gianni Paganini (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1981). There is an important preliminary reading of the cosmology of the manuscript in Miguel Benítez, *La Face cachée des Lumières* (Paris: Universitas, 1996), 421-431.

readers than ever before, and the cover announces that a translation into Spanish is forthcoming. The critical analysis in this volume brings out its importance for early modern philosophy.

It used to be another orthodoxy that any early modern philosopher worth his salt was a Platonist, an Aristotelian, a Stoic, or an Epicurean. But this judgment rests on a very tendentious idea that those schools are natural kinds, essentials found in the world, and that philosophy must reproduce them exclusively. But what evidence do we have of that? Rodríguez Donís's work shows us that our anonymous author drew on the skeptics and the cynics, too. And he was not alone: Gianni Paganini has very recently edited a journal issue with articles on the contemporary implications of each of Stoicism, Epicureanism, skepticism, and cynicism.³

Drawing heavily on Sextus Empiricus, Lucian (which brings out the importance of humor in philosophy), Machiavelli, Bodin, Pomponazzi, Vanini, and others, the anonymous author of this text was very eclectic. Some philosophers have thought that this must represent muddled thinking, and that anyone who thinks like this is simply not a good philosopher. But Michael Albrecht has shown that there were many good philosophers of eclectic tastes from ancient Greek times on, with strong representation in the seventeenth century.⁴ The original Greek Theophrastus has a place in his history,⁵ but *Theophrastus redivivus* does not, although Rodríguez Donís's analysis suggests that it should. What if the best philosophy for life is eclecticism? Our anonymous author might come out pretty well if the standard for philosophy is taken to be its ability to help us live a good life, as recent philosophers such as Pierre Hadot and Alexander Nehamas have insisted.⁶ The last book of the manuscript is a prescription for living according to nature, and much of it is inspired by the ancient cynics.⁷

Even if he might be right about how to live, the anonymous author is not always fully consistent nor right about his philosophy. Rodríguez Donís sup-

³ Gianni Paganini, ed., Special Issue on Hellenistic philosophy, *Iride* 56, 2009.

⁴ Michael Albrecht, *Eklektik: eine Begriffsgeschichte mit hinweisen auf die Philosophie- und Wissenschaftsgeschichte* (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1994).

⁵ Albrecht, *Eklektik*, 77, 120, 244, 698.

⁶ Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Pierre Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995).

⁷ On the cynics, see William Desmond, *The Greek Praise of Poverty* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2006).

plies a critical analysis that brings out many an aporia in his argument. But we can often learn as much from a philosopher's mistakes as from his successes.

This text belongs in the center of the ongoing reevaluation of the development of philosophy in the seventeenth century. It was a pivotal text in libertine and atheist culture. It contributed to a sea change in available mental furniture in seventeenth century philosophy and intellectual history that is only recently coming to light. We used to read Molière as a Christian, but now we can read him as a libertine.⁸ Some of the roots of Martin Mulso's radical early enlightenment in Germany may be found here: two of the four manuscripts we have are found today in Wien, and all of them seem to be derived from a copy collected for Prince Eugene by Baron Hohendorf.⁹

Winfried Schroeder's major work on atheism foregrounds the *Theophrastus redivivus*.¹⁰ Gianluca Mori's convincing claim that Pierre Bayle was a philosophical atheist, even if he might have been a sentimental Calvinist, drew on this text.¹¹ But where Bayle thinks that atheists could make up a thriving republic, the anonymous author thinks that widespread atheism would lead to anarchy. Finally, Gianni Paganini's masterful philosophical analysis of seventeenth-century skepticism, well aware of the *Theophrastus redivivus*, has given us a new view of the development of such skepticism that changes our view of Descartes.¹²

Jonathan Israel did not mention *Theophrastus redivivus* in the first volume of his massive reinterpretation of the radical Enlightenment as stemming in all important respects from Spinoza, even though it falls within the dates 1650-1750 that he claims to cover.¹³ The fact that it was written before Spinoza published anything undermines the claim that Spinoza was so uniquely important. In the second volume of his ongoing project Israel cites *Theophrastus redivivus* a few times as representative of Italian naturalism –the school of Pom-

⁸ Antony McKenna, *Molière dramaturge libertine* (Paris: Champion, 2005).

⁹ Martin Mulso, *Moderne aus dem Untergrund: radikale Frühaufklärung in Deutschland, 1680-1720* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2002), 3, 21, 25, 215.

¹⁰ Winfried Schröder, *Ursprünge des Atheismus: Untersuchungen zur Metaphysik- und Religionskritik des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1998), 22, 28, 76, 120, 144, 151, 180, 193, 218-232, 246-247, 273-278, 297-298, 404-407, etc.

¹¹ Gianluca Mori, *Bayle philosophe* (Paris: Champion, 1999), 221.

¹² Gianni Paganini, *Skepsis: Le Débat des modernes sur le scepticisme* (Paris: Vrin, 2008); see also Gianni Paganini, *Les Philosophies clandestines à l'âge classique* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2005).

¹³ Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

ponazzi, Cardano, Bruno, and Vanini– but claims that Spinoza went beyond it.¹⁴ He points out that Pierre Bayle considered *Theophrastus redivivus* part of the chain that connected the materialist philosophy of ancient Greece with his own age.¹⁵

This work is very important for the history of political philosophy because it brings together many of the arguments for the theory that religion is the product of political manipulation, from euhemerism to Machiavellianism. It is also important to see that the philosophically radical author of this text was not politically radical. Like many libertines of the seventeenth century tradition, as for Richard Rorty in our day, philosophy is something for the elite to keep at home while the masses are taught pious lies to keep them in line.

The foregoing attempt to situate this new book in the growing literature on clandestine philosophy in the seventeenth century could not do justice to the richness, nuance, and detail of this book. If any of these topics have piqued the reader's interest, the reader is advised to pick up this book and read it.

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¹⁴ Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1750* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 481, 625.

¹⁵ Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 628.