The Reception of French Materialism in Enlightenment Germany, 1739-1789

A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the Faculty of Humanities

2013

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Word Count: 79,967
Works frequently cited: Editions and Abbreviations

Unless otherwise stated, the following editions are used, abbreviated as follows:

*Correspondance Diderot*  *Correspondance de Diderot*, ed. by Georges Roth and Jean Varloot, 16 vols (Paris: Minuit, 1955-70).


*GGA* *Göttingische Zeitungen von gelehrten Sachen* (1739-53) and the *Göttingische Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen* (1753-1801).


*OP* [Julien Offray de La Mettrie], *Œuvres philosophiques*, ed. by Francine Markovits, 2 vols (Paris: Fayard, 1987).

*SVEC* Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century (Banbury, Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1955-).

The works of d’Holbach all appeared anonymously or under pseudonyms in his lifetime. To avoid a surfeit of brackets, his name will appear as the author in references. It should be noted, however, that these are all posthumous attributions, unknown to contemporary readers.

All internet sources were last accessed in September 2013.

All primary sources are quoted as published, including any idiosyncratic spelling, grammar and syntax, particularly common in eighteenth-century German. Unless otherwise stated, italics in quotations are in the original.
Abstract

This thesis assesses the reception in Germany of writings by four eighteenth-century French materialists: La Mettrie, Diderot, Helvétius and d’Holbach. Challenging the current orthodoxy which opposes a moderate, theologically-informed German Enlightenment to the radical, anticlerical French Enlightenment, the research presented here focuses on attempts in Germany to use the materialism of these French writers in a positive manner. Using the concept of cultural transfer, this study investigates the material circulation of their writings and how their ideas were discussed in Germany. It aims to show that there was in fact a set of German thinkers keen to circulate French ideas on materialism.

The research firstly assesses the availability (both in French and in German translation) of texts by the French authors, and reactions to their often controversial writings, both in review journals and texts by well-known German philosophers. This generally reveals a negative judgment of the French texts, which are dismissed as frivolous or dangerous. A range of examples shows how the literary-philosophical establishment consistently marginalised French materialism, which was seen as potentially dangerous to morality. The German socio-political framework will be studied, in order to understand if censorship or trading conditions were a barrier or a support to the circulation of French texts. After this first chapter on diffusion and discourse analysis, there are four additional chapters investigating the German reception of particular aspects of materialist thought, which analyse both the French writings, and the German context into which they were brought. Chapter two deals with sensualism and the idea of thinking matter. Chapter three analyses the reception of materialist conceptions of active matter, where motion is posited as an essential property of matter. Chapter four examines the materialist refutation of immortality of the soul. Chapter five assesses how the French writers’ ideas on morality, informed by their materialism, were transferred to German discourse.

The German proponents of French materialism are all much less well known than detractors such as Lessing, Goethe, Reimarus and Mendelssohn. They include Karl Spazier, Heinrich Friedrich Diez, Johann Heinrich Schulz, Karl von Knoblauch and Michael Hißmann, among others. Each of these writers, occupying different positions in the literary-philosophical field, interacts with French materialist texts in different ways, and works differently to introduce these ideas into their own texts, using different strategies, including quotation and translation. Some seem to quote these works without attribution; others boldly declare their French sources as authoritative figures to support their positions.

This thesis, therefore, aims to prove that in spite of the social and intellectual constraints on eighteenth-century German publishing, there were a number of German writers who, using a range of strategies, managed to circumvent these constraints and introduce these French ideas, either by appropriation, or by direct quotation, thus introducing the ideas of these previously condemned French philosophes into German discourse.
Declaration

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Acknowledgments

I wish to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to my two supervisors, Professor David Adams and Dr. Judith Purver. They have always known when to give me freedom to work things out for myself and when to offer guidance. Their joint support and assistance in preparing this thesis has been invaluable at every stage. I also extend my gratitude to Professor Stuart Jones and Professor Jim Bergin, who have both acted as advisors to the project with enthusiasm and insight.

I wish to thank the AHRC for supporting this thesis in the form of a doctoral scholarship. I also wish to thank the trustees of the William Robson-Scott Travelling Scholarship for their award, which enabled me to undertake research in Berlin in August 2012. In addition, I thank the organisers of the Graduate School which took place at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach in April 2012, where I was able to carry out further research.

I would like to thank my parents for their support.

Finally, I wish to thank Mathilde, to whom this work is dedicated.
Introduction

French radicalism and German conservatism?

Julien Offray de La Mettrie, a French doctor and philosopher born in Saint Malo in 1709, lived a short yet eventful life. Aged thirty-five, he published a treatise, *Histoire naturelle de l’âme* (1745), which roused such condemnation that he left his employment as a doctor with the *Gardes Françaises* and was forced to flee to Holland, where he had previously studied under the famous Dutch doctor Herman Boerhaave. Refusing to relinquish his atheistic views, he wrote *L’Homme machine* (1748), an even more controversial work defending the thesis that man was nothing more than a machine, playing on Descartes’s distinctions between humans and animals/automatons. So incendiary was this work that La Mettrie was forced to flee Holland, supposedly the most tolerant country in continental Europe, and travelled on to Prussia, where he was afforded refuge at the court of Frederick the Great. It was in Prussia that he penned the *Discours préliminaire* to the first edition of his complete works (1751), where he defined his mission: ‘écrire en philosophie, c’est enseigner le matérialisme.’¹

The notion of ‘teaching materialism’ leads us to wonder what kind of impact La Mettrie and other materialists had in these German surroundings. Unfortunately, La Mettrie’s own life came to an abrupt end in November 1751, when he died of food poisoning arising from hedonistically consuming a *pâté de faisan aux truffes*, which turned out to be toxic.² His consistent and explicit advocacy of materialism meant that few regretted the loss, happy that such a provocative agitator would no longer be around to scandalise Berlin.

The presence of La Mettrie, as one of the first of a series of *philosophes* to be invited to Berlin to discuss philosophy with Frederick, caused Germans to question the reputation of the Court. Lessing remarked in a letter to his publisher Friedrich

¹ La Mettrie, *Discours préliminaire*, OP, I, 18.
² This potentially mythical cause of death was widely circulated, with some linking La Mettrie’s death to his professed Epicureanism and hedonism. A recent history of his time in Berlin has suggested that he was poisoned by enemies, keen to silence his materialist views. See Pierre Pénisson, ‘La Mettrie à Berlin’, in *Matérialistes français du XVIIIe siècle. La Mettrie, Helvétius, d’Holbach*, ed. by Sophie Audidière and others (Paris: PUF, 2006), pp. 91-99.
Nicolaï that Berlin was notorious for being rather too accommodating to freethinking. It is significant that freethinking was seen as a particularly French trait, exploding ‘in Eurem französierten Berlin.’

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Frederick showed himself to be a paragon of tolerance by consistently extending asylum to persecuted philosophes like La Mettrie, Toussaint, de Prades, and by inviting Voltaire, d’Argens, Maupertuis, d’Alembert and Helvétius to his court. However, this also heightened conservatives’ fears that Prussia was becoming a hotbed of atheism.

Goethe is perhaps also responsible for initiating a distinction between the anticlerical lumières and the theological-compatible Aufklärung which has lasted to this day. Referring to one of the century’s most audacious atheist treatises, d’Holbach’s *Système de la Nature* (1770), Goethe claimed it had no influence on him or his contemporaries:

so war der heftige Streit französischer Philosophen mit dem Pfafftum uns ziemlich gleichgültig. Verbotene, zum Feuer verdammte Bücher, welche damals großen Lärmen machten, übten keine Wirkung auf uns. Ich gedenke statt aller des *Système de la nature*, das wir aus Neugier in die Hand nahmen. Wir begriffen nicht, wie ein solches Buch gefährlich sein könnte. Es kam uns so grau, so cimmerisch, so totenhaft vor.

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5 On de Prades, see Jeffrey D. Burson, *The Rise and Fall of Theological Enlightenment: Jean-Martin de Prades and Ideological Polarization in Eighteenth-Century France* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).

Goethe had acquired a copy of the much talked about text whilst in Strasbourg with friends in 1770, but was disappointed with its content. Goethe’s and Lessing’s observations not only link the philosophes with libertine and irreligious ideas circulating in Berlin; they also evoke the notion of a barrier between French irreligion and German piety. Goethe thus claims there was no influence of French anticlericalism on him or his contemporaries. This view has held currency ever since. Dilthey, for instance, held that the influence of the French philosophes was restricted to Frederick’s residence at Sans-Souci, describing the French and German philosophies as ‘zwei Flüsse, die, obwohl in einem Bett vereinigt, sich doch niemals mischen.’ How can two bodies of water not mix when in the same bed? The present study will investigate the confluence of these two streams and serve as a corrective to this cliché, in that we will follow the diffusion of French materialism in Germany, both bibliographically and ideologically.

The view that French materialism was completely ignored and without influence in Germany was also put forward by Feuerbach, albeit in reference to nineteenth-century materialism: ‘Es ist nichts verkehrter, als wenn man den deutschen Materialismus vom Système de la Nature, oder gar von der Trüffelpastete la Mettrie’s ableitet.’ Feuerbach sees German intellectual history as proceeding in a hermetic environment, devoid of any foreign influence. This particular form of Sonderweg history sees the Reformation, and thus Martin Luther, as the progenitor of all later German thought: ‘Der deutsche Materialist ist also kein Bankert, keine Frucht der Buhlschaft deutscher Wissenschaft mit ausländischem Geist, er ist ein echter Deutscher, der bereits im Zeitalter der Reformation das Licht der Welt erblickte.’ The present thesis does not pertain to nineteenth-century philosophical movements, yet it would be remiss not to comment on this statement, above all given that Feuerbach mentions two authors central to our study. Firstly, in insisting that the Reformation and Luther laid the seeds for scientific materialism, Feuerbach is merely talking of long-term antecedents, and the question of direct heritage and

9 Feuerbach, x, 118. As Marx W. Wartofsky, Feuerbach (Cambridge: CUP, 1977), p. 441, note 11, points out, however, Feuerbach himself used d’Holbach and La Mettrie as sources.
influence is completely ignored. Furthermore, by insisting on the native influences and ruling out cross-cultural interaction, Feuerbach’s analysis is flawed, as we will show in this thesis in our analysis of reactions to, and discourse generated by, the presence of French materialist texts in Germany. This is not to say, of course, that there was no ‘native’ radicalism in Germany prior to importation of French materialist texts.

More recent historians have also considered that French materialism had ‘keine Wirkung’ on its German readers. Specifically, Richard van Dülmen, in his study of the Illuminaten, though recognizing the strong influence of the writings of d’Holbach on this group, felt that the Illuminaten were very much the exception in Germany. In relation to the group’s leader, Adam Weishaupt, van Dülmen states that ‘sein Bekenntnis zu der radikal atheistisch-materialistischen Lehre der Aufklärer Helvetius und Holbach, die er auch die höchste Weisheit des Bundes pries, dürfte in seiner Zeit in Deutschland ebenso eine Seltenheit bilden.’ Joachim Whaley has recently followed this judgment, though in more measured terms: ‘The strict materialism of the Paris-based German émigré Baron d’Holbach (1723-1789) found few adherents in the Reich; Spinoza, by contrast, was a constant source of theological inspiration.’ Whaley does, however, indicate the gap which this study starts to bridge when he states that: ‘the true extent of radicalism is unclear.’ Indeed, though cases of direct endorsement of French materialist ideas may be rare, they fully deserve attention.

It thus appears, firstly, that many historians are agreed that France’s Enlightenment, by way of its anticlericalism, was radical. This is exemplified by Georges Gusdorf: ‘L’anticléricalisme des Lumières est un phénomène français ou

10 Richard van Dülmen, Der Geheimbund der Illuminaten (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1975), p. 26. Although van Dülmen does not claim that Weishaupt’s was the only such case, his comment could be misleading as it potentially excludes consideration of other cases outside of the Illuminaten. Manfred Agethen, Geheimbund und Utopie: Illuminaten, Freimaurer und deutsche Spätaufklärung (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1984), p. 213, flatly dismisses van Dülmen’s claim that French materialists were influential for Weishaupt as ‘ohne überzeugenden Beleg’. The recently published correspondence shows that Helvétius and d’Holbach were particularly popular among the Illuminaten, although these radical texts were reserved for advanced members of the order. See Die Korrespondenz des Illuminatenordens, ed. by Reinhard Markner, Monika Neugebauer-Wölk and Hermann Schüttler (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2005-), t: 1776-1781, pp. 14, 32, 84.
12 Ibid.
plus exactement catholique.’¹³ Secondly, there is general consensus that Germany’s Enlightenment was conservative, as typified by Hegel’s sweeping comment: ‘In Deutschland war die Aufklärung auf seiten der Theologie. In Frankreich nahm sie sogleich eine Richtung gegen die Kirche.’¹⁴ This distinction is perhaps acceptable at such general levels, yet we will here refine such interpretations with valuable new research. This thesis will clearly demonstrate there were German voices which do not fit into this mainstream history. This new research examines the passage of French radical texts into Germany. There are important questions to answer. Who read such texts, who translated them, who wrote about them, who quoted them, and in what ways? By following the path of cultural transfer, we will be able to locate lost or underground sources of German radicalism otherwise obscured to historians, focused as they are on the centre of the field, on the likes of Leibniz, Wolff, Mendelssohn, and Kant.

Materialism

The main aim of this thesis is to establish the diffusion of French ideas on materialism in eighteenth-century Germany. Firstly though, we must define what we mean by materialism and its importance. Philosophical materialism, as understood in this study, is, in its simplest form, the belief that the only substance which exists in the universe is matter. Materialism is opposed to substance dualism, the view that there are two kinds of substance: spatially-extended matter and a non-physical, immaterial substance (‘spirit’) responsible for the mind, among other things. This division of mind and body has been the central question in the philosophy of mind in the modern era since Descartes (1596-1650).¹⁵ Yet materialism was not an invention of seventeenth- or eighteenth-century philosophy, but rather a recurrent idea. In fact, materialism traces its first expression back to the pre-Socratic philosophers Leucippus and Democritus, and then Ancient Greek atomists, particularly Epicurus.

and the Roman Lucretius. Among a range of other contentious philosophical ideas which were labelled as *libertinage*, the materialism of antiquity was revived in France in the seventeenth century, notably by Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655).\textsuperscript{16}

By the eighteenth century, however, the incompatibility of materialism with Church dogma of substance dualism meant that it had been widely condemned and stigmatized. D’Holbach’s *Théologie portative* (1767) satirically described materialism as an ‘opinion absurde, c’est-à-dire, contraire à la théologie, que soutiennent des impies qui n’ont point assez d’esprit pour savoir ce que c’est qu’un esprit, ou une substance qui n’a aucune des qualités que nous pouvons connoître.’\textsuperscript{17} This amusing mockery of theological logic is more than a mere joke. It shows the extent to which the term ‘materialism’ was an indication of a position which was critical and non-conformist in regard to theology. More recent critics concur. For instance, Miguel Benitez states that materialism is ‘essentiellement critique’ and can be the vehicle of wider radicalism.\textsuperscript{18} The categories of ‘sceptique’ and ‘pyrrhoniste’ were synonymous with ‘matérialiste’.\textsuperscript{19} This comprehensive scepticism associated with a materialist position is crucial to understanding the strength of feeling behind negative theological reactions to seemingly arcane theories about the properties of matter: materialism displays scepticism with regard to spiritualism and the whole system of beliefs built upon spiritualism, principally the mind-body theories sanctioned by the Church.\textsuperscript{20} Moreover, they were battling against the heritage of Cartesianism, which ‘became the main ally of theology after being accused of connivance with the enemy.’\textsuperscript{21}


\textsuperscript{17} Abbé Bernier [d’Holbach], *Théologie portative ou Dictionnaire abrégé de la religion chrétienne* (London [Amsterdam]: n.pub. [Rey] 1768 [1767]), p. 147.


\textsuperscript{20} The Fifth Lateran Council (1512-1517) issued a decree on the immortal, immaterial soul: *Apostolici regiminis*. See *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. by Norman P. Tanner, 2 vols (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), t. 605.

Materialism, as a monist doctrine, is defined against dualism. Materialism, despite some proponents’ claims, does not solve the mysteries of the human mind or human existence. What it seeks to do is to rule out what they regarded as unacceptable recourse in metaphysics to untenable mysticism in the guise of ‘spirit’. Materialists were (and still are) not capable, for example, of explaining the finer workings of consciousness or identity through their knowledge of matter.\textsuperscript{22} In the eighteenth century, materialism was just starting to show dualism to be indefensible. Daniel Dennett insists that ‘[m]aterialism will not explain consciousness, but only promise to explain it.’\textsuperscript{23} Yet he also makes the point that ‘accepting dualism is giving up.’\textsuperscript{24} No eighteenth-century materialist explained consciousness or the universe. On this materialist basis, what was possible, however, was to reason as to how to construct a society and a morality best capable of procuring maximum human happiness, rather than following the theological perspective which argued that this life is a preparation for the next. Our study leads towards the consideration of these socio-political ramifications of materialism, and their impact in Germany.

\textbf{Socio-political conditions}

The term Germany has been labelled an ‘anachronism’ for the period 1685 to 1804, as Germany was in reality a \textit{Kleinstaaterei} arrangement of over 300 principalities and independent cities in the Holy Roman Empire.\textsuperscript{25} In writings of the period, however, many thinkers refer to a greater-German nation (‘Teutschland’). The anachronistic reference to ‘Germany’ did bear meaning for contemporaries, and thus the shorthand ‘Germany’ will be employed henceforth. This \textit{Kleinstaaterei} arrangement made an impact in various ways on the intellectual situation in terms of censorship, communication, and religious and cultural traditions, but as Mary Fulbrook notes, this Germany was ‘by no means a stagnant backwater: neither politically, nor in social and cultural developments.’\textsuperscript{26} The political disunity also

\textsuperscript{22} David Papineau, \textit{Thinking about Consciousness} (Oxford: OUP, 2002).
\textsuperscript{24} Dennett, p. 37.
\textsuperscript{26} Mary Fulbrook, \textit{A Concise History of Germany} (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), p. 71.
translates into a decentralisation, both politically and intellectually. Enlightenment in Germany was not directed from one centre. Though Berlin was certainly productive, other cities like Leipzig, Halle, Göttingen and Hamburg all provided unique intellectual environments which were at certain times all host to radical aspects. Martin Mulsow has noted the ‘polyzentrisch’ nature of German intellectual life in this period.\textsuperscript{27}

The Peace of Westphalia of 1648 theoretically separated the religious from the political, although Protestant German rulers remained the heads of their \textit{Landeskirche}. Each state established only one of the three officially recognized denominations of Catholicism, Lutheranism and Calvinism. Benjamin Redekop states that ‘rationalist Prussian theologians were essentially public servants of Prussian reformist absolutism.’\textsuperscript{28} The \textit{Aufklärung} was integrated into absolutist power structures, with an alliance between state power and state religion. Joachim Whaley has labelled the Protestant German pulpit as ‘a podium of the Enlightenment.’\textsuperscript{29} In Germany, the philosophical developments were intertwined with and sponsored by existing power structures.

With the exceptions of pockets of Roman Catholicism in Oldenburg and in areas of Hesse, the northern area of Germany was a largely Protestant zone compared to the Catholic south. Given the diversity of states, there was a variety of political administrations, with different systems. The province of Württemberg for example retained a parliamentary tradition throughout the period,\textsuperscript{30} and Hamburg was an exceptionally free city, also intellectually.\textsuperscript{31} Historians have tended to portray the Catholic areas as backward and repressive, with strict censorship and a lack of freedom for theological discussion. In addition, the Jesuit monopoly on higher education in Catholic states hindered heterodoxy, until the dissolution of the Jesuits in 1773. Yet, a form of Catholic reform must be acknowledged, however moderate it

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{27} Martin Mulsow, \textit{Frei geister im Gottsched-Kreis: Wolffianismus, studentische Aktivitäten und Religionskritik in Leipzig 1740-1745} (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2007), p. 11.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Fulbrook, p. 83.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Whaley, ‘The Enlightenment’, p. 114.
\end{itemize}
may have been.\textsuperscript{32} The administrative division of Germany stands in stark contrast to the unity of France. Yet both Germany and France were absolutist. The key difference between France and the German absolutisms would appear to be the ‘enlightened’ absolutism of German leaders. This appearance can be unhelpful. The German territories were not bastions of academic freedom, and the cliché of Prussia as enlightened – a view derived from the militaristic Frederick the Great’s personal interest in philosophy and the arts – ignores the political authoritarianism practised throughout the century, in Prussia and other German states.\textsuperscript{33} Yet relative to France, it is certain that Prussia was a freer publishing environment, which contributed to the formation of the public sphere.

**Public sphere and literacy**

Jürgen Habermas’s widely discussed theory of the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere in Enlightenment Germany analysed new forms of public space – in the form of coffee houses, Masonic lodges, newspapers, and societies – that allowed members of the bourgeoisie to participate in rational-critical debate.\textsuperscript{34} Van Dülmen and others have continued research into the formation of social elites.\textsuperscript{35} The resulting picture of the erudite Gebildeten is instructive in showing the links between erudite classes and political and social administrations, and their distance from the rest of society. Nicolai commented on the fact that the Gelehrtenstand was divorced from the

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population at large: ‘Dieses gelehrte Völkchen von Lehrern und Lernenden, das etwa 20000 Menschen stark ist, verachtet die übrigen 20 Millionen Menschen.’

The famous 1784 debate in the Berlinische Monatsschrift on ‘What is Enlightenment?’, revealed that at that point, ideas of Aufklärung were still regarded as elite preoccupations, though Mendelssohn, for example, did not think this meant the masses were excluded:


Indeed Mendelssohn saw that radical ideas were breaking out of the elite circles and becoming generalised opinions, complaining about ‘Materialismus, der in unsren Tagen so allgemein zu werden drohet.’ In any case, as Robert Darnton has shown, accounting for the circulation of ideas is highly complex. The study of intellectual history must examine the available evidence of the texts and attempt to reconstitute the possible impact of texts and discourse. This thesis does not argue that materialism in Germany was dominant, but with the importation of French writings on materialism, it became more prevalent than has been hitherto recognized.

36 Friedrich Nicolai, Das Leben und die Meinungen des Herrn Magisters Sebaldus Nothanker, 3 vols (Berlin: Nicolai, 1774), I, 117-18.
37 Moses Mendelssohn, ‘Ueber die Frage: was heißt aufklären?’, Berlinische Monatsschrift, 4 (September 1784), in Jubiläumsausgabe, VI.I, 115. In this same essay, Mendelssohn underlines his understanding of Enlightenment as a rationalisation of religion, but warns against irreligion: ‘Missbrauch der Aufklärung schwächt das moralische Gefühl, führt zu Hart Sinn, Egoismus, Irreligion und Anarchie’, p. 118.
 Various aspects of the period and material studied in this thesis have been the subject of previous research. Winfried Schröder and Daniel Minary have investigated the origins of German atheism. Martin Mulso has examined various aspects of underground freethinking in the *Frühaufklärung*, the period preceding that under consideration here, focusing on the relationships between radicals in clandestine networks. The notion of the underground in the German Enlightenment has elicited a number of recent scholarly works, and is currently a rich field of research.

The German reception of the selected French thinkers has also been examined to different extents by Roland Krebs, Roland Mortier and Anne Saada among others. Krebs found that *Spätaufklärung* scepticism could be linked to the reception of Helvétius, particularly focusing on Wezel, Tieck, Heinse and Wieland. Saada, complementing the work of Mortier, focusses on the way Diderot’s reputation was shaped by German periodical reactions. Work on the German thinkers encountered in this study has been minimal. Aside from the interest shown by a group of East Germans in the 1960s, they have generally been ignored by scholars. Since Werner Krauss’s pioneering work, there have been only


44 Krebs, *Helvétius*, p. 369. Given Krebs’s focus on these channels of reception, we will build on his study by expanding our horizon to encompass reception by other German writers.

piecemeal additions to the study of what can be termed the cultural transfer of the French Enlightenment to Germany. Ursula Goldenbaum has considered the relationship of Mylius and Lessing to the French *philosophes* at the court of Frederick the Great. Working on a similar period, Edgar Mass has written about the reaction to French materialists in German periodicals between 1747 and 1754. The interaction of French and Germans in Enlightenment Prussia has elicited various other studies. More recently, Jeffrey Freedman has made a contribution to the history of the French book trade in Enlightenment Germany, showing the significant commerce of French writing. Further evidence that there is on-going interest in this subject, and that this thesis is timely, can be gleaned from two book series of critical editions of German texts from the period.50

The usefulness of this thesis is suggested in existing research by Otto Finger who flagged up the French influences, but did not find the space to investigate them: ‘Der ganze große Fragenkomplex der vielschichtigen Auseinandersetzung mit dem materialistischen oder zum Materialismus tendierenden französischen Gedankengut der zweiten Hälfte des 18. Jahrhunderts muß hier vernachlässigt werden.’51 The originality of this thesis thus lies in considering cultural transfer of the specific idea of materialism, a component of the ‘Radical Enlightenment’.

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Radical Enlightenment

Undoubtedly, the most notable development in recent Enlightenment scholarship has been the much-debated trilogy of works by Jonathan Israel on the ‘Radical Enlightenment’. 52 Israel has labelled his approach as ‘controversialist’ in that it investigates the moments of historical controversy, defining his method as ‘a new, reformed intellectual history presiding over two-way traffic, or dialectic of ideas and social reality.’53 This method brings out the opposing views and currents of thought from a particular era, concentrating less on the evolution of particular thinkers and more on persistent discourse and its dialectic movement. Many have objected to Israel’s paradigm of the three strands of the Enlightenment: Radical Enlightenment, Moderate Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment.54 Critics object that his characterising of a thinker as radical or moderate ignores aspects which contradict the classification. One writer can very well be philosophically radical, yet politically reactionary; or even politically progressive on one issue, yet undemocratic on another. Anthony La Vopa, a measured critic, judged this radical-moderate distinction as ‘simply too crude to be historically workable.’55 It seems that Israel has since taken steps to address this. In Democratic Enlightenment, the third volume of his study, he analyses the writings of Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768), and concludes that ‘Reimarus pre-eminently exemplified the Enlightenment author

53 Israel, Contested, p. 23.
54 The radical-moderate classification applied by Israel has antecedents. Keith Baker pointed to this divide between moderates and radicals: ‘by the late 1760s the reforming movement in France was made up of at least four distinct though overlapping groups. Taken together, the first two of these groups comprised the important men of letters of the philosophe movement as usually defined, now seriously divided on matters of tactics and doctrine between the more radical wing of Diderot and d’Holbach and the moderates led by d’Alembert under the aegis of Voltaire.’ Keith Michael Baker, Condorcet: From Natural Philosophy to Social Mathematics (London: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 18. Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor seems to endorse this reading of the dynamics of the enlightenment long before Israel’s thesis, in a much more negative critique of the ‘Radical Enlightenment’, the title of chapter nineteen of his study. Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), pp. 321-54. Israel’s attempt to define ‘radical’ is what has drawn criticism.
radical in some respects and moderate in others.\textsuperscript{56} Israel has tried, nevertheless, to retain the concept of Radical Enlightenment as a valid approach, robustly defending his methodology and his interpretation of the Enlightenment.\textsuperscript{57} For Israel, ‘radical’ denotes concurrence with Spinozist monism, and necessarily democratic political activism. This study eschews the ‘radical’ category, and focuses on materialism, a more specific idea. In Enlightenment Contested, Israel argues that La Mettrie diverges from radicalism in his politics and morality, whereas we will argue the La Mettrie was nevertheless a proponent of materialism who affected the transfer of ideas to Germany.\textsuperscript{58} By isolating the idea of materialism, rather than an all-encompassing ‘radicalism’, the case for cultural transfer can be better made.

Where this thesis departs from Israel’s argument is his focalisation on Spinoza and spinozism as the basis of all radicalism. The present study avoids this contentious aspect of Israel’s interpretation by focusing on materialism and its transfer, not on classifying particular thinkers. We will seek to add significant detail to the understanding of complex matters of cultural transfer. Israel has talked of the ‘German disciples’ of Helvétius and Diderot.\textsuperscript{59} Yet to talk of disciples is to oversimplify the dynamic of transfer. The evidence uncovered by this in-depth study shows the complications and strategies of following the French materialists. German writers found it difficult to openly declare the sources of their materialism, due to the way French materialists were received in both France and Germany. We must first consider the backgrounds of the French materialists in this study.

**Corpus selection: French materialists**

This study takes four French *philosophes* as case studies, namely Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709-1751), Denis Diderot (1713-1784), Claude Adrien Helvétius (1715-1771) and Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d’Holbach (1723-1789). In selecting their


\textsuperscript{58} Israel, *Contested*, pp. 805-13.

\textsuperscript{59} Israel, *Democratic*, p. 281.
writings as the principal corpus of this study, we will concentrate on the most consistent, explicit and radical materialists French philosophy had to offer. They all make the transition from the scientific basis of a material conception of man and the universe to conclusions of atheism, and from this to the rejection of the immortality of the soul and a secular morality. They therefore develop their position beyond the scientific field upon which they draw.\textsuperscript{60} Crucially, all four benefited from wide and persistent dissemination in Germany.

There are several points of divergence between these thinkers. They disagreed about the value of retaining the terminology of the ‘soul’, where such a material soul would be located, about hylozoism and vitalism,\textsuperscript{61} moral systems, determinism, whether man was essentially good or bad, the impact of socialisation and a whole range of other problems. Materialism comes in many forms and expressions. Yet we can still coherently treat them together as a materialist corpus, as Zarka argues: ‘il n’y a aucune raison de faire jouer un matérialisme contre l’autre. L’histoire du matérialisme n’est pas homogène, elle comporte deux voies divergentes – voire davantage – mais deux voies également légitimes.’\textsuperscript{62} The differences between the French thinkers selected in this study will become apparent, and we will not seek to downplay them. Yet they can legitimately be grouped together as materialists.

It may come as a surprise that Voltaire is not included in this study. This is for two fundamental reasons. Firstly, Voltaire was not an atheist: ‘Nous sommes certainement l’ouvrage de Dieu,’ he maintained.\textsuperscript{63} He was a deist, systematically opposed to atheism. Whatever positions Voltaire variously adopted concerning the mind-body problem, or his consistent opposition to the dogmas of revealed religion and the social control exercised by churches, his materialism is not consistent with that of the chosen corpus. His basis for morality – namely individual enlightenment

\textsuperscript{60}The natural scientist Buffon, for example, could not be said to have argued in favour of atheism.
\textsuperscript{61}Hylozoism is the view that all matter is in some way alive. The tendency originated in ancient Greece, and was revived in the Renaissance by, among others, Giordano Bruno. Ralph Cudworth (1617-1688), leader of the Cambridge Platonists, introduced the term into English. Vitalism holds that living matter is fundamentally different from non-living matter by means of an \textit{élan vital}.
is diametrically opposed to the positions of La Mettrie, Diderot, Helvétius and d’Holbach. For example, Voltaire consistently opposed militant atheism. In his *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764), Voltaire’s most consistent claim is that atheism cannot prevent crime: ‘l’athéisme ne s’oppose pas aux crimes.’\(^{64}\) He identifies atheism with lawlessness. Voltaire does not define the Deity beyond very rudimentary qualities such as its eternal, intelligent and unitary nature, as he explains in *Le philosophe ignorant* (1766): ‘Il est donc une puissance unique, éternelle, à qui tout est lié, de qui tout dépend, mais dont la nature m’est incompréhensible.’\(^{65}\) As such when he talks of God, he talks of an entity which is almost completely devoid of meaning, but posited nonetheless as the cause of everything. Admittedly, there are some materialist elements to Voltaire’s thought, particularly concerning his acceptance of Locke’s suggestion of thinking matter, yet these fail to overcome his deism.\(^{66}\) In view of this fundamental deism as a necessary explanation of the origin of the universe, and his insistence on an afterlife where a supreme artisan will reward and punish human behaviour, labelling Voltaire a materialist becomes meaningless and contradictory. Essentially then, Voltaire’s thought does not fit with the materialist outlook we are examining here. Moreover, the undoubtedly massive diffusion of his work in Germany, which the bibliographical research for this thesis attests to, has already received considerable academic attention.\(^{67}\)


Corpus of German Materialists

As mentioned, this is not (another) study of well-known German thinkers like Lessing and Kant. Instead, the more fruitful reception of French materialism is to be found in the works of more marginal figures. Mortier writes of Diderot’s impious thought that ‘[l]a pénombre et le secret convenaient mieux à sa diffusion et le courant qui en sourd gagnera toujours à rester souterrain et malaisément accessible.’ This underground space Mortier refers to was inhabited by a range of thinkers. It would be misleading to portray them all as true underground thinkers, in that some enjoyed anonymity, whereas others enjoyed positions of considerable authority. Indeed, the backgrounds of those German thinkers who readily engaged with the ideas of French materialists were diverse: there were aristocrats, university professors, pastors and ambassadors. Recent publications point to renewed interest in these thinkers, underlining the timeliness of this study. Michael Hißmann (1752-1784), for example, a professor of psychology in Göttingen, has recently received academic attention. In his short life, Hißmann was a prolific editor and translator. He edited the *Magazin für die Philosophie und ihre Geschichte* (1778-83) and translated, among others, Condillac, de Brosses and Joseph Priestley into German. Hißmann’s position of authority and prestige, coupled with his willingness to publish under his own name, meant that he often had to introduce his more radical ideas veiled in rhetorical strategies. He read all of the French materialists in our corpus, and was a key disseminator of their ideas in Germany.

Heinrich Friedrich von Diez (1751-1817) studied law before becoming a revered orientalist and a civil servant, later leaving Germany in 1784 to become the Prussian Ambassador in Constantinople, curtailing his writing career. Diez’s interest in clandestine texts was notorious, though he later rejected his freethinking youth

68 Mortier, *Diderot*, p. 364.
and became a hyper-orthodox zealot.\textsuperscript{70} Prior to his later piety, he wrote at length on various subjects, all united by their admiration for French materialism. Diez, whose library extended to 17,000 volumes, wrote in \textit{Deutsches Museum} and \textit{Berichte der allgemeinen Buchhandlung der Gelehrten} (1781-84). Intriguingly, he also wrote the anonymously published \textit{Vortheile geheimer Gesellschaften für die Welt} (1772), which offers a clue as to the reception of subversive works. His early works have recently been republished, again showing the current interest in this area.\textsuperscript{71}

Johann Heinrich Schulz (1739-1823), so-called ‘Zopfprediger’ or ‘pigtail preacher’, was a Lutheran pastor who wrote a number of texts dealing with philosophical and political questions, inspired by texts of French materialists.\textsuperscript{72} Schulz’s controversial writings earned him the infamy of being the first person to be prosecuted for contravention of Wöllner’s Prussian Edict on Religion of 1788.\textsuperscript{73} Part one of his \textit{Versuch einer Anleitung zur Sittenlehre für alle Menschen, ohne Unterschied der Religion, nebst einem Anhang von den Todesstrafen} (1783) was reviewed by Immanuel Kant.\textsuperscript{74} This shows how in spite of his marginal status, Schulz had an impact on the mainstream of German philosophy.

Another link between mainstream and margins is provided by Johann Gottlieb Karl Spazier (1761-1805), who employed his readings of French materialism to counter the ideas of Moses Mendelssohn’s \textit{Phädon} (1761) in a refutation titled \textit{Antiphädon} (1785).\textsuperscript{75} Spazier, who studied theology and philosophy

\textsuperscript{70} He is perhaps now best known as Goethe’s advisor on oriental matters. Diez’s 856 manuscripts, held in the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin, have been catalogued by Ursula Winter, \textit{Die europäischen Handschriften der Bibliothek Diez}, 3 vols (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1986-94).
\textsuperscript{71} Heinrich Friedrich Diez: \textit{Frühe Schriften} (1772-1784), ed. by Manfred Voigts (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2010).
\textsuperscript{75} Karl Spazier, \textit{Antiphädon, oder Prüfung einiger Hauptbeweise für die Einfachheit und Unsterblichkeit der menschlichen Seele. In Briefen} (Leipzig: Crusius, 1785, repr. Berlin: Akademie, 1965, ed. by Werner Krauss). This 1965 reprint is testimony to its historical significance.
in Halle before becoming a teacher and court councillor in Dessau,76 is another example of a materialist who later repudiated his youthful ‘indiscretions’, this time in the form of a novel, *Carl Pilger’s Roman seines Lebens* (1792-96).77 Nevertheless, Spazier went on to translate some of Diderot’s tales in 1799, reaffirming his connection to French writings.78

Karl von Knoblauch (1756-1794), an aristocrat destined for a career in the higher echelons of administration, became a fervent opponent of religion, informed by his philosophical readings.79 Wary of the potential harm to his material wellbeing, Knoblauch chose the path of anonymity when publishing his materialist tracts in various periodicals like Christoph Martin Wieland’s *Der teutsche Merkur* and Wilhelm Ludwig Wekhrlin’s *Das graue Ungeheuer*.80 Despite his aristocratic background, Knoblauch’s materialism led him to embrace a radical, democratic republican politics. He wrote to Jakob Mauvillon in 1791 fearing the return of despotism after the French Revolution: ‘Sollte die französische Revolution ein unglückliches Ende nehmen, so wünsche ich keine Stunde länger zu leben. Der Despotismus würde wüthender und unerträglicher werden, als er es in Europa je war.’81 Knoblauch was a contemporary of Hißmann’s at Gottingen in 1776, and corresponded with Schulz, suggesting some form of network between these fellow radicals.82 This is not to say there was some kind of secretive network of radicals with a shared pact to espouse materialism and overthrow the Church, a familiar narrative associated with the *Illuminaten* and freemasons. Constellations are more complex and nuanced than such a facile notion of network of radicals. The borders

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76 Dessau was a hotbed of radical thought, with its ‘Philanthropinum’, founded by a German reformer Johann Bernhard Basedow (1724-1790), and the journal *Berichte der Buchhandlung der Gelehrten zu Dessau*, in which Diez wrote glowingly of the author of the *Systeme de la Nature*.
78 Denis Diderot’s *Erzählungen*, trans. by Karl Spazier (Magdeburg: Keil, 1799).
82 Jakob Mauvillon (1743-1794), a physiocrat and later supporter of the French Revolution, also corresponded with his great friend Knoblauch and with Hißmann. See *Mauvillons Briefwechsel*. 26
between mainstream and radical underground are porous and governed by complex social factors. Introducing materialist ideas in Germany was not a concerted effort.\textsuperscript{83}

Materialism in Germany

The provocation contained in La Mettrie’s desire to ‘enseigner le matérialisme’ cannot be overestimated in the context of the eighteenth century. The desire to teach materialism was countered by teaching against materialism, which reveals how negatively the mere word ‘materialism’ had become connoted in the eighteenth century. Schools and universities taught students to reject materialist ideas. Theological doctrine had a strong hold on public opinion, and the mechanisms of the various political and religious orders generally did a good job of institutionalising prejudices against materialism. Spazier described materialism as ‘verschrien und gehässig geworden,’ noting how the prevailing opinions, shaped by orthodox theology, had inoculated large numbers against the thought of La Mettrie and the author of the \textit{Système de la nature}, amongst others, ‘die jeder unphilosophische Schüler im philosophischen Hörsaal wohlweislich necken und jeder Zelot, ohne sie gelesen oder verstanden zu haben, ungescheut verdammten zu können.’\textsuperscript{84} Spazier goes on to claim that what held many back from declaring their views publicly was ‘die Furcht, […] sich aus der menschlichen Gesellschaft ausgestoßen und von Ämtern und Ehrenstellen ausgeschlossen zu sehen.’\textsuperscript{85} Thus there were mechanisms for preventing the embrace of materialism without having to resort to censorship. Hißmann remarked on other such mechanisms, namely that materialism was inhibited by the way educators presented it, seeing materialism – and potentially his own writings – as contradicting teachings, ‘die man von Kindheit auf, aus allen Schul- und akademischen Lehrbüchern der Theologen und Philosophen einsauget.’\textsuperscript{86}

The socio-religious context of strong Church-led education (be it Catholic, Lutheran or Reformed [Calvinist] confessions) meant that students were taught to reject

\begin{footnotes}
\item[83] Other writers like philosopher and novelist Johann Karl Wezel (1747-1819) will also be mentioned occasionally as examples of the German uptake of French materialism.
\item[84] Spazier, \textit{Antiphädon}, p. 92.
\item[85] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
materialist ideas. Hißmann anticipates the potential rejection of his own findings by most readers: ‘Man weiß insgemein höchstens so viel davon, daß es eine berüchtigte Lehre der Materialisten sey, und damit sind ihre Widersprüche schon hinlänglich dargethan; und ihre Verfechter zu gleicher Zeit entwafnet und zurückgetrieben.’\(^{87}\)

The education of children as a generator of prejudice, a key theme in d’Holbach’s writings, is taken up by Spazier as one of a number of reasons why materialism could not prosper in wider society, which he attributed to ‘Ängstlichkeit, Interesse, Vorurteile, die sich aus den Kinderjahren und dem Katechismusunterricht herschreiben.’\(^{88}\) Materialism faced a difficult task of overcoming such prejudice.

As we have already stressed, materialism was contrary to theological doctrine, as evidence from German dictionaries and encyclopaedias from the period shows. The entry for ‘Materialismus’ in the Philosopthisches Lexikon, compiled by the Lutheran theologian Johann Georg Walch, is typical of establishment narratives of the incomprehensibility of the theory: ‘Es zeigt dieses überhaupt einen Irrtum, oder falschen Begrieff an, den man in Ansehung der Materie hat [...] man nennet dasjenige einen Materialismum, wenn man die geistliche Substanzen läugnet und keine andere als cörperliche zulassen will.’\(^{89}\) This immediate labelling of the term as a falsehood, even in a quasi-neutral lexicon, shows the barriers in place to materialist thought. Materialists were persistently linked to a particular network of philosophers, showing how the myth of a concerted project of anticlericalism developed. Zedlers Universallexikon (first published between 1731 and 1754) defined materialists as ‘eine schlimme Secte unter den Philosophen,’ who ‘läugnen, daß es Geister gebe, oder daß die Seele des Menschen von dem Leibe unterschieden,’ with their system moreover labelled as dangerous: ‘welches der Religion und Tugend nachtheilig ist.’\(^{90}\)

\(^{87}\) Hißmann, Psychologische, p. 12.

\(^{88}\) Spazier, Antiphädon, p. 143. D’Holbach writes, for example: ‘Nos nourrices sont nos premières Théologienne, elles parlent aux enfants de Dieu’; ‘La religion passe des pères aux enfants’, and ‘Le cerveau de l’homme est, surtout dans l’enfance, une cire molle.’ Le Bon Sens, ou idées naturelles opposées aux idées surnaturelles (London [Amsterdam]: n.pub. [Rey], 1772), pp. 18-19.


\(^{90}\) ‘Materialistae’, Zedlers Universallexikon, XIX (1739), 1061.
Isolated Frühauflä rung radicals unsuccessfully attempted to espouse forms of Spinozism in Germany. Their experience underlines the un receptive environment faced by materialism, but also the fact that materialist ideas circulated prior to the importation of the texts of La Mettrie and Diderot in the mid-1740s. Matthias Knutzen (1646-1674[?]) is considered to be the first radical who can be labelled an atheist. 91 The authorities took his threat very seriously and organised a ‘ducal’ inquisition to investigate his secret society, but without any results. More famously, Johann Christian Edelmann (1698-1767) was condemned and forced to flee several towns, eventually dying in Berlin in 1767 after years living in obscurity and deprived of his right to publish. 92 Edelmann’s infamy was widespread, and his fate a constant reminder of the dangers of publicly declaring radically unorthodox views. 93 Lessing compares the foreign, imported scandal of La Mettrie with the native scandal of Edelmann, having followed La Mettrie’s eventful stay in Berlin with considerable attention. 94 He reviewed his works in journals, and wrote to his father with news about the Frenchman: ‘De la Mettrie, von dem ich Ihnen einigemal geschrieben habe, ist hier Leib-Medicus des Königs. Seine Schrift L’Homme machine hat viel Aufsehen erregt. Edelmann ist ein Heiliger gegen ihn.’ 95 This raises the problem of how to judge influence, and the delimitation of ideas along national borders. For if Germans expressed some ideas of materialism prior to the advent of a coherent French materialism, how can we isolate cultural transfer? We must take care, then, in

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91 Schröder, p. 420. Born in Oldensworth, Knutzen passed through Königsberg, Copenhagen, Jena, Altdorf and Berlin. He published pamphlets in Jena in 1674 which caused a furore and he disappeared soon after. Knutzen had formed an atheistic sect, the 'Gewissener' or Conscientiarii, which he claimed had adherents all over Europe.


94 Edgar Mass has suggested that Lessing and La Mettrie could have met each other, a possibility that will probably remain speculation. Edgar Mass, 'Zensur und Diskursdifferenzierung: Zur Rezeption der französischen “libre-penseurs” in Deutschland zwischen Edelmann und Reimarus’, in Les lettres françaises, ed. by Bois, Krebs and Moes, pp. 205-19 (p. 214).

95 Lessing, letter to Johann Gottfried Lessing, 2 November 1750, Werke und Briefe, XI, 32.
ascribing influence to French *philosophes*, not to overlook the heritage of radical German philosophers like Knutzen and Edelmann of the *Frühaufklärung* who were formulating quasi-materialist theories before the period of La Mettrie or Diderot.

As illustrated by the cases of Knutzen and Edelmann, radicalism, and thus materialism, was effectively driven underground in Germany, with Spazier noting that ‘[e]s gibt mehr heimliche Anhänger des Materialismus, als man glauben sollte.’ Thus any notion of an open public sphere must be heavily qualified to account for the fear instilled by the effective ostracising of those who crossed the line into materialism. It is for this reason that we will be dealing with marginal figures of the German Enlightenment. This arises not out of a perverse obsession with the periphery, but from the knowledge that the margins can help us understand the functioning of eighteenth-century networks and intellectual *milieux* which are not fully examined in scholarship on the period. Uncovering the periphery also provides information on the context of mainstream philosophy.

The wider context of German philosophy is crucial to understanding the process of cultural transfer. The philosophical heritage in Germany in the 1740s through to Kant was that of Leibniz-Wolffianism. This systematic philosophy allowed for rationalisation of religion. Its principle aim was to support religion. Philosophy in Germany was considered as a support for religion, though it had many theological critics who objected to its seemingly setting limits to God’s freedom – due to the acceptance of the laws of nature, within which God would have to act. This eventually led to Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi’s ‘salto mortale’ – a retreat into faith and rejection of philosophy – during the *Pantheismusstreit* debates in 1785 between Mendelssohn and Jacobi about Lessing’s alleged Spinozism. German Protestantism was a fractured landscape. The divisions between theological groupings opened up spaces into which materialists could position themselves. The gaps between orthodox Lutherans, liberal theologians like Neologians, and the ‘subversive’

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97 On the notion of the public sphere, see the discussion of Jürgen Habermas, above.  
100 ‘Neologie’ was a German reform theology which sought a rationalist path away from Lutheran orthodoxy and Pietism, but against deist abandoning of the ethical import of Christianity. Its central
elements like Lessing and Reimarus, allowed for a kind of triangulation, where materialism could attempt to align itself with certain ideas sanctioned by institutions.\textsuperscript{101}

Aims

The first of our aims is to provide an exposition of various French philosophers’ writings concerning materialism and morality. We will offer detailed analysis of French materialist ideas and sometimes innovative, close readings of their texts. This survey and analysis of different aspects of French materialism is a precondition to writing about the German reception thereof. Each chapter provides an overview of the various materialist writings on specific materialist issues.

