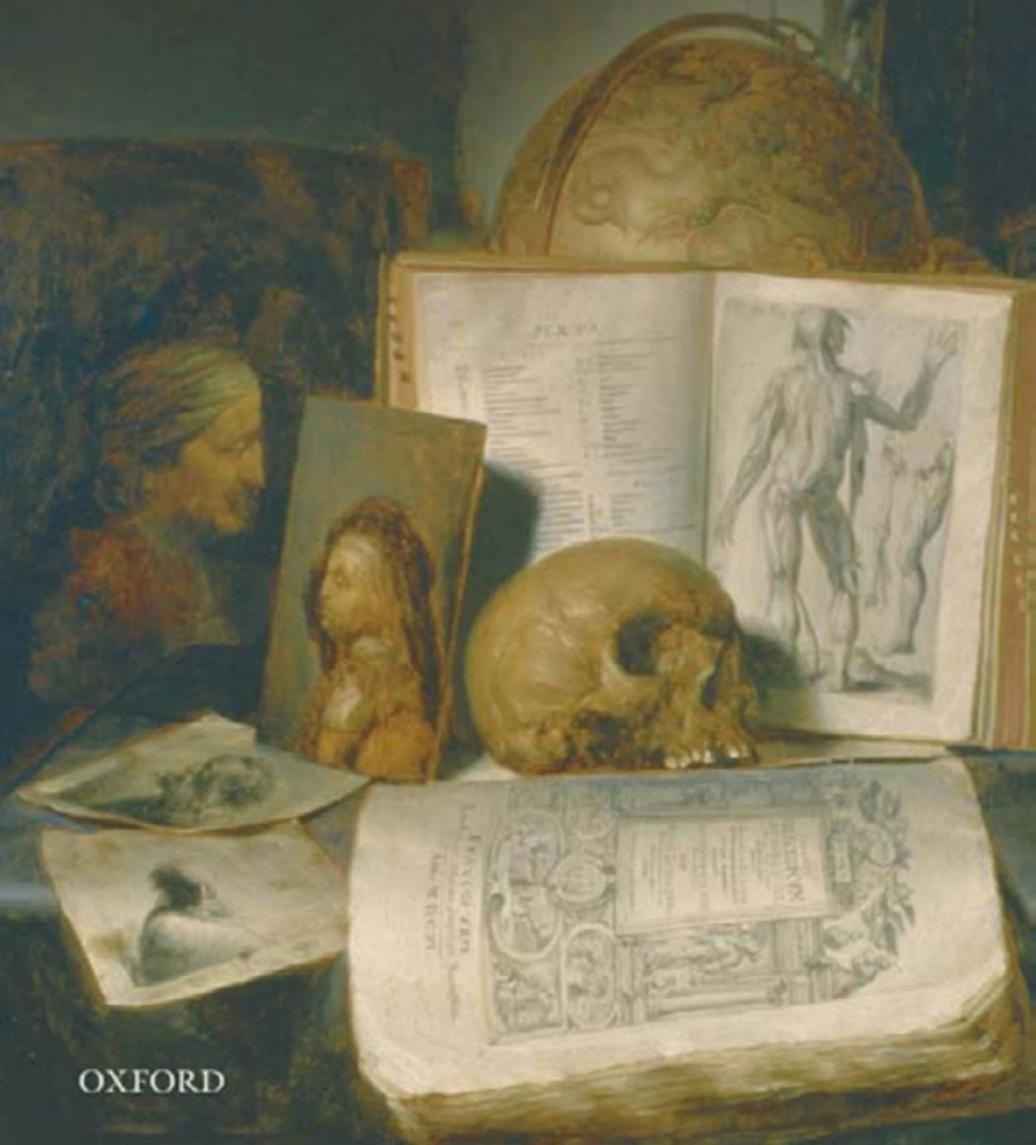


# Bodies of Thought

Science, Religion, and the Soul in the Early Enlightenment

ANN THOMSON



OXFORD

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For Nina and Tommy Thomson

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## Preface

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

<sup>1</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, ch. 6, 3.d.

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

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

<sup>2</sup> Murphy, 'Human Nature: Historical, Scientific, and Religious Issues'.

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