The second aim is to document the bibliographical basis for the dissemination of French materialism in the German Enlightenment and show the workings of cultural transfer. This original research, mapping transfer, will enable us to illustrate the trans-national nature of a pan-European Enlightenment. In turn, this seeks to underpin our argument that national histories must be written in ways which take account of cultural transfer.

A third aim is to demonstrate that French ideas actually modified the contours of German discourse. This is shown by the different types of reception of French books in Germany. They firstly triggered reactions in the form of outrage and dismissive reviews in journals and refutations in university disputations (which also served to provide further diffusion of the ideas). French ideas secondly compelled some potentially heterodox thinkers like Hermann Samuel Reimarus and Moses Mendelssohn to reaffirm their own position in relation to orthodoxy, using the radical positions of La Mettrie, Diderot, Helvétius and d’Holbach to demonstrate

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\item tenets were placing the Bible in a historical-critical context and considering Christianity as an effective route to a happier life. Its major representatives were J.J. Spalding, W.A. Teller and J.J. Semler. See Karl Aner, \textit{Die Theologie der Lessingzeit} (Hildesheim: Olms, 1929); Albrecht Beutel, \textit{Aufklärung in Deutschland} (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), pp. 248-86.
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their own moderate views and reaffirm their arguments for the immortality of the soul and the legitimacy of their systems of ‘natural’ religion and its compatibility with revealed religion. A third type of ‘reaction’ is the more enthusiastic engagement with the texts by German writers seeking to support their own arguments with the ‘authority’ of the caché of the foreign texts.

It is these ‘radical’ reactions which constitute the basis of the fourth aim of this study. By providing evidence of the impact of French materialism in Germany, this thesis will demonstrate that there was a radical tradition in Germany, and that French materialism found fertile ground in a context often portrayed as predominantly religiously oriented. The likes of Hißmann, Knoblauch, Diez, Schulz and Spazier will be shown to have fully embraced the ideas of La Mettrie, Diderot, Helvétius and d’Holbach. This will lead us to redefine ideas concerning the perceived ‘moderate’ nature of the Aufklärung.

It may be as well to offer a warning of what this study is not. It does not demonstrate that foreign influence on the Aufklärung was exclusively French in origin. As academic investigation has shown, other foreign streams of thought, notably from Britain, were of crucial importance. The present study does not seek to make totalizing claims about the Franco-centric nature of transfer: we are not reviving Réau’s theory of ‘l’Europe française’. Assessing the circulation and influence of French texts in Germany does not imply a simplistic model of following or adopting French thought. There were no clones of French texts. The reactions are more complex than that. Whaley writes that ‘the German Aufklärung was far from being a mere echo of more heroic trends elsewhere; it was not simply a pale derivative of a Western European mainstream.’ This is undoubtedly true, but where these influences are evident, they must be acknowledged and investigated for the way they became embedded in German thought.

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Methodology

Influence

Studies of influence are sometimes viewed with suspicion, as Hochstrasser eloquently explains: ‘when the notion of “influence” is applied to a long span of time and to a large number of writers it can easily deteriorate into nothing more than the correlation of superficially similar doctrines.’ ¹⁰⁵ This is a pertinent warning for this study. For influence is not a magical process of osmosis.

In reading German philosophers, we often find expressions which recall famous French discussions. For example, Moses Mendelssohn received a letter from Christian Nicolaus Neumann in 1754 where he was asked: ‘Wäre doch unsre Seele auch so etwas materielles, wie der Löffel! Wie leicht wollten wir so gar dem Blindgebohrnen ihr Wesen begreiflich machen? Denn der Blinde vermag, durch das Gefühl, sich von den Eigenschaften des Löffels zu versichern […]’. ¹⁰⁶ To any scholar of the Enlightenment, this immediately brings to mind the much-publicised discussion of a blind man’s conception of the soul in Diderot’s *Lettre sur les aveugles*, published five years earlier in 1749. ¹⁰⁷ Is there, therefore, an influence here? Would Neumann have formulated his question in such terms had Diderot’s text not existed? Another example is Kant’s famous essay *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung*, where he concludes by talking about ‘den Menschen, der nun mehr als Maschine ist.’ ¹⁰⁸ This has extremely strong echoes of La Mettrie’s *L’Homme machine* (1747), a text widely talked about and reproduced numerous times throughout the eighteenth century. Both of these quotations could be construed as the effective transfer of ideas into German discourse. Yet this plainly will not suffice to

¹⁰⁷ This text led to Diderot’s imprisonment at Vincennes and was thus newsworthy across Europe.
¹⁰⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung* (*Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 1784), in *Was ist Aufklärung: Thesen und Definitionen*, ed. by Ehrhard Bahr (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1974), p. 17. Given that Descartes, and subsequently Bayle, discussed the notion of the differences between men and machines, it is impossible to locate an accurate ‘source’ for Kant here. It is clear, however, that the terminology had successfully impregnated discourse.
establish influence. More rigour and evidence is needed, such as direct attributed quotations or other confirmation that these texts were read by these authors. In short, we must show that the influence is more than coincidence. By systematic study of the availability and reception of the French texts, we can establish how well known they would have been and thus be in a position to demonstrate their impact on philosophical discourse. So when there is kinship of ideas, we must seek to show sources of reading, and convincing similarities in expression.

There are, however, limits to this model of ‘influence’. There were no Germans whom we can describe as La Mettrian philosophers or acolytes or disciples of Diderot. Nonetheless, we can show how the Frenchmen’s books created considerable impact in Germany. There was greater impact than the simple echoes of the type noted in Kant’s essay and Neumann’s letter to Mendelssohn. Texts are referred to in many different ways. Pierre Bourdieu has discussed the process of the recontextualisation of foreign texts: ‘Les importations hérétiques sont souvent le fait de marginaux dans le champ, qui importent un message, une position qui a de la force dans un autre champ, avec pour effet de renforcer leur position de dominés dans le champ.’¹⁰⁹ We will see that Bourdieu’s insight is a useful way of considering these examples of cultural transfer. Marginal writers make the effort to use controversial French writings. One such importer of French writings, Diez, makes his criticism of German philosophy clear, and thus foregrounds his use of French texts as a source of philosophical renewal: ‘Teutschland ist immer ein Sklave seines Glaubens gewesen. Seine Philosophie ist daher so alt geblieben wie sein Glaube.’¹¹⁰ Cultural transfer often takes the form of introducing a text deemed heretical in its French context, in order to show the flaws in German ideas.

The primary stage of this research has been to assess the circulation of materialist French texts in Germany, which provides the basis for the study of any potential impact that they may have had. This has involved looking at the number of German translations of texts by French materialist writers published in the period, and examining reviews in periodicals, French editions published in Germany, and

¹¹⁰ Diez, Apologie der Duldung und Preßfreiheit (1781), DFS, p. 200.
other less systematic analyses of dissemination in the form of library catalogues and information gleamed from various correspondences. The results of this book history research are in themselves significant, as will be shown by analysis of them in chapter one. As Darnton states, the ‘advantage of book history as a kind of diffusion study is that one knows precisely what is being diffused: not discourse, not public opinion, but books.’ However, there is an important caveat to this research, which Freedman has formulated: ‘It would also be a mistake to draw any firm inferences about how French books were read from the mere fact of their dissemination.’

This is why the remaining chapters seek to understand the way these books were discussed in Germany, and the ways in which their ideas were understood and re-used in a German context. The book history research and the discourse analysis are thus used to complement each other. Hence this study is not a mere history of dissemination. It allies crucial information about dissemination with the way the ideas were received and re-contextualised in a German intellectual milieu with its own conflicts and contours. Meanings can change between different cultural, sociopolitical and linguistic contexts. Anthony Grafton has highlighted the errors of those who ‘treated transmission as a simple, one-directional process.’ Bourdieu points out the need to be aware of the transformation in meaning a text can undergo when it crosses borders: ‘le sens et la fonction d’une œuvre étrangère sont déterminés au moins autant par le champ d’accueil que par le champ d’origine.’ Thus care must be taken to analyse the function of borrowings and transfer.

**Cultural Transfer**

In historical research, methodology often sets national, geographical borders as the borders of investigation. So the history of subject X in France or the history of subject Y in Chile was how history was written. Comparative studies set a new paradigm, pioneered by Otto Hintze, Max Weber and Marc Bloch, for example. Here,

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112 Freedman, *Books*, p. 267. Freedman’s excellent research on the French book trade in eighteenth-century Germany, essentially a study in dissemination, concentrates on the factors behind the trade of books by the *Société Typographique de Neuchâtel* with German booksellers.
historical phenomena were compared between different national contexts. In the 1980s, a series of papers and articles, authored by Michael Werner and Michel Espagne, historians working on the influence of German thought in France during the nineteenth century, outlined a methodology of cultural transfer. They called for a theorisation of cultural transfer, bemoaning the ‘Defizit in der Erarbeitung eines theoretischen und methodischen Rahmens.’ When Werner and Espagne announced their call for a move away from comparative studies to studies based around theories of cultural transfer, they were arguing from the perspective of studies on France and Germany. As such, their ideas have a particular relevance here.

What is cultural transfer? It seeks to be a new paradigm defining itself in opposition to existing theories of comparative history. In a polemical attack on comparative history, Espagne and Werner claimed that historiography had too long been dominated by the paradigm of the nation state, highlighting problems associated with comparative models. These criticisms were, they claimed, twofold: firstly, the instability of homogenous ideas of nation. Nations change, borders change, and national identities are artificial constructs. A second criticism of comparative studies was its synchronic method. This means that situations were compared without taking into account of differing rates of development or varying contextual conjunctures. Espagne defines the comparative method in simple terms of taking two objects and comparing their similarities and differences. The problem, for Espagne, is that this means that the nationality of the object of study will be seen as an essential quality of it, and thus predetermines difference. If we go in search of difference, we will often find it, and in so doing, overlook the points of similarity, and vice versa. So what does the method of cultural transfer propose as an alternative to comparative studies? Cultural transfer seeks to study the interaction between two national cultures in the area where they come to a crossroads. The key

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concepts are appropriation, mediation, importation and adaptation. What necessarily emerges from such studies is that no nation exists in a vacuum, and as such the construct of nation is in many ways instable, even if inescapable. What we mean by nation is geographical, political, linguistic and also cultural borders. Working on cultural transfer, however, comparative studies are still of interest in terms of the need for contextual understanding of the two societies. Sociological, material and political contexts still help to explain the passage of ideas and arguments from one country and language to another. Cultural transfer thus implies a prerequisite understanding of the national cultures and their comparison. By adopting an approach which seeks to follow ideas and texts as they cross linguistic, cultural and geographical borders, we can look more precisely at how certain ideas were received, both positively and negatively and thereby correct the homogenous, simplified understandings of histories of national Enlightenments. For this specific period, cultural transfer methodology underlines the cosmopolitan ideal and the pan-European nature of the Enlightenment.

Each study of cultural transfer must set its own particular method. There need not be a uniting factor between diverse studies which take an example of cultural transfer as their object. Where the methodological considerations of cultural transfer dovetail with our present focus is the focus on the agents, the Vermittler, the passeurs who bring the two cultures together. This is as a logical step in research which attempts to ascertain how the writings of French materialists travelled to Germany: to look at who reviewed books in journals, who translated and published texts, and then to see who quoted the texts as authorities. Here then, we can see the emergence of a dynamic of transfer. The study is not a comparison, but truly the study of exchange and influence. Espagne and Werner write that cultural transfer is ‘zuallererst das Werk realer Vermittlerpersönlichkeiten.’ There is an additional factor to consider: the French passeurs. La Mettrie and others went to Germany and stayed for prolonged periods as they were forced to seek refuge when persecuted in France. We thus have a situation of polyvalent identities. Indeed, La Mettrie wrote

118 These notions correspond to real phenomena and we must be careful not to overstate the illusory nature of the construct of nation.
120 Espagne and Werner, ‘Deutsch-Französischer’, p. 506.
and published half of his writings in Prussia, using French émigré publishers, based permanently in Berlin. In many ways, La Mettrie had ceased to be French in terms of his external influences as he had been transplanted into an exile community and the court of a Prussian monarch, albeit a passionately Francophile one.

The importance of studying actual objects which are the agents of transfer, such as books or instruments, is also stressed by Espagne and Werner. The idea of transfer necessarily implies movement: ‘le déplacement […] sous-entend une transformation en profondeur liée à la conjoncture changeante du pays d’accueil.’\textsuperscript{121} A cultural import is necessarily subjected to modification in the new country, for one of two opposing purposes. Firstly, a cultural import could be used to justify existing positions; or alternatively used to call into question a dominant position in the discourse in the importing country. This idea is important in our findings. Cultural transfer can be configured as a two-stage process. Firstly, importing a cultural ‘product’ requires its decontextualisation. This means taking it out of the discourse, and surroundings from which it emanated. Secondly, there is a process of recontextualisation in the new environment.

Aspects of triangular exchange are to be considered too. As well as books translated directly from English to German, there were more than 135 texts which were translated into German from French translations of English-language works.\textsuperscript{122} The ideas of Locke, Shaftesbury, Hume and Toland were all crucial to the development of French materialist thought. It has been a criticism of the method of cultural transfer that it often excludes multiple-country transfers, and our method must be flexible enough to take this into account.

Behind the decision to use the framework of cultural transfer is a desire to highlight the inter-cultural nature of intellectual history. This international perspective counters ideas of national cultures. We take our lead from Israel, who argues that ‘it is indispensable […] to analyse the ebb and flow of ideas within a

\textsuperscript{121} Michel Espagne, \textit{Les Transferts culturels franco-allemands} (Paris: PUF, 1999), p. 286. This concurs with Bourdieu’s theory.

much broader European context than has been usual in the past.'¹²³ But this does not
mean that national contexts have no role to play or that comparative studies have no
place in historical studies. Research from the perspective of cultural transfer offers a
complementary approach, not an exclusive, contrary approach. This is where
Espagne and Werner’s lack of nuance and their polemical stance create problems.
Many of their ideas are based on a false distinction: ‘comparative history’ and
‘cultural transfer’ investigate different things from different perspectives. A
methodology of cultural transfer is based on transition and change which takes
account of foreign influences. Cultural transfer as a single theory is an insufficient
basis and our approach will require a mixture of other methodological considerations.

Other methodological considerations

Firstly, the ‘diffusionist school’, exemplified by the work of Robert Darnton, and its
ally, material bibliography, form a central pillar of this study in providing data for the
basis of transfer. Here the emphasis is on finding how books circulated and which
books were read where and when. The techniques involve looking though library
catalogues, scouring booksellers’ inventories, book fair catalogues, police records
and so on. The diffusionist approach takes account of the role of book production,
text diffusion, and marketing in the production of ideas. Diffusionist history often
serves as a corrective to underlying assumptions which have been made about certain
influences. The diffusionist findings are used to make the link between the ideas
present in writing and their impact and presence in cultural trends, in brief, how they
circulated. Criticisms of this method arise when we consider the gap between
cultural trends and the content of published material. Is there a causal relationship
and how can this be established? Darnton hints at this missing link when he admits
that ‘there is no getting around the fact that we do not know enough to draw general
conclusions about reader response.’¹²⁴ One criticism of diffusionist theory has been
its tendency to subordinate the content of books to their modes of circulation and its
focus on forms of sociability, thereby devaluing the actual philosophy. Herein lie the
drawbacks of diffusionist approaches. As a corrective, we will also use discourse

¹²³ Israel, Radical, p. 141.
¹²⁴ Darnton, Best-Sellers, p. 187. Darnton adds a teasing ‘Or is there?’ after this sentence. Yet a
subsequent chapter on ‘Reader Response’ fails to propose a universal model.
analysis. Discourse analysis examines the relationship between texts and the particular understanding of them within a society. This study thus draws on both diffusionist and discourse analysis methodologies, using them to reinforce each other.\(^\text{125}\) It is hence both a history of books and a history of the discourse in a society about those books. It may appear contradictory to draw on both methodologies, but they are not so diametrically opposed as to be incompatible, and in any case, as stated, diffusionist ‘method’ is more of a toolkit than an ideological methodology.

A second approach considered in the research for this thesis is Dieter Henrich’s idea of Konstellationsforschung.\(^\text{126}\) This approach, which aligns itself well with Espagne and Werner’s focus on the importance of passeurs/Vermittler, focuses on how particular constellations or groups of people exchanged cultural goods. Here, the relationship between writers and their contacts is seen as shaping the genesis and development of ideas. The study of constellations draws on sources such as correspondence and personal diaries and will help us to uncover underground and undocumented links between thinkers. As Mortier has noted, the underground was an attractive space for a younger generation as it allowed distinction from the mainstream, and was especially effective for the reception of Diderot: ‘Une partie de la jeunesse a dû s’y sentir interpellée dans ses velléités d’indépendance et de révolte, ou dans son souci de se distinguer de la masse pieuse.’\(^\text{127}\) It is this younger generation upon which we will focus when looking at positive reception, from the late 1760s onwards. When dealing with banned books and clandestine copies, it is important to note that such works passed secretly within certain communities. In recreating these communities and their internal workings (hierarchies, etiquette) we can better understand why clandestine ideas were or were not prominent. There arises a milieu which is termed the Denkraum. Marcelo Stamn considers that networks have been neglected and argues that such biographical information is an

\(^{125}\) For a useful overview of the background to the ‘diffusionist’ and ‘discourse analysis’ debates, see Darnton, Best-Sellers, pp. 169-80. Drawing on both, we are attempting to unite intellectual history and book history.

\(^{126}\) On this, see Martin Mulsow and Marcelo R. Stamn, Konstellationsforschung (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005). Henrich developed the methodology when researching the developments in Hegel’s philosophical work and early German idealism.

\(^{127}\) Mortier, Diderot, p. xv.
appropriate resource in philosophical research. The particularity of this approach is the focus on relationships between individuals and its attempt to reconstruct hitherto missing links or forgotten networks and spheres of influence. These additional methodologies point the way to eclectic frameworks for research and the need for different approaches. None of them provides a grand narrative. They are all reflections of each other and the differences between them are moderate and represent specific interests rather than gulfs in ideology.

Given the constraints on publishing and freedom of expression which operated in the period, it is worth noting that there are also points of hermeneutical method to consider. Leo Strauss’s theories of coded writing have been in vogue in the humanities for a number of years. His *Persecution and the Art of Writing* shows how external constraints influence the way people write and attempts to reconstitute disguised meaning by ‘reading between the lines’. Dissimulation, in other words, needs to be proven. We will make use of such Straussian readings, when it is justified to do so.

**Structure**

The structure of this thesis reflects its principal aims. Chapter One consists of an analysis of bibliographical research into the circulation of French philosophical texts in Germany during the period of study. This establishes the ‘material’ basis of the cultural transfer studied in subsequent chapters. Our analysis of the reception of French materialism is divided into four chapters on individual aspects of materialist thought. For each of these four topics, we will provide an exposition of the French

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materialists’ writings on the subject, explaining their theories, and the similarities and differences between them. We will then examine the way German writers understood and used these French ideas and used them in their own writings. This will provide a German context for each issue and assess the reactions of ‘mainstream’ German philosophers to the French texts. Thus Chapter Two considers materialist sensualism as a basis for epistemology, and the idea of ‘thinking matter’ – establishing sensitivity as a property of matter. This first component of materialism shows how French materialists radicalise Locke’s sensualism in order to establish the materiality of the soul. We analyse German writers who use French texts on sensualism to support materialism. Chapter Three examines another claim about the properties of matter – the theory that motion is an essential part of matter. We will investigate the transfer of this idea from France to Germany, illustrating the strategies used by German writers to insert carefully these heretical French positions into German philosophical discourse. Chapter Four analyses the transfer of the French materialists’ critique of the concept of the immortality of the soul and of their claim that the mind is material. German uptake of French writings on this subject demonstrates a particularly interesting dynamic, due to the effect of existing German debates on the subject. German materialists employ the French texts to undermine texts by the likes of Mendelssohn. The final chapter is devoted to materialist theories of morality. It explores how the theories previously discussed are applied to more political ends, underlining the marginal aspect of materialist philosophy, yet also showing how it contributed to increasing secularization. The combination of the diffusion and discourse analysis models is reflected in this structure. Let us now turn to the study of bibliographical evidence.
Chapter 1: The bibliographical basis for the reception of French materialism in Germany

This chapter sets out the bibliographical case for the transfer of French materialism to Germany during the Enlightenment. In studies of reception, the availability of texts is fundamental to any claims of influence, and so material bibliography forms a crucial pre-requisite stage of this study. We need to establish what was known of the French materialist authors, which of their works were available, and in what form. To this end, this chapter analyses the circulation of French authors’ works in Germany (in French and in German translation) and German reactions to these texts (both in the periodical press and academic discourse). Drawing on established bibliographies as well as presenting significant new findings, this analysis aims to show the extent and significance of the cultural transfer of French materialist thought into the German Enlightenment.

This chapter, informed by book history and discourse analysis, examines the relationship between texts and the discourse about those books. It has three aims. Firstly it will attempt to show that there are sufficient bibliographical grounds for maintaining that French materialist philosophy was an important presence in the Aufklärung. This will be done by analysing which works became available in Germany and when, with second and subsequent editions showing which works were particularly popular. Secondly, we examine how texts were received in order to show how criticism and refutation served to further disseminate the ideas put forward in them. Thirdly, the analysis seeks to show how the philosophes acquired their reputations, thereby demonstrating how they became quasi-illicit figures, ripe for underground success.

1 German translations published in Vienna, for example, are included, since this implies availability in German states.
2 Reprints and second editions can be taken as evidence of popularity and proof of a growing market for a work. As Elie Luzac put it in the Avertissement to the second edition of L’Homme plus que machine (1755), pp. 4-5: ‘J’en donne une nouvelle édition [...] parce que le commerce veut, que l’on imprime ce qui se consomme.’ However, care must be taken to differentiate this from the common practice of eighteenth-century booksellers to repackaging a book which failed to sell. By replacing the cover page of an unpopular work and changing the title (rhabillage), a bookseller would seek to liquidate unsold stock. Therefore, the bibliography differentiates authentic second editions from ‘re-issues’ (commonly known in French as remise en vente avec nouvelle page de titre).
Four bibliographies have been compiled, and are to be found in the appendix:

A. A bibliography of German translations of Diderot, La Mettrie, Helvétius and d’Holbach, the materialist writers central to this study.3
B. A bibliography of German journal reviews of the works of Diderot, La Mettrie, Helvétius and d’Holbach.4
C. A bibliography of French-language editions of Diderot, La Mettrie, Helvétius and d’Holbach which were published in Germany.
D. A bibliography of miscellaneous works which were important in shaping the reception of radical French materialism. These works demonstrate on-going reception.

The analysis of these various bibliographies will show how the reputations of Diderot, La Mettrie, Helvétius and d’Holbach were made and how their work was seen in Germany, thus enabling us to understand the position these thinkers took up in the German literary-philosophical field. Analysis of reviews of their works will show how they were disseminated. It will also show how the widespread negative attitude towards materialism, given the theological basis of German establishment periodicals, created an environment where these thinkers acquired an aura of a contraband import and provided quasi-illicit reading material for underground radicals. The criticism of the French materialists’ works led to increased dissemination, as exposure to criticism afforded them added notoriety.

The focus here is on translations, because their publication, with dates, provides definitive evidence of the availability of a text to all educated members of the German-speaking public. The presence in Germany of the original French texts, often printed in Holland and Switzerland, is attested by many sources, such as work on French booksellers and the catalogues of personal and private libraries.5

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3 A starting point for this research was Hans Fromm, Bibliographie deutscher Übersetzungen aus dem Französischen, 1700-1948, 6 vols (Baden-Baden, Verlag für Kunst und Wissenschaft, 1950-53).
4 The Index deutschsprachiger Zeitschriften des 18. Jahrhunderts has been the starting point for this research, <http://adw.sub.uni-goettingen.de/drz/pages/Main.jsf>.
5 Martin Fontius and Werner Krauss, Französische Drucke des 18. Jahrhunderts in den Bibliotheken der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 2 vols (Berlin: Akademie, 1970). This work reveals a healthy number of texts by La Mettrie, Diderot, Helvétius and d’Holbach in East German libraries. Unfortunately, the lack of information on dates of acquisition means this is not a reliable source, only indicative at best. Given German reunification and the advent of electronic catalogues, this work is no
Catalogues from book fairs and booksellers show French works by La Mettrie, Diderot, Helvétius and d’Holbach were readily available in Germany. These all show that French-language books travelled regularly and widely in Germany in the eighteenth century. However, despite all these indices, there is as yet no systematic or reliable way of showing the exact availability of these objects. This is why the translations are the basis of this research. This should, however, be seen rather as a complement to the knowledge that the vast majority of works by these authors would have circulated among erudite German readers in French, hence the reviews based on readings of the original French editions. As such, we must accept that the writings in their original French form were often readily available in Germany, without being able to systematically account for it.

Previous studies have attempted to trace the German reception of Diderot, Helvétius, and d’Holbach, and work has been done on reactions in Germany to individual works by La Mettrie. The following study builds upon this existing research by analysing newly-compiled bibliographical data, to examine each of these thinkers in order to present an overall view of the position of French materialist thought in Germany.

In presenting a range of thinkers as categorised into materialists and non-materialists, however, care must be taken not to reify the materialists, by placing them into one homogenous group. La Mettrie, Diderot, Helvétius and d’Holbach did not all consistently argue the same thing, even in their own writings. Nothing could be further from the truth, as their refutations of one another show. These thinkers

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6 See for example, Fontius, Voltaire, pp. 11-12.
7 Mortier, Diderot; Saada.
8 Krebs, Helvétius.
9 Schmeisser, ‘Baron d’Holbach’.
11 Despite their parallel ideas, Diderot later criticised La Mettrie in Essai sur la vie de Sénèque le philosophe, sur ses écrits, et sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron (1778) as ‘un auteur sans jugement, qui a parlé de la doctrine de Sénèque sans la connaître,’ labelling him ‘dissolu, impudent, bouffon,'
display antitheses and ambiguities both within their own works and when compared with one another. Hence a bibliographical survey of the kind undertaken here must limit itself to tracking the availability of, and reactions to, the works of each thinker in order to analyse the representation an eighteenth-century German reader would have of them. This will help us to deduce how much people could have understood of a thinker like d’Holbach or La Mettrie and the perception of their radicalism.

As a preliminary to this analysis, we will now consider the pathways which made cultural transfer possible. This first section of discussion will present the topology of the circulation of ideas by building on the survey of intellectual conditions of the Aufklärung presented in the introduction. We will consider the status of the French language in Germany, research on printing and reading practices, censorship, and communication networks (booksellers, correspondence, journals).

**Intellectual conditions**

**The French Language in Germany**

French was widely spoken by the educated population of German-speaking lands in the eighteenth century. One need only think of Frederick the Great’s renowned francophilia, Leibniz’s writings in French and the French influence on Court life. Rolf Reichardt and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink label this the ‘Faszinationskraft der französischen Sprache und Kultur’ in eighteenth-century Germany.  

French was the language of many of the European courts and, as such, functioned as the passport to communication with elites – hence the motivation for all educated classes to learn it.

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flatteur, était fait pour la vie des Cours et la faveur des Grands. Il est mort comme il devait mourir victime de son intempérance et de sa folie; il s’est tué par l’ignorance de l’art qu’il professait.’ Diderot, *DPV*, xxv: *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron*, ed. by Jean Deprun and others (1986), pp. 246–48. Diderot’s Réfutation d’Helvétius demonstrates the disagreement between the two materialists, which centre on Diderot’s rejection of Helvétius’ reductionist stance, and Diderot’s insistence on the human aspect of mind: ‘Je suis homme, et il me faut des causes propres à l’homme.’ *DPV*, xxiv: *Réfutations*, ed. by Jean Th. de Booy (2004), p. 523. Though he collaborated with d’Holbach and was a friend and a regular guest at the Baron’s salon, Diderot criticised d’Holbach’s boring style in a letter to Naigeon, commenting that d’Holbach’s poor translation of Hobbes’s *De Homine* was detrimental to the text: ‘[sa] diction…fatigue, elle ennuye, elle fait tomber un livre des mains.’ *Correspondance de Diderot*, xii, 47.

and ensure their children were taught French. Gerhard Sauder’s study of the use of French in Germany showed a ten-fold increase in the number of French grammars published during the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{13} This study, together with Johannes Kramer’s research, demonstrates that French was the elite lingua franca, and so French works would not have had to be translated in order for them to be widely read by the educated classes, and for opinions to be formed on them.\textsuperscript{14}

Translation was not always necessary, therefore, for a work to be well known and to have an impact in Germany. French originals often sufficed for critics and interested readers. Indeed, the vast majority of French philosophical texts were reviewed in German journals before they were translated, which underlines the truly cosmopolitan ethos of German review journals. Translations show that a wider reading public than those fluent in French was interested, but we should not take the absence of a translation as evidence of the lack of impact of a particular work. For example, d’Holbach’s Système de la Nature, which was published in French in 1770, gave rise to 12 articles in German periodicals – all reviews of refutations of the work – before the German translation was published in 1783 (A44).\textsuperscript{15} So although d’Holbach’s work itself was not reviewed in journals, it was the subject of many lengthy refutations, which were all reviewed. Despite an initial lack of translation, coverage of the reactions ensured it did not go unnoticed in Germany.

Moreover, after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, Germany had several large refugee communities through which French ideas flowed into German territories through the networks of the book trade, journal distribution and correspondence.\textsuperscript{16} The diaspora of the Huguenot refugees undoubtedly played a part in the spread and increased prevalence of French. The pan-European erudite journals which were produced by many Huguenot scholars further demonstrate the hold of French as the medium of Enlightenment communication. Pierre Bayle remarked on

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{14} Johannes Kramer, Das Französische in Deutschland: Eine Einführung (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1992).  
\textsuperscript{15} These references in brackets refer to the corresponding entry in the appendix.  
\textsuperscript{16} See The Berlin Refuge 1680-1780: Learning and Science in European Context, ed. by Sandra Pott, Martin Mulsow and Lutz Danneberg (Leiden: Brill, 2003); La Vie intellectuelle a\textsuperscript{ux} Refuges protestants, ed. by Antony McKenna and Jens Häseler (Paris: Champion, 1999).
\end{flushleft}
the dominance of the French language: ‘La langue française est désormais le pont de communication de tous les Peuples de l’Europe.’

Indeed, Germany was one of many centres for the production of French-language journals, the vast majority of which were in fact produced outside France.

Printing and Reading: pre-conditions

That Germany was such a centre of French book printing requires us to understand the process of literary production and reading practices in the German Enlightenment. A survey of the conditions and framework of German print culture, supported by statistical background information, is instructive in establishing how French print culture could develop there. Often, given the strict conditions of censorship, many French texts were printed beyond French borders. In the 1730s, for 19 French periodicals printed in France, 65 were printed abroad. In the 1780s, 73 were published in France to 167 abroad. In Germany from 1685 to 1789, there were 75 French-language journals, of which 39 were created after 1770.

Edgar Mass has calculated that the French press accounted for twelve per cent of all German publishing, with strong activity in Berlin and the Rhineland. The reactions of such journals to French materialism were mostly similar to the reactions of the French authorities.

The cities of Leipzig and Frankfurt am Main were the centres of German book printing and, with their international fairs, were crucial to the circulation of eighteenth-century books. However, perusal of our bibliography shows that the

22 As François Labbé, Gazette littéraire de Berlin (1764-1792) (Paris: Champion, 2004), p. 124, shows, the Gazette littéraire de Berlin was hostile to materialists, as were the Bibliothèque germanique and the Nouvelle bibliothèque germanique. The exceptions were La Gazette de Cologne and the Journal du Bas-Rhin edited by Cleve-based Jean Manzon (1740-1798). See Sgard, Dictionnaire des journalistes.
translations of controversial French books were printed in a range of locations, underlining the polycentric nature of the German Enlightenment. The catalogues of book fairs allow us to judge the expansion of the book trade, showing that the real growth took place in the second half of the eighteenth century. It is estimated that two thirds of the 175,000 book titles produced in Germany in the eighteenth century appeared after 1760.\textsuperscript{23} Around 1740, about 750 new titles entered the market every year, whereas in the 1780s and 1790s there were around 5,000 each year.\textsuperscript{24} As catalogues of the Leipzig book fairs show, the majority of books dealt with theology, but the proportion constantly diminished, from 38.5% in 1740 to 24.8% in 1770 and 13.5% in 1800.\textsuperscript{25} The percentage on philosophy grew from 22.6% in 1735 to 39.6% in 1800.\textsuperscript{26} Moreover, the number of books written in Latin diminished throughout the century to the point where around only two per cent were published in Latin at the end of the century.

There has been considerable focus on the growth of reading in Germany in the Enlightenment era.\textsuperscript{27} Empirical reconstruction of readership in Germany during the eighteenth century is always difficult due to the paucity of reliable contemporary sources on the question. Yet there are key indicators that literacy grew rapidly and significantly. Wolfgang Ruppert estimates that by 1800, the literacy rate had risen to 30% of the population, from five per cent in 1700.\textsuperscript{28} Although reading was an activity which was always limited to a minority of German society, reading practices altered radically at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The spread of reading and books manifested itself in the rapid expansion of reading societies, Lesegesellschaften.\textsuperscript{29} By the end of the eighteenth century, there were more than 400

\textsuperscript{26} Blanning, \textit{Culture}, p. 146.
\textsuperscript{29} Also known as \textit{Abonnementsgemeinschaften} and \textit{Lesekabinette}. See Otto Dann, \textit{Lesegesellschaften und bürgerliche Emanzipation: Ein europäischer Vergleich} (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1981).
such groups in Germany. These functioned on the basis of allowing their members access to material they purchased together, which would otherwise be restricted to wealthy private libraries. These groups also served to bring together like-minded readers, often from the burgeoning middle classes, and promote discussion. Rolf Engelsing posited an evolution from ‘intensive’ to ‘extensive’ reading: a switch from close and repeated reading of a limited corpus of (religious) books to extensive reading of a much wider corpus and thus the discovery of more texts, opening up a new field of heterodox, challenging literature, in a true market. Though not constituting a ‘reading revolution’, this is linked to the development of a secular, individual imagination. This process is a highly significant evolution of reading and thus of the importance of transmission and diffusion of ideas. The dominance of theological writings was broken, and readers were invited to question works and begin to think in intertextual ways. This could in part explain the increasing openness to texts imported from France and elsewhere.

Censorship

Censorship in Germany rested chiefly in the hands of individual princely and city governments. The kaiserliche Bücherkommission was established in Frankfurt am Main in 1569, and other German states often used this imperial apparatus instead of running their own system. After 1670, the German book trade was increasingly dominated by Leipzig, which became the foremost publishing centre of Protestant Germany and of all Central Europe. The divided nature of the German territories facilitated the freedoms of the press. The differing laws created competition between the states and cities, and so manuscripts would be sent to a neighbouring territory for publication in order to circumvent particular censorship issues. Hamburg and Saxony were particularly free, with Prussia, the Palatinate and Thuringia also very moderate. A range of tactics were employed to ensure that no book would go unprinted when visas were not granted. For example, texts were sent to less restricted neighbouring states; pseudonyms, false titles, fake publisher names and places were all used. Moreover, though a system of punishments was in place, the

30 Müller, Aufklärung, p. 19.
31 Rolf Engelsing, Der Bürger als Leser (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1974).
authorities were in practice often extremely lax in their attitudes towards offenders. A study of censorship in the Electorate of Saxony found a total of four cases of punishment between 1697 and 1763. Relaxed censorship was often a consequence of economic policy. Publishing was a very important sector of the economy in the more liberal states and in turn supported other suppliers, and this non-ideological basis for pragmatic lenience was explicit in the motivation for allowing publishing freedom. In effect, freedom of the press was relatively generous, despite the presence of guidelines, publishing visas, customs and postal checks.

However, it would be wrong to conclude from this that there existed a totally free press in Germany. The effort to suppress the Wertheim Bible, a German translation of the Pentateuch with notes by Johann Lorenz Schmidt (1702-1749), is an excellent illustration of the limits of these freedoms. In Prussia, Frederick the Great introduced a censorship edict in 1749, which was renewed in 1772. His crackdown on Voltaire’s Akakia is well documented. Lessing bemoaned that newspapers ‘sind, wegen der scharfen Censur größtenteils so unfruchtbar und trocken, daß ein Neugieriger wenig Vergnügen darinne finden kann.’ Book burnings were not uncommon through the century, with the burning of Edelmann’s writings in public in Frankfurt am Main on May 9, 1750 a prominent example.

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34 Ernst Fischer, ‘“Immer schon die vollständigste Preßfreiheit”? Beobachtungen zum Verhältnis von Zensur und Buchhandel im 18. Jahrhundert’, in Zensur im Jahrhundert der Aufklärung, ed. by Haefs and Mix, pp. 61-78 (p. 68).
35 See Paul Spalding, Seize the Book, Jail the Author: Johann Lorenz Schmidt and Censorship in Eighteenth-Century Germany (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1998).
38 Lessing, letter to Johann Gottfried Lessing, 8 February 1751, Werke und Briefe, XLI, 33.
Networks: Booksellers

French books were popular in Germany and a number of publishers and booksellers made a healthy living in Germany specialising in selling French texts:40

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Booksellers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Berlin</td>
<td>Haude &amp; Spener; Nicolai; C.F. Voss; Samuel Pitra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleve</td>
<td>J.G. Baerstecher41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dresden</td>
<td>Georg Conrad Walther</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frankfurt am Main</td>
<td>Franz Varrentrapp; Johann Conrad Deinet;42 Eslinger &amp; Knoch43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gotha</td>
<td>Karl Wilhelm Ettinger</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hamburg</td>
<td>J. H. Herold</td>
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<td>Leipzig</td>
<td>Breitkopf; Weidmann &amp; Reich</td>
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<td>Munich</td>
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<td>Tübingen</td>
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<td>Weimar</td>
<td>E.L. Hoffmann</td>
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French émigré booksellers and publishers in Germany:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Berlin</td>
<td>Etienne de Bourdeaux; François de Lagarde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamburg</td>
<td>Jean-Guillaume Virchaux; Pierre François Fauche;44 Petit &amp; Dumoutier</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mannheim</td>
<td>Fontaine45</td>
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40 Giles Barber, ‘Who were the booksellers of the Enlightenment?’, in The Book and Book Trade in Eighteenth-Century Europe, ed. by Giles Barber and Bernhard Fabian (Hamburg: Ernst Hauswedell & Co., 1981), pp. 211-24.
41 Cleve, situated close to the Dutch border on the Rhine, was a Prussian enclave, which thus benefitted from the freedoms afforded by Prussian censorship laws. Baerstecher ordered 300 copies of the Système de la Nature from the S.T.N., but failed to pay for them. See Freedman, Books, p. 47, 70.
42 Deinet turned down a supply La Mettrie’s works. See Freedman, Books, pp. 92-111 (p. 110).
These booksellers sometimes participated in co-editions of French texts with publishers in France, with the example of Esslinger collaborating with Durand in Paris for an edition of Helvétius’s *De l’esprit* (G26). An excellent source of supply of these French books was the *Société Typographique de Neuchâtel* (STN) in Switzerland. Jeffrey Freedman has used its archive to document the demand in Hamburg, from the bookseller Virchaux, for the pornographic, erotic, subversive, anti-monarchical *livres philosophiques* which had to be transported *sous le manteau*.

**Networks: Correspondence**

Private and public letters are rich sources of how news of publications was transmitted. Study of this correspondence demonstrates the explicitly international and cosmopolitan character of the Enlightenment. News and opinions travelled across borders at speed. Private correspondence can provide a confidential, intimate space, which, though possessing its own rules and conventions, liberated the writer from certain aspects of social conformity. This allows the historian insight into the way opinions were formed and shared.

Letters were a crucially important medium of the eighteenth century. Frederick the Great’s correspondence with the likes of Charles-Etienne Jordan, Jean-Henri-Samuel Formey, d’Argens, d’Alembert, Maupertuis and Voltaire tells us a great deal about how the interest in scandalous books was shared between the Prussian monarch and his librarians, lecteurs, secretaries and philosophes. The exchange of views demonstrates how ideas circulated between the court and other official institutions like the Berlin Academy. The letters of journal editors like...

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46 Freedman, *Books*, pp. 63-75. Münz’s situation, just outside of Cologne’s city walls, allowed Mettra to circumvent censorship. In 1784, his Münz shop was flooded, forcing his move to Neuwied.

47 Often, the presence of a French writer in Germany would lead to their French texts being published by German publishers, as for example with Maupertuis (Walther in Dresden published *Les oeuvres de Mr. de Maupertuis* in 1752) and Voltaire (Walther published Voltaire’s *Oeuvres* from 1748 to 1754).


49 Freedman, ‘Zwischen Frankreich’, p. 482. See also Freedman, *Books*. On this type of *livres philosophiques* more generally, see Darnton, *Best-Sellers*. Darnton’s thesis is that this type of literature served to build up the ideological origins of the French Revolution by delegitimitizing (through ridicule) figures of the absolutist regime.
Albrecht von Haller, Friedrich Nicolai and Christoph Wieland are important in explaining how news of literary events such as book-burning and arrests passed quickly from one country to another. This correspondence also uncovers, as we will see, how the defence of conventional religious ideas against the perceived threat of materialism was organised, and how establishment actors like these journal editors were complicit with theologians, either for financial considerations of lost readership, or out of fear of being ostracized from polite society, as we will see in the case of Helvétius.

Journals

The role of journals in the Enlightenment, and more specifically in reviewing and discussing French materialist works, cannot be overestimated. The first German-language journal, the Monats-Gespräche, was founded in Leipzig by Christian Thomasius in 1688. Hereafter, periodicals flourished and demand for literary news rose as literacy rates increased. Journals were highly influential and attained a very wide reach. It has been estimated that any one copy of a journal would have been read by ten different people. The market for periodicals was consequently highly competitive, and editors were under pressure to bring in the latest news from overseas. This explains the copying of news and the over-hasty translation of foreign reviews. For instance, the Staats- und Gelehrte Zeitung des Hamburgischen unpartheyischen Correspondenten review of Diderot’s Pensées sur l’interprétation de la nature (C43) was translated from the review in the Mercure de France of January 1754. This particular review was highly enthusiastic about this radical

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53 Saada, pp. 130–35. Mortier, unaware that this review was copied from the French review, wrongly concludes that it proved ‘l’intérêt tout particulier du milieu de Hambourg pour l’œuvre de Diderot.’ Mortier, Diderot, p. 350. Given that the review was merely plagiarised, we cannot confirm that the Pensées sur l’interprétation de la nature was read in Hamburg at an early stage.
work, and thus in translation somewhat misplaced in view of the other hostile reviews in journals whose reviewers had actually read Diderot’s text.

The journals which frequently carried reviews of the French materialist philosophers are the Freye Urtheile und Nachrichten (ten reviews); the Freymüthige Nachrichten von neuen Büchern (fifteen reviews); the Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek (eleven reviews), and the Göttingische Zeitung von gelehrtten Sachen and the Göttingsche Anzeigen von gelehrtten Sachen (GGA), with a combined fifty-two reviews. The GGA has been described as ‘das einflußreichste Rezensionsorgan des mittleren 18. Jahrhunderts,’ and Nicolai’s Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek as ‘the most influential review organ of the late Enlightenment.’ Analysis of the correspondence and editorial decisions relating to these two journals is therefore particularly important.

Journals contributed to forming public opinion and hence were powerful forces of influence. This was not lost on institutions of the establishment which were highly influential in the control of journals. The GGA came under the aegis of the Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen from 1753 onwards and was very much part of the Protestant establishment. Thus the reviews of ‘dangerous’ material were never neutral: ‘Die Argumentation der Rezensenten der GGA ist mehr von einer Theologie als von einer spekulativen Philosophie geprägt, auch mehr von einer praktischen, pietistisch orientierten als von einer dogmatischen Theologie.’ It is worth noting that moderate and reform theology had to distance itself from any suspicion of creeping irreligion, and thus was ever watchful to flag up any contentious philosophy so as to ensure that this moderate Enlightenment was not itself accused of radicalism. As we will see in the section on the reception of Helvétius, the Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek too had to cede to the pressure of

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54 The Göttingsche Zeitung von gelehrtten Sachen (1739-1753) became the Göttingsche Anzeigen von gelehrtten Sachen (1753-1802). In 1802 its title was changed to the Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeigen, still published today. Given this continuity, these titles will henceforth be collectively referred to as the GGA, as is the convention.
55 Karl S. Guthke, Literarisches Leben im achtzehnten Jahrhundert in Deutschland und in der Schweiz (Bern: Francke, 1975), p. 73.
theologians.\footnote{The Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek was itself later banned temporarily in 1791 after the Wöllner reforms of censorship in Prussia. See Selwyn, p. 203.} This episode shows how the links between the establishment institutions of religious and political feudalism made it possible to apply the brakes to any imported radicalism and ensure the continuing hegemony of the Protestant Church in the states of northern Germany. Most journals thus adhered staunchly to the moderate Enlightenment and were forced to distance themselves from radical ideas. It is through such journals, therefore, that we can gauge the reactions to radical French ideas and see how materialism was consistently condemned. Beyond the number of published translations and how scholars commented between themselves in correspondence, journals tell us how the establishment shaped the reputations of the philosophical works of French materialists. Review articles, by their number and content, tell us how French radicalism was presented to the German public.

The fact that a journal refuted a work or strongly criticised the author and his ideas does not mean that the work could have no impact. In fact, quite the opposite is true. A review, and especially one which highlights the scandalous nature of a particular work, guarantees further coverage and alerts readers to controversy. As Ann Thomson comments: ‘Journals were of course important throughout the century in informing readers of the main content of works, including those expressing heterodox ideas, often through the technique of apparent criticism.’\footnote{Ann Thomson, ‘Informal networks’, in The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy, ed. by Knud Haakonssen, 2 vols (Cambridge: CUP, 2006), II, 121-36 (p. 121).} There is thus a symbiotic relationship between scandal and refutation on the one hand, and popularity on the other.

**French books in Germany**

The German dissemination of texts by French materialists was only one part of the translation and trade of French books in Germany in the period. There was a wide interest in French works which created a market for translation. We have ample bibliographical evidence that French writers were widely read in Germany at this time, both in the original language and in translation. The STN database shows that
many orders for French-language items were regularly placed, and Fromm’s bibliography lists numerous works in translation throughout the century.\(^60\) In both cases, the books which were read ranged from the purely scientific (e.g. Maupertuis, Buffon) to the historical (e.g. Mably), to theological, and the novel (e.g. Mercier), as well as numerous ‘philosophical’ works of all kinds by more engaged writers such as Montesquieu, Rousseau and the particularly popular Voltaire (plays, short stories, historical works, polemical tracts and philosophical treatises). Hence, the writers whom we are dealing with in this study fitted into a context in which French writers were readily accepted by literate German readers, who were clearly receptive to works of all kinds, whatever their reactions to them may have been.

Chronological analysis indicates the growth of the mechanisms of cultural transfer (translators, publishers, printers, booksellers, and reviewers) and of the market of readers interested in French thought, which was capable of sustaining the economic activity of translating unorthodox French philosophy. The German literary market commercialised many French texts, and particularly texts associated with la libre pensée, to the extent that French philosophy became synonymous with freethinking. Freedom in Berlin was, for Lessing, simply ‘die Freiheit, gegen die Religion so viel Sottisen zu Markte zu bringen, als man will.’\(^61\) There was interest in, and a market for, controversial French texts, and the apparatus for their publication. However, the often justificatory perspective of prefaces and the condemnatory tone of reviews must be noted. This is evidence of the guidance that readers were offered to ensure that the ‘negative’ influence of these often heterodox ideas was minimised. These guidance mechanisms, however, often served to provide greater diffusion by drawing attention to the heterodox nature of the publications. Analysis of the bibliographical data of the corpus of materialist writers will now investigate the availability of their ideas and consider the impact of these same guidance mechanisms on their reputations.

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\(^60\) Fromm, Bibliographie: French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe, <http://chop.leeds.ac.uk/stn/interface>. Moreover, there was ample diffusion of clandestine literature. Andrew Fairbairn and Bertram Schwarzbach, ‘The Examen de la religion: A Bibliographical Note’, SVEC, 249 (1987), 91-156 (p. 121), found sufficient material linking Prussia with French clandestine literature to ask the question: ‘Was Prussia a centre of diffusion for French antireligious texts?’.

\(^61\) Lessing, letter to Nicolai, 25 August 1769, Werke und Briefe, XI, I, 622.
Analysis

La Mettrie

The reaction in Germany to La Mettrie’s works is almost more intense than in France. His five-and-a-half year presence at Frederick the Great’s court as a lecteur did not, to say the least, go unnoticed. As the bibliography of French editions shows, there were (at least) twenty-two French editions of La Mettrie’s works printed on German presses in the eighteenth century. His collected works, the Œuvres philosophiques, were reprinted or re-edited six times before 1789. Hence, regardless of the presence of individual works, it can safely be assumed that any interested readers, having heard so much about this controversial doctor’s writings, would have been able to procure a copy of La Mettrie’s writings in French without much difficulty.62

In addition, there were seven editions of German translations, of five works.63 Works were often reproduced anonymously: between 1756 and 1789 there was only one translation published, and this 1777 work (A36) was published anonymously. This gap could indicate that the controversial, hedonistic reputation of La Mettrie hindered further publications, though this does not necessarily equate to a lack of interest. The telling absence is a translation of L’Homme machine, La Mettrie’s most famous work, which did not appear in German until 1875. By way of comparison, La Mettrie’s most famous work was translated into English in 1749 and was already in its second edition in England by 1750.64 So despite his influence in Berlin, the reputation of the book and its author prevented his most famous work from being

62 There are several attested instances of German thinkers corresponding about reading La Mettrie’s works in French. See, for example, Krause’s and Gleim’s discussion in The Correspondence of Christian Gottfried Krause: A Music Lover in the Age of Sensibility, ed. by Darrell Berg (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p. 61.
63 L’école de la volupté dans l’isle de Calypso: aux dépens de nymphes (A1); Epître à Mademoiselle A. C. P., ou la machine terrassée (A3); L’Art de jouir (A4, A8); Ouvrage de Pénélope; ou Machiavel en médecine (A36); Discours sur le Bonheur ou Anti-Sénèque (A5, A6), and Réflexions philosophiques sur l’origine des animaux (A7), a work which became known as the Système d’Epicure.
64 Though this work was at first attributed in England to the Marquis d’Argens, La Mettrie’s authorship had been established by the time the second edition was reprinted.
rendered into German. But the ideas of *L’Homme machine* were, in the process of refutation, given detailed airings. For example, the review in the *Nachrichten von einer Hallischen Bibliothek* (D22), the journal edited by the influential Protestant theologian Siegmund Jakob Baumgarten (1706-1757), goes through the work point by point, detailing the apparent contradictions and outlining La Mettrie’s main points, with the page numbers referred to in marginal annotations. The absence of a German translation of *L’Homme machine* did not hinder the demonization of La Mettrie.

It was thus very possible for literate Germans to be familiar with La Mettrie’s ideas. There was an unreasoned number of reviews in both French and German. Knabe finds the large number of reviews in the *GGA* ‘auflässig’. 65 However, as we will see with the other writers, and as seen by perusal of the bibliographies in the appendix, scandal sells. The German periodicals revelled in telling their upstanding readers about the latest antics of those terrible, despicable and unreasoned French *libre-penseurs*. And none was more provocative then La Mettrie. It is thus not so surprising that La Mettrie was the subject of sixty-four reviews in German between 1739 and 1753, and at least seven books.

So how was his reputation made? He was talked of in Germany relatively early, with the *GGA* reviewing his medical writings from 1739 onwards. Haller’s connections to Boerhaave, under whom the German had studied before founding the medical faculty at the University of Göttingen, meant that he was well aware of La Mettrie, a fellow student under Boerhaave. Haller was horrified at how his fellow doctor had developed into a materialist in France since their period together in Leiden. The particular conflict centred on La Mettrie’s French translation of Haller’s edition of Boerhaave’s work *Institutiones medicae* (1708), which annoyed Haller because La Mettrie failed to attribute to Haller the annotated commentaries included in the translation (D6). 66 Haller then accused La Mettrie of having stolen (he uses the term ‘Diebstahl’) some of his ideas for the *Histoire naturelle de l’âme* (D9). From these early duels, the scene was set for a long, entertaining battle. La Mettrie took

65 Knabe, p. 121.
great delight in riling Haller, firstly by dedicating *L’Homme machine* to him, and later by writing *Le petit homme à longue queue*. The latter was an ironic fiction in which Haller is portrayed as a drunken materialist who rejects the existence of God whilst frequenting brothels.

The conflict stemmed from Haller’s criticism of La Mettrie in the *GGA* where Haller objected to the Frenchman’s interpretation of ‘irritability’ in terms of consequences for the concept of the soul. Haller was a serious doctor, but also a very pious man. He strongly contested the way in which La Mettrie interpreted Boerhaave’s findings: ‘Daß ferner dieser unbillige Schüler den rechtschaffenen Boerhaave zum Materialisten und Deisten machen will, ist eine strafbare Unbillichkeit.’ This interaction proves that La Mettrie was aware of his German critics and responded to his new surroundings. He was particularly annoyed by the suggestion by Samuel C. Hollmann that he had plagiarised *L’Homme machine* from Urban Gottfried Bucher’s *Zweyer guter Freunde vertrauter Briefwechsel vom Wesen der Seele* (1713), a charge La Mettrie hotly denied.

Journals were quick to judge La Mettrie. *L’Homme machine*, although officially published in 1748, actually appeared in November 1747 and critical responses to it began to appear almost immediately, the *GGA* reviewing it in the second week of December 1747. Evidently somebody had sent Haller a copy of the book, due to La Mettrie’s dedication of the book to him. This review followed hot on the heels of the review of *L’Histoire naturelle de l’âme*, the book which had provoked La Mettrie’s expulsion from France. Haller’s journal was blunt in its judgment of this earlier work: ‘Die wahre Absicht des Verfassers […] ist zu zeigen, daß die Seele materiel und folglich sterblich sey, und […] daß ein Geist seyn könne,

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67 Though written in 1751, this tract was not published until 1934. However, its contents were public knowledge to contemporaries. It is mentioned in d’Argens’s *Ocellus Lucanus, en Grec et en Français* (1762) and Chaudon’s *Dictionnaire anti-philosophique* (1767), II, 7. The title alone is suggestive of La Mettrie’s humour.


69 Hollander, *GGA* (1747), 415 (D8).

70 Samuel C. Hollmann, *Lettre d’un anonyme pour servir de critique au livre intitulé homme machine*, translated in *GGA* (1749), (D31). This was one of a number of satirical reactions to La Mettrie’s provocation, which are the subject of Ernst Bergmann’s *Die Satiren des Herrn Maschine. Ein Beitrag zur Philosophie und Kulturgeschichte des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig: Wiegandt, 1913).
ein blosses Wortspiel und ein Mißverstand sey.’\textsuperscript{71} La Mettrie’s materialism is thus spelt out explicitly for German readers from the outset.

Though La Mettrie’s works were ostensibly anonymous, his identity was not well guarded. Most critics knew which works he was responsible for. Indeed, he was labelled as ‘der freche Autor’ and ‘der berüchtigte La Mettrie.’\textsuperscript{72} \textit{L’Homme machine} was a target of particular animosity and was as a common target which any upstanding theologian (of any denomination) would condemn as the symbol of decaying morality. A whole host of figures lined up to explain why \textit{L’Homme machine} was a terrible book deserving condemnation, particularly neologians.\textsuperscript{73} Our bibliographical findings here confirm Vartanian’s judgment that \textit{L’Homme machine} was ‘perhaps the most heartily condemned work in an age that saw the keenest competition.’\textsuperscript{74}

What is also interesting in the case of La Mettrie is the large number of reviews in French-language journals in Germany. The French press in Germany, principally Berlin-based émigré Formey, denounced La Mettrie. The review of \textit{L’Homme machine} in the \textit{Nouvelle bibliothèque germanique} in 1748 was uncompromising and helped to shape reception by categorising La Mettrie as a Spinozist atheist: ‘la conclusion de son ouvrage nous montre que son athéisme est celui de Spinoza.’\textsuperscript{75} This label relegates La Mettrie to the margins of civilised scholarship, and would have made life difficult for anybody proposing to translate the work into German, which helps to explain why this task was not undertaken until 1875. The consistent labelling of La Mettrie as dangerous and as a materialist and an atheist was sure to create a lot of press coverage and the geographic locations of the refutations prove that news of the scandal travelled far and wide. Thus the criticism served to disseminate his work and led to it being read by more and more people whose interest was stirred.

\textsuperscript{71} Haller, \textit{GGA} (1747), 413 (D8).
\textsuperscript{72} \textit{GGA} (1748), 486 (D17).
\textsuperscript{73} Mark Pockrandt, \textit{Biblische Aufklärung: Biographie und Theologie der Berliner Hofprediger August Friedrich Wilhelm Sack (1703-1786) und Friedrich Samuel Gottfried Sack (1738-1817)} (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), p. 200
\textsuperscript{74} Vartanian, \textit{La Mettrie’s L’Homme Machine}, p. 95.
\textsuperscript{75} \textit{Nouvelle bibliothèque germanique} (1748), 328-56 (p. 335).
The mainstream German Enlightenment figures like Reimarus and Lessing read La Mettrie and actively shaped his reception in Germany (D50, D52). The particular interest in La Mettrie is without doubt linked to his status within Frederick the Great’s court. However, his relationship with the monarch was far from smooth. The Prussian King was becoming increasingly irritated by the impertinence of his lecteur and imposed a de facto censorship edict in May 1749. This measure was potentially intended to ban the Anti-Sénèque/Discours sur le Bonheur (first published in late 1748) and prevent it reappearing in the collected works Frederick commissioned. The Discours sur le Bonheur, which Falvey considers to be the culmination of La Mettrie’s thought, appalled Frederick and other Enlightenment philosophers because of its hedonistic content. La Mettrie had to write the Discours préliminaire for the Œuvres philosophiques to replace the banned text which he intended to open the collection. The Œuvres philosophiques too was subsequently censored in Prussia, to little effect. La Mettrie responded by ordering a reprint of the Anti-Sénèque (1751) and the Œuvres philosophiques including the Discours sur le Bonheur (1751) in Amsterdam from Elie Luzac.

His early death perhaps prevented the relationship degenerating any further and Frederick was able to write a generous Éloge de M. de La Mettrie which was published in due course in the proceedings of the Berlin Academy. This brings us to a rather glaring discrepancy between the fact that La Mettrie belonged to the same institutions as the establishment figures of the Berlin Academy (and was read by Formey, Maupertuis, Frederick and probably by all other members) and the lack of legacy in the establishment’s proceedings. Apart from the monarch’s eulogy, no trace of La Mettrie exists in the official proceedings of the Academy. Despite the

77 A second edition was printed in Berlin, which Lessing was able to read before the remaining copies were burned. In a letter to his father Johann Gottfried Lessing, dated November 2, 1750, Lessing writes: ‘Ich habe eine Schrift von ihm gelesen, welche Antiseneque ou le souverain bien heisset, und die nicht mehr als zwölfmal ist gedruckt worden. Sie mögen aber von der Abscheulichkeit derselben daraus urtheilen, dass der König selbst davon zehn Exemplare ins Feuer geworfen hat.’ Lessing, Werke und Briefe, XI, I, 32. In this same letter, Lessing comments that L’Homme machine ‘hat viel Aufsehen gemacht,’ further evidence of the impact La Mettrie made.
78 Falvey, pp. 12 and 19. La Mettrie apparently fraudulently told the publisher, Voss, that he had royal permission for the first editions of the Anti-Sénèque.
masses of coverage La Mettrie attracted in journals and official refutations across the German-speaking lands, his work was not permitted the respectability of being acknowledged by the establishment. This discrepancy between his strong initial presence and the lack of lasting legacy can be interpreted as a kind of attempted side-lining of La Mettrie into the role of court jester.\footnote{A recent study shows how La Mettrie remained ‘a proscribed thinker’ right through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. See Olivier Walusinski, ‘A Case of Charcotian grande hystérie: Observation by Julien Offray de La Mettrie in 1738’, \textit{European Neurology}, 67.2 (2012), 98-106.} He became an object of grudgingly tolerated amusement, but not somebody deserving of serious philosophical discussion.\footnote{Indeed, following the publication of a letter from Maupertuis to Haller, rumours circulated that he was suffering from genuine mental illness. See Falvey, p. 30.} Although there were few journal articles on his work after 1753, there were a large number of book refutations (H3-H9, H12, H15). These works show that La Mettrie’s ideas were considered dangerous enough to require refutation and that there must have been echoes of his thinking in wider society outside of the Berlin Academy. It is further evidence of the dual spheres of reception: the establishment-monitored mainstream and the free ‘underground’ sphere of coded allusions. It is to this continued underground reading of La Mettrie which these refutations were responding. The \textit{Œuvres philosophiques} were printed six times in the eighteenth century, with the place name given as Berlin. There is no reason to suspect this is false. A whole chapter of analysis was devoted to him in Trinius’s \textit{Freydenker-Lexikon} (1759). Thus interest in La Mettrie continued right through the century, as the spectre of La Mettrie survived. It is this interest we will investigate in the following chapters.

\textbf{Diderot}

There are already two invaluable studies of the German reception of Diderot, by Roland Mortier and Anne Saada.\footnote{Mortier, \textit{Diderot}; Saada.} We may thus limit ourselves to the analysis of the bibliographical data collated here. Analysing the list of German translations, we can see there were a large number of them, fifteen in all. The majority though, consist of Diderot’s dramas and novels, which became well-known and appreciated, with eight editions of \textit{Le Père de famille} being published before 1789 (excluding one false new edition) and three editions of his collected theatre (A9, A16, A41). The other very
popular work was the *Contes* published under the name of Solomon Gessner, with Diderot’s name often not appearing on the title page, or in the form of D***, in a curious publishing strategy. This was re-edited six times (excluding the two ‘remise en vente’ re-issues, A23 and A42) before 1789 – a *bona fide* phenomenon. Diderot’s novel *Les Bijoux indiscrets*, a highly subversive tale of despotic power and talking female genitals, was also translated (A18, A33), and thus Diderot’s unconventional stance on monarchy and transgressive style were known in Germany. The archives of the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel reveal that between 1769 and 1789, of the 405 orders for Diderot’s works in Europe, thirty-five were sent to destinations in Germany, a little under ten per cent.\(^8\) Whilst this is not phenomenal, it is further evidence of a clearly established market.

How was Diderot represented in Germany? Reviewing the 1780 German translation of Diderot’s *Essai sur le mérite et la vertu*, a free translation of Shaftesbury (A39), Lossius (C68) writes that Diderot’s ‘Anmerkungen möchten vielleicht gut seyn, wenn sie nicht vom Hrn. Diderot wären.’\(^8\) This prejudiced comment shows the extent to which the mainstream Enlightenment in Germany was keen to guide readers away from the radical writings of Diderot. Only his theatre was presented as acceptable writing. How could it be that a reviewer could write with such a coloured opinion on Diderot? How had he become such a reviled writer?

In terms of Diderot’s radical philosophy, there was an inauspicious start because the *Pensées philosophiques* were published anonymously. When this work was condemned to be burnt by the Paris parlement on 7 July, 1746, news from France travelled fast. Yet as Saada shows, the technique of ‘compilation’ tended to perpetuate mistakes about who the author was. In their quest to reveal who had caused such uproar in Paris, German journals published all manner of false information: that Diderot (or Didrot, Dridot) was a doctor, and later, that he was imprisoned in the Bastille (and not, as was the case, at Vincennes).\(^8\) Information flowed easily (and Saada shows the practice of plagiarism to be widespread) between French-language journals and German journals.

\(^8\) Available at <http://chop.leeds.ac.uk/stn/interface>. Whilst this archive is from only one book trader, and only covers the period from 1769 onwards, it is nevertheless indicative of general trends.\(^8\) Johann Christian Lossius, *Neueste philosophische Litteratur* (Halle: Gebauer, 1781), VI, p. 150.\(^8\) Saada, p. 8.
The GGA was not as well informed as others and attributed the *Pensées philosophiques* to Voltaire, whereas the *Bibliothèque raisonnée* had previously suggested it was by La Mettrie. Diderot was known in Germany as the French translator of Robert James’ *Medicinal Dictionary* (C2, C4, C5). The biographical inaccuracies which could cloud analysis of how Diderot’s reputation developed in Germany, were, however, cleared up, and he was definitively acknowledged as the author of the *Pensées philosophiques* in January 1748, by La Mettrie. Intriguingly, Johann Lorenz Schmidt, in the preface to his German translation of Du Marsais’s *Examen de la religion* (1747), was also very well informed and stated matter-of-factly that the *Pensées philosophiques* were by Diderot. It would thus be wrong to suggest that the anonymous nature of the publication of the *Pensées philosophiques* meant that people would not associate Diderot with scandalous writing after 1748. The chapter on Diderot in Trinius’s 1759 *Freydenker-Lexikon*, for example, is factually correct regarding the biographical and bibliographical details.

The *Pensées philosophiques* replicated La Mettrie’s *succès de scandale*. Writers again hurried to refute the work which, despite its deistic tendencies, was construed as atheistic. Baumgarten, Elsner and Formey all criticised Diderot for what they saw as atheism. Baumgarten announced the *Pensées philosophiques* as ‘übel ausgedacht’, labelling Diderot a ‘skeptischen Atheisten’, dismissing Diderot’s avowal of faith as disingenuous.

The *Pensées philosophiques* was, however, unlike La Mettrie’s *L’Homme machine*, translated into German very quickly, with Jakob Elsner’s rendering appearing in 1748 (A2). The fact that Diderot’s text was burnt in Paris gave it an

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87 Confirmation of the authorship the *Pensées philosophiques* came in La Mettrie’s *Homme machine*. La Mettrie, however, then went on to describe Diderot as a doctor and to misquote the *Pensées philosophiques*.

88 [Du Marsais], *Die wahre Religion oder die Religionsprüfung*, trans. by Johann Lorenz Schmidt (Frankfurt, Leipzig: n.pub., 1747; repr. ed. by Gianluca Mori, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2003), p. [31]. That Schmidt was able to claim this as early as 1747 (prior to La Mettrie) marks him out as a very well connected actor in networks of heterodox knowledge and raises questions as to his connections and sources. Schmidt was also the first German translator of Spinoza’s *Ethics*.

89 [Nachrichten aus einer Hallischen Bibliothek, 1 (1748), 244-52 (C8)]. This review clearly relies on a close reading of the text.
immediate interest.\textsuperscript{90} Elsner’s translation was published with the aim of containing the potential of the \textit{Pensées philosophiques} to encourage freethinkers by bringing it into the light and allowing for refutations in German. Johann Lorenz Schmidt, in the notes to his Du Marsais translation, referred to the ‘bekannten \textit{Pensées philosophiques}’.\textsuperscript{91} A review of the translation states that the ‘\textit{Pensées philosophiques sind bekannt}’.\textsuperscript{92} So the work was already widely known prior to its translation. This is important for our study as the \textit{Pensées philosophiques} is one of the few philosophical texts by Diderot to be translated into German, and went through many French editions in the eighteenth century. This work, along with news of the scandal of the \textit{Encyclopédie} in the 1750s, helped to establish Diderot’s reputation as a \textit{philosophe}.\textsuperscript{93}

Again, the presence of Formey in Berlin served to ensure that Diderot and his work were talked about, albeit not in a very positive way. The perpetual secretary of the Berlin Academy, as a contributor to the \textit{Encyclopédie}, knew Diderot. It would be erroneous to see this link as the equivalent of having a publicist in Prussia, given that Formey was a devout Protestant strongly opposed to Diderot’s deism/atheism, but Formey’s interest in Diderot’s work kept it in the limelight. Formey, a journal editor, had regular information on events in Paris. His enlightened way of refuting the \textit{Pensées philosophiques} involved re-publishing Diderot’s text, with Formey’s own \textit{Pensées raisonnables} following the original text. Including reviews of the original text, the translation, and Formey’s reaction, there were sixteen different journal articles about the \textit{Pensées philosophiques}. All these diligent and industrious refutations, whatever their intention, ensured that nobody interested in literary news

\textsuperscript{90} Diderot himself later commented on the increased sales that invariably accompanied book burnings: ‘Mais je vois que la proscription, plus elle est sévère, plus elle hausse le prix du livre, plus elle excite la curiosité de le lire, plus il est acheté, plus il est lu... Combien de fois le libraire et l’auteur d’un ouvrage privilégié, s’il l’avaient osé, n’auraient-ils pas dit aux magistrats de la grande police: “Messieurs, de grâce, un petit arrêt qui me condamne à être lacéré et brûlé au bas de votre grand escalier?” Quand on crie la sentence d’un livre, les ouvriers de l’imprimerie disent: “Bon, encore une édition!”’ \textit{Lettre adressée à un magistrat sur le commerce de la librairie, DPV, VIII: Encyclopédie IV}, ed. by John Lough and Jacques Proust (1976), p. 556.

\textsuperscript{91} Du Marsais, \textit{Die wahre Religion oder die Religionsprüfung}, trans. by Johann L Schmidt, p. 121.

\textsuperscript{92} \textit{Freymuthige Nachrichten von neuen Büchern}, 1749, 236 (C17).

\textsuperscript{93} There is interesting evidence that the devout Charles Bonnet, the Swiss Protestant scientist, coloured Haller’s view, feeding him with information on what he perceived as pride and plagiarism of the \textit{Encyclopédie}. Nikolai Immer, ‘Hallers Diderot: das Bild des “Encyclopedisten” in den Göttingisch-Gelehrten Anzeigen’, in \textit{Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift}, 60.3 (2010), 269-91. See \textit{The Correspondence between Albrecht von Haller and Charles Bonnet}, ed. by Otto Sonntag (Bern: Huber, 1983).
would have been unaware who Diderot was, as Mortier confirms: ‘Les réfutations des Pensées philosophiques, loin de freiner leur pénétration, contribuèrent plutôt à les faire connaître.’

Aside from the highly controversial Pensées philosophiques, what works of Diderot’s were known? In terms of translations, it is the absences which are telling. Neither the Lettre sur les aveugles, nor the Pensées sur l’interprétation de la nature was translated into German in the eighteenth century. Moreover, works by Diderot such as Le Rêve de d’Alembert (first published in 1830) and the Supplément au voyage de Bougainville (1796) could only have been known in French, if at all, as they were only published in serial form in the Correspondance littéraire, which had an extremely exclusive and limited circulation. Just as in France, Diderot’s whole corpus was not known in his day because of anonymous and unpublished works (such as La promenade du sceptique, which was not published until 1830), so no German (or Frenchman) could have a full picture of Diderot’s thought during his lifetime.

As the works which were translated were generally theatre, which, along with numerous productions, was given its prominence by Lessing, the radical philosophy was addressed only in reviews in periodicals. But as the data shows, many articles discussed the untranslated Lettre sur les aveugles, Pensées sur l’interprétation and the Encyclopédie. We can thus infer that these texts were restricted to the twin publics of the establishment gatekeepers and the underground connoisseurs who engaged with the texts in French. Though we have not considered the Encyclopédie in translation, it is worth noting that it developed a reputation with these underground groups, with Wekhrlin signalling its popularity: ‘Ganz Europa liest die Encyclopaedie.’

In 1770, a translation of writings by Madame Thiroux d’Arconville was

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94 Mortier, Diderot, p. 338.
95 For the full list of subscribers, see Inventaire de la Correspondance Littéraire de Grimm et Meister. SVEC 225-27, ed. by Ulla Kölving and Jeanne Carriat, 3 vols (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1984), 1, xviii-xix. There were usually 15 or 16 subscribers, all from royalty or nobility, and very much concentrated in German states.
published with the title *Des Herrn Diderot Moralische Werke* (A22). In fact, Diderot had nothing to do with this work, yet the attribution severely coloured his reputation. Indeed, on the basis of this falsely attributed work, the *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek* concluded that ‘Diderot eben so wie d’Alembert, ist ein sehr schlechter spekulativer Philosoph.’\(^97\) So Diderot was deemed a bad philosopher on the basis of works he did not write. This unfair judgment may have hindered further translations of important works like the *Pensées sur l’interprétation de la nature*. Diderot’s reputation had a pernicious effect on his reception in Germany.

Diderot’s reputation as an atheist became well known in Germany, where during his passage to and from Russia in 1773-74, he seemed to revel in the freedom to be able to espouse his views publicly. Diderot’s statements during his journey strongly influenced German perceptions. Lessing received a letter from his brother Karl in October 1773 with news of Diderot, relayed from Moses Mendelssohn, who had seen Diderot at the Leipzig book fair: ‘Rate, was er getan hat! Öffentlich vor dem Tore, im Kreise einer Menge Professoren und Kaufleute, den Atheismus gepredigt. [...] Diderot soll der größte Sophist sein, den man sich denken kann.’\(^98\) A Leipzig-based Swiss pastor, Georg Joachim Zollikofer, who also conversed with Diderot, presents a similar, more complete portrait in his letter to Christian Garve, explaining: ‘Er ergriff alle Gelegenheiten, um den Atheismus zu predigen.’\(^99\)

Diderot had a chequered history with Frederick the Great which included snubbing the monarch’s invitation to sojourn at his court during the philosopher’s journey to St. Petersburg in 1773.\(^100\) Although he was a foreign member of the Berlin Academy, Diderot was, unlike d’Alembert, no fan of Frederick. Moreover, the Prussian king was under the influence of d’Argens, who wrote to Frédéric that the *Pensées philosophiques* contained only ‘les choses les plus triviales’ and that Diderot

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\(^{97}\) *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, 26 (1775), 491 (C55).


\(^{100}\) Mortier, *Diderot*, pp. 38-40. Diderot was damning of Frederick II in his *Lettre sur l’Examen de l’Essai sur les préjugés ou Pages contre un tyran*, which remained unpublished until 1937.
‘n’est qu’un diseur de galimatias.’ Thus despite Diderot’s links to d’Alembert, Formey, Maupertuis and others in Berlin, he was out of favour at the Prussian court, and not appreciated by the Berlin philosophers outside of the court.

In conclusion, Diderot was better known than was previously thought, as indicated by the mass of journal articles. The second edition of Mortier’s study contains additional findings of new reviews absent from the first edition, yet Mortier did not change his analysis in line with the new data, retaining his pessimistic conclusion that it would be ‘abusif et téméraire de gonfler […] l’influence exercée en Allemagne par Diderot.’ Though the *Pensées philosophiques* were initially not linked to Diderot, this was quickly corrected and Diderot’s philosophy became synonymous with scandal and materialism. The list of journal reactions, which contains many unknown to Mortier, confirms that Diderot was also pushed into a marginal position as a radical figure. This means that we can infer that those Germans seeking out his work can be seen to be embracing the transgressive, unacceptable learning Diderot had come to represent. Given that the most incendiary works remained without translation (*pace* the *Pensées philosophiques*), it can be argued that Diderot as a materialist philosopher remained an underground figure, and therefore, potent radical force known only to the initiated reader, who was capable of reading French and able to access French journals. When German thinkers quote Diderot as an authority in the latter part of the eighteenth century, they knowingly embrace this reputation, even without knowledge of texts like *Le Rêve de d’Alemebert* or *Les Principes philosophiques sur la matière et le mouvement*.

Helvétius

Krebs’ study of the German reception of Helvétius shows that his works were widely available and widely discussed within mainstream moderate Enlightenment circles,
and not dismissed out of hand as scandalous provocative tracts of anti-religious bile, even though the scandal of events in Paris surrounding De l’esprit travelled across Europe. Helvétius was without doubt widely read. Jacobi, Thomas Abbt, Moses Mendelssohn, Johann Christoph Gottsched, Wieland, Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, and Nicolai all read his works. However, the suspicion that Helvétius was a ‘Trojan horse’ for materialism meant that these mainstream Enlightenment figures had difficulty in accepting the ideas he presented, and the reading of Helvétius was an activity very much shaped and guided by the workings of the establishment, as we will see.

There were four French editions of Helvétius’s work published in Germany (G23-G26) and twenty-two journal articles. Helvétius was not a mystery figure for German readers. De l’esprit was translated in 1761 (A11) and reissued in 1787 (A52), proving that interest was sustained. De l’homme was translated and published in two editions (A25, A51). Saint-Lambert’s biography of the life of Helvétius was also translated in 1773 (H21) and so there can be no doubt that there was a demand for Helvétius’s writings and for information about him. From the archives of the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel, we find that of 829 books by Helvétius ordered from 1769 to 1789, eighty-seven were for the combined German destinations. As with Diderot, this represents a little over ten per cent of the European market.

The only potential misinterpretation of Helvétius in terms of what he wrote were the false attributions of Le vrai sens du système de la nature, which was translated into German (A46, A47), and some journals’ suggestions that he may have been responsible for d’Holbach’s Système de la nature (F9). This would of course have brought an additional aura of scandal to the name of Helvétius, and it played a key part in the reaction to his posthumous De l’homme. The Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek review labelled this second work an example of ‘französische Sophisterei’, a charge which shows that German reviewers saw a distinctive Frenchness in the work, and regarded materialist writing as necessarily sophistic. 107

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106 The mistake is understandable as this text was included in editions of Helvétius’s collected works.
107 Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek, 25 (1775), 330 (E14).
Nicolai, the editor of the *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, thought that Helvétius was probably the author of the *Système de la Nature* and, through conversations with Moses Mendelssohn, came to share the view that Helvétius’s work was unordered ‘Sophisterey’.¹⁰⁸ The genesis of the review of *De l’homme* in the *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek* provides a perfect example of the workings of unofficial censorship by the establishment. Johannes von Müller (1752-1809), a young literary critic who would later become a member of Weishaupt’s *Illuminaten*, was enthused by Helvétius’s text, which he received from Schlözer, with whom Müller had studied in Göttingen.¹⁰⁹ Müller was commissioned to write a review for Nicolai’s journal. His review spoke in glowing terms of Helvétius’s work on human behaviour and of what a wonderful philosopher Helvétius was. Analysis of Nicolai’s correspondence reveals how Müller’s review was rejected on the grounds that it might offend the sensibilities of the Berlin ‘neologians’ Sack and Spalding, who somehow obtained Müller’s review manuscript.¹¹⁰ Nicolai, none too keen to risk the journal’s standing and attract suspicion from zealous theologians, wrote to Müller asking him to tone down the review. Helvétius was thus considered a dangerous writer who needed to be treated as such. Müller’s attempt to present a positive reading of Helvétius’s materialist anthropology was impeded and effectively censored by influential theologians and risk-averse, conservative journal editors, all keen to protect their own heterodox positions by rejecting materialism. This is how the positive reception of radical ideas was forced underground. This episode illustrates the difficult path faced by materialist ideas in Germany and the reason why the materialists were effectively marginalised.

So what did Müller do next with his positive review? He sent it to Wieland for publication in *Der teutsche Merkur*. In his reply to Müller’s proposal, Wieland writes of Helvétius:


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¹⁰⁹ Müller would later turn against materialism and become a close correspondent of Jacobi’s.
anstößig zu werden. Mit einer gewissen guten Art läßt sich alles sagen. ¹¹¹

Wieland conceives journalism as possessing techniques and sufficient room for manoeuvre to say anything. If this could have been considered as a licence to promote materialism, Wieland clarifies his opposition to materialism: ‘Überdies ist wohl nicht zu läugnen daß Helvétius nicht in allem, und am allerwenigsten in seinem Materialismus recht hat.’ ¹¹² Quite which of Helvétius’s views were seen as correct, given that Wieland did not subscribe to his fundamental premise of materialism, is not clear. Wieland shows his resistance to allowing the espousal – or even the serious consideration – of materialist ideas to be presented in print. The so-called ‘public’ sphere was thus not open to materialism, and not a safe environment for the approval of materialist ideas. ¹¹³ Editors were concerned about raising the hackles of organised religious groups, as Wieland was with his Catholic readership. This letter shows that market considerations were uppermost in an editor’s mind. The question remains though as to whether the self-censorship in fear of ‘public opinion’ was not itself an excuse for forming ‘public opinion’ by controlling content.

The translation of Helvétius demonstrates Gottsched’s ambiguous ‘guiding’ of so-called ‘dangerous’ French works, as he had previously done for works by Fontenelle and Bayle. ¹¹⁴ Gottsched’s foreword is seen as a way of making the translation acceptable and justifies the translation in terms of tolerance: ‘Sollte nun wohl ein Buch, das […] in Paris verbrannt worden, auch in Deutschland, und zwar im protestantischen Teile desselben, verbothen zu werden verdienen?’ ¹¹⁵ He also

¹¹² Ibid.
¹¹³ This evidence further undermines the Habermasian idea of an open public sphere. Public discourse was clearly restricted and guarded.
claimed to want to bring the work into daylight (the best form of disinfectant) to disarm its radical potential, so preventing it from mutating underground. Gottsched highlights the ‘heimliche Neigung zum Materialismus.’

Wieland remarked that ‘Werke von diesem Schlage müssen entweder gar nicht, oder von Männern übersetzt werden, welche Genie, Gelehrsamkeit, guten Willen und Muße genug haben, sie durch gehörige Scheidung des Guten und Bösen, unschädlich und gemeinnützig zu machen.’ This means that readers were not treated as having sufficient critical faculties as to be able to be trusted with a translation which has not been sufficiently sanitized by careful commentary in forewords. Wieland thus shows that he was not opposed to the possibility of suppressing works if he felt they could not be presented correctly.

Frederick II read Helvétius and acknowledged a certain debt to the Frenchman for his own thinking in a letter to Voltaire. Mendelssohn, to whom De l’esprit was recommended by Lessing and Abbt, rejected the book as too unsystematic for his German sensibilities – a recurrent judgement of French philosophy by German critics. There are numerous contemporary sources on the impact of Helvétius’s writings in Germany. Notable amongst these are a 1790 letter from Jacobi to Wilhelm von Humboldt, which mentions ‘der allgemeine Eindruck und die große, noch fortdauernde Wirkung des Buches De l’Esprit vor dreißig Jahren.’ Adam Weishaupt, who reserved the reading of d’Holbach and Helvétius for advanced members of the Illuminaten, knew that mention of Helvétius would lead to problems: ‘ich wage neuerdings verleumdet zu werden, das ich [Helvétius] anführe.’

The example of the rejection by both Nicolai and Wieland of Müller’s positive reviews of Helvétius shows how the reception of French materialist ideas was marshalled by a combination of ideological and pragmatic reasons, which

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117 Der teutsche Merkur, 6 (1774), 361-62 (E13).
118 Frederick II, King of Prussia, letter to Voltaire, 17 February 1770, OCV, 120: Correspondence, ed. by Theodor Besterman (1975), p. 34.
119 Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, letter to Wilhelm von Humboldt, 9 September 1790, in Jacobi, Auserlesener Briefwechsel, ed. by Friedrich Roth, 2 vols (Leipzig: Fleischer, 1827), II, 41.
120 Adam Weishaupt, Apologie der Illuminaten (Frankfurt, Leipzig: Grattenuer, 1786), p. 47.
prevented Helvétius’s materialism from being praised. In conclusion, Helvétius was a well-known figure in German letters, yet establishment forces conspired to set a clear limit to which aspects of his work could be appreciated, and which aspects were to be condemned. The translations, however they were introduced, permitted his ideas a wide currency.

D’Holbach

In many ways, d’Holbach is the most difficult of the authors to review here. His works were published late on in the period and his anonymity was guarded well enough in Germany to be problematic with regard to garnering reaction to his works as a corpus of writings by the same author. This is to say that our knowledge of d’Holbach’s bibliography was not shared by German eighteenth-century readers. D’Holbach was known only by his title as ‘der Verfasser des Système de la Nature’. This means that although other works like the Système Social (F12) and La Morale Universelle (F17) were reviewed, they were not often linked to the figure of ‘der Verfasser des Système de la Nature’. As such, d’Holbach can be considered a proponent of clandestine literature, even though his works were printed and widely distributed. We acknowledge, then, that we are anachronistically treating d’Holbach as the single author behind a series of texts which mostly appeared without connection for contemporaries. Though often deemed to have no influence in Germany, six of d’Holbach’s works were translated prior to the French Revolution, a considerable number given the controversy that each of these had provoked in France. This compares favourably with translations into other languages in the same period: only one work by d’Holbach was translated into English and one into Italian.

No study of the German transmission of radical French philosophy has yet recognized that the 1789 Theologische Charlatanerien (A55) is in fact a translation of d’Holbach’s Théologie portative ou Dictionnaire abrégé de la religion chrétienne (1767). The French text was originally presented as a work of the abbé Bernier, a pseudonym used to maintain d’Holbach’s anonymity – a necessary precaution given

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121 That both editors confided that they too found Helvétius to be full of truths and insights, at the same time as demanding Müller tone down his enthusiasm, raises the issue of private versus public communication.
its incendiary content. The title page of Theologische Charlatanerien names neither a translator, nor an author. It was reviewed in the Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek, where it received general praise, but was deemed to be tarnished by some sections which could produce an ‘üble Wirkung’. It is highly significant that the editor and publisher of this work chose not to state the French origins of the text. The 1788 Wöllner Edict on Religion had significantly changed the publishing environment, and the contents of Theologische Charlatanerien had to be distanced from their true provenance, disguised in some way. The question then arises as to who was responsible for this translation. Christian Ludwig Paalzow (1753-1824) is known to have translated several works by d’Holbach, yet Theologische Charlatanerien does not fit his usual modus operandi in that it uses neither his customary pseudonym Hierokles nor his selected publishers. Evidently, there was wider interest in the writings of d’Holbach. Could the anonymous translator of Le Bon Sens (A53) be linked to this work? In any case, as Mauthner suggests, and as is supported by the STN-archive statistics, this hitherto ignored translation shows that a real market for such texts had formed. This highly significant new finding illustrates an avid interest in d’Holbach’s materialist philosophy.

122 Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek, 100 (1791), 45-47.
124 See Martin Mulsow, ‘Christian Ludwig Paalzow und der klandestine Kulturtransfer von Frankreich nach Deutschland’, in Geheiliteratur, ed. by Haug, Mayer and Schröder, pp. 67-84. After studying law in Halle, Paalzow’s career as a lawyer was the cover for his anonymous writing activities. He was another radical reader of French materialism, and indeed a translator of works by Voltaire, Fréret and d’Holbach. Paalzow’s Versuch über die Gesetze was reviewed by Hißmann, further adding to the sense of shared references between these various figures. [Paalzow], Versuch über die Gesetze (Breslau: Löwe, 1781), Review [Hißmann], ‘Breslau’, GGA (1782), 199-200.
125 This interest is also reflected in a more predictable source: Adolph Freiherr Knigge (1752-1796), a prominent member of Adam Weishaupt’s Illuminaten, anonymously translated d’Holbach’s Recherches sur l’origine du despotisme oriental (1761, with Boulanger given as the author on the title page) as Ueber den Ursprung des Despotismus, besonders in den Morgenländern (n.p: n.pub., 1794).
126 Fritz Mauthner, Der Atheismus und seine Geschichte im Abendlande, 4 vols (Stuttgart, Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1920-23; repr. Heppenheim: m-presse, 2010), III, 447 writes: ‘Der oft geistreichelnde und unwissenschaftliche Ton dieses Buches darf uns über seine geschichtliche Bedeutung nicht täuschen; die wohlfleie Iorie war offenbar für die Masse gewöhnlicher Leser berechnet, die weder von der zurückhaltenden Kritik der Aufklärer noch von der vornehmen Weltanschauung eines Lessing, Herder oder Goethe befriedigt werden konnte.’ It is interesting to note that Mauthner sees such a public as unsatisfied by the works of German thinkers.
The *Système de la Nature* (1770) caused great scandal in France, rivalling the furore caused by La Mettrie’s *L’Homme machine*. In German periodicals, there were ten articles (F4, F6, F9, F11, F13-16, F19-20) nine of which were reviews of refutations of the work, before the German translation was published in 1783 (A44).

So d’Holbach’s work itself was not reviewed in German journals until 1784 (F20), but was the subject of many full-length published refutations, which were reviewed. As a book, it was seen as too dangerous even to acknowledge the original text as a new publication to be read. D’Holbach’s works were, however, in extraordinary demand. The *Société Typographique de Neuchâtel* archive reveals that 456 copies of d’Holbach’s books were ordered by German booksellers, out of a total of 3050 orders that the STN received up to 1789. These 456 included 200 in Cleve, 100 in Dresden, twenty-four in Berlin and twelve in Mannheim. Schreiter’s 1783 translation was so successful that a second edition was published in 1791.

D’Holbach was born in Germany and studied there in his youth. On July 26, 1754, the Berlin Academy made d’Holbach a foreign associate. He thus had links to the German intellectual scene, yet it is difficult to tell exactly how news passed from Paris of the burning of the *Système de la nature* as it could have been by means of any number of French journals which circulated in Germany. The *Correspondance littéraire*, for example, carried news of the arrêt du parlement of August 18, 1770 in its issue of 1st September 1770.

Again, d’Holbach’s work was read in Berlin. Frederick the Great published his own refutation (H18), and Jean Castillon, another member of the Berlin Academy, likewise published a refutation (H19) in 1771. Thus we know the text was definitely available in Berlin immediately after its publication and subsequent banning and burning in Paris. Pinto’s and Holland’s French refutations were both translated into German (H20, H22) long before d’Holbach’s work was translated.

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Hence, d’Holbach’s ideas were propagated by means of detailed refutation, which required the explanation of the original ideas. So once again, a radical work circulated among German scholars and Berlin Academy members, only for the proceedings of the Académie to show no trace of the work, illustrating the way radical works were marginalised and categorised as subversive and unworthy of official debate.

There seems to be disingenuousness in the interest in the *Système de la Nature*, in that the best way of refuting the work was discussed, without allowing those who could not read French to access the original arguments. Voltaire’s *Dieu, réponse au Système de la nature* was reviewed by German journals. The actual *Système de la nature* thus had a surrogate presence. It was present through its absence and the simultaneous coverage of its refutations.

The reviews of refutations were full of invective for the unknown author. The *GGA* review of Pinto’s refutation attacks the ‘Verfasser des Système de la Nature’, comparing him with La Mettrie:


Schreiter’s 1783 translation was reviewed by Tiedemann in the *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*. The review demonstrates how this influential (and supposedly open-minded) journal was not particularly committed to open discourse and would have preferred the translation not to have been published at all, noting that Germany ‘des seichten Geschwäitzes im Vaterland genug habe: wozu sollen wir auch noch das Ausländische zueignen?’

But Germany did indeed import foreign scandal, as remarks about the book’s popularity show.

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130 *GGA* (1776), 948-52 (F17). This review, incidentally, demonstrates the longevity of La Mettrie’s reputation and standing in Germany, twenty-five years after his death.

131 *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, 58 (1784), 500 (F20).
The book was immensely popular, even prior to the translation, concurring with the sales statistics cited above. In a review of Holland’s Philosophische Anmerkungen, the Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek reported that the Système de la Nature ‘fieng an, das Buch zu seyn, von welchem, dem Modeton gemäß, an Toiletten, in Assemblen, an großen Tafeln, beim Kaffeetische etc. gesprochen werden mußte.’\textsuperscript{132} Such widespread knowledge of the book’s content clearly worried the establishment.

Indeed, even Wieland, who as we have seen was not against the idea of (limited) public discourse on writings by materialists, comes across as positively draconian in his reaction to d’Holbach’s work. In a letter to Johann Wilhelm von Archenholtz in November 1783 – hence after the translation of Système de la Nature – Wieland is shocked to read that that Heinrich Friedrich Diez (a passeur considered in this thesis) had openly praised d’Holbach. Wieland writes of

\begin{quote}
die bis zum Erstaunen weit getriebene Freymüthigkeit […], womit seit einiger Zeit im Teutschen Museum und in den Berichten der Buchhandlung der Gelehrten über die Religion gesprochen wird. In letztern thut sich hierinn ein gewisser Diez hervor, von welchem ich zu wissen wünschte, wer und wo er ist, und wie er dazu kommt sich so öffentlich und namentlich impune für einen Proselyten des Systeme de la Nature erklären zu dürfen.\textsuperscript{133}
\end{quote}

Wieland’s comment tells us not only that there were public professions of approval for d’Holbach’s ideas, but that a man of the establishment (and thus a shaper of opinion), was shocked that Diez had declared his views publicly. The idea of impunity expressed by Wieland makes explicit his assumption that limits on freedom of expression should be enforced by punishment. This tells us a lot about the climate of official disapproval and the manufacturing of consensus that was created by this level of self-censorship. Intriguingly, Moses Mendelssohn claims not to have read the text. In a letter to Campe, Mendelssohn writes: ‘Wenn das berüchtigte Systeme de

\textsuperscript{132} Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek, 21 (1774), 546-50 (pp. 548-49), (F13).
\textsuperscript{133} Wieland, letter to Johann Wilhelm von Archenholtz, 8 November 1783, Briefwechsel, VIII, ed. by Annerose Schneider (1992), p. 150. Archenholtz would later edit several journals himself and was no theologian and there was certainly no reason for Wieland not to be candid with him.
la Nature, das ich nie habe lesen mögen, nicht gründlicher ist, als diese englische Broschüre [Hume’s Natural Religion], so begreife ich nicht, wie es vernünftigen Männern hat so furchtbar scheinen können.”134 Bizarrely, Mendelssohn possessed a 1771 edition of this (expensive) book.135 Other conservative men of letters also procured copies of d’Holbach’s texts. For example, Jacobi ordered many controversial works from Marc-Michel Rey in Amsterdam: Les Prêtres démasqués (twice), Le Christianisme dévoilé, De l’imposture sacerdotale, Théologie portative and Lettres à Eugenie.136 Freedman’s analysis of the STN archives reveals that the Système de la Nature was so mired in controversy that no bookseller would accept it in conservative Cologne, and that in Frankfurt, Esslinger’s son-in-law, Christian Schwan, refused to stock the book, but kept one copy for his own use.137 The Système de la Nature was sold freely in Hesse, as Jacques Mallet Du Pan’s letter to Voltaire in 1772 indicates, a fact he used to illustrate the Landgrave’s tolerance: ‘Par son ordre il [le fanaticisme] n’est plus de potence dans la Hesse, comme il n’est point de cuistre sacerdotal qui ose gêner la liberté de la pensée. Le système de la nature se vend à côté de sa réfutation.’138

D’Holbach’s case then, within the constraints of anonymity, provides a final example of how the German reaction to materialist philosophy served to disseminate French materialism whilst simultaneously condemning it as outrageous and wicked, thus pushing it into the hands of underground radicals.

**Continuity of reactions**

Interest in French materialist writings was strong among opponents. There was a plethora of compendia, encyclopaedic dictionaries and apologist histories, which critiqued works by French materialists, with the firm intention of anathematizing

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134 Mendelssohn, letter to Peter Campe, 6 January 1781, Jubiläumsausgabe, XIII, 1-2.
135 Verzeichniss der auserlesenen Büchersammlung des seeligen Herrn Moses Mendelssohn (Berlin: n.pub., 1786), p. 26. As noted later, Mendelssohn is notoriously unreliable about which books he has read.
137 Freedman, Books, p. 84.
them. In addition to Trinius’s *Freydenker-Lexikon* (1759), there were a number of church histories and defences of Christianity which sought to refute the French materialists, yet which also demonstrate the continuing diffusion of the French texts. As early as 1748, Johann Christoph Harenberg’s *Gerettete Religion*, primarily a refutation of Edelmann’s ideas, quoted La Mettrie in the preface to the second volume, showing that his writings were spreading quickly.\(^{139}\) In 1749, Christoph Gottlob Grundig – who had published a refutation of Herbert of Cherbury in the previous year – dedicated ten pages of discussion to La Mettrie in his *Fortgesetzte Geschichte der heutigen Deisten und Freygeister*.\(^{140}\) In 1752, the Gotha-based pastor Johann Caspar Löwe, noted the publication of the *Œuvres Philosophiques* in Berlin in the introduction to his *Dogmatische und Moralische Einleitung in die Religions-Streitigkeiten mit den Deisten*. Though shocked by such writings, Löwe maintained that they did no harm to the truth of religion. He states that the unnamed author (La Mettrie) of the *Œuvres Philosophiques* ‘bekennet ihr kurzes Leben in Müßiggang und Wollust zu bringen wollen. Diese und dergleichen trockene Einfälle der Vertheidiger des Unglaubens thun […] der geoffenbarten Wahrheit nichts.’\(^{141}\) Löwe also mentions Diderot (Diederot), citing the ‘Philosophischen Gedanken, welche eine der giftigsten Schmäh-Schriften wider das Christenthum sind.’\(^{142}\) Johann Heinrich Christoph Zahn’s six-volume *Briefe an die Freydenker* (1764-66) attempted to refute La Mettrie and Helvétius.\(^{143}\) The trend for Church history continued throughout the century, and the continual characterisation of French materialists as radical atheists with it.\(^{144}\)

\(^{139}\) Johann Christoph Harenberg, *Die gerettete Religion, oder Gründliche Wiederlegung des Glaubensbekennnisses Johann Christian Edelmanns*, 2 vols (Braunschweig, Hildesheim: Schröder & Merckwitz, 1747-48), ii, [i-xvi].

\(^{140}\) Christoph Gottlob Grundig, *Fortgesetzte Geschichte der heutigen Deisten und Freygeister* (Köthen: Cörner, 1749), pp. 80-90.

\(^{141}\) Johann Caspar Löwe, *Dogmatische und Moralische Einleitung in die Religions-Streitigkeiten mit den Deisten* (Frankfurt: Christian Mevius, 1752), p. [vi].

\(^{142}\) Löwe, *Dogmatische*, p. 19


\(^{144}\) Johann August Nösselt, *Vertheidigung der Wahrheit und Göttichkeit der christlichen Religion* (Halle: Waisenhaus, 1766), p. 139, decried La Mettrie; Friedrich Ludolf Lachmann, *Versuch einer Kirchengeschichte des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Lemgo: Meyer, 1771), focussed on La Mettrie (pp. 154-61), Diderot (pp. 217-19), and Helvétius (pp. 221-23).
At the end of the century, this genre of writing included mention of ‘Mirabaud’, or the author of the *Système de la Nature*, alongside the now habitual references to La Mettrie, Diderot and Helvétius. One notable case was Paulin Erdt, a Catholic Franciscan theologian from Freiburg, who curiously presented two books of Christian apologetics as translations, when there appear to be no source texts. Erdt’s *Die Seele des Menschen Matthäus* (1786) – presented as a translation from the Italian – focussed on La Mettrie in the introduction as a hook upon which to hang discussion of the soul, forty years after the publication of his controversial texts. This adds to the sense that La Mettrie’s reputation long outlasted his lifetime. Erdt published another text in the same year, *Züge von der Geschichte der Gottlosigkeit*, this time presented as a translation from English – but which is again clearly not a translation, judging from its German contextualisation of writings. This contextualisation includes a justification which provides interesting evidence that French materialism was (at least viewed to be) making progress in German towns and cities: ‘Ich lebe in einer Stadt, in welcher eine Menge auch junger Leute von materialistischen Grundsätzen angesteckt sind; […] in welcher die Schriften des Helvet, des Mirabeaud, Robinet und dergleichen von verschiedenen Leuten mit größter Begierde gelesen; in welcher von öffentlichen Lehrern Reden nach den Helvetischen Grundsätzen auch in den ansehnlichsten Zusammenkünften ohne Scheue vorgetragen werden.’ The continual refutation of French materialists served to disseminate their ideas.

**Provisional Conclusion**

We must reiterate the point that the large number of translations of French works into German proves that there was a market of readers broad enough to sustain such activity. In addition, there were a considerable number of French editions which

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145 Johann August Christoph von Einem, *Versuch einer vollständigen Kirchengeschichte des achttzehnten Jahrhunderts*, 2 vols, 2nd edn (Leipzig: Weygand, 1786), I, discusses La Mettrie (pp. 304-307); Helvétius (pp. 306-308); Diderot (p. 339); and Mirabaud/Système de la Nature (p. 296).
147 Erdt, *Züge von der Geschichte der Gottlosigkeit* (Augsburg: Rieger, 1786), p. 7. The text also presents the main works and ideas of Diderot (pp. 157-63), the *Système de la Nature* (‘Mirabeaud’ pp. 163-70), La Mettrie (pp. 149-54) and Helvétius (pp. 154-57).
were published in Germany, underlining the links which existed between these materialists and German publishers. The networks of booksellers, journals and correspondence further underline these links.

The dynamic of transfer occurred in two phases. First came scorn and condemnation in journals. Yet this technique served to provoke interest in the work and raise the attention of those predisposed to freethinking, and served to spread further the ideas contained in these radical French works. We have seen that in the case of each of the four materialists analysed, they were systematically labelled dangerous thinkers. This means that they were pushed out of the mainstream of Enlightenment thought in Germany and into the margins, rejected as dangerous and low-grade imports. Therefore, those German thinkers who later read these works and quoted these French thinkers were actively and deliberately indulging in illicit, quasi-underground works, and thus following the path of ‘impolite learning’, to borrow Anne Goldgar’s phrase.148

By way of conclusion, we can see that this analysis proves that there are limitations on the Habermasian thesis of an open public sphere. The ‘public sphere’ was governed according to its own rules, having an unwritten constitution of moderate Enlightenment, which attempted to filter out materialism. Conformity to anti-materialist orthodoxy was a condition of entry. As we have seen, though French materialist texts were available, translated, and relayed via reviews and refutations, the reputations of French radicals were difficult to rescue from the mud through which the institutional journals dragged them. No respectability could be conferred on thinkers advocating radical materialism. Furthermore, this analysis serves to indicate that histories of the Enlightenment cannot be written on strictly national levels without taking account of the flow of ideas between countries. Cultural transfer was an active process which took various forms. This analysis demonstrates the popularity of radical works despite the negative establishment reactions to them. All the elements we have examined point to the underground extension of the reception in a positive sense. We turn now to analysis of specific elements of materialist thought.

Chapter 2: Thinking Matter

We will now consider German reception of particular elements of French materialist thought. This chapter examines the first such element: sensualism. Also known as sensationalism, sensualism is the Aristotelian contention that all ideas, concepts and consciousness originate in the senses, and thus come from the external, material world. The basic premise, widely popularised by Thomas Aquinas’ Latin Peripatetic axiom Nihil est in intellectu nisi quod ante fuerit in sensu, is opposed to the concept of innate ideas. As a basis of epistemology, it is not necessarily an exclusively materialist doctrine. Materialists additionally contend that the brain, responsible for ideas, is composed exclusively of matter endowed with the capability of thought, completely independently of ‘immaterial substances’. Materialism thus holds that matter thinks, either at the level of the simplest particle, or as a result of certain combinations of matter. This requires attributing to matter the property of sensation (also termed sensitivity). The attribution of the property of sensitivity to matter itself is a distinctly materialist proposition. When combined with epistemological sensualism, this posits a material basis to ideas, arguing that human cognition is an exclusively material process. Ultimately, this line of reasoning means that the ‘soul’, as a concept, could either be reduced to the material workings of the brain, or be dispensed with altogether, as La Mettrie and d’Holbach would claim.

This chapter will briefly trace the development of this notion of ‘thinking matter’ from its suggestion by John Locke (1632-1704) in 1689 (‘GOD can, if he pleases, superadd to it another Substance, with a Faculty of Thinking’), through to its uptake, in modified, materialist forms, by La Mettrie, Diderot, Helvétius, and d’Holbach. We will then proceed to examine how their ideas were received in Germany in the predominantly rationalistic philosophical context of Leibniz-Wolffianism, which reacted strongly against sensualistic notions of ‘thinking matter’. Finally, we will show that materialist sensualism was enthusiastically

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2 The terminology of ‘matière sensible’, indicating that the property of sensitivity (or feeling or sensation) is being attributed to matter, is thus understood as a continuation of Locke’s more primitively expressed suggestion of ‘thinking matter’.
integrated into the ideas of thinkers like Spazier, Knoblauch and Schulz, based upon their reading of French materialists.

There are two distinct (yet mutually reinforcing) aspects of materialist sensualism to consider. Firstly, the initial epistemological premise which holds ideas originate in the senses, and secondly, the more scientific notion that sensitivity is a property of matter. Epistemological sensualism and the wider materialist position are concomitant. However, we must make clear the caveat that a sensualist position (either in epistemology or in the theory of matter) is not necessarily a monist, materialist position in terms of the nature of the soul. It favours materialism, and is a step towards materialism, but is not exclusively materialist. As we will see, there were sensualist theorists like Condillac and Maupertuis who were not fully-fledged, self-proclaimed materialists, because they retained the notion of an immaterial, simple soul to explain human consciousness and identity. Epistemological sensualism can thus be compatible with substance dualism.

As for the second aspect, thinking matter, Cartesian physics attributed to matter the single property of extension. To this, materialists added the essential property of ‘sensibilité’, exemplified by Diderot’s contention that ‘la sensibilité, c’est une propriété universelle de la matière.’ If, however, all matter is endowed with this additional property, why is all matter not sentient? The distinction between active and inert matter makes it difficult to explain why a stone is inanimate, yet a human thinks. Our interest here is in thinkers who advocate both epistemological sensualism and the physical sensualism of matter, excluding immaterial substances.

Materialist sensualism was highly controversial. The anti-religious implications of thinking matter were lost neither on proponents nor on critics. In the *Encyclopédie* article ‘Spinosiste’, Diderot makes a distinction between ancient and modern Spinozists. Referring to the latter, he writes: ‘Le principe général de ceux-ci, c’est que la matière est sensible […] De là ils concluent qu’il n’y a que de la matière,

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3 We will be using ‘thought’ and ‘sensitivity’ interchangeably here, sensitivity being a basic, lower-level attribute of higher mental processes like memory, desire or imagination.

4 Diderot, letter to Duclos, 10 October 1765, in *Correspondance Diderot*, V, 141. See also Hisayasu Nakagawa, ‘Génèse d’une idée diderotienne: la sensibilité comme propriété générale de la matière’, in *Être matérieliste*, ed. by Fink and Stenger, pp. 199-217.
& qu’elle suffit pour tout expliquer. By implication of the absence of ‘God’ and the ‘soul’, Diderot makes clear the heretical nature of positing that all matter has the inherent property of being capable of thought. Many different thinkers accepted elements of materialist sensualism, without necessarily reasoning according to Diderot’s definition of Spinozists. Indeed, when Voltaire criticised Saunderson’s atheism in Diderot’s Lettre sur les aveugles (1749), Diderot replied that Voltaire’s embrace of Locke’s concept of thinking matter is itself tantamount to acceptance of Saunderson’s position. Thiners who restricted their utterances to scientific works, not wishing to stray into the field of philosophy, were equally at risk of their sensualist findings being conflated with explicitly blasphemous materialists: Buffon, for example, was the object of attack by the Nouvelles ecclésiastiques, which claimed that in Buffon’s view, ‘c’est la matière […] qui éprouve toutes les sensations dont l’homme est capable. Quel pas vers le matérialisme!’

The consequences for religious belief of this modification of the theory of matter were evident to eighteenth-century German thinkers, too. Leibniz, writing to Sophia Charlotte, Queen of Prussia, complained of the potential irreligion of materialists, ‘dont la doctrine, si elle estoit poussée et outrée, n’établirait que confusion et hazard, et détruirait avec l’intelligence et l’ordre non seulement l’immortalité de l’âme par sa nature, mais même l’existence de la divinité.’

In light of the stated focus of this study on Franco-German cultural transfer, it may seem incongruous to include an English philosopher as a central thinker in this process. However, any study of sensualism in eighteenth-century philosophy

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5 Diderot, ‘Spinosiste’, Encyclopédie, III, 605.
6 Diderot, letter to Voltaire, 11 June 1749, Correspondance Diderot, i, 77: ‘Il s’ensuit donc de cet aveu et de mon raisonnement, continueroit Saunderson, que l’être corporel n’est pas moins indépendant de l’être spirituel, que l’être spirituel de l’être corporel; qu’ils composent ensemble l’univers, et que l’univers est Dieu. Quelle force n’ajouteroit point à ce raisonnement l’opinion qui vous est commune avec Locke que la pensée pourroit bien être une modification de la matière.’ This difference of opinions also shows that epistemological sensualism in itself was not an exclusively materialist position, and other questions, like the explanation of consciousness, or identity, could be invoked to retain belief in an immaterial spirit.
must take into account the influence of John Locke. There is, furthermore, evidence that Locke’s path to German thinkers was mediated through French – an example of triangular cultural transfer. It is thus with Locke that this chapter begins. We will then discuss the role of sensualism in the thought of the materialist philosophses and show how their shared premise of ‘matière sensible’ transferred to a network of German thinkers, keen to diffuse these French philosophses’ ideas in Germany, regardless of the obstacles they faced. First though, we will turn to the modern provenance of sensualism by considering how John Locke’s thought was received in Germany and in France.

John Locke

Following the British empiricist tradition of Francis Bacon, Locke was the first modern thinker to posit a theory of mind which reduced all properties and qualities of the mind to sensory perception, ‘having ideas, and Perception, being the same thing.’\(^9\) Locke’s ideas caused a great furore in Britain when first published.\(^10\) In his Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1689), Locke sets out to explain his theory of mind, and explicitly states his intention of refuting the widely held belief in innate ideas, attacking this ‘established Opinion amongst some men, that there are in the Understanding some innate Principles.’\(^11\) Locke contends that the mind is a tabula rasa at birth and that there are no innate ideas ‘stamped on the Mind.’\(^12\)

Locke places the senses at the origin of all ideas. He also posits reflection as an additional, original source of ideas, whereby the understanding – a term that he uses as a synonym of ‘mind’ – provides itself with ideas of its own operations:

9 Locke, Essay, p. 108.
10 The furore centred on his ‘suggestion’ concerning thinking matter. It is worth making clear that Locke was in no way an atheist and claims: ‘That God is to be worshipped is without doubt as great a truth as any that can enter into the human mind.’ Locke, Essay, p. 87. Locke also refers to ‘the Wisdom and Will of our maker,’ p. 564. Indeed, Locke’s A Letter Concerning Toleration did not extend the duty of tolerance to atheists.
12 Locke, Essay, p. 85. He is not, in current parlance, a naïve realist, that is, he does not view the transfer of ideas from external world to mind as a simple or straightforward process. Indeed, Locke distinguishes between primary and secondary qualities of perceived objects, as well as between simple and complex ideas in the mind.
such are *Perception, Thinking, Doubting, Believing, Reasoning, Knowing, Willing*, and all the different actings of our own Minds; which we being conscious of, and observing in our selves, do from these receive into our Understandings, as distinct *Ideas*, as we do from Bodies affecting our Senses. This source of *Ideas*, every Man has wholly in Himself: And though it not be Sense, as having nothing to do with external Objects; yet it is very like it, and might properly enough be call’d internal Sense. But as I call the other *Sensation*, so I call this *REFLECTION*.\(^\text{13}\)

Thus the mind, through reflection, is also an original source of knowledge. This distinction, between external objects and internal sense, means Locke leaves a place for the soul in his system. The distinction was subsequently eliminated by other sensualists, thus radicalising sensualism into a purely material process.\(^\text{14}\)

The simplest and most unambiguous reading of Locke is that the only two sources of ideas are senses and reflection. As reflection is dependent on senses, it follows that the senses must be the source of all ideas. Thus no possibility for innate ideas exists. At his most basic, and most explicit, Locke is refuting innate ideas. Additionally, Locke suggested that the property of sensation (thinking) could be attributed to units of matter itself. Locke actually says it would be impossible for humans to know: ‘whether any mere material Being thinks, or no […], whether Omnipotency has not given to some Systems of Matter fitly disposed, a power to perceive and think.’\(^\text{15}\) The development of sensualism from the Lockean premise of the sensory origin of ideas is complex. Sensualism, albeit in diverse manifestations, came to be used by German materialist thinkers by way of a triangular transfer process.

\(^{13}\) Locke, *Essay*, p. 105.

\(^{14}\) There has been significant debate on whether, in Locke’s thinking, reflection is the same or distinct from consciousness. See Kevin Scharp, ‘Locke’s Theory of Reflection’, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 16.1 (2008), 25-63.

\(^{15}\) Locke, *Essay*, p. 540.
Direct reception of Locke in Germany

Klaus Fischer has claimed that ‘whatever his [Locke’s] influence in England or France, it was negligible in Germany.’

We will argue here that, although this may be true if one considers only the direct reception of Locke, an investigation of the influence of French materialists in Germany demonstrates that, by way of its reception by French thinkers, Locke’s suggestion of thinking matter and sensualist epistemology in fact had a far from negligible impact in the German context.

Bibliographical information provides no evidence that Locke was widely discussed in Germany. Rather, it will be argued, Lockean empiricism and sensualism were filtered through French thought. The dominance of French as the language of cultural transfer is reflected in the triangular transfer – that is, transfer via the medium of French – of certain German translations of Locke. These translations were based not on the English originals, but on the French translations by Coste and Mazel.

A German translation of the second treatise of *Two treatises of government*, based on Mazel’s French translation, appeared in 1718 as *Le gouvernement civil, oder Die Kunst wohl zu regieren*. Two separate translated versions of *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, both based on Coste’s French translation and including Coste’s abridgement of the *Vindications*, were published in German in 1733 and 1758.

Before Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* was finally translated into German, at Gottsched’s suggestion, by Heinrich Engelhard Poley in 1757, only a short section, chapter nineteen of book four, had been published in German. As regards periodicals, the *Index zu deutschsprachigen Rezensionszeitschriften des 18. Jahrhunderts* shows that there were thirty-two articles in German on Locke’s writings in the period up to 1789. Of these, thirteen

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17 This phenomenon of English philosophy being translated into French and then from French to German was not exceptional. Some 135 books were translated in this way in the Enlightenment era. See Graeber, Roche and Stackelberg, *Englische Literatur*.
19 <http://adw.sub.uni-goettingen.de/idrz/pages/Main.jsf>.
were reviews of French translations or critiques. From this we can infer that in Germany Locke was little read in German, but quite widely read in French, and to some extent in Latin. However, French *philosophes*, particularly Voltaire in the early stages, did diffuse Locke’s idea of thinking matter in German intellectual circles, subsequently amplified by the writings of La Mettrie, Diderot, Helvétius and d’Holbach, who unite sensualist epistemology and the concept of ‘thinking matter’ in a coherent materialist world-view. The German context into which French materialism was imported is crucial in understanding the dynamic of such transfer.

**German philosophy and sensualism**

Debates on sensualism in Germany were complex and depended heavily on the specificities of competing Protestant theologies. The dominant school of philosophy, Leibnizio-Wolffianism, was a barrier to the acceptance of sensualism, since Leibniz was a rationalist, not an empiricist, and defended innate ideas. Leibniz, who was interested in English ideas and writing at the same time as Locke, learned of the furore caused in England by Locke’s sensualist epistemology through his principal correspondent there, Burnett. Leibniz first read sections of Locke’s *Essay on Human Understanding* in English, but only read it in full when it appeared in French in Coste’s translation of 1700. The Leibnizian critique of sensualism helps to explain the German context. Although Leibniz wrote a refutation of Locke’s *Essay*, the *Nouveaux Essais sur l’entendement humain*, which he finished in 1704, this was unknown before it was first published in 1765. Leibniz’s views on the soul, however, were well known, and dominant, regardless of his (as yet unknown) views on Locke. In section seventeen of the *Monadologie* (1714), Leibniz develops his famous windmill analogy of the mind: here, the German thinker claims that if we

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23 Leibniz, *Œuvres philosophiques, latines et françaises, de feu Mr. de Leibnitz, tirées de ses manuscrits, qui se conservent dans la bibliothèque royale à Hanovre*, ed. by Rudolf Erich Raspe (Amsterdam & Leipzig: Schreuder, 1765). Leibniz chose to delay publication due to Locke’s death in 1704 and the unpublished manuscript thus lay undiscovered in Leibniz’s library.
were to enter into the mechanism which converts sense data into ideas, we would not be able to see mechanisms pushing and pulling against each other as in a windmill, because the process is not ‘mechanical’. He thus discounts the possibility of a material soul, and also defends innate ideas. More specifically, he makes a distinction between necessary truths and contingent truths which relies on certain ideas (necessary truths) being prior to the senses, which are the source of contingent truths. It is Leibniz’s ‘pre-established harmony’ which apparently allows him to escape the intractable problem of the Cartesian binary materialist-dualist model, which cannot overcome the problem of interaction between immaterial and material.

The second major objection to a material sensualism, in Leibniz’s view, is that it could never explain the unity of consciousness and self-consciousness, or apperception, and consequently identity. These are pertinent objections. Yet to go from raising problems which are yet to be explained to completely dismissing the possibility of a *tabula rasa* and sensualist epistemology is quite a step. Be that as it may, perhaps on the grounds of religious belief, perhaps out of conviction based on his system of monads, Leibniz had recourse to the immaterial soul as the only possible explanation of consciousness, and a continuous sense of self-identity. Leibniz’s anti-sensualism, systematised and widely diffused by Wolff, set in place the general barriers to sensualism for generations. Indeed, Mendelssohn’s early *Philosophische Schriften* (1761) endorsed this position.24

Leibniz’s own philosophy, defending an immaterialist view, formed a bulwark against the penetration of Lockean sensualism into *Frühaufklärung* thought. In the *Nouveaux Essais*, Leibniz explicitly refutes Locke, going so far as to reformulate the famous Latin dictum with an exception: ‘Nihil est in intellectu quod non fuerit in sensu excipe: nisi ipse intellectus.’25 Fischer finds that the *Nouveaux Essais* ‘did much to check the incipient growth of Lockean empiricism.’26

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24 Beck, p. 332, states that ‘[n]o other single work gives so perspicuous a presentation of the Leibniz-Wolffian tradition.’
26 Fischer, ‘John Locke’, p. 445. Jolley, *Leibniz* (2005), p. 25, describes the *Nouveaux Essais* as ‘rambling and repetitive’ and criticised Leibniz for making ‘little or no attempt to come to grips with Locke’s assumptions or even the announced goals.’
However, Kant was very much aware of Lockean sensualism, though later in the century. The fact that Kant uses Locke as a direct interlocutor shows the extent to which Locke’s epistemology had become known by the 1770s, thanks to the controversy surrounding French materialists’ use of Locke, rather than purely the philosophy of Locke. According to Kant, Lockean epistemology is merely ‘eine gewisse Physiologie des menschlichen Verstandes.’ Yet Kant goes some way towards (Lockean) sensualism: ‘Erfahrung ist ohne Zweifel das erste Product, welches unser Verstand hervorbringt, indem er den rohen Stoff sinnlicher Empfindungen bearbeitet.’ Waxman even claims that Kant and Locke, with the ‘sensibilist principle, that unites their systems […], remained in fundamental agreement.’ However, Kant in fact rejects Locke, and argues for his own idealist conception of the soul. Whatever affinities the two thinkers may have, Kant, in blending both rationalist and empiricist approaches in his transcendental idealism, rejects a strictly empiricist approach. For the purposes of the present study, it is enough to establish that Kant, and thus the wider field of German philosophy, was aware of Locke by the 1770s. The fact that Locke was discussed by Leibniz and Kant may already serve to undermine Fischer’s claim that Locke’s influence ‘was negligible in Germany.’ It will presently be argued that it is by looking beyond the direct transfer, and towards the distillation of Lockean thought in French materialism, that we can find a radical heritage for sensualism in the German Enlightenment.


28 Kant, Critik der reinen Vernunft (Riga: Hartknoch, 1781). ‘Vorrede’.


Beyond Leibniz and Kant

The German understanding of sensualism as the basis of wider materialist views is evidenced by several refutations of the thinking matter theory. Georg Friedrich Meier’s *Beweis, daß keine Materie denken könne* (1743) was followed a year later by Gottlieb Ludolph Münter’s *Beweis, daß eine zusammengesetzte Materie nicht denken könne.* These refutations show that the idea that matter was endowed with sensibility/thought had begun to be quite widely diffused in Germany. This, as we will see, was due to the circulation of Voltaire’s clandestine *Lettre philosophique sur l’âme,* with which the dates of these refutations concur.

Johann Georg Sulzer’s 1771 paper entitled *Observations sur quelques propriétés de l’âme comparées à celles de la matière: pour servir à l’examen du Matérialisme,* in which he refutes the possibility of thinking matter, is indicative of the general discourse of the Berlin Academy: ‘L’Agrément ou le désagrément des sensations ne vient point de la facilité ou de la difficulté à les recevoir qu’on voudroit supposer dans les organes; ces sentiments viennent de ce qui est dans l’âme avant qu’elle reçoive ces impressions.’ This defence of innate ideas, by means of an immaterial soul, demonstrates the German mainstream opposition to sensualism.

The situation began to change, however, with a wave of German sensualist epistemologists. In the 1770s, German thinkers like Johann Nicolaus Tetens (1736-1807), Dietrich Tiedemann (1748-1803) and Karl Franz von Irwing (1728-1801) represented the growing tendency towards sensualist epistemology, but resisted the temptation to accept that matter could think, given they were, as Minter says, ‘anxious to avoid materialism.’ Thus although empirical and sensual epistemology slowly began to take hold, setting the scene for Kant’s critical philosophy, these thinkers considered *Seelenorgane* as links between the body and soul, thereby

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34 Voltaire’s *Sur l’âme* drawn from the *Lettre philosophiques* is to be distinguished from a 1751 text *De l’âme.*
endowing matter with spiritual properties. This recourse to immateriality indicates the limits of sensualism in mainstream German philosophy. Tiedemann, for example, distances himself from the likes of La Mettrie, whose *Traité de l’âme* is cited in his *Untersuchungen über den Menschen* (1776-77) as an example of misuse of scientific reason. That sensitivity must happen in extended space is a point which La Mettrie ‘gebraucht und mißbraucht […]], weil er daraus folgert, daß die Seele eine Kraft des Gehirns ist, welches, so viel ich sehe, noch nicht daraus folgt.’ Forms of sensualism developed, which thinkers situated relative to French materialist forms.

The anonymous author of the later journal article ‘Ueber die Denkkraft der Materie’ bemoans the controversy which the ‘thinking matter’ debate aroused, blaming the mutual hatred between the ‘gewinnsüchtigen Gottesgelehrten’ and the ‘verwegenen Weltweisen’ for impoverishing debate. Employing military imagery, the author describes those who, ‘zur Vertheidigung der Geisteslehre Panzer, Harnisch und Waffen anlegen,’ coming up against their enemies, ‘die ihnen und den Geistern selbst den ewigen Krieg ankündigen.’ The seemingly neutral author, asking more questions than he or she resolves, is at pains to declare the question unanswerable because it is impossible to prove either way by means of experiments, as reducing matter to its smallest particle not only separates it from its organisation; it is impossible to do: ‘bis hiehin aber gehet uns die Erfahrung ab, worauf wir den Vernunftsschluß gründen könnten.’ The author then declares ‘daß die Materie ein Ding sey, welches wenigstens eben so unbegreiflich ist, als ein anderes entgegengesetztes Ding, so man Geist nennet.’ Finally though, the piety of this seemingly sceptical view is revealed in its conclusion, declaring materialists to have underestimated both the ‘creator’ and ‘reason’: ‘nur sehe ich nicht, wie Philosophen den Schöpfer so arm, und die Vernunft so blöde machen können.’

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41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.
A picture of resistance to materialist sensualism thus begins to emerge, founded on the dominant philosophy of Leibnizio-Wolffian rationalism. It is into this context that French materialist ideas were imported. Thus we will see how these materialist ideas were ‘decontextualised’ from their French origins, which lay in opposition to the dominant Catholic Church, to be ‘recontextualised’ in German intellectual debates against the dominant, religiously orthodox rationalism. So, given this barrier to the acceptance of sensualism, how well known in German discourse were sensualist ideas of thinking matter?

In the previous chapter, we focused on the role of institutions in labelling ideas as dangerous, and controlling which ideas were admitted into polite discussion and which debates were blocked out of the mainstream by way of condemnation. There are intriguing records which show that by the 1770s, Locke was a completely respectable source in Germany. Indeed, Frederick the Great even ordered Prussian universities to teach Locke: ‘Sie (die Professores) müssen in der Medecin besonders bey des Borhavens Metode bleiben, in der Astronomie Neuton, in der Metafisik Loc [...] folgen.’ So Locke’s teaching had official approval in the latter third of the eighteenth century, in Prussia at least. This demonstrates the way in which Locke’s sensualism became a respectable tenet of philosophy and had lost nearly all its earlier reputation of radicalism. This is further underlined by a comment made by the lay preacher and pupil of Johann Lorenz von Mosheim, Gottfried Winkler. Winkler, in his study of the so-called enemies of religion, claims that the Abbé de Prades’ writings, which saw him expelled from France and persecuted by the Sorbonne, were not at all dangerous because all they did was re-state established Lockean principles: ‘Er behauptet, 1) daß alle unsere Erkenntniß von den Sinnen herkomme. Dieser Saz wird auch in seiner Einschränkung unter uns und den Reformirten behauptet, Lock hat ihn erklärt und bewiesen.’ Winkler thus claims that Lockean sensualism has

43 This note appears in the margins of a 1770 letter to Frederick from his Minister of State Freiherr von Fürst and is quoted in Anton Friedrich Büsching, Character Friedrichs II. Königs von Preussen (Halle: Curts, 1788), p. 36.
44 Frederick’s own admiration for Locke is expressed in a letter to Voltaire: ‘La philosophie nous vient d’Epicure; Gassendi, Newton, Locke l’ont rectifiée; je me fais honneur d’être leur disciple, mais pas davantage.’ Frederick II, King of Prussia, letter to Voltaire, 8 September 1775, OCV, 126: Correspondence, ed. by Besterman (1975), p. 172.
45 Johann Lorenz von Mosheim and Gottfried Winkler, Wahrheit und Göttlichkeit der christlichen Religion: Geschichte der Feinde der christlichen Religion, aus dessen Vorlesungen, 2 vols (Dresden: Schneider, 1783-84), I, 211. A recent thesis argues that Winkler manoeuvred to introduce radical
become an established component of Calvinist theology. This means that sensualism as advocated by Locke was afforded respectability and perhaps represented a gateway to the more radical implications of a sensualist epistemology. It is surprising to see this level of acceptance and support in Germany for such a fundamental cornerstone of materialist thought. This suggests a distinction between acceptable sensualist epistemology and the unacceptable material sensualism of ‘thinking matter’. It is in its French distillation, as represented by the work of of La Mettrie, Diderot, Helvétius and d’Holbach that sensualism retained its incendiary potential.

Sensualism in France

Comparing the German reception of Locke with that in France, a very different picture of his influence emerges. A number of studies attest to the greater extent of Locke’s influence in France than in Germany. Locke’s ideas were much more widely available in French, and at an early stage too. A long abridgement of Locke’s Essay appeared in Le Clerc’s Bibliothèque universelle et historique in 1688 (prior to the publication of the full work itself in 1690). Pierre Coste’s translation was published in 1700 using Locke’s fourth edition. This was a popular work which even went through a number of pirated editions. Coste also updated his translation in 1729 using the fifth English edition of 1706. It was thus published in French in 1700, 1714, 1723, 1729, 1732, 1742, 1750, 1755 and 1758. Moreover, a number of French journals carried reviews and discussions of Locke’s writings which contained presentations of the Essay, such as the Bibliothèque raisonnée and Le Clerc’s Bibliothèque choisie, which published the ‘Eloge du feu M. Locke’ in 1705.

Voltaire’s embrace of Lockean principles was a crucial factor not only in French sensualism, but also in its subsequent transfer to German thought. In the

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47 Yolton, p. 2.
thirteenth of his *Lettres philosophiques* (1734), Voltaire declares, with typical rhetorical flourish (‘je me vante de l’honneur d’être en ce point aussi stupide que Loke’), that ‘toutes nos idées nous viennent des sens.’\(^49\) This famous Thirteenth Letter also circulated in a different form as an independent text, known as the *Lettre philosophique* or the *Lettre philosophique sur l’âme*. The *Lettres philosophiques* shocked French legislators: the book was banned upon publication in France, despite Voltaire’s care to present the idea as useful to religion: ‘la sage et modeste philosophie de Loke; loin d’être contraire à la religion, elle lui servirait de preuve, si la religion en avait besoin.’\(^50\)

Voltaire, writing to Formont in 1732, admitted the need to tone down his advocacy of Locke in France, and even to disguise Locke’s thought: ‘je suis aussi obligé de changer tout ce que j’avais écrit à l’occasion de m. Locke, parce qu’après tout je veux vivre en France, et il ne m’est pas permis d’être aussi philosophe qu’un Anglais. Il me faut déguiser à Paris ce que je ne pourrai dire trop fortement à Londres.’\(^51\) A week later, illustrating the difference in intellectual climate between France and England, Voltaire further underlines the overbearing influence of the theologians:

> Il n’y a qu’une lettre touchant mr Locke. La seule matière philosophique que j’y traite est la petite bagatelle de l’immatérialité de l’âme, mais la chose est trop de conséquence pour la traiter sérieusement. Il a fallu l’égayer pour ne pas heurter de front nos seigneurs les théologiens.\(^52\)

These comments by Voltaire show, firstly, the serious nature of his commitment to Locke’s thought, and secondly, the way the fear of resistance to sensualism in France pushed many *philosophes* to dissimulate radical ideas. Despite this, sensualism, as a basic principle of the origins of ideas, along with the suggestion of thinking matter,

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\(^51\) Voltaire, letter to Jean Baptiste Nicolas Formont, 6[?] December 1732, OCV, 86: *Correspondence*, ed. by Besterman (1975), p. 255.

\(^52\) Voltaire, letter to Formont, 15 December 1732, OCV, 86, 260.
was adopted in various guises by Voltaire, Condillac, Maupertuis, de Prades, La Mettrie, Diderot, Helvétius and d’Holbach amongst others.

Following the criticism of Voltaire, led by David Boullier, there was a substantial backlash against Locke in France, where the Catholic authorities considered him as providing a breeding ground for the ‘esprits forts’. The Sorbonne, France’s arbiter of acceptable thinking, would later cause de Prades to flee France for having dared to refer to Locke in positive terms in his thesis. The Sorbonne’s theologians adopted Cartesian innate ideas as doctrine. Attacks on Locke’s thought also came from those sympathetic to Malebranche.

Alongside Voltaire, a second major passeur of Locke was the abbé Étienne Bonnot de Condillac (1715-1780), whose *Essai sur l’origine des connaissances humaines* (1746) and *Traité des systèmes* (1749) supported Locke’s ideas against Cartesian and Malebranchian abstraction, and were major sources of psychological theories for French sensualist thinkers. Condillac, though maintaining a sensualist stance, later distanced himself from Locke by refusing, in the more detailed *Traité des sensations* (1754), to accept the separation between the faculties of the senses and of the intellect. Condillac uses the concept of the ‘association of ideas’ to replace Locke’s ‘reflection’ as a source of knowledge. He attempts to establish all ideas as modes of sensation using the hypothesis of a model statue of a man whose mind is a *tabula rasa* and whose senses are all turned off. Condillac turns on the five individual external senses one by one to establish their links to ideas. Though

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53 This does not, however, suggest Voltaire was in any way a consistent materialist.
55 A particular charge levelled by Jean Astruc. Yolton, p. 60.
56 See Burson, *Rise*.
57 Yolton, p. 5. Debate was particularly fierce from 1735 onwards.
Condillac was an important thinker in terms of his transmission of Lockean thought, he always maintained that the soul was immaterial.\(^{59}\)

The most radical figures of the French Enlightenment came to sensualism perhaps not directly from Locke, but through a variety of sources such as Voltaire, clandestine literature, and Condillac. Yet the materialists continued to quote Locke as an authority, despite their radical departures from his theories. They were, as Israel states, ‘regularly invoking Locke while simultaneously subververting Locke’s basic positions.’\(^{60}\) Locke’s distinction between sensation and reflection was erased by materialists. Israel claims that Locke’s ‘vaguely formulated but fundamental dualism’ was a barrier to materialism, although this underestimates the radicalism of Locke’s initial suggestion.\(^{61}\) Thus although Locke became acceptable for German Protestants and scientists, he was also used by materialists as a badge of orthodoxy, when their intentions were much more radical.

Sensualist epistemology became the cornerstone of materialist philosophy. The *Discours préliminaire* of Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* states:

> Toutes nos connaissances directes se réduisent à celles que nous recevons par les sens; d’où il s’ensuit que c’est à nos sensations que nous devons toutes nos idées. Ce principe des premiers Philosophes a été long-temps regardé comme un axiome par les Scholastiques […] Aussi cette vérité fut-elle traitée à la renaissance de la Philosophie comme les opinions absurdes dont on aurait dû la distinguer; on la proscrivit avec elles.\(^{62}\)

This statement of intent establishes the sensualist epistemological foundation of the *Encyclopédie*. In Diderot’s article ‘Philosophie de Locke’, the *Encyclopédie* focuses on Locke’s ‘suggestion’ of thinking matter. Like Voltaire, Diderot dismisses the implications for religious teaching of the suggestion that ‘sensibilité’ is a general property of matter:

\(^{59}\) Condillac argued for the simplicity of the human soul, on the basis of the unity of consciousness. Despite his commitment to the immaterial soul, he was nevertheless accused of materialism.  
\(^{60}\) Israel, *Contested*, p. 367.  
\(^{61}\) Israel, *Contested*, p. 778.  
\(^{62}\) D’Alembert, ‘Discours préliminaire’, *Encyclopédie*, 1, 9.
Locke avoit dit dans son essai sur l’entendement humain, qu’il ne voyoit aucune impossibilité à ce que la matiere pensât. Des hommes pusillanimes s’effrayeront de cette assertion. Et qu’importe que la matiere pense ou non? Qu’est-ce que cela fait à la justice ou à l’injustice, à l’immortalité, & à toutes les vérités du système, soit politique, soit religieux?63

Diderot here hints at the most important factor of the shared assumptions of the materialists: how the change in properties attributed to matter (now including ‘sensibilité’) should inform all other branches of philosophical thought, asking:

Quand la sensibilité seroit le germe premier de la pensée, quand elle seroit une propriété générale de la matiere; quand inégalement distribuée entre toutes les productions de la nature, elle s’exerceroit avec plus ou moins d’énergie selon la variété de l’organisation, quelle conséquence fâcheuse en pourroit on tirer? aucune.64

Of course, the ‘trojan-horse’ Encyclopédie would never admit to the irreligious consequences of thinking matter, but Diderot, in following Locke by adding a property to matter, was deliberately seeking to disprove Christian theories of the workings of the soul, so as to posit a purely material understanding. In this, his intent is radically different from Locke’s.

Once matter is equipped with sensitivity, there are two options open to the philosopher to explain why a stone is inanimate, and why humans are capable of cognition. Is it due to a vitalist principle inherent in certain types of matter (vitalism), or is it a result of the organisation of certain masses of matter (emergentism)? It has been argued that Diderot, in keeping with his notorious contradictions, was ‘never able to decide between the two alternatives, or indeed to believe for long, with any real conviction, in either one.’65

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64 Ibid.
Diderot’s *Pensées sur l’interprétation de la nature* (1754) is particularly important for our argument, as this work was available to German readers. In this text, Diderot presents the idea of ‘sensibilité sourde’.66 Diderot also used the *Pensées sur l’interprétation de la nature* to challenge Maupertuis’s conception that molecules possess higher-level properties of desire, aversion and memory, offering the alternative view that higher-level mental properties are a product of organisation.67 Unfortunately, much of Diderot’s thought on thinking matter was unavailable to most of his contemporaries, as it remained unpublished in his lifetime.68 Though Diderot’s indecision between vitalism and emergentism points to the vacillation which permeates some of his work, we can perhaps infer from this that he regarded all matter as having the inherent property of sensitivity. How inert sensitivity becomes active is a question that he cannot answer (aside from specific examples of digestion of food). Diderot’s hesitant views, and the fact that most of the works explicitly expressing sensualist positions remained unpublished before 1789, mean that he is not always called upon by German thinkers exploring sensualist ideas, though there are exceptions, as we will see with Knoblauch.

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Unlike Diderot’s, La Mettrie’s sensualist views were accessible to all. His sensualist and empirical epistemology was explicit: all our ideas come from the senses. Nowhere is this idea more clearly put than in _L’Histoire naturelle de l’âme_ (1745): ‘Point de sens, point d’idées’ and ‘l’Ame dépend essentiellement des organes du corps, avec lesquels elle se forme, croît, décroît.’ These ideas are repeated in the more widely available _L’Homme machine_, which claims that it is ‘impossible de donner une seule idée à un Homme privé de tous les sens.’ In _L’Homme machine_, La Mettrie assumes _Locke_ has so utterly refuted the Cartesian notion of innate ideas that he need not write anything further on the subject.

La Mettrie polemically and provocatively takes aim at Leibniz in diverse works, which of course made it difficult for his writings to gain acceptance in Germany until later generations came to reassess them, once Leibniz’s dominance had receded. He labels monads as ‘une hypothèse inintelligible’, stating that Leibnizians ‘ont plutôt spiritualisé la Matière, que matérialisé l’Ame.’

The _Histoire naturelle de l’âme_ presented the view that matter possessed the property of feeling. Yet in _L’Homme machine_, La Mettrie ostensibly evades the question which metaphysicians ask, namely ‘si la matièrë peut penser’, because, he claims, it cannot be proved, and hence, ‘nous éviterons cet écueil, où Mr. Locke a eu le malheur d’échouer.’ La Mettrie, in viewing the notion of thinking matter as clearly destined to remain a part of speculative philosophy, decides that organisation is more important: ‘demander si la matière peut penser, sans la considérer autrement qu’en elle-même, c’est demander si la matière peut marquer les heures.’ For La Mettrie, matter may not have the universal quality of thought, but it can be endowed with this property by organisation: ‘qu’elle est susceptible de sensation et de sentiment.’ La Mettrie is thus an emergentist. Most importantly though, La Mettrie’s version of sensualism insists that sensibility is the key to explaining all intellectual capacities: ‘vous avez vu que la faculté sensitive exécute elle seule toutes

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69 La Mettrie, _L’Histoire naturelle de l’âme_, OP, I, 243. Also known as the _Traité de l’âme_.
70 La Mettrie, _L’Homme machine_, OP, I, 83.
71 La Mettrie, _L’Homme machine_, OP, I, 63. La Mettrie also attacks Leibniz and Wolff in _Traité de l’âme _and in _Traité des systèmes_, OP, I, 202, 257.
72 La Mettrie, _L’Homme machine_, OP, I, 63.
73 La Mettrie, _L’Homme machine_, OP, I, 63.
74 La Mettrie, _L’Histoire naturelle de l’âme_, OP, I, 143.
ces facultés intellectuelles; qu’elle fait tout chez l’homme, comme chez les animaux; que par elle tout s’explique.”

His sensualism is emphatic.

Having reduced the workings of the mind to the organisation of matter, in L’Homme machine, La Mettrie dispenses with the term ‘âme’, distinguishing it from the faculties to which the term has hitherto been attached: ‘toutes les facultés de l’Ame dépendent […] de la propre organisation du cerveau et de tout le corps.’ He then declares that: ‘L’Ame n’est donc qu’un vain terme dont on n’a point d’idée et dont un bon esprit ne doit se servir pour nommer la partie qui pense en nous.’ This idea of (theologically derived) language having invented signifiers that have no corresponding reality is echoed when La Mettrie claims that ‘immatérialité’ is ‘un grand mot vuide de sens.’

Continuing our survey of the sensualism of French materialists, we must note that Helvétius explicitly states that all human knowledge and understanding is based on sensation. In De l’esprit, Helvétius writes ‘la sensibilité seule produit toutes nos idées,’ and later concludes: ‘or les sens sont les sources de toutes nos idées; privés d’un sens, nous sommes privés de toutes les idées qui y sont relatives.’ Helvétius also redefines soul, seemingly following La Mettrie in making clear that the term âme is simply related to certain faculties of physical bodies. In the posthumous De l’homme (1773), Helvétius writes:

L’âme n’est en nous que la faculté de sentir; que l’esprit en est l’effet; que dans l’homme tout est sensation: que la sensibilité physique est par conséquent le principe de ses besoins, de ses passions, de sa sociabilité, de ses idées, de ses jugemens, de ses volontés, de ses actions & qu’enfin si tout est explicable par la sensibilité physique, il est inutile d’admettre en nous d’autres facultés […] L’Homme est une machine qui

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75 La Mettrie, L’Histoire naturelle de l’âme, OP, I, 224.
76 La Mettrie, L’Homme machine, OP, I, 98.
77 La Mettrie, L’Homme machine, OP, I, 98.
78 La Mettrie, L’Homme machine, OP, I, 65.
79 Helvétius, De l’esprit, p. 6. This view was controversial enough to be cited by the Sorbonne’s commission of inquiry into the book in 1759.
80 Helvétius, De l’esprit, p. 251.
mise en mouvement par sa sensibilité physique doit faire tout ce qu’elle exécute.\footnote{Helvétius, De l’homme, i, 123-24.}

Helvétius, as we see, was immediately developing the moral consequences of his sensualism, to which we shall return in the final chapter. Finding that sensibility only manifests itself in organised bodies of animals, Helvétius judiciously avoids answering the question of whether ‘la matiere sentoit ou ne sentoit pas’ because using observation, it is ‘impossible de démontrer que tous les corps soient absolument insensibles.’\footnote{Helvétius, De l’esprit, pp. 31-32.} Yet he does not rule out the hypothesis.

By the time d’Holbach came to publish Système de la Nature in 1770, sensualism was such a well-known epistemological standpoint that it was hardly necessary to explain it any further than to say: ‘pour avoir de l’intelligence, des desseins & des vues il faut avoir des idées; pour avoir des idées il faut avoir des organes & des sens.’\footnote{D’Holbach, Système, i, 69.} The empirical basis to d’Holbach’s ideas pervades his works, with the insistence on ‘observation’ omnipresent. In terms of the thinking matter thesis, d’Holbach accepts the hypothesis that ‘la sensibilité est une qualité universelle de la matiere’, but fails to decide how the ‘deux sortes de sensibilité; l’une active ou vive & l’autre inerte ou morte,’ are to be explained in terms of vitalism or emergentism, though he seems to side with the latter, stating that sensibility is a result ‘d’un arrangement, d’une combinaison propre à l’animal.’\footnote{D’Holbach, Système, i, 105.} D’Holbach does not involve himself in deciding between the two, preferring to concentrate on the idea of sensation being linked to movement of matter: ‘toutes les facultés intellectuelles, c’est-à-dire, toutes les façons d’agir que l’on attribue à l’ame, se réduisent à des modifications, à des qualités, à des façons d’être, à des changemens produits par le mouvement dans le cerveau.’\footnote{D’Holbach, Système, i, 177.}

Taking the corpus as a whole, the views of Diderot, La Mettrie, Helvétius and d’Holbach spanned a period of over twenty-five years, and provide many examples

81 Helvétius, De l’homme, i, 123-24.
82 Helvétius, De l’esprit, pp. 31-32.
83 D’Holbach, Système, i, 69.
84 D’Holbach, Système, i, 105.
85 D’Holbach, Système, i, 177.
of cultural transfer to German thinkers, who explicitly cite their French influences. Specific evidence for this cultural transfer will now be presented.

**French materialist sensualism in Germany**

I propose to show that Locke’s sensualism, that is, the view that the human ideas originate in the senses, and the possibility that matter ‘thinks’, was very much present in Germany in its radicalised, materialist form, and that this transfer was channelled through French thought. Each of the German thinkers we will study here, as agents in the cultural transfer of French materialism to Germany, will be shown to have engaged with French materialist sensualism and to have served to re-transmit this in the German intellectual sphere.

The preliminary stage in this process concerns clandestine literature and particularly Voltaire’s *Lettre philosophique sur l’âme* which helped diffuse Locke’s thought not only in France, but also in Germany. There is evidence that Voltaire’s clandestine text circulated in Germany, via the Huguenot Refuge. A certain Bocquet, in correspondence with Formey, was happy to reveal that he had been reading a ‘[m]anuscrit où l’on soutient que c’est la matière qui pense,’ known to be Voltaire’s *Lettre*. Bocquet, who was a member of the *Société impartiale de Magdebourg*, was heavily involved in the diffusion of this text. The *Lettre philosophique sur l’âme* was then translated into German by Johann Gustav Reinbeck and published in 1739, along with the French original, and with Reinbeck’s defence of the immortality of the soul. This heritage of clandestine texts was a precursor to the reading of French

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materialist texts, showing that sensualist ideas were beginning to arouse interest in Germany.88

By the latter part of the century, empiricism had made great inroads in Germany. In *Morgenstunden* (1785), Mendelssohn bemoans the dominance of empiricism: ‘Die besten Köpfe Deutschlands sprechen seit kurzem von aller Spekulation mit schnöder Wegwerfung. Man dringet durchgehends auf Thatsachen, hält sich blos an Evidenz der Sinne, sammelt Beobachtungen, häuft Erfahrungen und Versuche.’89 Crucially, this is attributable to French materialism, specifically Helvétius:

Helvetius sucht, in einer von seinen nachgelaßenen Schriften, den misverstandenen Satz zu behaupten: daß alle menschliche Erkenntniß aus sinnlichen Empfindungen entspringe. Wie er dieses blos auf die Wirkung der äußern Sinne einschränkt, und die ganze Masse unserer Begriffe aus einem Spiel der Fibern im Gehirn erklären will; so glaubt er, der Seele alle allgemeine Begriffe absprechen zu müssen. Alles ist im Gehirn sinnlicher Eindruck.90

Mendelssohn, who bizarrely claimed not to have read Helvétius, defends the view that there is a special, immaterial substance of the soul.91 It is also telling that Mendelssohn sees the premise as misunderstood, in that he can position Locke as a defender of an immaterial soul, thus specifically countering the French materialist development of Locke’s ideas. Mendelssohn rehearses La Mettrie’s analogy of the watch as a composite system of thought, only to reject the proposition of thinking matter: ‘Das Stundezeigen ist eine Bewegung nach einer gewißen Richtung. Wenn sich kein Theil in der Maschine bewegte; so könnte die gantze Maschine keine Stunden zeigen. […] Kann die Materie das

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88 Reinbeck’s refutation of Voltaire was then translated into French in Berlin, probably by Formey, and published in 1744, without reprinting the *Lettre philosophique sur l’âme*, only Reinbeck’s remarks on it. *Réflexions philosophiques sur l’immortalité de l’âme raisonnable avec quelques remarques sur une lettre dans laquelle on soutient que la matière pense. Traduit de l’allemand* (Amsterdam, Leipzig: Arkstee & Merkus, 1744).
Vermögen zu dencken besitzen? [...] Ich glaube die Unmöglichkeit sey erwiesen.'

That making matter capable of thought was a ‘dangerous’ materialist position was clear to all. Gottsched, in his preface to the German translation of Helvétius’s *De l’esprit*, declared the question of ‘thinking matter’ to be a preoccupation of freethinkers: ‘Diese Frage pflegen nun wohl die Freygeister mit Lockens Ansehen zu bestärken; der da gesagt haben soll: das Subject, welches ausgedehnet ist, das ist, die Materie, könnte von Gott auch wohl die Eigenschaft, oder Kraft zu denken erhalten haben.’ Gottsched thus takes care in presenting Helvétius’s text to warn German readers of, and draw their attention to, the ‘dangerous’ elements of Helvétius’s thought, including the proposition of thinking matter. The French materialists’ position is also made clear in Winkler’s continuation of Mosheim’s *Wahrheit und Göttlichkeit der christlichen Religion*, in which Winkler highlights Diderot, La Mettrie and Helvétius as materialists who hold ‘dass, das Denken eine Eigensschaft der Materie sey.’ This element of materialist thought was thus well understood in Germany.

That Locke served as a conduit for more radical French materialist philosophy is illustrated by the case of Johann Carl Wezel (1747-1819), who studied theology and philosophy in Leipzig, a city notorious for its freethinking. Wezel admits to having been inoculated against Locke in his youth: ‘Ich kannte Locken nur vom Hörensagen, und hatte keine große Meynung von ihm’, but found that upon reading the English philosopher, in Coste’s French translation, ‘er zündete in meinem Kopfe ein Licht an.’ Wezel then declared Leibniz to be unreadable and

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92 Mendelssohn, *Abhandlung von der Unkörperlichkeit der menschlichen Seele, Jubiläumsausgabe*, III.1, 165. The editors have noted this use of La Mettrie, pp. 421-25.


94 Von Mosheim and Winkler, *Wahrheit*, I, 189. As Mosheim died in 1755, all the opinions on thinkers after around 1750 are Winkler’s own. Winkler’s work was not incompatible with certain anticlerical positions.

95 Wezel has been the subject of considerable scholarly work, for example: Dennis Brain, *Johann Karl Wezel: From Religious Pessimism to Anthropological Skepticism* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999); Phillip S. McKnight, *Novels of Johann Karl Wezel: Satire, Realism and Social Criticism in Late Eighteenth Century Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 1981). On Leipzig, see Mulsow, *Freigeister*, pp. 11-14.

96 Johann Karl Wezel, ‘Anmerkungen zu der im vorigen Stücke befindlichen Recension, über Sprache, Wissenschaften und Geschmack der Teutschen’, in *Neue Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste*, 26.2 (1782), 193-211 (pp. 209-10). See also Albert R. Schmitt,
took an empiricist approach to philosophy, which involved reading La Mettrie, and above all Helvétius, as is evidenced by his quotations in his fictional works such as Lebensgeschichte Tobias Knauts (1773-76) and Belphegor (1776). At the heart of his materialism is a commitment to sensualist epistemology. In the novel Belphegor, often seen as a darker, German Candide, he sees the mind as ‘nichts als das Resultat seiner Beobachtungen.’

However, for philosophical work in German treating the sensualist problem, we must turn to the two published volumes of Wezel’s Versuch über die Kenntnis des Menschen (1784–85). Here, though he has evidently read works by La Mettrie and Helvétius, he hardly mentions them at all, thereby indicating that such French imports were not considered respectable in Germany. The only mention of Helvétius is as a source for the concept of shame and its relation to notions of vice and virtue among different peoples, referencing ‘disc II, chap 14’ of De l’esprit. Yet although Wezel does not reveal these important sources in his philosophical work, we can judge them to have had a significant impact on his writings. Wezel, writing in the 1780s, is fully convinced of the empiricist basis of scientific progress: ‘der Weg zur Wahrheit ist erst in unserm Zeitalter [...] der Weg der Beobachtung und Erfahrung.’ Moreover, employing the same motif as La Mettrie and Helvétius, he isolates man as the first object of study from a medical, biological perspective, and complains of the reactions of unscientific theologians: ‘sie schrien gleich über die Materialisten.’

Unlike La Mettrie, Wezel retains the notion of the soul, defined as the properties of the mind. Yet he also localises this soul in the brain, the ‘Werkstatt der

98 It is perhaps indicative of Wezel’s controversial nature that when he failed to find a publisher for the final parts of his Versuch über die Kenntniss des Menschen, he returned to his native Sonderhausen in 1793, living his final twenty-six years as a (reportedly insane) recluse.
99 Wezel, Versuch über die Kenntniss des Menschen, 2 vols (Leipzig: Dykischen Buchhandlung, 1784-85) II, 228. In this section, Helvétius talks of ‘une infinité de pays où la corruption des mœurs, que j’appelle religieuse, est autorisée par la loi, ou consacrée par la religion.’ De l’esprit, p. 150.
100 Wezel, Versuch, I, 19.
101 Wezel, Versuch, I, 9.
There is a key point where, instead of the mysterious active forces Haller invokes to explain the interaction of immaterial and material in the brain, Wezel attributes the mind’s workings to ‘diese Fluidum, der reinste edelste, elementarische Theil der Materie,’ or locates them ‘in der unbekannten luftähnlichen Materie.’ The crucial thing to note as regards both these expressions is that, however qualified they may be, they both declare the workings of the mind to be material and non-visible to human observation. Thus we can see how the ideas of Helvétius were received by Wezel and his sensualist position was developed.

French materialists, in their radicalisation of sensualism, supplanted Locke as the source of anathema on this subject. August Wilhelm Rehberg (1757-1836), secretary to the Hannoverian Geheime Ratskollegium, criticised the system of those ‘groben Materialisten’, who ‘mit Epikur, Helvétius und Diderot in der Seele nichts finden, als sinnliche Vorstellungen, und empirische Verblindung und Widerholung derselben.’ Given how clearly the positions of the likes of Helvétius and Diderot were signposted, it is little wonder that the likes of Schulz, Hißmann and Knoblauch were able to find inspiration in the French writings, as we will now consider.

Knoblauch

A more provocative proponent of sensualistic materialism in Germany than Wezel was Karl von Knoblauch, who contributed a series of anonymous articles to a number of journals edited by Wekhrlin. Moreover, Knoblauch’s sources reveal irrefutable cultural transfer of French materialism. It is Knoblauch’s sensualism which defines his materialism. In an article in Das graue Ungeheuer, Knoblauch writes: ‘Ohne Kopf zu denken, ohne Nerven zu empfinden, scheint nicht minder diffizil zu seyn, als ohne Augen sehen, ohne Ohren hören, ohne Lunge athmen, ohne Magen verdauen.’ Here, Knoblauch is implicitly referencing the French

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102 Wezel, Versuch, 1, 83.
103 Wezel, Versuch, 1, 181.
104 Wezel, Versuch, 1, 79.
106 Mondot, Wekhrlin.
107 [Knoblauch], ‘No title’, Das graue Ungeheuer, XII (1787), 101. He is here repeating the same idea he had expressed in another article in the previous issue of Das graue Ungeheuer: ‘Wer ohne Hirn menschliche Gedanken und Empfindungen haben will, der will ohne Augen sehen, ohne Ohren...’
materialists who believe that all mind is corporeal, aping the construction ‘point de sens, point d’idées’. Thus all thought is based on the senses, with the importance of the nerves emphasised. Knoblauch is clear that the theory of innate ideas is incoherent, and affirms his sensualist empiricism: ‘Erfahrung ist die Basis aller unsrer Schlüsse.’ With this sensualist epistemology established, Knoblauch addresses the issue of matter.

Knoblauch’s article ‘Über das Denken der Materie’, published anonymously in Der teutsche Merkur (1787), offers an exemplary case of the workings of cultural transfer, specifically as regards the idea of thinking matter. His article begins by situating his thoughts in the context of German philosophy, namely Kant’s critical philosophy, and then cites Mendelssohn, Garve and Feder as philosophers who rejected the thinking matter thesis. After summarising their views – mentioning by name Mendelssohn’s Phädon, oder Über die Unsterblichkeit der Seele (1767), a book which also elicited responses from Spazier and Schulz – Knoblauch rejects their ideas and inability to configure a way for individual molecules to come together to form thought. He claims: ‘das Denken sei eine Qualität der Materie […] Denken ist überall – wo wir es wahrnehmen können – mit Ausdehnung verbunden.’ Having mentioned Buffon, amongst others, Knoblauch concludes his article with a page-long quotation from Diderot, translated into German. Though he acknowledges Diderot as the source of the quotation, he does not state which work it comes from. It can in fact be traced to the Pensées sur l’interprétation de la nature, the very work which explains that thought (‘sensibilité’) is a property of matter. Knoblauch must have read the work in French (no translation yet existed) and have drawn strong support from it for his thinking on thinking/sensitive matter. The fact that Diderot is

hören,’ in ‘No title’, Das graue Ungeheuer, XI (1787), 276, the very same volume in which he published a translation of Diderot’s conversation between Holmes and Saunderson, taken from the Lettre sur les aveugles.

108 Karl von Knoblauch, Grundsätze der Vernunft und Erfahrung in ihrer Anwendung auf das Wunderbare (n.p.; n.pub., 1791).


111 One of the few of Diderot’s available works where he argues that matter possesses the property of sensibility. See above, p. 100.
given such a prominent position at the conclusion of the article shows his importance in the formation of Knoblauch’s ideas.\textsuperscript{112}

Diderot’s \textit{Pensées philosophiques} (1746), popular in Germany, were also key for Knoblauch’s materialism on the question of thinking matter. Indeed, he translated pensée twenty, in a slightly modified dialogue form, in an article for the \textit{Hyperboreische Briefe}, yet disguising the provenance.\textsuperscript{113} This dialogue considers the problem of defining thinking beings, given Descartes’s distinction between humans and animals. Knoblauch uses Diderot to argue that there can be no intelligence in creation, and no difference between animals and humans. Knoblauch’s disguised endorsement of Diderot did him no harm because he took the precaution of publishing anonymously. Other writers were not so careful, as the case of Schulz shows.

\textbf{Schulz}

Schulz, the so-called ‘Zopfprediger’, the first person to be prosecuted for contravention of Wöllner’s Prussian Edict on Religion of 1788,\textsuperscript{114} also reached sensualist conclusions through reading French \textit{philosophes}.\textsuperscript{115} In his \textit{Philosophische Betrachtungen über Theologie und Religion} (1784), he states that questions of God cannot be answered, as reason is entirely dependent on the senses: Schulz rules out the possibility of an immaterial substance in the mind, and goes as far as to re-state Locke’s famous Latin dictum, claiming that teachings about spirits are a chimera, ‘so lange es gewiß ist, daß unser menschlicher Verstand nichts denken kann, wozu ihm die Sinne nicht den Stoff geliefert haben! Es ist und bleibt eine ewige und

\textsuperscript{112} In \textit{Antihyperphysik zur Erbauung der Vernünftigen} (1789), Knoblauch again underlines the primacy of the senses and the materialist basis of human life that his sensualism establishes: ‘Wer keine Sinne hat, hat keine Empfindungen, kann also auch seine Empfindungen nicht miteinander vergleichen, kann also auch keine Begriffe haben. Wer keine Begriffe hat, der denkt und will nicht. Wer nicht denkt und will, der ist kein Geist.’ Knoblauch, \textit{Antihyperphysik zur Erbauung der Vernünftigen} (n.p.: n.pub., 1789), reprinted in \textit{Bibliothek der deutschen Aufklärer des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts}, ed. by Martin von Geismar [Edgar Bauer], 5 vols (Leipzig: Wigand, 1846–47), v, 255-57 (p. 257).


\textsuperscript{114} See introduction.

\textsuperscript{115} See Saine, pp. 294-310.
unbestreitliche Wahrheit: *Nihil est in intellectu, quod non ante erat in sensu*.\(^\text{116}\) Schulz thus takes a sensualistic position to refute the existence, or knowledge of, ‘Geist’, because ‘ein solcher Geist kein Vorwurf unserer Sinne und sinnlichen Epfindungen werden kann.’\(^\text{117}\) This is a daring use of his sensualist epistemology.

Schulz then connects this to the impossibility of knowing anything about God, because an immaterial God is similar to ‘daseinige, was von keinem menschlichen Verstande erkannt und begriffen werden kann.’\(^\text{118}\) Consequently, all talk of ‘Geist’ and ‘God’ is simply ‘leeres Geschwäz’\(^\text{119}\). By defining the word ‘Seele’ as simply the various actions and qualities of the mind, Schulz can dispense entirely with the ‘nackte, leere, bedeutungslose Wortzeichen “Geist”’. Schulz also borrows the Holbachian motif of chimera to describe spirit as ‘nichts weiter als eine Chimära!’\(^\text{120}\). Schulz knew the consequences of claiming that ‘Geist’ is meaningless, even before he lost his job and was prosecuted.\(^\text{121}\) He understood the intellectual environment and pressure to conform and avoid what he sees essentially as a problem of definition, or ‘Wortstreit’: ‘es fehlt auf ihren Schilden das Wort, Geist! und statt desselben, befinden sich andere Worte darauf! – Das ist eine Gotteslästerung! Das signalisirt Atheisten! Und diese sind die gefährlichsten Menschen unter der Sonnen!’\(^\text{122}\).

It is worth underlining Schulz’s use of satire here, as well as his disingenuous way of pleading the case for the radical ideas he borrows from Spinoza and, significantly, from d’Holbach (referred to as Mirabaud), whom he champions throughout his works. By equating d’Holbach’s ‘Energie der Natur’ with the theologians’ ‘Geist’, the priest Schulz knows perfectly well this is not a simple quibble over definitions, but a radical idea that attacks the logic of religion.\(^\text{123}\)

\(^{116}\) [Johann Heinrich Schulz], *Philosophische Betrachtung über Theologie und Religion überhaupt und über die jüdische insonderheit* (Frankfurt, Leipzig: n.pub., 1784), pp. 69-70. The popularity of this work led to a second edition in 1786. Though published anonymously, Schulz was immediately known to be the author.

\(^{117}\) Schulz, *Philosophische Betrachtung*, p. 69.

\(^{118}\) Schulz, *Betrachtung*, p. 71.


\(^{120}\) Schulz, *Betrachtung*, p. 69.


\(^{122}\) Schulz, *Betrachtung*, p. 119.

\(^{123}\) Johannes Müller quickly noticed Schulz’s *Philosophische Betrachtung* and the way it drew on the *Système de la Nature*. In a letter to Jacobi, 10 October 1786, *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi. Briefwechsel*,
Schulz, as we will see in more detail in later chapters, also made this sensualistic foundation the basis to his moral theory: ‘Die Moral hingegen leitet ihre Vorschriften aus der Natur des Menschen […] her: in soweit nemlich diese Naturen den menschlichen Sinnen vorliegen, von denselben empfunden, von dem menschlichen Verstande erkannt, und von der menschlichen Vernunft beurtheilt werden können.’ The linking of materialist sensualism to morality was also undertaken by the philosopher Michael Hißmann.

Hißmann

Hißmann, who translated Condillac’s *Essai* and works by de Brosses and Priestley, is perhaps the most interesting case of a German thinker really engaging with sensualist ideas and critically attempting to overcome the problems of consciousness and identity. In his sketch of the history of philosophy, Hißmann names Locke as having given the impetus to end the belief in innate ideas: ‘Der englische Weltweise aber bewies, daß man gar nicht Ursache habe […] zur Gottheit seine Zuflucht zu nehmen.’ The interesting factor here is that Hißmann read Locke in French as he quotes him in French, once again underlining the triangular cultural transfer. Moreover, Hißmann admits to using the *Encyclopédie* as a source on Locke. This explains why Hißmann’s understanding of Locke excludes ‘God’ in a way which, as we have shown, Locke himself did not. Hißmann adopts Lockean sensualism in a radicalised French form. The sensualist epistemology, derived from Lockean origins, is the subject of his claims of religious orthodoxy. Hißmann strategically places the acceptance of sensualist epistemology as the stepping stone to an acceptable materialism by claiming that: ‘Der rechtgläubige Buddeus stimmt dem englischen Weltweisen bey. Er glaubt nicht, daß das Denken eine der Materie

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widersprechende Eigenschaft sey. Ein Beweis, daß die Orthodoxie bey der Annahme einer materiellen Seele gar nicht leide." 129 This appeal to the right-thinking Buddeus, Johann Franz Budde (1667-1729), functions, in a Straussian reading, to veil Hißmann’s advocacy of materialism in the respectability of Budde’s Lutheran-Pietist reputation. Hißmann felt the need to disarm potential criticism of his support of the idea of thinking matter. However, his claim that Protestants could easily accept a material soul is obviously a rhetorical strategy aimed at introducing materialism into Germany. It mirrors Winkler’s claim that Calvinist theology accepts Locke’s ideas, and Frederick the Great’s decree on the teaching of Locke.

There is rapid progress from the foundation of a sensualist epistemology to the more complex issues of the relationship between matter and intelligence. Just as La Mettrie had declared the question of whether matter can think or not to be a useless dead end (see above, p. 101), Hißmann follows the same argument: ‘so ist die Untersuchung sehr unnüz, ob auch die Materie denken könne, gerade wie es unnüz ist zu untersuchen, ob die Materie schwer sey, ob sie elektrische und magnetische Kraft haben könne?’ 130 Again parallel to La Mettrie’s argument (‘demander si la matière peut penser, sans la considérer autrement qu’en elle-même, c’est demander si la matière peut marquer les heures’), Hißmann subverts the oft-used metaphor of a watch to show the organisation of matter to be the more important question: ‘Die vielen Räder in einer Uhr haben einen einzigen einfachen Effekt, die Bewegung des Zeigers zur Zeitmessung. Können viele Gehirnfibern nicht auf eine ähnliche Weise zur Erzeugung eines einfachen Gedankens zusammenwirken?’ 131 Here, Hißmann defends the emergentist thesis: it is the different ‘fibres’ of the brain, organised in a specific way, which enable thought. Thus, Hißmann finds the solution to the question, as La Mettrie had done, in the organisation of matter: ‘Ich glaube, die Materie könne, den strengsten Raisonnements zufolge, allerdings denken, wenn sie auf eine gewisse Weise

129 Hißmann, Psychologische, p. 270.
130 Hißmann, Psychologische, pp. 269-70.
131 Hißmann, Psychologische, p. 273.
organisiert ist, die ich näher nicht bestimmen will, weil ich das Gehirn nur sehr unvollständig kenne."\(^{132}\)

In highlighting the striking resemblance of La Mettrie’s and Hißmann’s views, it may seem we are arguing for osmosis transfer or mere coincidence. However, there is hitherto ignored proof of the genesis of Hißmann’s views. In his *Anleitung zur Kenntniß der auserlesenen Literatur in allen Theilen der Philosophie* (1778), Hißmann includes a section with the title ‘Kann die Materie denken, oder kann sie es nicht?’ where he lists La Mettrie’s *L’Homme machine* along with refutations: Luzac’s *L’homme plus que machine* and Ploucquet’s *Dissertatio de materialismo, cum supplementis & confutatione libelli: l’homme machine* (H6).\(^{133}\) In outlining his position against Leibniz and the Wolffian school of ‘monadologists’, as La Mettrie had also done, Hißmann shows the influence of Helvétius, calling on him as an authority to support his own views: ‘Helvétius hielt die Sensibilität für die Grundkraft der menschlichen Seele.’\(^{134}\) Here Hißmann, in using the terminology of the soul, is referring to nothing more than the faculties of mind, stating: ‘daß es etwas Körperliches ist, was in uns empfindet und denkt.’\(^{135}\) Thus we can offer a correction to Mortier’s view that ‘[s]i enfin un Hiszmann s’aventure à identifier le corps et l’âme et réduit la conscience à un processus nerveux, c’est à la médecine et à la philosophie anglaises qu’il doit ses arguments.’\(^{136}\) Instead, we can demonstrate the French influences in Hißmann’s thought, given the readings he suggests in the *Anleitung*.

Hißmann manages to resolve some of the problems of materialism (identity and consciousness, for example) by denying their continuity. For Hißmann, the notion of stable, unchanging identity is also a myth. Human consciousness changes during the course of a lifetime: ‘weil unsre Seele das unwandelbare und unveränderliche Wesen nicht ist, wofür man es in den heutigen gangbaren

\(^{132}\) Hißmann, *Psychologische*, p. 270.


\(^{134}\) Hißmann, *Psychologische*, p. 189.

\(^{135}\) Hißmann, *Psychologische*, p. 269.

\(^{136}\) Mortier, *Diderot*, p. 358.
psychologischen Systemen zu halten pflegt. Hißmann strongly attacks the idea that the human mind is a simple substance, and therefore immaterial:

Ich finde in der ganzen Geschichte keine einzige so auffallende unwahrscheinlicliche Fiktion unwahrscheinlichere, als das ungläublichste Feenmärchen [...] als [der Gedanke von einem einfachen, im Menschen wohnenden Wesen, und die willkührliche Umschaffung des Gehirns in ein einfaches Wesen].

References to Helvétius by name appear regularly throughout the Psychologische Versuche. Hißmann is sometimes daring and damning of those lacking the courage to draw materialist conclusions: ‘Merkwürdig ist es, daß diejenige Psychologen, die die Sensibilität, Einbildungskraft und das Gedächtniß für Vermögen unsrer Nerven halten, dennoch nicht Muth genug haben, Verstand und Vernunft als Gaben eines Theils unsers Körpers anzusehen.’ Yet elsewhere, he quotes Helvétius on the danger of speaking of dangerous subjects in public, cryptically signalling that he too is not yet courageous enough to declare his conclusions. This French quotation from Helvétius stands as the epithet of the fourth section of the Psychologische Versuche:

Avant d’attaquer une erreur généralement reçue, il faut envoyer, comme les colombes de l’arche, quelques vérités à la découverte, pour voir si le déluge des préjugés ne couvre encore la face du monde… & si l’on apperçoit çà & là dans l’univers quelques isles où la vertu, & la vérité puissent prendre terre pour se communiquer aux hommes.

The inclusion of these words not only reinforces Hißmann’s reading of Helvétius as formative, it points to the fact that his project is more radical than it appears. Hißmann’s sensualism is thus part of a wider materialist ambition, spelled out at the start of the text: ‘Ist die menschliche Seele Materie: so müssen wir nothwendig eine neue Psychologie haben, die nur der physiologische und anatomische Psycholog

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137 Hißmann, Psychologische, p. 149.
138 Hißmann, Psychologische, p. 249.
139 Hißmann, Psychologische, p. 228.
140 Hißmann, Psychologische, p. 176.
We will investigate Hißmann’s new psychology and its relation to his morality in later chapters, noting for now that in communicating his bold materialism, he did take care to highlight the ‘Mißbrauch der Lehre von der Materialität der Seele,’ the reason why ‘man [hielt] die Behauptung des Materialismus für gefährlich.’

Hißmann’s bravado falls short of risking his career and reputation and, although his early death prevents us from making a representative career-long judgment to compare with others, he did have one way of signalling his true source readings. The French influences are manifest, yet also sometimes disguised. One such quotation unveils a latent radical intent. At the end of the second section of the *Psychologische Versuche*, Hißmann asks ‘Wozu also ein drittes Wesen zur Empfindung und dem Bewußthseyn?’ (beyond nerves and the brain), which he links with an asterisk to a quotation in French: ‘Admettre une âme pour expliquer les phénomènes c’est être réduit à l’opération du Saint-Esprit.’ This quotation is not attributed to anyone. It stands alone. We have discovered that it is from La Mettrie’s *L’Homme machine*. This is highly significant. That Hißmann is secretly quoting a work written thirty years before demonstrates not only the affinity of views, but also the long-standing influence La Mettrie’s works had among non-conformist thinkers in eighteenth-century Germany. There is a clear case of cultural transfer, authenticated by this quotation, which is reserved for similarly minded aficionados of La Mettrie’s work. The *Psychologische Versuche* ends with a plea to fellow philosophers: ‘Hütet euch, Weltweisen, Seelensklaven zu werden.’ Hißmann’s daring, however, remains within the bounds of acceptability, because the endorsement of La Mettrie remains hidden.

So we have come to see that no matter how evident it is that Hißmann had read La Mettrie and borrows notions from him, the provenance cannot be admitted. Helvétius, whose thought had been granted entry to the sphere of acceptable learning by Gottsched’s translations and prefaces, was a more acceptable source than La
Mettrie, who was still invariably demonised and a risky association thirty years after his death.

Sensualism became an important principle of German philosophers, but was moulded into various forms by different individuals. As we saw, Kant adopts a certain amount of empiricism, which he incorporates into his system. However, we have shown that the materialist interpretations of sensualist epistemology are expressions of materialist world-views, clearly influenced by French materialist thinkers.

**Provisional Conclusion**

In modifying Fischer’s claim that ‘Locke’s philosophy […] never really left a very strong impression on the finest minds of the German Enlightenment,’ aside from the question of what constitutes the ‘finest minds’, we need to pay attention to how Locke’s thought was filtered through French materialists. Doing so reveals that there was a large impact on a range of German sensualist thinkers. These thinkers may be grouped on the margins of German Enlightenment thought (as recorded in mainstream intellectual history), but this does not mean they did not constitute an essential part of the wider spectrum of Enlightenment thought. The string of German refutations and reactions to Locke’s epistemology and thinking matter suggestion, after successful retransmission by Voltaire’s thirteenth *Lettre*, set the scene for real engagement with these ideas, and the final rejection of innate ideas, which can be seen to be facilitated by the north German context of Calvinism, as Winkler claims. This was, moreover, exploited by Hißmann, who disingenuously claims to be concurring with religious ideas, when actually opposing them.

Triangular English-French-German transfer is the source of much more radically materialist ideas than simple epistemological sensualism. Though some thinkers may have come to Locke independently of this triangular transfer (and this

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study does not claim that Locke came to Germany exclusively via this route), it is the radicalism of French materialism that developed the idea of thinking matter.

Beyond refuting innate ideas and establishing the senses as the sources of ideas, French materialists reduced the soul to a signifier with no corresponding reality, or one used to refer to mental faculties or purely material processes of the brain. This material conception of the ‘soul’ was a radical idea, judged to be incompatible with religious teachings and values. Given the bibliographical basis to the cultural transfer of French materialist ideas established in Chapter One, we can here see the impact they had in terms of a positive reception among a group of German thinkers, however reticent the latter may have been in consistently crediting the influence of these ideas on their own thought. In detailing the ways in which Wezel, Knoblauch, Schulz and Hißmann quoted and engaged with the likes of La Mettrie, Diderot, Helvétius and d’Holbach, we have uncovered some highly significant examples of cultural transfer, showing the enduring resonance of the writings of these French thinkers in the contextually different world of German philosophy. It is with cases like this that we can illustrate the integrated pan-European nature of the Enlightenment.
Chapter 3: Matter and movement

The materialist understanding of movement

Having examined how the sensualistic aspects of French materialism were transferred to and reconfigured in German thought, we shall now turn to another element of materialism which found important echoes among German thinkers: the essentiality of movement to matter. This second theoretical debate on the properties of matter provided an additional foundation for a materialist ontology. There was a high degree of consensus between the French materialists on this subject, although their exact conceptions differed. As with Locke for sensualism, we may trace the modern lineage of the debate back to Anglophone writings, namely to the heritage of Newtonian mechanics and the writings of John Toland, an Irish-born thinker whose thought particularly influenced d’Holbach, who translated works by Toland into French.¹ Toland’s assertion that ‘Motion is essential to Matter, no less than Extension’ became a cornerstone of French materialism.² La Mettrie, Diderot, Helvétius and d’Holbach distinguish themselves by their appeal to findings from the natural sciences in the formulation of their arguments, drawing on discoveries in the area of animal reproduction. Their claim that movement/energy is essential to matter constitutes the second component of materialism which was subject to cultural transfer in Germany.

The relationship between matter and movement is a tenet of materialism which, as with sensualism, has precedent in Antiquity, a common source for eighteenth-century philosophy. The hylozoist notion of matter possessing motion can be traced back to the writings of Epicurus and Lucretius. La Mettrie, praising the ‘Anciens, dont la Philosophie pleine de vuës et de pénétration, méritoit d’être élevée sur les débris de celle des Modernes,’ was essentially referring to their belief in the

² Toland, Letters to Serena, ‘Preface’, §14. See also p. 164: ‘Matter is necessarily active as well as extended.’
immanence of sensibility and motion within matter.\textsuperscript{3}

The reigning orthodoxy of Cartesian mechanics held that the inertia of matter necessarily implies an immaterial source of movement. Descartes’ system allowed him to explain movement only by recourse to a divine intervention, whereby God sets matter in motion, after which the laws of motion would permit the universe to continue independently. When Descartes published these ideas, theologians and other Aristotelians initially judged them to be opening the door to atheism, but by the middle of the eighteenth century, they were accepted by virtually all Christian and deist philosophers.

There were departures from this orthodoxy, however. A key text of the littérature clandestine, the Essais sur la recherche de la vérité, penned by a still anonymous author, made the claim that the soul is material (‘l’âme ne peut être autre que matérielle’) and whilst avoiding dogmatism in other areas, posited the eternal nature of matter. Then comes the question of movement:

Il y a dans l’univers un mouvement qui anime cette matière. Or, quel est ce mouvement, et quel en est le principe? Je réponds que, quoiqu’il n’y ait peut-être rien de si ignoré dans la phisique que le mouvement et ses causes, ce qu’on en sçait avec certitude est qu’il est inséparable de la matière et que jamais il ne peut y avoir de mouvement sans matière. Ainsi il peut se faire que le mouvement soit essentiel à la matière et fasse partie de son être.\textsuperscript{4}

Movement (in this sense the same as motion and energy) was thus proposed as an essential property of matter in French clandestine literature of the early eighteenth century. This presages the transition from a mechanical to a more organic, biological understanding of physics. The author of the Essais, writing before the advances in scientific understanding which would inform the writings of La Mettrie, Diderot, Helvétius and d’Holbach, further defends his conjecture by arguing that this energy

\textsuperscript{3} La Mettrie, L’Histoire naturelle de l’âme, OP, i, 141.

\textsuperscript{4} Essais sur la recherche de la vérité, repr. in Philosophes sans dieu: Textes athées clandestins du XVIIIe siècle, ed. by Gianluca Mori and Alain Mothu (Paris: Champion, 2005), pp. 217-64 (p. 261). Sergio Landucci edited the original critical edition for this text, concluding that the text dates from before 1728.
is eternal: ‘De quelque façon que cela soit et quelque parti que l’on prenne, le mouvement doit être éternel comme la matière.’\(^5\)

The idea that movement is essential to matter, therefore, was not new, nor was it invented by the writers under consideration. In French, the distinction between the concept of motion as either essential or accidental to matter dates back to Coste’s translation of Newton in 1720.\(^6\) The originality of Diderot, La Mettrie and other materialists of the second half of the eighteenth century consisted in their use of new scientific discoveries, which we will discuss shortly, and the proselytizing nature of some of their writings. In short, the ways in which they came to the idea differed from predecessors, and its application was more far-reaching in that it also denied ‘God’ as a source of energy.

By defining movement as an essential property of matter, French materialists were again exploiting an area where their ideas contradicted religious orthodoxy, strategically placing themselves in opposition to the Church. There is a radical change of tone and motivation in the later theorisations of matter which held that movement was a property essential to matter, and not an accidental, separately added, independent property. If motion was simply added to matter, then, like sensitivity, it could have been ‘added by God’. However, by maintaining that movement is an essential part of matter, the world can be argued to be self-sufficient and eternal. The supreme artisan becomes redundant: the whole universe could have evolved from eternal matter. Voltaire’s *Traité de Métaphysique*, written in 1734 but unpublished until the 1784 Kehl edition, succinctly explains contemporary understanding of the issue: ‘le mouvement n’est pas essentiel à la matière; donc la matière le reçoit d’ailleurs; donc il y a un Dieu qui le lui donne. De même l’intelligence n’est pas essentielle à la matière, car un rocher ou du froment ne pensent point.’\(^7\) Voltaire, who rejected the materialist position, also rhetorically charges the materialist position

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5 *Essais sur la recherche de la vérité*, p. 262.
7 Voltaire, *Traité de Métaphysique*, *OCV*, 14: 1734-1735, ed. by W.H. Baber and others (1989), p. 429. As seen in the sensualism chapter, Voltaire holds that that matter can ‘think’, but refuses to accept this as essential, thus allowing for God to impart this to certain matter only.
with being necessarily destructive of society: ‘Les matérialistes doivent encore soutenir que le mouvement est essentiel à la matière. […] Il faudra encore qu’ils assurent qu’il n’y a aucune liberté, et, par là, qu’ils détruisent tous les liens de la société.’\(^8\) Voltaire’s position was therefore diametrically opposed to the materialist thinkers of our corpus, underlining the decision to exclude his texts from our consideration of cultural transfer of materialism. Moreover, Voltaire illustrates the level of opposition to such a seemingly obscure point of theory.

The scientific outlook

The scientific basis of this manifestation of materialism distinguishes it from earlier forms. La Mettrie, Diderot, Helvétius and d’Holbach all read widely about findings in the natural sciences and used these advances to bolster their positions. Without examining in detail all the various theories of generation proposed during the Enlightenment period, we will focus on the philosophical interpretation of these results in terms of materialist philosophy.\(^9\) The various theories within the field of natural science did not lead to contemporary consensus.\(^10\) A key example is the Swiss naturalist Abraham Trembley’s works on polyps.\(^11\) Trembley’s experiments showed that a polyp, when divided into many parts, was able to regenerate itself, suffering no loss of its vital principle, potentially demonstrating that its ‘soul’ (understood here as energy rather than thought) was divisible, thus material and indistinguishable from the body. La Mettrie was particularly prominent in his materialist interpretation of Trembley.

A second and perhaps more instructive scientific figure whose work was

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\(^8\) Voltaire, \textit{Traité de Métaphysique}, \textit{OCV}, 14, 438.

\(^9\) In doing so, it must be remembered that eighteenth-century philosophy did not consider ‘science’ as an entirely distinct discipline.


called upon to underpin materialist outlooks was John Turberville Needham (1713-1781). His *New Microscopical Discoveries* (1745) appeared in French translation in 1747, published in Leiden.\(^\text{12}\) Yet, as we know today, Needham, an ordained Catholic priest (and not an Irish Jesuit – a myth spread by Voltaire), was completely mistaken in his claim to have shown a life force creating spontaneous generation. In fact, Needham had simply observed yeast fermenting. Yet materialist thinkers referred to Needham and his experiments as another layer of proof for their views that energy/movement was an essential property of matter.\(^\text{13}\) La Mettrie used Needham’s findings in *L’Homme plante*,\(^\text{14}\) d’Holbach in *Système de la Nature*, and Diderot in various works.\(^\text{15}\)

Of course, not all thinkers interpreted the results in the same way. Charles Bonnet, for instance, complains of the perceived misuse of Trembley’s polyp: ‘On sçait combien on avait déraisonné sur la nature de l’Ame, à l’occasion de la Découverte du Polype. Les Materialistes s’en étoient saisis avec avidité pour étayer leur dogme favori.’\(^\text{16}\) Maupertuis, in his *Essai sur la formation des corps organisés* (1754) explains that ‘[q]uelles philosophes ont cru qu’avec la matière et le mouvement, ils pouvoient expliquer toute la Nature,’\(^\text{17}\) before, in true deist conviction, explicitly denying that such scientific understanding could even explain the genesis of a single organism, implicitly supporting the notion of an intelligent supreme artisan: ‘Jamais on n’expliquera la formation d’aucun corps organisé par les

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\(^{12}\) It has been suggested that this translation could have been by La Mettrie, supported by the reference to the work in his *Homme plante*: ‘comme le Traducteur de Néedham l’a conjecturé’, *OP*, I, 290. This potential meta-referencing is to be found elsewhere in La Mettrie’s anonymous works, where he refers to ‘l’auteur de *L’Homme Machine*’ for example. It is this aspect of disguised self-referencing which clouded the question of attribution of *L’Homme plus que machine* for so long.


\(^{15}\) Roger, *Sciences*, pp. 494-520.

\(^{16}\) Charles Bonnet, *Contemplation de la nature*, 2 vols (Amsterdam: Rey, 1764-65), I, p. xxix.

seules propriétés physiques de la matière.' Indeed, in his *Essai de cosmologie* (1750), Maupertuis, though a scientific thinker, flatly opposed the materialist interpretations, insisting that movement is not essential to matter: ‘Nous voyons des parties de la matière en mouvement, nous en voyons d’autres en repos: le mouvement n’est donc pas une propriété essentielle de la matière.’

Yet the materialists saw these advances in understanding in the disciplines of biology and chemistry as truly revolutionary. Replacing the physical models predominant until then, these findings offered an active conception of matter. French materialists wrote about movement in a way that made clear their rejection of deistic belief in a supreme artisan.

**French materialists and movement as essential to matter**

Helvétius, who in his posthumously published *De l’homme* (1773) was at pains to defend all philosophers against the charge of atheism, defended those thinkers ‘qui soutiennent le mouvement essentiel à la matière, qui le regardent comme la force invisible & motrice qui se répand dans toutes ses parties.’ Helvétius thus holds that movement is essential to matter.

La Mettrie’s ideas on movement and matter show a clear progression. Initially, he did not hold that movement was an essential property of matter: in his *Histoire naturelle de l’âme* of 1745, he writes that ‘[l]a matière est par elle-même un principe passif, elle n’a qu’une force d’inertie.’ Yet even at this early stage in his thinking, this position is nuanced by what follows, where La Mettrie distinguishes ‘matière’ from ‘la substance des corps’ and ‘corps organisés’. Matter alone is seen as passive, whereas ‘la substance des corps’ is active, containing a ‘principe moteur’ which is essentially what we talk of when we talk of the soul: ‘c’est à ce principe

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20 Helvétius, *De l’homme*, I, p. 204. Helvétius continues, explicitly linking this philosophical position and the scientific observations: ‘Voit-on les astres changer continuellement de lieu, se rouler perpétuellement sur leur centre; voit-on tous les corps se détruire et se reproduire sans cesse sous des formes différentes; voit-on enfin la nature dans une fermentation et une dissolution éternelle.’
qu’on donne le nom d’Ame.’

Here, a clear distinction is made between organised matter and unorganised matter. In the first chapter of *L’Histoire naturelle de l’âme*, La Mettrie states that the first universal property of matter (attested by most philosophers – in opposition to Descartes’s insistence that the only universal property of matter is extension) is ‘la puissance d’acquérir la force motrice.’ He presents a view of unorganised, single units of matter as passive, but as having the additional essential properties of ‘la puissance d’acquérir la force motrice & la faculté de sentir.’ This does not mean that movement is (essentially) within matter, but that matter can acquire movement.

In much of what follows in the next three chapters of *L’Histoire naturelle de l’âme*, it is at times difficult to distinguish between what is presented as a historical account of what the Ancients thought and that which La Mettrie is expounding as his personal position. Yet we are finally given insight when he explains his purpose:

> C’est pourquoi, si nous démontrons ce principe moteur; si nous faisons voir que la matière, loin d’être aussi indifférente qu’on le croit communément, au mouvement et au repos, doit être regardée comme une substance active, aussi bien que passive, quelle ressource auront ceux qui ont fait consister son essence dans l’étendue?

Thus La Mettrie makes the case that, in its simplest, unorganised form, matter is ‘susceptible de mouvement’ and later that ‘il est assez évident que la matière contient cette force motrice qui l’anime, et qui est la cause immédiate de toutes les loix du mouvement.’

La Mettrie reveals his anti-religious ideas when he refers to Descartes, who ‘a prétendu avec quelques autres Philosophes, que Dieu étoit la seule cause efficiente du mouvement, et qu’il l’imprimoit à chaque instant dans tous les corps.’ La Mettrie was well aware, therefore, of the position he was adopting, against beliefs in

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22 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
divine causes. Indeed he declared Descartes’ opinion to be merely a ‘hypothèse qu’il a taché d’ajuster aux lumières de la Foi.’ 29

From this earlier position, La Mettrie advances yet more radical positions in *L’Homme machine*, in which he posits movement as an essential property of matter. La Mettrie dispenses with the idea of a soul, stating that ‘[l]’ Ame n’est qu’un principe de mouvement ou une Partie matérielle sensible du Cerveau.’ 30 Drawing on a wider range of scientific experiments, La Mettrie is now explicit and adamant that the origin of the movement of matter is independent of the organisation of a body: ‘qu’il est clairement démontré contre les Carthésiens, les Staahlïens, les Mallebranchistes, et les théologiens peu dignes d’être ici placés, que la matière se meut par elle-même, non-seulement lorsqu’elle est organisée, comme dans un cœur entier, par exemple, mais lors même que cette organisation est détruite.’ 31 That matter still contains energy once it ceases to be in an organised form is an argument which recurs in other materialist writings.

For La Mettrie, then, matter contains a ‘puissance motrice’ by and for itself, and is thus neither governed by chance nor endowed with the property by a supreme artisan:

Ainsi détruire le Hazard, ce n’est pas prouver l’existence d’un Etre suprême, puisqu’il peut y avoir autre chose qui ne seroit ni Hazard, ni Dieu; je veux dire la Nature, dont l’étude par conséquent ne peut faire que des incrédules; comme le prouve la façon de penser de tous ses plus heureux scrutateurs. 32

Renowned for his scandalous and provocative positions, La Mettrie is knowingly heretical and incendiary. His position makes clear his attempt to discredit existing models which are informed by theological notions of a supreme artisan. In the eyes of La Mettrie, fascinated as he is by Haller’s concept of irritability and Trembley’s polyp, the explanations of life found in the Bible are incompatible with science. In

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29 Ibid.
L’Homme machine, by using a range of examples all drawn from scientific experiments, La Mettrie establishes an active conception of matter. To this end, he lists ten scientific experiments, showing variously that movement occurs independently of a supposed immaterial vitalism and that movement is essential to matter.33 It is worth repeating that not all these experiments were reliable, as we noted with the case of Needham’s experiment. Yet La Mettrie’s case was that if all these apparently dead body parts could continue to move, even when removed from the organisation of the body, that movement must be an essential property of matter, and not the result of the organisation of the whole living organism. These scientific experiments are interpreted in a clear way, which makes movement an essential part of matter: ‘Voilà beaucoup plus de faits qu’il n’en faut, pour prouver d’une manière incontestable que chaque petite fibre, ou partie des corps organisés, se meut par un principe qui lui est propre.’34

The extent to which La Mettrie’s writing is dependent on and follows from seventeenth-century mechanical notions of matter and the universe has recently been highlighted by Ann Thomson, who argues that such a direct lineage is mistaken and ‘the link between the mechanical philosophy and materialistic explanations is more complex than has been thought.’35 Nevertheless, what we must take from this discussion is the consistency with which La Mettrie argued that movement was an essential property of matter after his initial ambiguity. This progression can also be found in Diderot.

33 La Mettrie, L’Homme machine, OP, I, 99-100: ‘1) Toutes les chairs des Animaux palpitent après la mort […]. 2) Muscles éparés du corps, se retirent, lorsqu’on pique […]. 3) Les entrailles conservent longtemps leur mouvement […]. 4) Une simple injection d’eau chaude ranime le cœur et muscles, suivant Cowper. 5) Le cœur de la grenouille […] se remue pendant une heure et plus, après avoir été arraché du corps. 6) un homme convaincu de trahison, qu’on ouvrit vivant, et dont le cœur, jeté dans l’eau chaude, sauta à plusieurs reprises. 7) Prenez un petit poulet encore dans l’œuf, arrachez lui le cœur; vous observerez les mêmes phénomènes […]. 8) La chenille, les vers, l’araignée, la mouche, l’anguille offrent les mêmes choses à considérer; et le mouvement des parties coupées augmente dans l’eau chaude. 9) Un soldat ivre emporta d’un coup de sabre la tête d’un coq d’Inde. Cet animal resta debout, ensuite il marcha, courut; venant à rencontrer une muraille, il se tourna, battit des ailes, en continuant de courir, & tomba enfin. Etendu par terre, tous les muscles de ce Coq se remuèrent encore. 10) Les Polypes font plus que de se mouvoir, après la Section; ils se reproduisent dans huit jours en autant d’Animaux, qu’il y a de parties coupées. J’en suis fiché pour le système des Naturalistes sur la génération, ou plutôt j’en suis bien aise; car que cette découverte nous apprend bien à ne jamais rien conclure de général, même de toutes les Expériences connues, & les plus décisives!’

34 La Mettrie, L’Homme machine, OP, I, 100.
Diderot’s conceptions of movement as an essential property of matter, as with many of his positions, evolved from his early work. In the *Pensées philosophiques* (1746), he is clearly undecided on the matter: ‘Que le mouvement soit essentiel ou accidentel à la matière, je suis maintenant convaincu que ses effets se terminent à des développements.’\(^{36}\) In the *Lettre sur les aveugles* (1749), Diderot had already expressed notions that outlined the genesis of the universe as we know it, suggesting that the infinite and eternal molecules of nature contained within them the movement necessary to combine into infinite forms before coming to a sustainable and self-perpetuating form, from a basis: ‘où le mouvement continue et continuera de combiner des amas de matière, jusqu’à ce qu’ils aient obtenu quelque arrangement dans lequel ils puissent persévérer.’\(^{37}\) At the end of the *Pensées sur l’interprétation de la Nature* (1754), Diderot writes that ‘il est évident que la matière en général est divisée en matière morte et en matière vivante.’\(^{38}\) Then, using the form of the question, he sets out a series of thoughts:

Mais comment se peut-il faire que la matière ne soit pas une, ou toute vivante, ou toute morte? La matière vivante est-elle toujours vivante? Et la matière morte est-elle toujours et réellement morte? La matière vivante ne meurt-elle point? […] Ce qu’on appelle matière vivante, ne serait-ce pas seulement une matière qui se meut par elle-même? Et ce qu’on appelle une matière morte, ne serait-ce pas une matière mobile par une autre matière? Si la matière vivante est une matière qui se meut par elle-même comment peut-elle cesser de se mouvoir sans mourir? S’il y a une matière vivante et une matière morte par elles-mêmes, ces deux principes suffisent-ils pour la production générale de toutes les formes et de tous les phénomènes?\(^{39}\)

We can see from these questions the direction that Diderot’s thought was taking. His conception of matter contains a dynamic force. Matter contains within it movement.

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With the last of these questions, Diderot opens up the problematic of matter and movement to the truly radical possibility that the creative aspect of nature was self-perpetuating, and thus the impulse of movement, essential to matter, was capable of existing without a divine creator.40

Diderot considers that force and energy are basically the same. This means that unlike in a mechanist system of inert matter, the energy required for movement is contained within matter.41 This is clearly to be found in Diderot’s works which were available to German intellectuals. There is also a range of writings unavailable to his contemporaries in which Diderot deals with this problem of movement.42 Diderot asserts that matter has energy at the level of the molecule, and thus matter is an active force.43 The materialist position that he reached in later life in many ways dovetails with his position in section twenty-one of the Pensées philosophiques in relation to the origin of the universe, where he tentatively supposed: ‘que la possibilité d’engendrer fortuitement l’univers est très petite, mais que la quantité des jets est infinie, c’est-à-dire que la difficulté de l’événement est plus que suffisamment compensée par la multitude des jets.’44 Anthony Strugnell labels this ‘an unambiguous statement of materialist belief.’45 We have now demonstrated that Diderot held movement to be essential to matter (though some of his clearest expressions of this were unavailable to contemporaries). His influence on d’Holbach, however, is clear, and it is to d’Holbach’s writings that we will now turn.

40 On Diderot’s materialism, see Colas Duflo, Diderot philosophe (Paris: Champion, 2003) and Ursula Winter, Der Materialismus bei Diderot (Geneva: Droz, 1972).
42 By the Rêve de d’Alembert (written in 1769, but not published until 1830 and thus not considered here as a basis of cultural transfer), Diderot takes up Needham’s findings, channelled through the character of d’Alembert, who posits the permanence of movement in matter, yet with a distinction between matter and life. Diderot, DPV, xvii, 139.
43 The idea of a ‘flux perpetuel’, present in Le Rêve de d’Alembert, is repeated in another work unavailable to eighteenth-century critics, the Principes philosophiques sur la matière et le mouvement (written in 1770, but unpublished until the Œuvres of 1798), where Diderot writes of ‘la fermentation générale’, the principle that matter is the source of all life: ‘je conclus qu’elle [la matière] est hétérogène; qu’il existe une infinité d’éléments divers dans la nature; que chacun de ces éléments, par sa diversité, a sa force particulière, innée, immuable, éternelle, indestructible; et que ces forces intimes au corps ont leurs actions hors du corps, d’où nait le mouvement ou plutôt la fermentation générale dans l’univers.’ Diderot, DPV, xvii, 18.
44 Diderot, Pensées philosophiques, DPV, ii, 29.
Diderot’s early conception of the ‘fortuitous’ origins of the universe intersects with d’Holbach’s ideas in the *Système de la Nature*, albeit expressed in a very different way:

La nature ne fait donc rien que de nécessaire; ce n’est point par des combinaisons fortuites & par des jets hasardés qu’elle produit les êtres que nous voyons; […] Des jets infinis, faits pendant l’éternité, avec des éléments & des combinaisons infiniment variés, suffisent pour produire tout ce que nous connaissons, & beaucoup d’autres choses que nous ne connaitrons jamais.  

D’Holbach’s materialism, in its expression at least, is the most systematic, and simplest to characterise. Moreover, reactions to his works show us that it was precisely the claim that movement was an inherent and essential part of matter which was the most vocally contested point. The style of his works – campaigning, polemical and synthesising – lent itself to clear expressions of doctrinal thought, such as: ‘L’univers, ce vaste assemblage de tout ce qui existe, ne nous offre par-tout que de la matière & du mouvement.’ D’Holbach is clear that movement is essential to matter: ‘Nous dirons que le mouvement est une façon d’être qui découle nécessairement de l’essence de la matière; qu’elle se meut par sa propre énergie; que ses mouvemens sont dûs aux forces qui lui sont inhérentes.’ It is this clarity which lent itself to the wide diffusion of his thought and made it an easy target for those wishing to condemn a book capable of turning ‘uneduced’ readers into non-believers.

A close reading of the sections of *Système de la Nature* concerned with movement and matter will provide us with the synthesis necessary to study how these ideas were diffused and reacted to in Germany. Chapters two, three and four of the *Système* deal in depth with this notion. Chapter two, entitled ‘Du mouvement et de son origine’, sets out the foundations of d’Holbach’s conception of matter and

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47 See Curran, *Atheism*, pp. 132-33. Bergier, for one, attempted to refute d’Holbach’s work on a scientific basis.
movement. There is a linear progression in the presentation of the ideas from the exposition of scientific understanding to the refutation of ideas of ‘supernatural’ forces, an attempt to explain the start and end of life, and the work finally culminates in an attack on revealed religions. The starting point is the observation of nature: ‘La nature, comme on a dit, est l’assemblage de tous les êtres & de tous les mouvements que nous connoissons, ainsi que de beaucoup d’autres que nous ne pouvons connoître parce qu’ils sont inaccessibles à nos sens.’ By movement inaccessible to our senses, d’Holbach is referring to the movement of particles at an atomic level, given his understanding of contemporary research in chemistry.

D’Holbach takes up the issue of movement and rest in the physical world to show that what previous scientists referred to as dead and live forces are in fact misnomers, because all molecules, all bodies, are in permanent, perpetual movement: ‘que cette force d’inertie est capable d’agir & réagit effectivement. Enfin on sentira que les forces que l’on appelle mortes et les forces que l’on appelle vives ou mouvantes sont des forces de même espèce qui se déploient d’une façon différente.’ All matter is thus seen to be in constant movement, and containing an internal force:

Ainsi les corps même qui semblent jouir du plus parfait repos reçoivent pourtant réellement, soit à leur surface soit à leur intérieur des impulsions continuelles de la part des corps qui les entourent, ou de ceux qui les pénètrent, qui les dilatent, qui les raréfient, les condensent, enfin de ceux même qui les composent. Par là les parties de ces corps sont réellement dans une action & une réaction ou dans un mouvement continu.

Crucially, d’Holbach explains this continual movement as essential to matter: ‘Nous dirons que le mouvement est une façon d’être qui découle nécessairement de l’essence de la matière; qu’elle se meut par sa propre énergie; que ses mouvements sont dus aux forces qui lui sont inhérentes.’ Basing his ideas on his knowledge of

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chemistry, a subject about which he wrote for the *Encyclopédie*, d’Holbach judged energy and movement to be essential to matter as an unalterable law of nature: ‘ce mouvement est une suite nécessaire des lois immuables, de l’essence et des propriétés inhérentes aux éléments divers et aux combinaisons variées de ces éléments.’ This is used by d’Holbach as an opportunity to criticise received wisdom, Christian doctrine and the impact of prejudice on scientific knowledge: ‘Si l’on eût observé la nature sans préjugé, on se seroit depuis longtemps convaincu que la matière agit par ses propres forces, & n’a besoin d’aucune impulsion extérieure pour être mise en mouvement.’

D’Holbach makes clear that this new understanding of matter radically changes his definition of nature, and thus the whole logic of the mechanical worldview requiring an external source of movement is invalidated:

> Si par la nature nous entendons un amas de matières mortes, dépourvues de toutes propriétés, purement passives, nous serons, sans doute, forcés de chercher hors de cette nature le principe de ses mouvements; mais si par la nature nous entendons ce qu’elle est réellement [...] alors rien ne nous obligera de recourir à des forces surnaturelles.

This rhetorical switch, intended to underline the falsity of outdated mechanistic models, which had evolved to support religious ideas, redefines nature in order to dispense with the supernatural. Thus there is a clear logical progression from this scientific understanding to questioning of ideas of the spiritual and thus of divinity and religion. D’Holbach then makes the case that matter is eternal and must always have existed, thus negating the problem of beginnings:

> Ceux qui admettent une cause extérieure à la matière sont obligés de supposer que cette cause a produit tout le mouvement dans cette matière en lui donnant l’existence; cette supposition est fondée sur une

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56 D’Holbach, *Système*, i, 23.
D’Holbach makes the link to religion explicit, refuting the possibility of a spiritual existence which can intersect with the material world.

In the third chapter, entitled, ‘De la matiere, de ses combinaisons différentes et de ses mouvemens divers; ou de la marche de la nature’, the link is made from basic matter to its organised forms in discussion of animals, plants and minerals, and the decomposition of these forms:

Les animaux, les plantes & les minéraux rendent au bout d’un certain temps à la nature, c’est-à-dire à la masse générale des choses, au magasin universel, les éléments ou principes qu’ils en ont empruntés. La terre reprend alors la portion du corps dont elle faisoit la base & la solidité; l’air se charge des parties analogues à lui même et de celles qui sont les plus subtiles et légères, l’eau entraîne celles qu’elle est propre à dissoudre.59

This circle of matter through stages of inanimate and animate activity recalls La Mettrie, and found an echo in German reconfigurations of these ideas. D’Holbach makes the connection between matter’s essential movement and the origin of the universe: ‘La nature par ses combinaisons enfante des soleils, qui vont se placer aux centres d’autant de systèmes; elle produit des planetes qui par leur propre essence gravitent & décrivent leurs révolutions autour de ces soleils.’60

In summary, d’Holbach synthesises the findings of La Mettrie, Diderot and Helvétius in terms of the basic premise that movement must be an essential property of matter. This is used to argue against the impossibility of a ‘spiritual’ creator

59 D’Holbach, Système, t, 38. It is worth noting here the parallels with Diderot’s Rêve, which d’Holbach would doubtlessly have read and discussed with his associate.
60 D’Holbach, Système, t, 39.
adding movement to the matter in the universe, which both Cartesianism and Newtonian physics rely on to explain movement. The link from this position derived from physics to an atheistic world-view was cogently argued by a select group of French materialists. How were these ideas judged in Germany?

**German Reactions**

**Knoblauch**

One case demonstrating the prolonged and evident influence on German thought of the concept of active matter developed by French materialists is that of Karl von Knoblauch. In the article ‘Etwas von den Naturgesetzen’ which appeared anonymously in *Der teutsche Merkur* in the third and fourth quarters of 1787, Knoblauch claims: ‘Die Beobachtungen zeigen uns eine aktive Materie, welche Bewegung hat.’\(^61\) This shows that he has clearly understood the importance of claiming movement as an inherent characteristic of matter.

The materialist views of Knoblauch are summarised on the next page of this same article, where he states: ‘Alles ist in der physischen Welt nur Metamorphose. Nur die Formen verändern sich.’\(^62\) From a science-based discussion, Knoblauch makes a crucial transition to the application of this science to other kinds of knowledge. Science, he writes, should be used to assess any kind of testimony, with the obvious example being scripture and its claims as to the occurrence of miracles. Knoblauch writes: ‘Zur Glaublichkeit eines Fakti wird seine physische Möglichkeit zuerst erfordert. Wenn diese letztere fehlt, so kann der Erzähler eines solchen Fakti auf unsern Glauben und Beyfall gar keinen Anspruch machen.’\(^63\)

The proudly transgressive, if not provocative nature of Knoblauch’s intertextual references is summed up by the final part of the article ‘Etwas von den Naturgesetzen’, where he quotes Diderot in French. He takes an excerpt from section

\(^{61}\) [Knoblauch], ‘Etwas von den Naturgesetzen’, *Der teutsche Merkur* (1787:3), 82-94; (1787:4), 197-203 (p. 87).
\(^{62}\) [Knoblauch], ‘Etwas’, p. 88.
\(^{63}\) [Knoblauch], ‘Etwas’, p. 93.
forty-eight of the *Pensées philosophiques*, which reads: ‘tous les peuples ont de ces faits, à qui, pour être merveilleux, il ne manque que d’être vrais; avec lesquels on démontre tout, mais qu’on ne prouve point; qu’on n’ose nier sans être impie, et qu’on ne peut croire, sans être imbécille.’\(^{64}\) The choice of this section of Diderot is crucial. It serves to bring potentially abstract discussions on dry subjects in physics into the domain of wider public use and human significance. It is used to explain why the application of science and learning to the functioning of society is so difficult to achieve in the public sphere. It becomes clear that Knoblauch’s interest in science and materialism has the specific aim of combating ideas generally accepted in eighteenth-century society, first and foremost the belief in miracles and phenomena which contravene the scientific laws of nature. The persistence of belief in such phenomena is an annoyance for Knoblauch, whose readings in French materialism have filled him with a vigorous desire to combat superstition. Yet in this article, other than the final quotation from Diderot, Knoblauch relies on relatively ‘safe’ authors to support his claims, such as the Dubrovnik-based polymath and theologian Ruđer Josip Bošković, Buffon, and d’Alembert. His interpretations, though, go beyond his sources and show traces of the influence of the more radical sections of Diderot and d’Holbach which he openly quotes in later essays.

Knoblauch attacks the claim that laws of motion are proof of the existence of God by the principle of Final Causes, opposing those who have: ‘jene Gesetze aus den Absichten herzuleiten versucht, welche der Urheber der Natur bey der Feststellung jener Regeln sich vorgesetzt haben könnte. Boscowich, d’Alembert, und Buffon verwerfen diese Art zu raisonniren, wie mich dünkt, mit gutem Grunde.’\(^{65}\) Again, his choice of author here is specifically designed not to arouse more suspicion than necessary. Though he could easily have listed the author of the *Système de la Nature* or Diderot as others who support his view, he chooses the respectable voices of scientific enquiry, not the scandal-ridden *philosophes*.

He describes nature as a system which regulates itself through its own laws. The existence of the laws of attraction and repulsion is precisely the evidence used by d’Holbach to claim the universalism and determinism of self-conservation,

\(^{64}\) [Knoblauch], ‘Etwas’, p. 94.

\(^{65}\) [Knoblauch], ‘Etwas’, p. 201.
whether it be used to explain the movement of bodies in physics or the survival
instincts of humans. Knoblauch, mentioning Bošković, Buffon, and Fabre as sources,
was still reliant on Wieland to have his work published in Der teutsche Merkur, and
is not as forceful or daring as suggested by some of his other work where he quotes
French materialists (see above, pp. 109-10, and below, p. 163 and 212-13). Thus he
fails to declare explicit influence from more radical figures like d’Holbach, and
makes a concession – whilst nevertheless arguing that the study of nature makes us
inclined to reject miracles – that ‘Naturgesetze [sind] in der That Gesetze Gottes.’
This reticence does not invalidate the claim that Knoblauch was engaged in cultural
transfer: it merely shows the steps needed to be able to enter into public discourse.
Indeed, the concession to the idea of God is contradicted by Knoblauch in the very
same article, when he poses it as one of two possibilities and also states that the
movement inherent in matter can explain the origin of the physical world. The step
of linking the properties of matter to the origin of the physical world is one made by
the more radical materialists, who wish to exclude the workings of a divinity. Thus it
is a crucial link for Knoblauch to make. Furthermore, he adopts and propounds
repulsion and attraction as the principal forces in nature:

Die großen, einfachen, ewigen Gesetze der Attraktion und Repulsion,
auf welche sich die uns noch größenteils unbekannten besonderen
Gesetze der chemischen Affinitäten, der elektrischen und magnetischen
Erscheinungen allem Vermuten nach reduciren lassen, erklären uns den
Ursprung der physischen Welt. Die Beobachtungen zeigen uns eine
aktive Materie, welche Bewegung hat.  

Moreover, his basic position is that matter contains its own energy and all life is
living: it is ‘durch sich selbst aktive Materie,’ an expression coming close to
d’Holbach’s ‘par ses propres forces.’ Knoblauch consistently counters the opinion
that movement could have been ‘created’ by a divinity, thus apparently contradicting
his concession that the ‘Naturgesetze [sind] in der That Gesetze Gottes.’ In his Anti-
Hyperphysik zur Erbauung der Vernünftigen (1789), he asks ‘Woher könnte der

66 [Knoblauch], ‘Etwas’, pp. 89-90.
67 [Knoblauch], ‘Etwas’, p. 87.
68 [Knoblauch], ‘Etwas’, p. 84.
reine Geist die Idee der Bewegung haben, von welcher doch alle Phänomene der
sichtbaren Welt abhängig sind. This rhetorical question, adopting the wider
argument of the incompatibility of and incommunicability between the material and
immaterial or spiritual, clearly shows that Knoblauch does not believe that the
universe has a divine creator. In another text published in Hyperboreische Briefe in
1788, Knoblauch hypothesizes about the universe’s inherent energy as capable of
bringing about creatures and humans, utilizing La Mettrie as a source: ‘Hätte die
Erde sich selbst bevölkern können, hätte sie jene zeugende Kraft gehabt, die ihr la
Mettrie zueignet, so müste sie solche noch izt haben. Oder ist sie nicht ein Theil des
nothwendigen, unveränderlichen Weltsystems?’ This final rhetorical question,
daring deist/theist opponents to claim the earth to be outside of the natural universe,
functions to support La Mettrie’s position. As such, Knoblauch demonstrates a
particularly fruitful use of anonymity. He is able to claim different positions in
different texts, without worries about consistency. Thus he occasionally puts
forwards the views of Diderot, La Mettrie and d’Holbach in a positive light,
contributing to their rehabilitation, and the diffusion of their materialism.

As further proof of the growing radicalism of Knoblauch, we can cite a
footnote to the word ‘Materie’ in his Grundsätze der Vernunft und Erfahrung, in
ihrer Anwendung auf das Wunderbare (1791), where Knoblauch writes that ‘die
[Materie] doch ohne Bewegung so wenig, als ohne Ausdehnung denkbar ist.’ This
comes only one page after a page of explicit quotation from d’Holbach’s Système de
la Nature, which Knoblauch assures us is ‘von der Hand eines Meisters’ and whose
author is referred to as one of the ‘Koryphäen der neueren philosophischen
Schule.’ Thus Knoblauch later reveals a very real admiration for d’Holbach and we
can infer that d’Holbach’s writing was of central importance in the formation of
Knoblauch’s ideas. Thus though not all of his writings reveal verifiable cultural

69 Knoblauch, Anti-Hyperphysik zur Erbauung der Vernünftigen (1789), in Bibliothek der deutschen
257.
164).
71 Knoblauch, Grundsätze der Vernunft und Erfahrung, in ihrer Anwendung auf das Wunderbare
(1791), in Bibliothek der deutschen Aufklärer, v, 282.
72 Ibid. Knoblauch quotes at length from the French edition, from chapter three oft he second volume,
translating passages into German himself.
transfer from d’Holbach (often due to concern to get his ideas published), we can confirm that d’Holbach’s thought on the essentiality of movement to matter circulated in Germany, and found important support among a group of German thinkers.

**Spazier**

Karl Spazier’s *Antiphädon*, which we look at in much greater detail in the next chapter concerning the idea of the immortality of the soul, is also a work which presents the materialists’ views on the relationship between movement and matter. Strangely, given his readings in French materialism, Spazier commences the sixth letter (‘Wo Wirkung ist, ist Kraft’), of this faux-epistolary work by claiming that the subject at hand is too important to be treated with French frivolity, perpetuating a certain idea of French philosophy: ‘Die Sache ist zu ernsthaft, und bei einer so wichtigen Materie, als ich zu untersuchen noch vor mir habe, möchte ich mich ebensowenig des Vorwurfs eines französischen Leichtsinns schuldig machen.’ He proceeds with requisite seriousness to define the soul as a power to make ideas, or imagination: ‘Die Seele, sagt man, ist eine Kraft, die Vorstellungen hervorbringt; also eine Vorstellungskraft.’ Spazier thus redefines the soul simply as ‘Kraft’ and then exploits the important ambiguity of the German word, which can mean either force (potential) or energy, as in movement, by defining ‘Kraft’ as the ability to modify things: ‘Kraft nenne ich das Vermögen eines Dinges, Veränderungen hervorzubringen.’ This strategy of reduction means that ‘Kraft’, being the soul, is implicitly a movement as well as, explicitly, a capacity for change.

Spazier uses a whole series of twists and rhetorical devices, symptomatic of his ability to hide his true direction of argumentation, in order to take the reader round in a circle and conclude the opposite of what he had announced he was going to show (so that ‘die Definition gerade das Gegenteil von dem beweist, was sie beweisen soll’). In outlining philosophers’ reasoning about the soul, Spazier shows

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74 Spazier, *Antiphädon*, p. 68.
75 Spazier, *Antiphädon*, p. 69.
76 Spazier often worries about how he may be interpreted and explains what he is not saying: ‘Ich will dies nicht einmal auf den menschlichen Körper anwenden und sagen, die Kraft des Menschen
the difficulty of maintaining that movement is separate from matter and regulated by an immaterial soul. ‘Kraft’, or movement in our terminology, can thus be conceived only as part of matter: Spazier asserts that ‘wir eben gesehen haben, daß Kraft nie als etwas Selbständiges, als eine Substanz an und für sich, sondern immer nur in etwas anderem gedacht werden kann, wie dies denn schon aus der Definition selbst folgt.’ Movement must be a part of matter. Any motion must be brought about by matter, and thus the soul is material: ‘Wir bemerken Veränderungen, die die Seele in sich selbst oder in dem Körper hervorbringt, und wir schließen daher auf Wirksamkeit, auf Kraft.’

It is when we attempt to explain the origins of this movement that, according to Spazier, we make the mistake of wanting to attribute it to a primitive force:

Man fasse, wenn man will, alle einzelnen Kräfte der Seele zusammen unter der einen Grundkraft, aus welcher sich alle Modifikationen derselben erklären lassen; und man wird doch immer auf etwas anderes, auf ein primitives Etwas, in welchem diese Grundkraft vorhanden sein muß, zurückgehen müssen.

What, asks Spazier, could this ‘primitives Etwas’ be? ‘Das Wesen der Seele selbst. – Gut. Aber was heißt denn das, die Kraft ist in dem Wesen der Seele gegründet?’ Spazier thus shows the circularity of the argument by continuing it ab adsurdum:

Die Instanz, Gott ist ja doch in sich selbst gegründet, erleichtert die Schwierigkeit im Geringsten nicht. Denn wenn diese Redensart: Gott ist in sich selbst gegründet, einen vernünftigen Sinn haben soll, so kann darunter nichts anderes als seine notwendige Existenz von Ewigkeit her verstanden werden.

– “Vielleicht ist sie aber unmittelbar in Gott gegründet.”


Ibid.

Ibid.

Spazier, Antiphädon, pp. 69-70.

Spazier, Antiphädon, p. 70.
Das kann aber wohl niemand ohne Ungereimtheit sagen. Denn ist das, so wäre ja Gott die bewegende Kraft (vis matrix) der Seele und folglich auch die unmittelbare Ursach aller Gedanken, Entschliessungen und Handlungen der Menschen. Und wo bliebe denn unsere Freiheit […]? Und würde überdies nicht Gott auf solche Weise geradezu zum Urheber des Bösen gemacht?81

Spazier thus inverts theological reasoning, and using a technique similar to Bayle, shows that if, as in the Cartesian system, God had applied movement to the universe, not only is this a form of determinism, but God is also the cause of all evil in the world. For Spazier, this line of argument is problematic because it considers all these ‘Kräfte’ as emanating from a source other than nature.

The solution to this problem, for Spazier, is to make movement a part of matter (or in his terminology, ‘Kraft’ a part of ‘Substanz’), concluding that ‘die Kraft in etwas anderem, in einer Substanz, Materie usw. hinreichend gegründet sei, und – das bezweifelt weiter niemand.’82 Spazier then uses a call to authority which is, in some ways, surprising, given the controversy which such a position would entail. He cites Leibniz, Baumgarten and Wolff as sources and allies with whom he concurs, and thus adds further support for his case that movement is always a part of matter. In a text which mentions La Mettrie and the Système de la Nature, it is to German philosophers to whom Spazier turns when wishing to make controversial claims: ‘vielleicht helfen wir uns […] wenn wir mit Leibniz, Wolff und Baumgarten die Kraft und Substanz eins und eben dasselbe sein lassen, und besonders mit dem letzteren die Kraft so definieren, daß sie der hinreichende Grund der Wirklichkeit einer Substanz ist.’83 In many ways, this shows just how controversial his position is, in that he wants to disguise it as a very much accepted part of German philosophy. This disguises the readings of French philosophes which Spazier has clearly undertaken, as proven by his quotations elsewhere.84 By seemingly integrating his positions into a German philosophical tradition, Spazier seeks to downplay the

81 Ibid.
82 Spazier, Antiphädon, p. 71.
83 Spazier, Antiphädon, p. 70.
84 See above, p. 27, and below, p. 167.
radical consequences of his position, especially given the way he undermines the notion of an original creator by raising the question of the creator of the creator.\textsuperscript{85}

Schulz

The works of Johann Heinrich Schulz stand out for their direct discussion of d’Holbach’s theories of movement. Still attributing the text of \textit{Système de la Nature} to Mirabaud, Schulz takes d’Holbach’s notion of the ‘Energie der Natur’ to be a legitimate and reasoned explanation of the origin of the universe and of all natural phenomena, including the workings of the mind.

Schulz terms his own work a ‘Vertheidigung der Atheisten […] wider die Mendelsohnsche Beschuldigungen.’\textsuperscript{86} Given his preoccupation with Mendelssohn’s attack, Schulz has a specific use for d’Holbach’s theory. Firstly, he wants to show that d’Holbach’s work is not dangerous and deserves better than to be simply decried as atheism, or ‘Gottesleugnung’ – thus Schulz is attacking an intellectual environment by showing its intolerance and the way in which German intellectuals can be governed by a climate of fear and conformity. Moreover, he wants to free the \textit{Système de la Nature} from the controversial baggage it carried round with it. To this end, Schulz claims that ‘Mirabaud’ is not an atheist, because his system fulfils the requirements of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, here being the ‘Energie der Natur’. Secondly, Schulz claims d’Holbach’s explanation of the origin of the universe to be socially superior because the ‘Energie der Natur […] fordere keine Tempel, keine Altäre und Priester für sich.’\textsuperscript{87} Schulz can be seen, therefore, to embark on a full-scale rehabilitation of work by the most reviled author of the century. Indeed, Schulz claims that there cannot be any true atheists, as atheism logically involves denying sufficient reason. Importantly, there are precedents for this argument among French materialists. D’Holbach argues: ‘Si par \textit{Athée} l’on désigne un homme qui nierait l’existence d’une force inhérente à la matière & sans laquelle l’on ne peut concevoir la nature, & si c’est à cette force motrice que l’on donne le nom de \textit{Dieu}, il n’existe point d’athées.’\textsuperscript{88} Schulz clearly recycles this

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\textsuperscript{85} Spazier, \textit{Antiphädon}, pp. 69-70. \\
\textsuperscript{86} Schulz, \textit{Philosophische}, p. 228. \\
\textsuperscript{87} Schulz, \textit{Philosophische}, p. 229. \\
\textsuperscript{88} D’Holbach, \textit{Système}, II, 333.
\end{flushright}
argument in his writings to effect a change in attitudes in Germany.

Thus Schulz’s use of the idea that motion is essential to matter was not a simple case of wishing to advocate d’Holbach’s thought. It was part of a wider process of discrediting revealed religion. This position was truly iconoclastic, because of his career in the established church as a priest in Gielsdorf, near Berlin. Moreover, Schulz was employing the Système de la Nature in the context of Moses Mendelssohn’s attack on atheists, and thus using this French writing as an import to counter German mainstream positions. Schulz’s tactics thus confirm Bourdieu’s theory.

Provisional conclusion

Across a number of writings, all of the French materialists under consideration in this study came to posit that motion was an essential property of matter, without which it is impossible to conceive the notion of matter. Using logical and scientific evidence, these four thinkers utilized the essentiality of motion to matter to argue that eternal matter could explain the origin of the universe and the origin of life forms and their evolution to current forms, via different theories of reproduction. What they had in common, therefore, was the lack of a divinity in their conceptions of the universe and the self-sufficiency of nature.

These ideas circulated in Germany. As we have seen in the bibliographical chapter, the mainstream reactions were hostile. However, as we have seen in the second part of this chapter, there were German thinkers who were inspired by the French materialist ideas on motion and who used these ideas to develop their own critiques of religious beliefs. Yet, as we saw with Knoblauch, it was difficult for them to declare that their inspiration came from the likes of Diderot or d’Holbach given the notoriety of these writers, whose works were banned and burned in France. Thus Knoblauch, who quotes these writers in other places, disguises his discussion of the laws of nature (which was just as much a discussion of the falsity of religious belief) as an examination of the writings of Buffon and d’Alembert, when in fact his
atheistic conclusions are much more closely aligned with the author of the *Système de la Nature*.

Karl Spazier and Johann Heinrich Schulz, both of whom were writing refutations of Moses Mendelssohn’s anti-atheist defence of the immortality of the soul, also endorsed the view that movement is essential to matter, and both were equally influenced by the French materialists. Whereas Spazier attempts to disguise his views as a mere continuation of the views of Leibniz, Baumgarten and Wolff (highly unlikely given his wider arguments), Schulz fully engages with the *Système de la Nature* in an attempt to rehabilitate its author in Germany, and uses this import as a means of showing the error of German philosophy, here represented by Mendelssohn and his ideas on the immortality of the soul, the subject of the next chapter.
Chapter 4: The Immortality of the Soul

Following the analysis in previous chapters of materialist ideas about properties of matter in terms of both sensualism and movement, we have seen how materialist philosophes argued that the ‘soul’ is material, or dismissed it as a meaningless term. This was disputed by a range of Christian (and Jewish) apologists. What irritated them just as much, however, was the argument that, if the soul is necessarily material, then it ceases to exist when the organisation of the matter disintegrates after death. This chapter will address the religious dogma of immortality of the soul, and the materialist refutation thereof. The issue is by no means unique to the eighteenth century. The notion of an immortal soul has been an integral part of Western thought since Socrates, and the Christian churches’ subsequent adoption of the idea as dogma. The question of the immortality of the soul therefore transcends the period and the milieu we are studying here. It is consequently crucial that we isolate the aspects of the controversies in German letters as they pertained to the various strands of intellectual debate triggered by the writings of the French materialist thinkers under consideration in this study.

German philosophy and the soul’s immortality

Among others who entered this debate, Moses Mendelssohn, proposed a lengthy defence of the soul’s immortality in his Phädon oder die Unsterblichkeit der Seele (1767). Not only can we consider his text as symptomatic of the general trend among German Aufklärer; it was specifically Mendelssohn’s writings which triggered a reaction among certain dissident German thinkers, who used the ideas and arguments of French materialists to buttress their refutations of Mendelssohn.¹

Our analysis situates the specificities of the German debate on the immortality of the soul as a reaction to the import of French materialist texts, in the

¹ Schulz’s reply to Mendelssohn became particularly vituperative with his anonymous Der entlarvte Moses Mendelssohn, oder völlige Aufklärung eines räthselhaft en Todverdrusses des M. Mendelsohn über die Bekanntmachung des Lessingschen Atheismus von Jacobi (Amsterdam: n.pub., 1786). Jacobi sent this book to Johannes Müller, informing him he did not want it back. Jacobi, Briefwechsel, I.V, 442.
wider context of established German discourse. There had, after all, been *Frühaufklärung* writers who had argued against the immortality of the soul: for example Friedrich Wilhelm Stosch’s *Concordia rationis et fidei sive harmonia philosophiae moralis et religionis christianae* (1692), and Theodor Lau’s *Meditationes philosophicae de deo mundo et homine* (1717). Yet it is the contention of this thesis that the importation of texts by La Mettrie, d’Holbach, Diderot and Helvétius was a key component in transforming discourse on immortality of the soul. From a scientifically derived theory of matter, their discourse led to a position more critical of religious beliefs, specifically the control exerted on society by the doctrine of immortality of the soul and the consequent teachings of afterlife and judgment. The key factor here is that if the soul is material (or defined as the functioning of the brain), then we know that the disintegration of the organisation of this matter after death precludes notions of immortality. This is an application of materialist beliefs which aims to counter religious doctrine, and had mutated from being a scientific hypothesis to being a political tool. Theories of spiritual substance provided the basis for the system of punishments and rewards taught in the Church.

In the following analysis, we will first look at the various arguments made by the corpus of French materialists, situating them in their own context, before considering the impact of the circulation of their work in Germany. To do this, we will consider the existing German discourse on the issue, and then analyse the writings of certain German thinkers whose interaction with the French texts was such that they then espoused materialist views, thus acting as *passeurs*.

**French materialists and the immortality of the soul**

Immortality was widely held to be an essential quality of the ‘soul’: the 1762 edition of the *Académie Française* dictionary defined the human soul as ‘indivisible, spirituelle, immortelle’. Yet, the *Encyclopédie* referred to the notion of the immortality of the soul as a ‘dogme’, thereby putting the idea at the level of required,

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3 ‘Âme’, *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française*, 4th edn (1762). <http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/content/dictionnaires-dautrefois>.
rather than reasoned, belief. The 1771 edition of the Jesuit *Dictionnaire de Trévoux* defined materialism as a ‘dogme très dangereux, suivant lequel certains philosophes prétendent que tout est matière, et nient l’immortalité de l’Ame.’ This tells us that denying the soul’s immortality was a constituent part of a materialist position. Olivier Bloch, the distinguished scholar of materialism, also defines opposition to the immortality of the soul as a central part of materialism: ‘Ce qu’il y a de proprement matérialiste, c’est en effet une critique radicale des notions clefs de la tradition religieuse et métaphysique […] contre le Dieu créateur et l’âme immortelle.’ Bloch evokes a libertine tradition, and we can trace this in clandestine French literature, which we will briefly consider here as putting forward the formative ideas upon which materialists developed their theories.

Boulainvilliers’ *Essai de Metaphysique* (1731), a loose translation of the ideas of Spinoza, certainly played an important role in the diffusion of scepticism concerning immortality. Wade has, however, urged caution regarding the Spinozist origins of Boulainvilliers’ thought, finding that Spinoza is ‘strangely truncated, misinterpreted, and misrepresented’ in Boulainvilliers’ circle. It was another prominent member of this clandestine group, Nicolas Fréret, who offered a more complete treatment of the notion of the immortal soul. His *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe* contains a chapter dedicated to critiquing the immortality of the soul. Fréret’s faux-epistolary narration argues that we have absolutely no idea of what happens after death, and that there is no foundation to beliefs in the ‘distinction de l’homme en deux ou trois substances,’ essentially disagreeing with the Cartesian notion of the divide between the material and the spiritual. Instead, Fréret’s fictional character, Thrasybule, expresses the view that the Church uses ideas of

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4 Yvon, ‘Âme’, *Encyclopédie*, 1, 107.
7 Boulainvilliers’ *Essai de métaphysique* was published for the first time in *Réfutation des erreurs de Benoît de Spinoza* (Brussels: Foppens, 1731).
9 This text is dated to 1720-25 by Mori and Mothu and circulated as a manuscript before d’Holbach arranged the first printed publication in 1765 (by Rey in Holland). The parallels with d’Holbach’s own thinking are manifest throughout. See *Philosophes sans Dieu*, ed. by Mori and Mothu, pp. 62-185.
immortality and the impending afterlife and judgment as a way of controlling
people.\textsuperscript{11} Thrasybule continues to reassure Leucippe that only the ‘esprits vraiment
raisonnables’ are clever enough to admit that knowledge of the ‘soul’ after death is
unattainable to humans: ‘Vous êtes trop sensée, ma chère Leucippe, pour vous laisser
effrayer par les vains fantômes de l’imagination des poètes, qui n’ont de réalité que
dans l’esprit d’une populace timide et superstitieuse.’\textsuperscript{12} Similar contempt for the
Church and its exploitation of a superstitious people is echoed in the work of later
materialists.

Let us now consider how Diderot, La Mettrie, Helvétius and d’Holbach
conceived of the issue. We will divide this analysis into four sections, analysing the
writings of the four thinkers concurrently.\textsuperscript{13} Building on the argument that the ‘soul’,
a term employed to mean the workings of the mind (ideas, identity, consciousness,
judgment, etc.), is reducible to the workings of matter (the properties of which
include sensitivity/thought, and energy/movement), materialists refused to accept
this ‘soul’ could be immortal. The first section of our analysis will address the
‘unknowability’ of an afterlife, the point raised by Fréret, essentially critiquing the
lack of a rational foundation to any such teaching. Secondly, we will examine the
scientific ideas put forward by materialists to deny the immortality of the soul.
Thirdly, we will consider the recurrent criticism of the anthropogenic origins of the
belief – that is, that it is in some way natural to hope for immortality as this arises
from human instincts of self-preservation, or \textit{amour de soi}.\textsuperscript{14} The fourth section,
linked to the third, will consider criticism of the Church’s social and political
control, achieved through manipulation of this natural hope for immortality. The
political critique of religious institutions is common to the materialist \textit{philosophes}.

\textsuperscript{11} Fréret, \textit{Lettre}, p. 183.
\textsuperscript{12} Fréret, \textit{Lettre}, p. 185.
\textsuperscript{13} Criticisms concerning the immortality of the soul often overlap in some way, as they depend on the
belief in a material soul (or the absence of any soul).
\textsuperscript{14} Rousseau distinguishes between \textit{amour de soi} as the primitive survival instinct and \textit{amour propre},
which is a malign self-regard dependent on the opinion of others, and thus a side-effect of
socialization.
Scepticism as unbelief

For La Mettrie, philosophy is deemed superior to theology because it admits the unknowability of an afterlife and the nature of the ‘soul’ after death, echoing Fréret’s *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*. This point is made in the very first paragraph of *L’Histoire naturelle de l’âme* (1745): ‘L’essence de l’Ame de l’homme et des animaux est, et sera toujours aussi inconnuë que l’essence de la matière et des corps.’\(^{15}\) Subsequently, section eight of La Mettrie’s *Abrégé des systèmes*, a work included in his 1751 *Œuvres philosophiques*, widely available in Germany, is devoted to a discussion of philosophers’ attitudes to the question of immortality. Here, La Mettrie discusses the immortality of the soul, condemning previous philosophers for their claims which overstep their evidence: ‘Si nous n’avons pas de preuves philosophiques de l’immortalité de l’Ame, ce n’est certainement pas que nous ne soyons pas bien aises qu’elles nous manquent.’\(^{16}\) Indeed, in discussion of Boureau-Deslandes (1689-1757), La Mettrie attacks all those who have accepted Descartes’ arguments as to the immortality of the soul:

> si M. Deslandes eût aussi solidement réfléchi qu’il a coutume de faire, il n’eût pas avancé témérairement que Descartes est *le premier qui ait bien éclairci les preuves de ce dogme; qui ait bien fait distinguer l’âme du corps, les substances spirituelles de celles qui ne le sont pas; il ne s’en serait pas fié aux quatre propositions qu’il rapporte et qui loin de rien éclaircir, sont aussi obscures que la question même […] Il est évident par-là que Descartes n’a parlé de l’âme que parce qu’il était forcé d’en parler.’\(^{17}\)

La Mettrie, whilst stating that theories of immortality are without basis, actually defendes Descartes by reading between the lines, declaring that Descartes’ strategy was but ‘une ruse de style, pour faire avaler aux théologiens un poison caché.’\(^{18}\)

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\(^{15}\) La Mettrie, *L’Histoire naturelle de l’âme*, *OP*, I, 125.

\(^{16}\) La Mettrie, *Abrégé des systèmes*, *OP*, I, 269-70.

\(^{17}\) La Mettrie, *Abrégé des systèmes*, *OP*, I, 252. La Mettrie here quotes from Boureau-Deslandes’ *Histoire critique de la philosophie* of 1741.

\(^{18}\) La Mettrie, *L’Homme machine*, *OP*, I, 111.
In the *Histoire naturelle de l’âme*, the French doctor uses a sleight of hand himself by claiming that his philosophy is compatible with religious dogma, whilst in fact showing the opposite. La Mettrie discusses the way in which ‘la foi’ (a term he uses to avoid naming Christianity or the Church) has (mis)used the terms derived from philosophy to claim ‘que l’Ame est une substance active et sensible, et que toute substance est par soi même impérisssable’, thus asking: ‘ne semble-t-il pas naturel que la foi ait prononcé en conséquence que l’Ame est immortelle?’.

If there was any doubt as to La Mettrie’s true convictions, he suggests his position to be in opposition to ‘la foi’:

> enfin puisque les Théologiens ont une Ame si supérieure à celle des Philosophes, qu’ils nous disent et nous fassent imaginer, s’ils peuvent, ce qu’ils conçoivent si bien, l’essence de l’Ame, et son état après la mort. Car non seulement la saine et raisonnable Philosophie avoué franchement qu’elle ne connoît pas cet être incomparable qu’on décore du beau nom d’Ame […] mais elle a toujours blâmé les Philosophes qui ont osé affirmer quelque chose de positif sur l’essence de l’Ame.

The use of mockery here is designed to ridicule theology and declare philosophy to be superior. It is important to note that the review of the *Histoire naturelle de l’âme* in the *GGA* told readers that La Mettrie rejected the soul’s supposed immortality: ‘Die wahre Absicht des Verfassers […] ist zu zeigen, daß die Seele materiel und folglich sterblich sey, und daß so gar diese Meinung von allen grossen Leuten allemahl angenommen, der irrige Begriff aber, daß ein Geist seyn könne, ein blosses Wortspiel und ein Mißverständ sey.’

Thus though he may have tried to disguise certain views, German readers were not unaware of his tactics.

Diderot concurs with La Mettrie on this theme of ‘unknowability’, particularly in the *Lettre sur les Aveugles* (1749), which, through the character of Saunderson, expresses doubt about the existence of God:

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20 Ibid.
21 ‘Paris’, *GGA* (1747), 413.
Un phénomène est-il, à notre avis, au-dessus de l’homme? nous disons aussitôt: c’est l’ouvrage d’un Dieu; notre vanité ne se contente pas à moins. Ne pourrions-nous pas mettre dans nos discours un peu moins d’orgueil, et un peu plus de philosophie? […] Demandez à un Indien pourquoi le monde reste suspendu dans les airs, il vous répondra qu’il est porté sur le dos d’un éléphant et l’éléphant sur quoi l’appuiera-t-il? sur une tortue; et la tortue, qui la soutiendra?… Cet Indien vous fait pitié et l’on pourrait vous dire comme à lui: Monsieur Holmes mon ami, confessez d’abord votre ignorance, et faites-moi grâce de l’éléphant et de la tortue.\textsuperscript{22}

Saunderson’s argument concerning the unknowability of a supreme artisan, as expressed by Diderot, is extended in the final part of his dialogue, just before his death, to the notion of immortal souls:

Qu’est-ce que ce monde, monsieur Holmes? un composé sujet à des révolutions, qui toutes indiquent une tendance continuelle à la destruction; une succession rapide d’êtres qui s’entre-suivent, se poussent et disparaissent: une symétrie passagère; un ordre momentané […] Vous jugez de l’existence successive du monde, comme la mouche éphémère de la vôtre. Le monde est éternel pour vous, comme vous êtes éternel pour l’être qui ne vit qu’un instant: encore l’insecte est-il plus raisonnable que vous. Quelle suite prodigieuse de générations d’éphémères atteste votre éternité? quelle tradition immense?\textsuperscript{23}

The conclusion is clear: the teachings of the immortality of the soul are unfounded. For Diderot, the material which constitutes the body and the mind is destined for destruction, and so eternity is impossible for organised forms. The fact that Saunderson dies just after dismissing the immortality of the soul to the priest demonstrates the provocative nature of Diderot’s views.

\textsuperscript{22} Diderot, \textit{Lettre sur les Aveugles}, \textit{DPV}, iv, 48.

\textsuperscript{23} Diderot, \textit{Lettre sur les Aveugles}, \textit{DPV}, iv, 52.
Scientific arguments against immortality of the soul

In *L’Histoire naturelle de l’âme*, La Mettrie presents, and seemingly subscribes to, the Aristotelian theory of three different types of soul: ‘végétative’, ‘sensitive’ and ‘raisonnable’. Whilst disingenuously claiming to adhere to religious teaching on the immaterial and immortal soul, he in fact presents all the faculties of the ‘soul’ (memory, imagination, passions, instinct, taste etc.) as material processes. La Mettrie also intimates that men and animals are so similar that the distinction of the ‘âme raisonnable’ is not as well established as some would believe, thereby subjecting the Cartesian notion to considerable doubt. La Mettrie rhetorically asks ‘[q]uelle différence y a-t-il donc entre notre faculté de discourir et celle des bêtes?’ before claiming there is almost none.24 The belief in the ‘âme raisonnable’ is reduced to nothing more than faith by La Mettrie in the title of chapter fourteen: ‘Que seule la foi peut fixer notre croyance sur la nature de l’Ame raisonnable.’25 The quality of this faith is undermined by the constant insistence on the use of empiricism, the primacy of the senses and examination of the body. La Mettrie’s materialism implicitly denies the immortality of the soul: ‘Aussi avons-nous souvent fait observer que toutes les opérations de l’Ame sont totalement arrêtées lorsque son sentiment est suspendu, comme dans toutes les maladies du cerveau.’26 The scientific experiments used by La Mettrie to demonstrate his theory of matter are now used to show that an immortal soul is impossible.

The quasi-distinction between animal and human souls is explicitly erased in the more radical *L’Homme machine*:

S’il est évident qu’elles [les opérations de l’âme] ne peuvent se faire sans intelligence, pourquoi la refuser à ces Animaux? Et si vous leur accordez une Ame, Fanatiques, vous êtes perdus; vous aurez beau dire que vous ne décidez point sur sa Nature, tandis que vous lui ôtez l’immortalité; qui ne voit que c’est une assertion gratuite? Qui ne voit

qu’elle doit être, ou mortelle, ou immortelle, comme la nôtre, dont elle doit subir le même sort.\textsuperscript{27}

He thus points out a further flaw in the Cartesian reasoning, which is, as he states here, arbitrary. Having pointed out the problems of the dualist versions, La Mettrie then claims that we cannot say that a being either completely disintegrates or takes a different form in an afterlife, because such eventualities are unknowable: ‘Ne disons point que toute Machine, ou tout Animal, périt tout-à-fait, ou prend une autre forme, après la mort; car nous n’en savons absolument rien.’\textsuperscript{28} This anti-dogmatic argument, which stems from the empiricism, to which, as we saw in the chapter on sensualism, La Mettrie adheres, does not survive long. His unequivocal atheism is expressed in section seventy-two of the \textit{Système d’Épicure}: ‘La mort est la fin de tout; après elle, je le répète, un abîme, un néant éternel; tout est dit, tout est fait.’\textsuperscript{29} This switch from the sceptical position to a very definite rejection of the immortality of the soul is a key feature of La Mettrie’s provocative writing.

\textbf{Anthropogenic origins of belief and clerical control}

Diderot had earlier written, in thought twenty-three of the \textit{Pensées Philosophiques} (1746): ‘Le déiste assure l’existence d’un Dieu, l’immortalité de l’âme et ses suites,’ in contradistinction to an atheist, who does not.\textsuperscript{30} Diderot brings us to the third part of our analysis when he discusses an acceptable side of the desire for immortality. In personal correspondence, Diderot presented a view of immortality which redefined the concept, stating that immortality can only be achieved on earth, in the memory of other men, conserved in human legacy:

\begin{quote}
Or, le sentiment de l’immortalité; le désir de s’illustrer chez la postérité, de faire l’admiratio et l’entretient des siècles à venir, d’obtenir après sa
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{27} La Mettrie, \textit{L’Homme machine}, \textit{OP}, I, 115.

\textsuperscript{28} La Mettrie, \textit{L’Homme machine}, \textit{OP}, I, 116.

\textsuperscript{29} La Mettrie, \textit{Système d’Épicure}, \textit{OP}, I, 377.

\textsuperscript{30} Diderot, \textit{Pensées Philosophiques}, in \textit{DPV}, II, 30. It is worth noting here that Voltaire wrote the following objection in the margins of his 1754 edition: ‘Beaucoup de deistes n’admettent point l’immortalité de l’âme.’ This was repeated in his 1777 edition of Diderot’s text, where he wrote: ‘Non, le deiste croit en dieu et ne croit pas pour cela l’âme immortelle, voire les saduceens.’ It is interesting to note here Voltaire’s private views vary from his public profession of the necessity of the soul’s immortality. \textit{OCV}, 138: \textit{Corpus des notes marginales. 3 Dale-Frisi}, ed, by Natalia Elaguina and others (2010), pp. 138-40.

\textbf{152}
mort les mêmes honneurs que nous rendons à ceux qui nous ont
précédés, de fournir une belle ligne à l’historien, d’inscrire aussi son
nom à côté de ceux que nous ne prononçons jamais sans verser une
larme, sans pousser un soupir, sans éprouver le regret, de nous assurer
les bénédictions que nous avons tant de plaisir à donner aux Sully, aux
Henri quatre, à tous les bienfaiteurs du genre humain, tend à émouvoir
le cœur, à enflammer l’esprit, à élever l’âme, à mettre en jeu tout ce que
j’ai reçu d’énergie. 31

Diderot’s work emphasises the normality of human hope for immortality. He
considers that all humans have the vanity of hoping for immortality. 32 This very
human desire for legacy and esteem has been manipulated by religious leaders as a
means of social control.

La Mettrie too addresses this hope for immortality as the provenance of the
idea itself, finding the origins in ‘amour propre’ in the Abrégé des systèmes: ‘Nous
sommes tous naturellement portés à croire ce que nous souhaitons. L’amour-propre
trop humilié de se voir prêt d’être anéanti, se flatte, s’enchaîne de la riante
perspective d’un bonheur éternel.’ 33 The idea of an immortal soul is thus clearly
dismissed as a human invention, which has perhaps come about as a mechanism of
evolution, in that the belief in future happiness encourages survival. It is nevertheless
recognized as a natural idea.

D’Holbach also recognizes this legitimate idea of immortality: ‘En effet il est
une immortalité à laquelle le génie, les talens, les vertus sont en droit de prétendre;
ne blâmons, n’étouffions point une passion noble fondée sur notre nature, & dont la

31 Diderot, letter to Falconet, February 1766, Correspondance Diderot, vi, 59. This correspondence
was published as Le Pour et le contre, see DPV, xv: Le Pour et contre ou Lettres sur la postérité, ed.
by Roland Mortier and Raymond Trousson (1986).
32 If we are to interpret the Diderot character of the Entretien d’un philosophe avec la maréchale de
*** (1776) as representative of the author, Diderot himself does not believe in the immortality of his
own soul, because of his materialism: ‘Je n’ai pas cet espoir, parce que le désir ne m’en a point dérobé
la vanité; mais je ne l’ôte à personne. Si l’on peut croire qu’on verra, quand on n’aura plus d’yeux;
qu’on entendra, quand on n’aura plus d’oreilles; quand on n’aura plus de cœur, qu’on sentira, quand
on n’aura plus de sens; qu’on existera, quand on ne sera nulle part; qu’on sera quelque chose, sans
étendue et sans lieu, j’y consens.’ Diderot, Entretien d’un philosophe avec la Maréchale de ***,
Diderot, Œuvres complètes, ed. by Jean Assézat and Maurice Tourneux, 20 vols (Paris: Garnier,
1875-77), ii, 519.
33 La Mettrie, Abrégé des systèmes, OP, i, 270.
société recueille les fruits les plus avantageux.\textsuperscript{34} This aspect of striving for long-lasting reputation is seen in a positive light by d’Holbach, who considers that it as a terrestrial way of encouraging achievement: ‘Le désir de l’immortalité ou de vivre dans la mémoire des hommes fut toujours la passion des grandes ames; elle fut le mobile des actions de tous ceux qui ont joué un grand rôle sur la terre.’\textsuperscript{35} This anthropogenic origin of the belief in immortality (and immateriality/spirituality) is posited in the \textit{Système de la Nature}:

C’est de là que sont venues successivement les notions de \textit{spiritualité}, d’\textit{immatérialité}, d’\textit{immortalité} & tous les mots vagues que l’on inventa peu à peu à force de subtiliser, pour marquer les attributs de la substance inconnue que l’homme croyoit renfermer en lui-même, & qu’il jugeoit être le principe caché de ses actions visibles.\textsuperscript{36}

From this basis of the idea of an immortal soul being invented by humans, d’Holbach moves on to the main thrust of his argument: that such beliefs are a flawed basis of morality, and that they are exploited by the Church to impose control. This is the fourth point we will address.

**Socio-political control**

In the chapter ‘De l’immortalité de l’ame; du dogme de la vie future; des craintes de la mort’ of the \textit{Système de la Nature}, d’Holbach, who explicitly and forcefully asserts the materiality of the soul, ridicules the Ancients’ idea of an immortal soul:

malgré tant de preuves si convaincantes de la matérialité de l’ame ou de son identité avec le corps, des penseurs ont supposé que, quoique celui-ci fut périssable, son ame ne périssoit point; que cette portion de lui-même jouissoit du privilège spécial, d’être \textit{immortelle}.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{34} D’Holbach, \textit{Système}, t, 295-96.
\textsuperscript{35} D’Holbach, \textit{Système}, t, 296.
\textsuperscript{36} D’Holbach, \textit{Système}, t, 78.
\textsuperscript{37} D’Holbach, \textit{Système}, t, 258.
For d’Holbach, it is society which has created an inordinate fear of death, and then exploited this fear: ‘Toutes les institutions humaines, toutes nos opinions conspirent à augmenter nos craintes & à rendre nos idées de la mort plus terribles & plus révoltantes.’ This exploitation of superstitions is presented as inhumane in that it increases human suffering, and also ineffective, in that it fails to control human behaviour or instil virtue:

Tels sont les objets affligeants dont la religion occupe ses malheureux & crédules sectateurs. Telles sont les craintes que les Tyrans de la pensée des hommes nous montrent comme salutaires: malgré le peu d’effet qu’elles produisent sur la conduite de la plupart de ceux qui s’en disent, ou s’en croient persuadés, on voudroit faire passer ces notions pour la digue la plus forte que l’on puisse opposer aux déréglemens des hommes.

Religion is then claimed to be the cause of immoral behaviour because it turns reward into the central motivation for virtuous behaviour, which, following Bayle, negates any virtue, as virtue must be selfless. Indeed, d’Holbach goes further still, and makes the Church the institution which sanctions crime:

Nous répondrons donc que la religion, dans le fait, accorde le ciel aux méchants; elle y place souvent les plus inutiles & les plus méchants des hommes. Elle aiguise, comme on vient de le voir, les passions des méchants en légitimant des crimes que sans elle ils craingroient de commettre, ou pour lesquels ils auroient de la honte et des remords. Enfin les ministres de la religion fournissent aux plus méchants des hommes des moyens de détourner la foudre de dessus leurs têtes, & de parvenir à la félicité éternelle.

In other words, d’Holbach sees the church, and the system of morality built on its teachings, as facilitating criminal behaviour in that forgiveness prior to death can

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38 D’Holbach, Système, t. 269.
39 D’Holbach, Système, t. 270.
remedy all these problems. This militant attack on the whole system of Christian morality was shared by the other materialists, if expressed in less virulent terms.

The final sentence of La Mettrie’s *Abrégé des systèmes* emphatically spells out the importance of combating the idea of an immortal soul: ‘l’immortalité de l’Ame. Aujourd’hui, c’est un Dogme essentiel à la Religion; autrefois c’étoit une Question purement philosophique, comme le Christianisme n’étoit qu’une secte.’

By implication, the fact that the Christian Church has become so dominant in Europe means that pernicious ideas of an afterlife have become too widespread to ignore. La Mettrie is thus also proposing that we have to refute the idea of the soul’s immortality on the grounds that this will lead to a more coherent system of morality, where actions have clear consequences.

In summary, French materialists argued that if the ‘soul’ is material (if we can indeed say that such a thing exists at all), then upon death, the ‘soul’ necessarily ceases to exist, as the mind’s organisation disintegrates upon death. Immortality is shown to be something which cannot be known, and so a sceptical position rules out such a premise. Materialists posited an anthropomorphic origin to the ideas of immortal souls, yet decried the exploitation of such ideas by the institutions of organised religion. Before considering how these French materialist rejections of the immortality of the soul were influential in Germany, it is worth noting that these were extreme views within the French Enlightenment, not shared by all *philosophes*. Maupertuis, for example, states that: ‘Il suffit que nous sachions que nous avons une ame indivisible, immortelle, entièrement distincte du corps, & capable de mériter des peines ou des récompenses éternelles.’ Voltaire’s position, however, is not consistent enough on this question to consider here. Indeed, at his most consistent, Voltaire seems to make a dogmatic claim that because no proof of immortality is possible, religion must be used to control society, and the only way to regulate behaviour is to institute a system of rewards and punishments in the afterlife. He attempts no proof of the immortal soul, for he knows none is possible, yet sees it as prudent to posit that the soul is immortal in order to control society. Voltaire was best-known for his position that immortality should be taught on utilitarian grounds:

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‘l’homme a toujours eu besoin d’un frein.’ His opposition to French materialists allows us to isolate their influence in Germany, the context of which we will now consider.

Mainstream German philosophy and the immortality of the soul

Reimarus and Lessing

German theologians naturally defended the idea of the immortality of the soul, in keeping with the precepts of Christian teachings. Philosophers too, were committed to defending the position, often regardless of sometimes subversive, anticlerical stances. For example, both Reimarus and Lessing, generally considered to be Deists, wrote at length in defence of the idea of the immortality of the soul. We will here briefly consider these arguments whilst demonstrating that the writings of La Mettrie, and later the works of Helvétius and d’Holbach, formed part of the backdrop to these German texts by Reimarus and Lessing, thus modifying the contours of debate. Lessing, mocking Frenchified Berlin, explains that Mendelssohn’s non-freethinking, orthodox Phädon had been confiscated in Vienna, ‘weil er in Berlin gedruckt worden, und man sich nicht einbilden können, daß man in Berlin für die Unsterblichkeit der Seele schreibe.’ The considerable diffusion of French works in Berlin shaped its reputation as a freethinking enclave where the immortality of the soul is denied.

Reimarus’s *Abhandlungen von den vornehmsten Wahrheiten der natürlichen Religion* (1754), which set out to refute La Mettrie, Buffon, Maupertuis, Lucretius, and others, defends the concepts of God and immortality of the soul on the basis of natural religion (i.e. not revealed religion). Reimarus ostensibly developed natural religion as a means of defending Christianity without superstition. Reimarus, on the basis of a critical study of the Old Testament as a historical document, rather than a


\textsuperscript{44} On Reimarus, see the recent *Between Philology and Radical Enlightenment: Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768)*, ed. by Martin Mulsow (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

\textsuperscript{45} Lessing, letter to Nicolai, 25 August 1769, *Werke und Briefe*, XI, 622-23.
work of revelation, claims that teaching on immortal souls is absent from the Old Testament. In part ten, ‘Von der Seelen Unsterblichkeit, und den Vortheilen der Religion,’ Reimarus takes aim at La Mettrie in sub-section eighteen. The timing of the work, written in the years immediately following the publication and furore surrounding La Mettrie’s texts, shows the strength of reaction in Germany to La Mettrie’s views on the soul.

La Mettrie’s ideas are outlined relatively objectively by Reimarus, who refuses to conform to the dominant narrative of La Mettrie as a perverse and despicable man. Reimarus states that ‘Er [La Mettrie] mag wohl in der That für sich kein so böses Herz gehabt haben.’ This defence does, however, contain some distortion of La Mettrie’s ideas and some obvious disdain, talking of ‘Schanldthaten’, the ‘betrübten und fürchterlichen Gedanken,’ and dismissing La Mettrie’s overall project as atheism (and therefore inadmissible regardless of the insights provided): ‘Aber zum Unglück wollte er ein allgemeines Lehrgebäude der thätigen Atheisterey machen.’ This stance in relation to La Mettrie shows Reimarus strategically positioning himself against radicalism, only in order to underline the moderation of his own unorthodoxy. In this way, La Mettrie functions as a shield for Reimarus, who draws attention to the Frenchman’s (more extreme) views for his own purposes.

Reimarus’s quotations of La Mettrie are translated into German by the author, and then given in the French original along with the source in footnotes, from which we can see that Reimarus read several different works by La Mettrie, including the Traité de la vie heureuse. The general outline of the Frenchman’s ideas is, as stated, fair:

La Mettrie befleißigt sich, lauter Unvollkommenheit und Unordnung in der Welt zu finden. Da ist dieses und jenes unnütze, häßlich, schädlich: das eine sollte so, das andere nicht so seyn oder gehen. Selbst seine Abgöttinn, die Natur, ist blind und unverständlich, alt und kraftlos, alles

47 Reimarus, Wahrheiten, p. 673.
48 Ibid.
wird durch ein wüstes Ungefähr regieret. Er selbst hat keine Seele, sondern ist eine bloße zerbrechliche Maschine, gleichwie die Thiere sind; und hat nach diesem kurzen Leben nichts weiter zu hoffen.\textsuperscript{49}

It is this denial of an afterlife and immortality that causes Reimarus problems, however, and constitutes the sole reason why he quotes La Mettrie. He summarises the chaos that reigns in the universe, as seen by La Mettrie, and the lack of hope for an afterlife:

Er düncket sich in diesen wüsten Raum der Welt durch ein blindes Ungefähr oder Schicksal, ohne Endzweck, hinein geworfen zu seyn, da er mit seiner Schwäche tausenderley Zufällen bloß gestellt ist, da ihn keine obere Macht schützet, kein gütiger Rathschluß zu einer gewünschten Glückseligkeit bestimmt hat: sich selbst allein gelassen, mit sich selbst und der Natur übel zufrieden, ohne Zuversicht und Hoffnung des Zukünftigen.\textsuperscript{50}

Despite Reimarus’s findings that the Old Testament provides no basis for such belief, his deist convictions and system of natural religion insist upon the immortality of the soul. Reimarus argued that though the essential components of true religion (the existence of a divine Creator and the immortality of the soul) were not present in the Old Testament, they could be arrived at through reason. The Hamburg professor uses a passage from the \textit{Abregé des Systèmes}, where La Mettrie admits to his own fear of death and his fear of ceasing to be, in order to attempt to show that:

Dieses innere Gefühl der Gemüthsunruhe, welches der Mann bey aller seiner Wollust aufrichtig an den Tag legt, giebt einen unläugbaren Beweis, wie sehr und oft die Lust bey solchen Leuten vergället und gestört werde, welche sich die Hoffnung einen ferneren Lebens aufschneiden.\textsuperscript{51}

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\textsuperscript{49} Reimarus, \textit{Wahrheiten}, p. 672. \\
\textsuperscript{50} Reimarus, \textit{Wahrheiten}, p. 673. \\
\textsuperscript{51} Reimarus, \textit{Wahrheiten}, p. 676.
\end{flushright}
These fears are thus held up to be the proof that religion is necessary: ‘Das ist die nothwendige Folge eines Lehrgebäudes, welches alle Religion ausschließt: weil diese allein eine Versicherung geben kann, daß wir zur Unsterblichkeit von unserm Schöpfer bestimmt sind.’

Reimarus argues that religion is necessary for a belief in immortality, rejecting what he had read in La Mettrie.

Reimarus’s *Fragmente* were published posthumously by Lessing, and in many ways Lessing’s thought on the subject of the immortality of the soul owes much to his mentor. He repeats the notion that the Old Testament lacks consistent teachings of immortal souls and punishment and reward in the afterlife. In *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* (1778), this teaching constitutes the second stage of humanity’s progress, with the coming of Christ: ‘Und so ward Christus der erste zuverlässige, praktische Lehrer der Unsterblichkeit der Seele.’ This practical teaching echoes the utilitarian proof which Reimarus had proposed in answer to La Mettrie. As we saw in the bibliographical chapter, Lessing was an early critic of La Mettrie’s and an avid consumer of other French writings, notably recommending Helvétius’s *De l’esprit* to Mendelssohn, and reading Bayle and Diderot.

Despite the fact that mainstream German philosophy clearly reacted to La Mettrie, even its more subversive writers like Reimarus and Lessing were unwilling to follow the materialists in their denial of the immortality of the soul. The culmination of this defence of the immortality of the soul was Mendelssohn’s immensely popular *Phädon, oder die Unsterblichkeit der Seele* (1767), which was in its fifth edition by 1780.

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52 Ibid.
53 See also Heinrich Kofink, *Lessings Anschauungen über die Unsterblichkeit und Seelenwanderung* (Strasbourg: K.J. Trübner, 1912).

Moses Mendelssohn

The ‘German Socrates’ modelled his three discourses on Plato’s *Phaedo*, arguing that human self-consciousness and continuous identity shows that there is a unified self which cannot be a composite of matter, regardless of the capacity of matter to think. It is our sense of continuous identity which, for Mendelssohn, proves that the soul is a simple and immortal thing distinct from the material body. There are several references to the concept of the body, particularly for animals, as a ‘Maschine’, which could be construed as the terminology of La Mettrie and his *L'Homme machine*. Indeed, in *Morgenstunden*, Mendelssohn directly references the thought of La Mettrie, actually using the Frenchman in a positive light to counter the idea of final causes.  

It is the *Phädon*, however, which provides examples of the prevalent views on immortality of the soul in German discourse in the 1770s. Mendelssohn argues that the doctrine of two substances, material body and immaterial soul, means the soul is immortal: ‘Ist die Seele beym Leben etwas, das der Allmächtige außer dem Körper und seiner Bildung geschaffen und mit ihm verbunden hat: so hat es seine Richtigkeit, daß die Seele auch nach dem Tode fortdauren und Vorstellungen haben müsse.’  

Humans would have no memory, reason or consciousness, according to Mendelssohn, were it not for a soul made of a simple, immaterial substance, which is separate from the body. We would instead find ourselves having ‘[e]in dunkles Gefühl ohne Bewuβtsein, ohne Erinnerung, ein vernunfloszer Zustand, in welchem wir uns des Vergangenen nicht erinnern, und dessen wir uns auch in Zukunft nie wieder besinnen.’ Mendelssohn argues that a composite soul is impossible. The parts, even if they were composed of thinking matter, would not be able to bring about ideas in continuity because of the impossibility of repeating and maintaining stable concepts and consciousness:

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finden wir nicht in unserer Seele eine fast unendliche Menge von Begriffen, Erkenntnissen, Neigungen, Leidenschaften, die uns unaufhörlich beschäftigen? […] Wo wären diese in den Theilen anzutreffen? Entweder zerstreut, einige in diesem, andere in jenem, ohne jemals wiederholt zu werden […] denn alle Vorstellungen und Neigungen unseres Geistes sind so innerlich verknüpft und vereinigt, daß sie nothwendig auch irgendwo unzertrennt zugegen müssen […] ja wir würden nicht einmal die Person seyn, die wir vor einem Augenblick gewesen, wenn unsere Begriffe unter vielen vertheilet und nicht irgend wo zusammen in ihrer genauesten Verbindung anzutreffen wären.\textsuperscript{59}

Mendelssohn concludes explicitly that the soul is a simple, single substance, and immortal: ‘Es giebt also in unserm Körper wenigstens eine, einzige Substanz, die nicht ausgedehnt, nicht zusammengesetzt, sondern einfach ist, eine Vorstellungskraft hat, und alle unsere Begriffe, Begierden und Neigungen in sich vereiniget.’\textsuperscript{60}

We thus find, though not explicitly, a refutation of the views of Helvétius, La Mettrie and Diderot on immortality, with which Mendelssohn was familiar.\textsuperscript{61} Mendelssohn’s text had enough impact to draw a reaction from Kant in his second edition of the \textit{Kritik der reinen Vernunft}.\textsuperscript{62} Kant criticised the way Mendelssohn had argued for the simplicity of the soul and its immortality. Other German thinkers also focussed their energies against Mendelssohn, and in so doing, would demonstrate their engagement with the radical ideas of d’Holbach, La Mettrie, and Helvétius. They use Mendelssohn’s text as the occasion to look again at these French writers and to show the superiority of the latter’s arguments to those of Mendelssohn.

\textsuperscript{59} Mendelssohn, \textit{Jubiläumsausgabe}, III.I, 96.
\textsuperscript{60} Mendelssohn, \textit{Jubiläumsausgabe}, III.I, 97.
\textsuperscript{61} Along with works by Diderot’s 1772 \textit{Œuvres philosophiqes et dramatiques} and d’Holbach’s \textit{Système de la Nature}, Mendelssohn’s personal library also contained La Mettrie’s \textit{Histoire naturelle de l’âme}. See \textit{Verzeichniss der auserlesenen Büchersammlung des seeligen Herrn Moses Mendelssohn}, pp. 26-36.
German materialists and the immortality of the soul

Knoblauch

Knoblauch took tentative steps to rehabilitate La Mettrie’s reputation in an article for Wekhrlin’s *Hyperboreische Briefe* in 1788. Questioning the premise of life after death, whereby it is believed that ‘die Menschen sterben – um wieder aufzuleben,’ Knoblauch, pretending to adopt the position of a Christian who is fortunate enough to accept such teaching, highlights philosophy as an alternative to faith: ‘Aber wäre ich nicht so glücklich, ein untrügliches Orakel über unsere Bestimmung zu verehren, so würde, weil ich ein Arzt bin, La Mettrie im Punkt der Seele mein Philosoph seyn.’ This tacit agreement with La Mettrie, thirty-seven years after the Frenchman’s death, indicates the genesis of Knoblauch’s thought. Moreover, it suggests the superiority of science and medicine in this domain. Knoblauch’s implied advocacy of La Mettrie’s rejection of belief in immortal souls is clarified as a position derived from observation and the science of matter:


Knoblauch, using dialogue, can thus suggest that immortality would be nonsense were one not convinced of it by scripture. If this were not the case, then perhaps La Mettrie’s position would be more reasonable. Knoblauch’s explicit meaning was not shared by Hißmann in his use of French materialists.

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63 [Knoblauch], ‘Wahrmund an Wißlieb – Ueber die Natur der Dinge’, *Hyperboreische Briefe*, 1 (1788), 131. The choice of the interlocutors’ names is telling.
64 [Knoblauch], ‘Wahrmund an Wißlieb’, p. 131. The ‘Wurm’ and insect parallel is perhaps a reference to La Mettrie’s use of Trembley’s findings of the regeneration of freshwater polyp. Importantly, Knoblauch also derives this position from agreement with materialist conceptions of matter as active and sensitive.
Hißmann

Hißmann, who, as we know, was a secret reader of La Mettrie, also read d’Holbach and Diderot, and their influence becomes manifest in his 1777 *Psychologische Versuche, ein Beitrag zur esoterischen Logik*, a book popular enough to merit a second edition in 1788. Hißmann attempts, weakly, to reconcile his statements about the materialist basis of his soul and its immortality: ‘Ich glaube an die Unsterblichkeit meiner Seele, und glaube zuversichtlich an ihre Materialität. Und wenn ich auch das erste nicht glauben sollte: so müste ich doch tugendhaft seyn; denn ich will glücklich seyn.’\(^{65}\) This surprising claim is perhaps best read – in Straussian fashion – as a disingenuous avowal of faith, given the qualification and the way he later modifies this belief into belief in the hope of immortality, much as Diderot does. Hißmann attacks the dubious basis on which the immortality of the soul is posited (its immateriality), yet he refuses to be drawn into a futile argument: ‘O man lasse ihnen ihre besseren Gründe der Hoffnung ihrer Unsterblichkeit, die gewiss nicht erschüttert wird, wenn der Philosoph an einem theologisch-dogmatischen Beweis zweifelt.’\(^{66}\) To lessen the impact of this unpalatable truth for theological readers, he quotes Bonnet as arguing that ‘die Seele [behält] die Hoffnung zur Unsterblichkeit.’\(^{67}\) Yet Hißmann selects Bonnet here to advance his materialism. He states that Bonnet is a pious man who argues that the soul would be immortal even if it were material. However, Hißmann is arguing that the soul is material, and that ideas of God and immortality are misplaced. He claims that ‘[d]ie mehresten Menschen bleiben immer Materialisten, wenn ihr Lehrer ihnen gleich in allen Lehrstunden von der Einfachheit der Seele predigt, weil sie sich eine solche Substanz, die ganz Negation ist, gar nicht denken können.’\(^{68}\) This is a rare example of a writer daring to give credence to claims of widespread materialism in Germany.

In the next stage of his argument, Hißmann reduces immortality of the soul to simply a reassuring notion, akin to the reassurance one gives children: ‘Gott wird meine Seele nimmermehr untergehen lassen, sie sey einfach oder zusammengesetzt. [...] *Der gleichen Vorstellungen beruhigen mich überzeugend*, und eröfnen mir die

\(^{65}\) Hißmann, *Psychologische*, p. 13 (my italics).
\(^{67}\) Ibid.
\(^{68}\) Ibid.
frohen, schönen Aussichten in die seligen Gefilde der Unsterblichkeit.' Hißmann here writes as if he believed such notions, but this is undermined by reference to such beliefs as mere ‘Vorstellungen’. There cannot be conclusive proof of immortality, but it is nonetheless reassuring to believe this ‘beruhigende Lehre von der Unsterblichkeit der Seele.’

Yet this does not mean that Hißmann accepts that such beliefs are positive, in their current form. Indeed, in his definition of virtue, Hißmann’s argument resembles the logic of d’Holbach and Bayle: ‘Tugend ist für mich liebenswürdig, ohne Rücksicht auf Lohn und Strafe [...] Hinsicht auf ewige Strafe oder Lohn fesselt und macht Sklaven.’ His Anleitung zur Kenntniss der auserlesenen Litteratur in allen Theilen der Philosophie (1790) develops this further. Having established that ‘Beweise für die Immaterialität sind, im Ganzen genommen, eben so schlecht, wie die Demonstrationen für die Unsterblichkeit,’ Hißmann again states: ‘Man kann Materialist seyn, und froh die Unsterblichkeit hoffen.’ Hißmann then crystallises the division between the motivation of a man and his actions on earth. This systematic denial of a link between religious convictions and the virtue of a person’s behaviour is a motif Hißmann has developed from this reading of d’Holbach: ‘Man kann diese Hofnung haben und dabey ein Bösewicht seyn. Man kann der rechtschaffenstes Weltbürger seyn, und mit der einbrechenden Nacht des Todes eine ewige Nacht erwarten.’ Hißmann, developing his materialist thought, does not hold the soul’s immortality to be philosophically defensible. Indeed, his argument that the idea inverts morality reflects his engagement with the French materialist works he lists in the Anleitung. He does evoke the idea of hope in immortality, as other materialists do.

69 Hißmann, Psychologische, pp. 255-56 (my italics).
70 Hißmann, Psychologische, p. 269.
71 Hißmann, Psychologische, p. 13.
72 Hißmann, Anleitung, p. 251.
73 Hißmann, Anleitung, p. 255 (my italics).
74 Ibid.
In his *Antiphädon*, a refutation of Mendelssohn’s *Phädon*, Spazier also talks of the hope of immortality as distinct from actual immortality.\(^7\) Knowingly addressing controversial subject matter, Spazier urges his reader to remain calm – evidently preparing to be accused of irreligion: ‘erschrecken Sie nicht, mein Freund!’\(^6\) The irreligious belief here is the denial of the soul’s immortality:

> Und in der Tat bin ich schon längst auf dem Wege gewesen zu glauben, daß der Glaube an eine ewige Fortdauer – so beseligend er auch in gewissen Lagen und Umständen für einen einzelnen Menschen sein kann – doch dem menschlichen Geschlecht überhaupt wirklich nicht den Nuzen verschaft hat, den man von ihm erwarten sollte; daß er vielmehr demselben in mancher Hinsicht schädlich gewesen ist.\(^7\)

Here, Spazier admits to the reassuring aspect of the notion (‘beseligend’), but makes the same argument as d’Holbach – that such a belief is in fact damaging to society: ‘Denn die Moralität hat nicht wenig darunter gelitten.’\(^7\)

> Just as in d’Holbach, religious belief is seen to facilitate and condone criminal behaviour:

> Dem Lasterhaften wurde das Laster darum weniger schrecklich, weil er seine Reue bis auf das Sterbebett verschieben und von einer fremden Verdienstlichkeit – die sich auf eine unabwehnbare Ewigkeit hin erstrecken soll und die ihn die Volksglaubenslehre, von manchen unverständigen Priestern erklärt, geruhig erwarten ließ – einen zuverlässigen Anteil an ewigem Freudegenüß dennoch fordern zu können wändete.\(^7\)

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\(^7\) Mendelssohn’s *Phädon* elicited a number of reactions. Along with Spazier’s *Antiphädon*, there was Phillip Eberlin, *Antiphädon über die Natur* (Mannheim, Frankenthal: n.pub., 1784). This text is more an exposition of Spinoza’s thought.

\(^6\) Spazier, *Antiphädon*, p. 46.

\(^7\) Spazier, *Antiphädon*, p. 47.

\(^7\) Ibid.

\(^7\) Spazier, *Antiphädon*, p. 47.
This argument, that belief in the afterlife is pernicious for life in society in the present, is a leitmotif of d’Holbach’s writing, which Spazier had read. There is at the very least a kinship of outlook. Spazier holds that the conviction that remorse and apology can wait until the deathbed prevents the proper functioning of society. He also posits that the element of reward in the system skews virtue and prevents more positive behaviour as people act in a good way only when they think they will be rewarded, and not for the sake of the good itself: ‘Der Mensch tat weniger Gutes darum, weil es an sich gut war, als vielmehr, weil er dafür einen ewigen Lohn berechnete.’

Spazier recycles d’Holbach’s recurrent theme of an afterlife being merely a distraction from the here and now: ‘Süße Hoffnungen schläfern ein; wer seinen Blick stets gen Himmel richtet, übersieht seine irdischen Verhältnisse, kann das nicht werden, was er seinem Beruf nach sein soll.’ That this is due to false belief in an immortal soul is made explicit: ‘Aber ist es recht, wenn man das Seinige nicht tut, daß man alsdann auf diese Welt schmält, der Gottheit Unvollkommenheiten zur Last legt, an denen man selbst schuld ist und, zur Schadlosaltung für sein Dasein, ihr eine Unsterblichkeit abtrotzt?’ Spazier thus establishes his position against the immortality of the soul on the grounds of its inefficiency in regulating behaviour. He then links this position to a more general denial of the immateriality of the soul. For as much as we can talk about the two as distinct problems, they are inextricably linked.

Spazier invokes La Mettrie on three occasions in his text. That Spazier names La Mettrie thirty-four years after the Frenchman’s death is evidence of a sustained, underground influence. It could also explain why Spazier takes aim at Albrecht von Haller, La Mettrie’s arch-nemesis prior to his death. Quoting Haller’s Von der Heiterkeit der Sterbenden, Spazier quotes an unnamed text by Johann Christlieb Kemme (1738-1815) which flatly refutes Haller’s findings: ‘Es ist falsch, daß die Seele dann noch heiter ist, wenn die körperlichen Kräfte ganz hin sind; denn die Erfahrung lehrt, daß, sobald die Kräfte des Gehirns schwinden, es auch mit der

80 Spazier, Antiphàdon, pp. 47-48.
81 Spazier, Antiphàdon, p. 50
82 Spazier, Antiphàdon, p. 50.
83 Spazier, Antiphàdon, pp. 92, 94, 136.
Munterkeit der Seele aus ist.” With a rhetorical flourish, Spazier then accuses Haller of preferring ‘lieber zum Unbegreiflichen übergehen als bei dem Natürlichen, das vor den Füßen lag, stehenbleiben.’

This case shows that Spazier not only read La Mettrie’s and others’ scientific materialist works, but that he also had the courage to endorse their refutations of the immortality of the soul. However, this was not the case with all Germans interested in French materialism. Johannes Müller, he of the positive review of Helvétius’s *De l’esprit* which was rejected by Nicolai and Wieland, wrote to his friend and Swiss publisher Johann Heinrich Füßli in 1772 to report that, though the soul may be material, he drew the line at admitting the soul to be mortal:


This shows us that the particular step of embracing both aspects of the materialist philosophy coming from France was still not common. Spazier was, however, not alone in using these French materialist ideas to attack Mendelssohn.

**Schulz**

Johann Heinrich Schulz used the writings of d’Holbach as a support to argue against Mendelssohn, specifically on the question of the immortality of the soul. Working as a priest in Gielsdorf, near Berlin, he had gained renown for his refusal to wear a wig when preaching in the pulpit. Schulz did of course, as previously mentioned, fall

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84 Spazier, *Antiphädon*, p. 94.
85 Spazier, *Antiphädon*, p. 95.
87 Saine, p. 285.
foul of the stricter censorship laws introduced in Prussia in 1788 by Wöllner’s Edict on Religion. This propensity for controversy is evident across his writings.

Of his various works, the *Philosophische Betrachtung über Theologie und Religion überhaupt und über die jüdische insonderheit* (1784) deals most extensively with the immortality of the soul. As with the notion of motion and matter which we discussed in the previous chapter, Schulz is an apologist for d’Holbach’s *Système de la Nature*, and also defends its critique of the immortality of the soul. The author of the *Système de la Nature* is described as ‘ein so scharfsinniger Mann.’ Yet Schulz takes care not to let his own position be mistaken for that of the anonymous author of the scandalous French text, troublingly claiming ‘daß ich die Fortdauer des Menschen keineswegs leugne.’ A closer reading reveals that Schulz, like Diderot and d’Holbach, retains the concept of an afterlife as mere hope, and even a source of solace: ‘O diese Hoffnung und gewisse Erwartung ist mir vielmehr die seelisgste Quelle des Trostes und der Freude.’ However, Schulz is also keen to separate this hope from religion, in contradistinction to Mendelssohn’s reasoning: ‘Aber diese Hoffnung beruht bey mir nicht auf Gründe der Religion; den hier wäre sie auf den elendesten Sand gebauet!’

Schulz uses Mendelssohn’s defence as a hook upon which he can hang the ideas of the *Système de la Nature* and its refutation of the doctrine of the immortal soul, just as Spazier also uses Mendelssohn’s *Phädon* a year later. Indeed, Schulz explicitly refutes Mendelssohn’s attack on atheists by distinguishing atheism from the denial of the immortality of the soul and declaring that the belief in an afterlife of reward and punishment, posited on the immortal soul, is a useless regulator of human behaviour.

Prior to his refutation of Mendelssohn, Schulz takes the precaution of again (disingenuously) declaring his own belief in immortal souls: ‘Genug, daß ich mich für die gewisse Erwartung der Fortdauer des Menschen nach dem Tode, ausdrücklich

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89 Schulz, *Philosophische*, p. 185.
Mendelssohn had written that ‘Menschenliebe’ without belief in an afterlife would be a weakness, conflating atheism with egoism and anti-social behaviour. Schulz refutes this view, arguing that no such thing as atheism truly exists, as this would deny the Principle of Sufficient Reason (Satz vom zureichenden Grund), which is very different to a ‘Gottheits-Phantome’. Secondly, he argues that ‘[e]s kann aber auch Religionsbekenner geben, die zugleich, neben ihrer Religion, die Hoffnung der Unsterblichkeit verwerfen!’ So Schulz strategically separates atheism from not believing in the immortality of the soul, and so uses the imported French text to argue against a whole tradition of German rationalism, which since Reimarus has argued that the existence of the divine, benevolent Creator and a belief in the immortality of the soul can be derived independently of scripture.

The translation of the *Système de la Nature* in 1783 is also the occasion for Schulz to promote the work:

Wir wollen z.B. das *System der Natur* des Herrn von Mirabaud hierüber mit zweyen Worten prüfen, und dis um so viel lieber; weil da gedachtes System nunmehro ins teutsche, und noch dazu in so vortreflichem Style übersetzt ist; mithin zu vermuthen steht, daß es jetzt noch weit mehrere Leser, als zuvor, finden werde.

This excuse for a closer reading of d’Holbach aims to shape future reading of the translated text in a positive way, and win support for d’Holbach’s system.

Schulz introduces his readers to some of d’Holbach’s arguments which undermine belief in the immortality of the soul, or at least modify it to such an extent that it becomes irrelevant. There are places where ‘Mirabaud’ has seemingly suggested that an immortal soul is nonsense: ‘Gedachter Herr von Mirabaud scheint es in manchen Stellen, und insonderheit im dreyzehnten Hauptstück des ersten Theils seines Buchs, ausdrücklich darauf angelegt zu haben, den Ungrund einer Hoffnung

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94 Ibid.
95 Schulz, *Philosophische*, p. 188.
However, Schulz argues that this is counterbalanced by a close reading which shows that d’Holbach’s objection to hope in immortal souls: ‘die allerleerste und nüchternste Declamation von der Welt sey.’ Limiting himself to three sections of *Système de la Nature* (of the more than twenty possibilities he claims to be able to provide), Schulz quotes from the fifth section of the translated *Système de la Nature*, a section about order: ‘das, was den Menschen zu dem Tode bringt, ist für ihn die gröste aller Unordnungen. Indessen ist der Tod für ihn nichts, als ein Uebergang zu einer neuen Art von Existenz: er ist in der Ordnung der Natur!’ Schulz then offers an interpretation, disguising the French text’s true ramifications. Certainly, d’Holbach’s text is translated faithfully, but this passage from one state to another is the passage of the matter of the brain (and body) from organised to decomposed matter, with the atoms remaining, yet in dispersed, unorganised form – nothing ‘human’ remains. Yet in Schulz’s presentation, d’Holbach’s ‘Uebergang’ shows that immortality of the soul is not denied outright by the author, because matter is not destroyed.

A second section, about ‘man’, is quoted at length too, to show that the laws of nature account for the fact that humans come to life and then die:

Alle verschiedenen Zustände, Revolutionen, und Veränderungen werden bey der menschlichen Maschiene durch eben dieselben Geseze geordnet, welche die Natur allen Wesen vorschreibt, die sie gebohren werden läßt, [...] und die sie endlich zerstört und auflößt, indem sie die Form derselben abändert.

This declaration of the absolute and unalterable laws of nature (replacing any divinity) is suggested by Schulz to be in keeping with teachings of the immortality of the soul, in that nature becomes immortal. This quotation is cross-referenced with section thirteen of the *Système*, which is also quoted: ‘Die Natur hat uns, ohne uns um Rath zu fragen, auf einige Zeit in die Reihe der organischen Geschöpfe gestellet; und wird uns, ohne unsere Einwilligung, wieder aus derselben abtreten lassen; um

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96 Schulz, *Philosophische*, p. 188. Note Schulz gives a precise reference for interested readers.
97 Ibid.
irgend eine andere Stelle einzunehmen!'.

This continuity of nature is seen by Schulz to be akin to accepting some kind of system of afterlife, however dissimilar to Christian teachings.

Schulz thus asserts that contrary to what is widely claimed, the *Système de la Nature*, which as we have seen was decried and vilified (but also widely read), does not claim to refute the idea of the immortality of the soul *per se*, but that its author rejects certain manifestations of this idea, arguing ‘daß er blos die besondere Lehre von der Auferstehung und Unsterblichkeit des Menschen bestreite, welche man auf die falschen Begriffe, von einer immateriellen Seele, und von ihrer Verbindung mit einem materiellen Körper gebaut hat!’. This rather staggering claim, that the materialism of the *Système de la Nature* is simply a refutation of one particular kind of immortality of the soul which is posited on false terminology, betrays Schulz’s fundamental agreement with d’Holbach. The *Système de la Nature* makes a systematic attack on all aspects of religious belief; it does not simply cast a hint of doubt on one aspect of Christian belief. That Schulz goes to such lengths to offer his endorsement of the text illustrates his own convictions. These convictions were also evident in his preaching, some of which he published, including the anonymous *Predigt über die falsche Lehre von den ewigen Höllenstrafen* (1784).

Schulz’s works were not without impact in Germany. Not only was he prosecuted after the 1788 censorship acts; part one of his *Versuch einer Anleitung zur Sittenlehre für alle Menschen, ohne Unterschied der Religion, nebst einem Anhang von den Todesstrafen* (1783) was reviewed by Immanuel Kant. Kant saw that Schulz had applied the concept of vital force to all animate beings and dispensed with the notion of the soul. What Kant most took umbrage at, however, was the fatalism which he perceived Schulz to be endorsing. This shows that the enthusiasm

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100 Schulz, *Philosophische*, p. 190.
102 This anonymity was partial, given the title page says it is by the author of the *Anleitung zur Sittenlehre*, and he writes openly about his activity as a preacher. The text states: ‘Die ganze Hoffnung der Seeligkeit ist und bleibt denn, nach jener Lehre, ein Traum.’ [Schulz], *Predigt über die falsche Lehre von den ewigen Höllenstrafen* (Berlin: n.pub., 1784), p. 37. The only intertext here is the Bible.
103 Parts one and two appeared in 1783 (Berlin: Stahlbaum). Kant’s review of part one appeared in the Königsberg journal *Räsonierendes Bücherverzeichnis*. Parts three and four only appeared in 1790. See Kant, *Practical*, pp. 3-10.
for French materialism on the margins of the German philosophical field had an impact on the mainstream, canonical figures. Schulz’s *Versuch* was also reviewed by Hißmann in the *Göttingische Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen*. Indeed, Schulz even sent the book to Hißmann. This is evidence of the constellation of interest and support for materialist ideas in Germany.

Schulz later claimed that all those who have declared themselves as atheists have been virtuous upstanding citizens, and have very good moral systems, regardless of a lack of religion: ‘alle bekanntgewordenen Atheisten [sind] zugleich als die ernstlichsten und eifrigsten Moralisten aufgetreten!’ As we will see in the next chapter, Schulz, influenced as he was by the French materialists, further elucidates this separation of morality and politics from religion and propounds a system of secular law in the style of d’Holbach and Helvétius. Schulz, in inserting the radicalism of the French text into the German context, is very much repositioning it in order to bring about social and political change within Germany.

**Provisional conclusion**

The German vision of *Aufklärung* as harmonising with religion is clearly evident in the writings of reputed German philosophers like Reimarus, Lessing and Mendelssohn. German philosophy, on the whole, tended to support belief in the immortality of the soul. French materialist ideas were a trigger for German philosophers to write defences of immortality, relying on substance dualism. Without the radicalism of La Mettrie and Helvétius, they would no doubt have been less inclined to mount such stringent defences of the dogma; it required sceptics and attacks on immortality in order for Reimarus, Lessing and Mendelssohn to broach the subject, and the French materialists were particularly useful for them to demonstrate their own ‘orthodoxy’. Thus the mainstream of German Enlightenment

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104 [Hißmann], review of [Schulz], *Versuch einer Anleitung zur Sittenlehre für alle Menschen*, in *GGA* (1783), 700-704.
105 Menk, p. 149.
rejected the radicalism of French materialists in this area where theory begins to influence morality.

The writings of more marginal figures, however, reveal many examples of a kinship of outlook. The works by Knoblauch, Hißmann, Spazier and Schulz, in different ways, use the writings of La Mettrie, Helvétius and d’Holbach in order to refute the arguments of their fellow German thinkers. There existed, then, a significant, though marginal, body of readers who were providing the French materialists with a receptive environment in German-speaking territories. They used the imported ideas as a support in their own refutations of prominent German texts, particularly Mendelssohn’s *Phädon*. In doing so, they attempted to rid the French texts of their subversive and dangerous reputation. However, all of them took ample care to stress their own (disingenuous) beliefs in the hope of the immortality of the soul – showing that such espousal was still a necessary precondition for entry to the public sphere, or a prudent insurance policy in any case. The immortality of the soul, with its implications of punishments and rewards in the afterlife, is connected with the effect of materialism on morality, the subject of the next chapter.
Chapter 5: Morality

Conventional understanding of morality

Our final theme in this study of the reception and impact of French materialism in Germany is that of morality. This topic represents the culmination and application of the scientific aspects of materialism discussed in preceding chapters. Less strictly concerned with the scientific processes and hypotheses with which the philosophes busied themselves, this next section seeks to show, firstly, the ways in which the conclusions of materialism impacted on their ethics, given their rejection of belief in immaterial, immortal souls, and secondly, how German thinkers variously rejected or embraced the secular morality which the materialist philosophes derived from their theories of matter.

The discussion of morality in the eighteenth century still relied on notions of vice and virtue. Bayle’s suggestion of the possibility of a virtuous atheist had done much to secularise the notion of virtue. However, the general understanding of virtue was still entangled with Catholic definitions, themselves developments of Platonic and Aristotelian notions which had enumerated four cardinal virtues: temperance, prudence, courage and justice. Since St. Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica*, written in the thirteenth century, Catholic thought had added three theological virtues (faith, hope and love) to the cardinal virtues.\(^1\) Materialists and secularists dispensed with these theological virtues, yet still had to redefine virtue as a concept, given its centrality to morality. The 1762 *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* defines ‘la morale’ as ‘la doctrine des mœurs,’\(^2\) whereas ‘la vertu’ is defined as ‘habitude, disposition habituelle de l’âme qui porte à faire le bien & à fuir le mal.’\(^3\) Thus the two terms are inextricably linked in that good moral systems have to recognize and promote virtue. Materialists redefined virtue to exclude faith, and to include motivation for socially acceptable behaviour.

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\(^1\) These theological virtues are required to accept grace from God and attain salvation through Jesus Christ. These are divisive issues between Catholicism and Protestantism.


\(^3\) ‘Vertu’, *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* (1762) <http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/>.
It is difficult to synthesize all the various moral systems of eighteenth-century *philosophes*. What we must instead do, is both to pick out the major unifying tendencies of our corpus of materialists and to analyse the major differences between them. What emerges is a trend towards secularization, and a strong critique of the corruption of morals which, it is claimed, results from absolutist influences and religious belief. Though there are notable differences between the materialist *philosophes*’ respective systems in regard to issues such as definitions of virtue and universality or relativity of moral codes; they all share the view that happiness is the aim of human life, that civil laws are the only way of regulating human behaviour, and that religion corrupts morality. This reflects the wider context of the secularization of different aspects of eighteenth-century life, where the pursuit of personal happiness became a fundamental of philosophy, resulting in a proliferation of treatises on the subject.  

But what of the German reception? What did German thinkers make of the anticlericalism of the French materialists? Were concepts such as *amour de soi*, the passions, and virtue also central to parallel debates in Germany? Was the concept of happiness prominent in German debates on morality? How did Germans who had read French materialist texts subsequently define virtue? How did German journals critique the French texts in terms of moral systems?

To answer these questions, the discussion of morality will be subsumed under four different themes as discretely as is possible for such an over-arching subject with many inter-related factors. First, we will consider the passions, or materialist psychology, that is to say the view that man acts in accordance with the desire to achieve happiness and avoid pain. This is the basis of all human behaviour for La Mettrie, Diderot, Helvétius and d’Holbach. This first theme examines the role of the biological, unconscious drives of human bodies. Dependent on the passions are notions such as *volupté* (sensual pleasure), *amour de soi* (and *amour-propre*), and the differing definitions of virtue. A second central notion is that of sociability, a divisive issue in eighteenth-century French philosophy. Indeed, the term apparently

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enters into usage during the period, with the *Encyclopédie* being the first lexicon to include the word ‘sociabilité’. 5 A third and consequent theme to be considered is the need for civil legislation and laws to shape human social interaction. Posited on the notion of virtue being defined by human values, this was an attempt to replace religious ideologies with a new system of law informed only by philosophy and a scientific understanding of man. This theme can be considered as the defence of secularisation and the new social science, understood in terms of education and legislation. This leads to a final over-arching theme, closely linked to secularisation: the criticism of theologically derived laws and customs, in short, an attack on the Church. This final element had two facets: it aimed to denounce the absurdities of organised religion and to rehabilitate and defend atheism. There was therefore, by implication, a political aspect to these French writings; indeed, this is the end to which all the arguments tend. Accordingly, the political function of the German reception of these ideas will be analysed. Before analysing this reception, we must first look at the writings of the French thinkers and the context of their writings on morality.

**French materialism and morality**

The *Encyclopédie* entry ‘Philosophe’, a reworked form of Du Marsais’s clandestine treatise on the subject (1743), states:

> Notre philosophe ne se croit pas en exil dans ce monde […] La société civile est, pour ainsi dire, une divinité pour lui sur la terre […] Le philosophe est donc un honnête homme qui agit en tout par raison, & qui joint à un esprit de réflexion & de justesse les mœurs & les qualités sociables.6

This tells us that the ‘secte philosophique’ – as the *philosophes*’ detractors labelled them – considered their role as socially engaged. Theories of mind and matter count

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for nothing if they do not necessitate changes in the way we live and govern human societies. That matter held the key to the senses, thought, energy and mortality was of great importance, for it defined humans and the universe, and the relationship between the two, without reference to a transcendental God. Indeed, the materialists believed that they alone held the key to the theories which would enable virtue to be achieved and morals improved.

In *Le Système d’Epicure*, La Mettrie insisted that ‘[l]e Matérialisme est l’antidote de la Misantropie.’ This means that by putting forward the conclusions of his study based upon ‘l’observation de l’homme’, La Mettrie wishes to encourage the creation of a society with laws aimed at maximising human happiness, not arbitrarily enacted laws supposedly communicated from a divine creator, which can be harmful for human beings, given their claimed ‘non-human’ origins. This very phrase of La Mettrie’s was quoted in an article by Knoblauch in *Das graue Ungeheuer*, thus demonstrating another case of cultural transfer. The phrase also implicitly responds to a wave of attacks from theologians, who consistently claimed that materialism, and the *philosophes* more generally, were destroying the moral fabric of society and engendering a noticeable decline in mores. As such, the link between the more obscure aspects of theoretical debates (about the nature of matter, the soul, the mind, and consciousness) and practical political and legal debates was crucial. The critics of materialism considered that it had made the transition into wider society. The French establishment and Church saw in materialism the source of moral decay; this is why La Mettrie eagerly defends materialism against charges of misanthropy.

The link between *philosophie* and morality in wider society was clearly established for certain thinkers. The accusation that materialist ideas were responsible for a degradation of behaviour was widespread and repeated by the authorities. The *premier avocat général de Paris*, Omer Joly de Fleury, expressed what many were thinking in the announcement which accompanied the 1759 decree suspending the sale and publication of *L’Encyclopédie*. He asked: ‘Peut-on se

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8 [Knoblauch], ‘No title’, *Das graue Ungeheuer*, xi (1787), 161.
dissimuler qu’il n’y ait un projet conçu, une société formée pour soutenir le matérialisme, pour détruire la religion, pour inspirer l’indépendance, et nourrir la corruption des mœurs?’. 10 The establishment crackdown thus envisaged materialism as a concerted project undertaken by a secretive group of people with the express intention of bringing about immoral behaviour through belief in materialism. A second such decree, condemning d’Holbach’s anonymous *Le Bon Sens* (1772) and Helvétius’s posthumous *De l’homme* (1773), reasoned along similar lines, with similar rhetoric. The judgment of the unknown author of the former book states: ‘Après ce système aussi absurde que criminel, qui excita, ces dernières années, la douleur de la religion & l’indignation des loix […] il a craint que ce poison affreux ne circulât pas assez rapidement dans les cœurs corrompus.’ 11 Helvétius was considered to be conflating virtue and the idea of personal interest. He was judged to be arguing that ‘[l]es vertus ne sont que des noms sans idées, & sans réalité, des modifications de l’intérêt personnel, seul principe, seul but de toutes les actions humaines.’ 12

There can hence be no doubt that the French authorities strongly rejected materialist morality, equating it with a charter for criminal and licentious behaviour. Abbé Dufour’s 1759 *L’Ame ou le sistème des matérialistes, soumis aux seules lumières de la raison* evokes the spectre of a rising tide of materialism: ‘le matérialisme ce monstre si souvent combattu, sans avoir été détruit, fait, aujourd’hui, des progrès trop rapides, pour n’en pas être alarmé.’ 13 The extent to which the notion of materialism was seen to be inherently bound up with corruption is illustrated by Dufour’s rhetorical question: ‘Quelles funestes conséquences ne tireroit-on pas, contre les bonnes mœurs s’il étoit vrai que tout fût matière dans l’Univers?’ 14 This makes clear the link that critics made between the scientific opinion of materialism and its immoral consequences. German critics were quick to apply similar

10 Omer Joly de Fleury, *Arrests de la cour de Parlement, portant condamnation de plusieurs Livres & autres Ouvrages imprimés: Extrait des registres de Parlement*. Du 23 janvier 1759, p. 2. The *Encyclopédie* had already been the subject of a banning order on 7 February 1752.
14 [Dufour], *L’Ame*, p. ix.
judgments, as we will see. But first, we must survey the French materialist conceptions of morality.

**Passions**

The passions, a philosophical concept which is no longer much discussed, are of particular importance in understanding materialist discourse on morality. Ancient philosophy had made much of the passions, and this heritage was crucial to moral discussions since the Renaissance. The early modern period provided various arguments about the relationship between the passions and politics. For example, Descartes’ final work, *Les Passions de l’âme* (1649), provides a mechanistic explanation of the passions as animal spirits which serve to move the pineal gland, leading him to argue that mastery of the passions by the intellect was necessary to attain a higher virtue. The *Encyclopédie* article ‘Passions’ perpetuates this orthodoxy: ‘En un mot, la passion nous fait abuser de tout. Les idées les plus distinctes deviennent confuses, obscures.’ The materialists represent a break with existing theories of the passions in that they deny that the passions required eradication or remedy. The passions were thus crucial to the establishment of a materialist morality.

Nobody was more provocatively vocal in defence of the passions than La Mettrie, whose *Discours sur le Bonheur* (1748, also known as the *Anti-Sénèque*) in its various guises, and his *École de la Volupté* (1746, later reworked as *L’Art de jouir*), set out what was interpreted as a hedonistic, anarchist treatise, devoid of judgment on right and wrong. His extreme position presented the passions as the ultimate arbiter of each individual’s happiness. The human machine acts according to its passions, which must be fulfilled for it to achieve happiness, which for La Mettrie is synonymous with pleasure. La Mettrie separates happiness from intellectual processes. In the *Discours sur le Bonheur*, he uses the term ‘âme’ to reject the role of the mind (intellectual capacities) in happiness: ‘l’âme n’y entre

pour rien.'

He also separates truth from happiness, finding that idiots and madmen are equally capable of happiness, highlighting that there are many ‘heureux imbéciles’ whereas ‘tant de gens d’esprits sont malheureux.’ He goes as far as to point out that the illusions of pleasure are equivalent to pleasure itself, given that both sources provide the body with the same sensation. La Mettrie is thus applying his sensualism to argue for the parity of different sources of happiness, whether it be from dreams, drugs or daily life: ‘l’illusion même, soit qu’elle soit produite par des médicaments, ou par des rêves, est la cause réelle de notre bonheur, ou malheur machinal.’

Thus, morally, man should seek happiness in any way which gives him the sensation of pleasure. In turn, virtue needed to be redefined. La Mettrie took the step of totally dissociating virtue from pleasure or happiness. He points out the most virtuous are not always the happiest.

In L’Art de jouir, which was translated into German in 1751 and again in 1756 (A4, A8), he opened with an infamous appeal to pleasure: ‘Plaisir, Maître souverain des hommes et des Dieux devant qui tout disparaît, jusqu’à la raison même, tu sais combien mon cœur t’adore.’

Holding (physical, sensual) pleasure to be the ultimate arbiter of happiness, which he posits as the purpose of life, La Mettrie praises volupté, his term for all direct sensual pleasure. Epicureanism, which was widely (if wrongly) held to preach pleasure as the sovereign good, was undoubtedly an important source for La Mettrie. This, allied with his praise of sexual pleasure and of the benefits of opium and alcohol, explains why La Mettrie’s critics were quick to charge him with advocating debauchery. A section at the end of the Discours sur le Bonheur illustrates La Mettrie’s provocation:

Que la pollution et la jouissance, lubriques rivales, se succédant tour-à-tour, et te faisant nuit et jour fondre de volupté, rendent ton âme aussi lascive, s’il se peut, aussi gluante que ton corps. Enfin puisque tu n’as pas d’autres ressources, tires-en parti: Bois, manges, dors, ronfles, rêves

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18 La Mettrie, Discours sur le Bonheur, OP, ii, 244.
19 La Mettrie, Bonheur, OP, ii, 243.
20 La Mettrie, Bonheur, OP, ii, 244-45.
21 La Mettrie, L’Art de jouir, OP, ii, 299.
[...] la crapule et la débauche n’ont rien de trop fort pour toi, si l’ordure et l’infamie sont ton partage; vautres-y toi, comme font les porcs, et tu seras heureux à leur manière.23

There is reason to argue that this is in fact no invitation for people to behave as pigs, yet this is undoubtedly what La Mettrie was perceived to be arguing. The passions, as basic urges, are the fundamental starting point for any moral system, however incomplete La Mettrie’s moral thought was. La Mettrie urges those who achieve happiness through debauchery to live true to their desires. He argues that to attempt to reason with them would be useless: ‘Je perdris mon temps et ma peine à prendre un autre ton: parler de tempérance à un débauché, c’est parler d’humanité à un tyran.’24 It is only human controls (social and legal) which can attempt to shape the actions of these passions, as we will see.

To dismiss La Mettrie as completely iconoclastic and radically distant from any of his contemporaries would be to overlook the considerable similarities between his and the other materialists’ fundamental positions of defining happiness, virtue and vice and the advantages of a secular morality over religious tradition. Diderot wrote scathingly of La Mettrie, as noted. D’Holbach also promoted the image of La Mettrie as an advocate of amorality, naming him as an example of the ‘athées qui ont nié la distinction du vice et de la vertu, et qui ont prêché la débauche et la licence dans les mœurs. L’auteur qui vient tout récemment de publier l’homme machine a raisonné sur les mœurs comme un vrai frénétique.’25

Yet there are real affinities in their moral systems, beginning with their shared views on the passions. Diderot is perhaps more critical of existing moral systems than he is the defender of a particular system devised by himself. As with La Mettrie, Diderot does not articulate a fully formed moral system. Blum states that Diderot ‘ne cesse de soutenir l’indépendance de la morale à l’égard de toute autorité ecclésiastique et de toute révélation divine […] mais] ne présente pas une position

23 La Mettrie, Bonheur, OP, II, 286.
24 La Mettrie, Bonheur, OP, II, 286–87.
25 D’Holbach, Système, II, 348, note 81. Quite how more than twenty years counts as recent is not clear.
morale immuable à travers sa vie d’écrivain.' However, there are central elements of his morality which do not change, and allow links to be made with other materialist writers. Diderot sees happiness as man’s duty. He retains virtue as a component of that happiness, which can be achieved by helping other humans to achieve happiness. The work of Diderot’s which was best known in Germany, the \textit{Pensées philosophiques} (1746), contains a defence of the passions, linking it to La Mettrie’s writings of the same era. In section five, Diderot cautions against attempts to extinguish man’s passions: ‘C’est le comble de la folie que de se proposer la ruine des passions.’ He clearly attacks critics of the passions, in effect theologians, who with the premise of the fall of man, see humans as inherently bad: ‘On déclame sans fin contre les passions; on leur impute toutes les peines de l’homme, et l’on oublie qu’elles sont aussi la source de tous ses plaisirs. […] Cependant il n’y a que les passions et les grandes passions, qui puissent élever l’âme aux grandes choses.’ In \textit{Éléments de physiologie} (written 1774-80, first published in 1875), Diderot reduces all the passions to a singular aim of happiness: ‘Il n’y a qu’une passion, celle d’être heureux.’

Helvétius has been described as ‘the boldest defender of the passions.’ In \textit{De l’esprit}, he argues that the passions, derived through physical sensualism, determine vice and virtue: it is ‘à la sensibilité physique que l’homme doit ses passions; & à ses passions, qu’il doit ses vices & toutes ses vertus.’ This determinism is underlined by Helvétius’s argument that the passions cannot be ignored, reasoned with, or suppressed: ‘Il est impossible, dans la pratique, de livrer, pour ainsi dire, tous les jours des batailles à ses passions, sans en perdre un grand

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\item \textsuperscript{27} Diderot, \textit{Pensées philosophiques}, DPV, II, 19.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Diderot, \textit{Pensées philosophiques}, DPV, II, 17.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Diderot, \textit{Éléments de physiologie}, DPV, XVII, 486. This work was influenced by Haller’s writings, showing the ambiguities in the relationship between the two men, given that Diderot, in Leipzig on the way to Russia, publicly spoke scathingly of Haller. See Aram Vartanian, ‘The Enigma of Diderot’s \textit{Éléments de physiologie},’ \textit{Diderot Studies}, 10 (1968), 285-301.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Helvétius, \textit{De l’esprit}, p. 368.
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Reason can prevent errors induced by the passions, but without passions, just as Diderot argued, humans are incapable of greatness: the reasonable person will perhaps avoid the ‘erreurs où nous entrainent les passions; mais aussi ne reçoit-il aucun de ces coups de lumière qu’on ne doit qu’aux passions vives.’ This is repeated, in a more anticlerical tone, in De l’homme: ‘Il faut pour votre intérêt même, que les passions & les besoins continuent de vivifier l’homme. Pour les étouffer en lui, il faudroit changer sa nature. Ô vénérables théologiens! ô brutes! ô mes frères! abandonnez ce projet ridicule.’ Indeed, Helvétius notes that the Church predicates its whole moral system on the eradication of the passions: ‘C’est au contraire sur la destruction de ces mêmes passions que le corps ecclésiastique fonde [sa grandeur].’ If the passions, however necessary they may be, lead to errors and conflict with the passions of others, what can be done? Virtue is thus determined by the passions:

L’homme vertueux n’est pas donc point celui qui sacrifie ses plaisirs, ses habitudes & ses plus fortes passions, à l’intérêt public, puisqu’un tel homme est impossible; mais celui dont la plus forte passion est tellement conforme à l’intérêt général, qu’il est presque toujours nécessité à la vertu.

This seemingly means that nothing can be done to promote virtue, as passions are determined: ‘Les passions en effet sont des desirs vifs: ces desirs peuvent être également conformes ou contraires au bien public.’ Yet Helvétius noticed that certain people had different levels of passions, different intensities and proportions. This, he argues, is due to social and political environment, and not materially determined. To make his case, Helvétius distinguishes two kinds of passions. The first are natural, and akin to human needs, like hunger. The second type, the ‘passions factices’, are social, such as pride, patriotism, fanaticism and avarice. They can, therefore, be shaped by social conditions and education. Helvétius

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32 Helvétius, De l’esprit, p. 373.
33 Helvétius, De l’esprit, p. 580.
34 Helvétius, De l’homme, I, 37.
35 Helvétius, De l’homme, I, 34.
36 Helvétius, De l’esprit, pp. 374-5.
37 Helvétius, De l’homme, I, 36.
38 Helvétius, De l’esprit, p. 321.
suggests a system of balancing the passions against each other: ‘les passions seules peuvent combattre contre les passions.’

D’Holbach too accepts that the human passions cannot be overcome. Section one of *La Morale Universelle* (1776) deals systematically with the issues of the physical determinism of human behaviour and materialist psychology. He writes, recalling Diderot, that ‘[r]ien n’est plus inutile que de déclamer contre les passions; rien de plus impraticable que le projet de les détruire.’ Instead the passions must be coaxed, guided towards mutual benefit: ‘On pourra se promettre de faire des passions un usage avantageux; on les dirigerà vers l’utilité publique, à laquelle dans la vie sociale l’utilité particulière de chaque homme se trouve nécessairement liée.’

D’Holbach is seemingly in agreement with La Mettrie’s theory of accepting each man’s natural urges so as to allow each man to find happiness: ‘Si l’homme d’après sa nature, est forcé de désirer son bien-être, il est forcé d’en aimer les moyens; il seroit inutile & peut-être injuste de demander à un homme d’être vertueux s’il ne peut l’être sans se rendre malheureux.’ D’Holbach envisages man’s passions being allowed to run free when they are socially propitious: ‘que les passions humaines aient un libre cours, quand il en résultera des avantages réels & durables pour la société.’ The link between passions and society brings is to our next theme: sociability, which can better explain this conflict.

**Sociabilité**

French materialists shared a second component of their respective moral systems: human sociability as an essential quality of humans. Debates on sociability centred on the question of whether humans are inherently social: is living with other humans an essential, constituent part of human psychology? Rousseau, in popularising the idea of a pre-social man in the ‘state of nature’, argued that humans enter into a

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41 D’Holbach, *La Morale Universelle*, 1, 32.

42 D’Holbach, *La Morale Universelle*, 1, 32-33.

43 D’Holbach, *Système*, 1, 152.

social contract when forming groups, and thus sociability was an enforced, added extra to essential human qualities. Social contract theory, drawn from Hobbes and natural law theorists like Grotius and Pufendorf, was already in decline when Rousseau sought to reinvigorate it. Most French philosophe rejected this ‘state of nature’ thesis, deciding that man was always and eternally sociable. Sociability was thus considered as a constituent quality of humans. Society was a collection of humans interacting to help one another, only in order to further individual personal interests (intérêt personnel). Discussing Grotius’s system, Istvan Hont writes that ‘self-regarding and other-regarding motives were not in opposition, rather they formed a distinctive combination.’

This is distinguished from a notion of sociability which posited a separate faculty of socialitas as kindness and courtesy or ‘artificial beneficence’. This consideration of humans as materially determined to be social for their own self-interest is central to morality for the French materialists.

In French Enlightenment thought, sociability denoted a particular conception of ‘a psychological field in which self-interest and altruism were mutually constitutive.’ La Mettrie evoked social determinism in L’Homme machine, namely the suggestion that we act socially to further our own chances of survival and a prosperous wellbeing: ‘peut-être ne respectons-nous la bourse et la vie des autres, que pour nous conserver nos Biens, notre honneur et nous-mêmes.’ La Mettrie endorses sociability as a constituent part of human psychology, which promotes happiness. He thus extends happiness from his previously narrow conception of happiness as equated to volupté (physical sensual pleasure of the body, derived from sexual, gastronomic, narcotic or other sources) to include other sources. In conceding other sources of happiness aside from volupté, La Mettrie distances himself from the extremism of his L’Art de Jouir, which he accepts was perhaps too provocative: ‘Je ne prétends pas faire consister le bonheur dans la volupté; car, quoique j’aie autrefois fait couler de ma plume toute l’ivresse qu’elle avoit répandue dans mes sens […]

47 Gordon, Citizens, p. 70.
48 La Mettrie, L’Homme machine, OP, i, 93.
souscris (par tempérament peut-être) à plus de modération.’

This moderation has come from La Mettrie’s acceptance of the social constraints on man. La Mettrie has long been severely misrepresented as someone who always considered man outside of the social environment. Even modern scholars dismiss his moral system as such, with Mauzi describing his system as being ‘sans aucun égard pour la société et ses lois.’

La Mettrie’s views were caricatured by his contemporaries due to his own propensity to make provocative statements, and despite his clarifications as to his moral system.

La Mettrie established his vision of happiness partly by dispensing with the concept of essential, unchanging virtue and vice: ‘L’idée de la vertu nous a été si peu donnée avec l’être, qu’elle n’y est même pas stable quand l’éducation et le temps ont développé et orné nos organes. C’est un oiseau sur la branche, toujours prête à s’enlever.’

Virtue is thus defined as relative, unstable and, essentially, impossible to grasp. He does, however, tentatively retain the terminology, despite his reservations as to its relative meaning, by appeal to the notion of society: ‘toute la différence qu’il y a entre les méchants et les bons, c’est que chez les uns, l’intérêt particulier est préféré à l’intérêt général, tandis que les autres sacrifient leur bien propre, à celui d’un ami, ou du public.’

Though virtue is not absolute, it is relative to society: ‘Quoiqu’il n’y ait point de vertu proprement dite, ou absolue, ce mot ne formant, comme tant d’autres, qu’un vain son, il en est donc de relatives à la société, dont elles sont à la fois l’ornement et l’appui.’

Society is thus the arbiter of virtue, as the history of customs throughout different civilisations shows, from which La Mettrie draws various examples to show that some actions previously considered as virtuous are sometimes now seen as barbaric. As societies vary, so too does virtue. This strategy of dismissing the terminology parallels his attack on the terminology of ‘âme’ seen previously.

49 La Mettrie, Bonheur, OP, II, 282.
50 Mauzi, L’Idée, p. 249.
51 La Mettrie, Bonheur, OP, II, 261.
52 La Mettrie, Bonheur, OP, II, 265.
53 La Mettrie, Bonheur, OP, II, 252-53.
54 In Le Discours sur le Bonheur, La Mettrie actually compromises on his earlier rejection of the term ‘âme’ in L’Homme machine and uses the term here as a synonym for mind, not wishing his message to be lost in the polemics of his earlier text.
D’Holbach too subscribes to notion of sociability as a constituent part of human psychology, explicitly countering Rousseau’s idea of a state of nature: ‘Ce n’est que par abstraction que l’homme peut être envisagé dans un état de solitude [...] ce qu’on appelle l’État de la Nature seroit un état contraire à la Nature.’

The abstract idea is of no use to the moralist. True natural man is inescapably social: ‘La nature dit à l’homme d’être sociable, d’aimer ses semblables, d’être juste, paisible, indulgent, bienfaisant, de faire jouir ou de laisser jouer ses associés.’

Though wishing to rewrite a moral system from these first principles, d’Holbach retains virtue as a term, but essentially redefines it into sociability, that is co-operation: ‘La vertu n’est réellement que la sociabilité.’ Yet sociability is not sacrifice or altruism. It is necessary for self interest: ‘pour se rendre heureux lui-même, il est obligé de s’occuper du bonheur de ceux dont il a besoin pour son propre bonheur [...] Aimer les autres, c’est aimer les moyens de notre propre félicité.’

Where d’Holbach does differ from his fellow radical’s position is in his conception of virtue as a universal value, in sharp contrast to La Mettrie’s arguments about relativity. The very title of d’Holbach’s Morale Universelle (1776) points to this division. The distinction between good and evil, between vice and virtue, are judged by d’Holbach to be permanent. The distinction ‘n’est point fondée sur des conventions entre les hommes, & encore bien moins sur les volontés chimériques d’un être surnaturel, mais sur les rapports éternels & invariables qui subsistent entre les êtres de l’espèce humaine vivants en société, & qui subsisteront autant que l’homme & la société.’

This underlines the importance of the notion of sociabilité in the construction of moral systems. The understanding of sociabilité allows for each person’s interest and amour de soi to be furthered. D’Holbach rejects earlier philosophical propositions of an innate benevolence, instead, ‘c’est relativement à lui-même que l’homme montre de la bienveillance aux autres [...] cette bienveillance n’est pas désintéressée.’ It is only when personal interest harms other people that it becomes unvirtuous: ‘L’intérêt personnel & les passions qu’il met en jeu ne sont des

55 D’Holbach, La Morale Universelle, I, 69.
56 D’Holbach, Système, II, 275.
57 D’Holbach, Système Social, I, 14.
58 D’Holbach, Système Social, I, 91.
59 D’Holbach, Système, I, 134-35 (my emphasis).
60 D’Holbach, La Morale Universelle, I, 26.
dispositions blâmables, que quand elles sont contraires au bien-être de ceux avec qui nous vivons.’

Helvétius was the eighteenth century’s most renowned social determinist. He concurred with other materialists in defining vice and virtue as relative to society: ‘Nul Individu ne naît bon, nul Individu ne naît méchant. Les hommes sont l’un ou l’autre, selon qu’un intérêt conforme ou contraire les réunit ou les divise.’ In his theory of sensualism, as we saw in preceding chapters, he posited a psychological materialism less concerned with the nature of matter, and more focussed on the role of education and social relations in determining behaviour. With man naturally inclined to seek pleasure and avoid pain, Helvétius considers how this can be reconciled with living in society. He assumes that man is constitutively social, understanding sociabilité in the same terms as other materialists. Like La Mettrie, Helvétius finds that we aid others in order to further our own wellbeing, judging others in terms of the way they advance our own position: ‘que l’intérêt personnel est, dans chaque société, l’unique appréciateur du mérite des choses et des personnes.’ He develops these ideas in De l’homme, where sociability is seen as a necessity: ‘l’amour des hommes pour leurs semblables est un effet de la nécessité de s’entre-secourir.’ Rejecting the state of nature thesis, Helvétius declares that sociability is ‘une qualité innée […] La sociabilité est l’effet du besoin […] L’intérêt et le besoin sont le seul principe de toute sociabilité.’

Diderot’s embrace of sociabilité as an inherent quality of humans was perhaps not the most sustained or central of notions for his (incomplete) morality. Yet Diderot did agree that the attainment of happiness was the central aim of human life. In a work definitely read, reviewed and translated in Germany, Diderot defines virtue as relating to fellow humans, ignoring any sense of theological virtues: ‘Celui-

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61 D’Holbach, La Morale Universelle, 1, 24.
63 Helvétius, De l’esprit, p. 92.
64 Helvétius, De l’homme, I, 116.
65 Helvétius, De l’homme, I, 112.
66 Diderot sees contributing to the happiness of others as a duty: ‘Les devoirs de l’homme? Se rendre heureux…contribuer au Bonheur des autres.’ Diderot, Introduction aux grands principes, ou réception d’un philosophe (1798). Though written in 1763, this text was unpublished until 1798. Hence it was not available as a source to contemporaries, and this particular formulation of the view would have been unknown in Germany. Œuvres complètes, ed. by Assézat and Tourneux, II, 85.
là seul mérite le nom de vertueux, dont toutes les affections, tous les penchants, en un mot toutes les dispositions d’esprit et de cœur, sont conformes au bien général de son espèce.’

Virtue thus becomes a secular term based on man’s constitutive sociability. It must be admitted that the most radical parts of Diderot’s materialist morality, including the political and anticlerical attacks such as Les Observations sur le Nakaz, are mostly contained in works which, for understandable reasons, were not published in his lifetime. The incompleteness of Diderot’s moral thought has negative consequences for its transmission in Germany.

Secular Legislation

The political implications of a materialist morality were secular legislation, with a strong state capable of instituting an environment favourable to cooperation, and the democratic rule of law. Part of this argument was the view that religion was ineffective in promoting virtue. Following in the natural law tradition, the argument for a human institution of law was developed, designed to safeguard individuals’ freedoms and ability to flourish. The materialists, to some extent proof of a certain realism on their part, accepted that the passions and sociability have always led some members of society to seek more power and to act contrary to virtue, with Helvétius noting that: ‘les loix faites pour le bonheur de tous ne seroient observées par aucun, si les magistrats n’étoient armés de la puissance nécessaire pour en assurer l’exécution.’ The acceptance of fallibility of the passions leads to calls for the rule of law, not for the elimination of the passions. This prioritisation of the need for legislative power is shared by other materialists.

Pierre Hermand has noted Diderot’s failure to develop a system, or practical conclusions: ‘De ce principe du bonheur qu’il a posé comme devant diriger la conduite, il ne tire aucun précepte pratique.’ If there is a practical conclusion in Diderot’s writings, however, it is surely that a secular legislation is required, and inherently superior to the religious forms. In section twenty-three of the Pensées

67 Diderot, Essai sur le Mérite et la Vertu, DPV, t: Le modèle anglais, ed. by Arthur M. Wilson and others (1975), p. 360. Though this is a free translation of Shaftesbury’s An inquiry concerning virtue, or merit, the French text was very much seen to be a work of Diderot’s.
68 Helvétius, De l’esprit, p. 277.
Philosophiques, Diderot critiques the differences in morality founded upon belief in the immortality of the soul, seemingly suggesting that deists and sceptics (here meaning agnostics) have more motivation than atheists to be virtuous. However, the conditional clauses reveal his true intentions:

Le déiste assure l’existence d’un Dieu, l’immortalité de l’âme et ses suites: le sceptique n’est point décidé sur ces articles; l’athée les nie. Le sceptique a donc, pour être vertueux, un motif de plus que l’athée, et quelque raison de moins que le déiste. Sans la crainte du législateur, la pente du tempérament et la connaissance des avantages actuels de la vertu, la probité de l’athée manquerait de fondement, et celle du sceptique serait fondée sur un peut-être.70

The initial part of this proposition suggests that people of faith have more reasons to act virtuously. However, Diderot subverts this reasoning by arguing that (human) legislation, and fear thereof, is the only efficient means of controlling human behaviour. Indeed, an atheist would have no reason to act virtuously, were it not for personal interest and the resultant natural tendencies of sociability. However, Diderot suggests, atheists do have legislation and the fear of immediate punishment, as well as natural sociability, and the knowledge of the immediate rewards of virtue. This notion of the secular legislator is the cornerstone of Diderot’s moral thought. The civic legislator, natural sociability and a good temperament do exist, and so atheist virtue is not without some basis.

La Mettrie does not deny that crime exists, and sees the need for action against criminality: ‘l’intérêt public mérite d’être consulté et préféré, car il faut bien tuer les chiens enragés, et écraser les serpents.’71 La Mettrie thus establishes, on the basis of materialist ethics, the rights of the state to protect individuals. This is not an ‘anything goes’, permissive, anarchist hedonism. Yet, his categorical endorsement of punishment, or public protection, is left in confusion when he asks that those who do commit crimes because they are physiologically unable not to, be afforded leniency and not made to feel regret: ‘Qu’on ne dise point que j’invite au crime; car je n’invite

70 Diderot, Pensées philosophiques, DPV, II, 30 (my emphasis).
71 La Mettrie, Bonheur, OP, II, 265.
qu’au repos dans le crime.' It seems that fear is the only effective deterrent to crime, and the gallows and hangman could be retained in La Mettrie’s system of justice. He claims that justice is the daughter of his philosophy, and ‘les Bourreaux et les gibets sont à ses ordres: crains-les, plus que ta Conscience et les Dieux.’

As the following passage from the *Système de la Nature* makes clear, d’Holbach agrees with La Mettrie that determinism exists, but follows Helvétius in attributing a greater role to education and society in steering this determinism: ‘N’imputons donc plus à notre nature de nous rendre méchants […] c’est l’éducation qui porte en nous le germe des vices qui nous tourmenteront nécessairement pendant tout le cours de notre vie.’ D’Holbach is also in agreement with La Mettrie that immediate fear, and not religious doctrine, is the only effective way of controlling human vice: ‘Tout homme qui n’a rien à craindre devient bientôt méchant […] la crainte est donc le seul obstacle que la société puisse opposer aux passions de ses chefs.’

The belief in the need for legislation to shape human behaviour became the cornerstone of Helvétius’s politically oriented morality: ‘C’est donc uniquement par de bonnes loix qu’on peut former des hommes vertueux. Tout l’art du législateur consiste donc à forcer les hommes, par le sentiment de l’amour d’eux-mêmes, d’être toujours justes les uns envers les autres.’ Helvétius declares that legislation and morality are one and the same activity: ‘la morale et la législation, que je regarde comme une seule et même science.’ Secular legislation and education are the major points of Helvétius’s moral thinking. Indeed, Helvétius thinks that a theory of morality without a robust legislative and executive system is utterly useless: ‘il est évident que la morale n’est qu’une science frivole, si l’on ne la confond pas avec la politique & la législation.’ Helvétius also argues that religion is an insufficient way of regulating human behaviour, finding examples to prove that ‘ces peines et ces plaisirs éternels qui, considérés dans la perspective de l’avenir, font communément

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76 Helvétius, *De l’esprit*, pp. 236-8.
77 Helvétius, *De l’esprit*, p. 239.
78 Helvétius, *De l’esprit*, p. 161.
une impression trop foible pour y sacrifier des plaisirs criminels, mais présents.'

The inefficacy of religious belief in setting respected moral systems, and a belief in
the potency of fear within a legal system, were shared by the four philosophe
EDucation is equally an important component of this civic society. D’Holbach
proposes that the instruments of society be used to inculcate virtuous behaviour in
citizens: ‘Que l’éducation, le gouvernement & les loix les habituent à les contenir
dans les justes bornes fixées par l’expérience & la raison. Que l’ambitieux ait des
honneurs, des titres, des distinctions & du pouvoir, quand il servira utilement sa
patrie.’

The role of civil legislation and education is an inherent part of
d’Holbach’s materialist moral system, as it is with Helvétius, and with La Mettrie,
who (merely) implies similar ideas. Common to all four materialists considered here
was a call for such education to be freed from clerical control, as we will now see.

Anticlericalism and Atheist Apologetics

Diderot’s anticlerical views relating to morality are best expressed in a (private)
letter to Sophie: ‘Partout où l’on admet un Dieu, il y a un culte; partout où il y a un
culte, l’ordre naturel des devoirs moraux est renversé, et la morale corrompue.’
Diderot held that an ideal moral system would be a secular, utilitarian legal
framework which allowed for the individual needs of man to be balanced with those
of fellow men. Diderot defended atheism as the superior moral system: ‘Il
n’appartient qu’à l’honnête homme d’être athée.’

Diderot’s reputation as an atheist
was, as established earlier, well known in Germany, where he seemed to revel in the
freedom to be able to espouse his views publicly.

La Mettrie’s defence of atheism was clear, if slightly veiled, in that he
attributes the following maxim to an unnamed ‘friend’ (thus avoiding expression of
approval): ‘L’univers ne sera jamais heureux, à moins qu’il ne soit Athée.’

This ‘friend’ went on to explain the superiority of atheism over religion:

79 Helvétius, De l’esprit, p. 233.
80 D’Holbach, Système, t, 148.
81 Diderot, letter to Sophie Volland, 6 October 1765, Correspondance Diderot, v, 134.
82 Diderot, Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron, DPV, xxv, 330. This line is repeated in the
‘Prière’ inserted at the end of the Pensées sur l’interprétation de la Nature in certain collected works.
83 La Mettrie, L’Homme machine, OP, t, 97.
Si l’Athéïsme, disoit-il, était généralement répandu, toutes les branches de la Religion seront alors détruites et coupées par la racine. Plus de guerres théologiques: plus de soldats de Religion; soldats terribles! La Nature infectée d’un poison sacré, reprendroit ses droits et sa pureté. Sourds à toute autre voix, les Mortels tranquilles ne suivraient que les conseils spontanés de leur propre individu.\textsuperscript{84}

Religion is thus characterised as a source of conflict which needs to be eradicated. This view is also found in his \textit{Système d’Epicure}: ‘La religion n’est nécesssaire que pour qui n’est pas capable de sentir l’Humanité.’\textsuperscript{85} La Mettrie rejects any claims that religion is necessary for virtue. Here, he fully embraces Bayle’s paradox, and explicitly states the superiority of atheism over religion in terms of morality: ‘comme on peut dire d’après tant d’expériences, que la Religion ne suppose pas l’exacte probité, les mêmes raisons autorisent à penser que l’Atheïsme ne l’exclut pas.’\textsuperscript{86}

Helvétius’s attack on the self-interest and essentially corrupt nature of clerics is more pronounced in \textit{De l’homme} than in \textit{De l’esprit}. Crucially, he links priesthood to the destruction of morality: ‘Ministres des autels [...] vous avez préféré de commander à des superstitieux & à des esclaves [...] vous êtes la plaie des nations, l’instrument de leur malheur & les destructeurs de la vraie morale.’\textsuperscript{87} Helvétius completely redefines religion, appropriating the word for his own understanding of a general set of shared principles, and nothing to do with faith or divinity: ‘Quelle est la religion vraiment tolérante? celle, ou qui n’a, comme la païenne, aucun dogme, ou qui se réduit, comme celle des philosophes, à une morale saine & élevée, qui sans doute sera un jour la religion de l’Univers.’\textsuperscript{88}

D’Holbach is renowned for his anticlericalism and attacks on religion, which were amongst the most systematic and virulent of the eighteenth century. In \textit{Le Christianisme dévoilé} (1766) he explains that, unlike other attacks on religion, his is motivated by what he sees as the negative impact of religion on society: ‘Je

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{86} La Mettrie, \textit{L’Homme machine}, \textit{OP}, 93.
\textsuperscript{87} Helvétius, \textit{De l’homme}, t. 50 [printed as p. 40 due to an error in the original edition, situated between pages 49 and 51].
\textsuperscript{88} Helvétius, \textit{De l’homme}, p. 53.
l’attaque, parce qu’elle me paroît nuisible au bonheur de l’État, ennemie des progrès de l’esprit humain, opposée à la saine morale, dont les intérêts de la politique ne peuvent jamais se séparer." The conclusion of this work is that: ‘L’at de la religion est d’enivrer les hommes.’ In d’Holbach’s eyes, religion is an unmitigated disaster: ‘la religion enivre les hommes dès l’enfance, de vanité, de fanatisme et de fureurs, s’ils ont une imagination échauffée.’ Yet this is based on a similar to argument to Bayle’s paradox. The system of future rewards and forgiveness gives licence to unvirtuous behaviour. Teachings of salvation and faith avoid the true purpose of being good. Religion is seen as inefficient in its control of human behaviour: ‘En effet l’expérience nous prouve que la religion est une digue incapable de résister au torrent de la corruption auquel tant de causes accumulées donnent une force irrésistible.’ D’Holbach argues, like Diderot, that unbelievers must have more reason to act virtuously than those who blindly follow the teachings of theologians: ‘l’homme qui pense et médite connoît mieux les motifs d’être bon, que celui qui se laisse guider en aveugle par des motifs incertains ou par les intérêts des autres.’ To conclude our survey of French materialist morality, d’Holbach encapsulated the reason for his campaign against religion: ‘La théologie nuit aux progrès de l’esprit humain.’

**German reviews of French materialist morality**

The exaggerations of La Mettrie’s thought were certainly paraded by respectable German critics in an attempt to demonstrate the threat of materialist philosophy. Here was an avowed materialist declaring his atheism and his rejection of the categories of good and bad. La Mettrie was caricatured in the reviews in Germany.

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93 D’Holbach, *Système*, t. 1, 324.
The French-language *Bibliothèque germanique*’s review of *L’Homme machine* asked if ‘l’athée dogmatisant’ was ‘l’ennemi le plus cruel du genre humain?’ They accused him of wanting to ‘introduire une licence effrénée, en rompant les liens les plus forts qui attachent les hommes à leurs devoirs. […] La société deviendrait un coupe-gorge et une image de l’Enfer dont l’athée se moque.’ The journal thus stressed the link between La Mettrie’s theory of the materiality of the human mind and the dangerous society that would allegedly be created, if his precepts were followed. The *GGA* published a review of La Mettrie’s *Traité de la vie heureuse*, penned by a riled Haller, which laid out similar criticisms, labelling the book as: ‘Eine Schrift, wo man die genauesten Bände des geselligen Lebens zerreißt, und dem Menschen anrähtet, ohne Sorge für seine Mitbürger, ohne Liebe zur Tugend, oder zur Wahrheit, in seinen Lüsten hinzuleben.’ Again, the lack of sociability in La Mettrie’s vision is severely criticised, and the emphasis placed on *volupté* rebuked. *L’Art de jouir* was reviewed by Lessing in the *Critische Nachrichten aus dem Reiche der Gelehrsamkeit* in July 1751 where he dismissed the text and its ‘Unverschämtheit’, stating it to be by the same author as *L’Homme machine* and other texts by La Mettrie. In January 1752, three months after La Mettrie’s death, the *GGA* also reviewed the new Berlin edition of *L’Art de jouir*, advising that the book’s central subject was ‘volupté’: ‘Die Wollust, die ohnedem mit allzustarker Gewalt die Menschen beherrscht, empfiehlt er ihnen als das wahre Gute, und fast als eine Tugend’ before condemning the German printer ‘eines so schädlichen Buchs […], dessen Ende so schändlich ist, daß es von niemand gelesen werden, der noch erröhtetet.’ The claim that people might blush, and the general attribution of scandal, are symptomatic of the side-lining of La Mettrie’s work in German periodicals. Yet the German edition of *L’Art de jouir* provides evidence of successful German dissemination. If anything, this review is an example of refutation leading to further dissemination. La Mettrie provocatively talked of human sexuality in a way which German audiences were certainly not ready for. His sympathy for those whose physiology required pleasure to be achieved in ways

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97 Haller, *GGA* (1749), 292 (misprinted as 192), (D29).
98 *Critische Nachrichten aus dem Reiche der Gelehrsamkeit* (1751), 216 (D50).
99 ‘Göttingen’, *GGA* (1752), 9-10, (D57).
unacceptable to society was misrepresented as a call for permissiveness.100 His moral system was largely represented as an invitation to immoral behaviour.

Reimarus does, in fairness to La Mettrie, accurately represent the Frenchman’s concern to limit personal pleasure at the point where it infringes that of others in society. This acceptance of La Mettrie’s social concerns was rare amongst contemporary reactions, but Reimarus is clear that La Mettrie is not a hedonist at all costs: ‘Sonst äußert er hin und wieder einen Abscheu gegen die Laster, welche andern Menschen Leid und Drangsal zufügen, und die bürgerliche Gesellschaft elend machen. Er beklagt diejenigen, welche von solchen bösen Leuten belästigt werden.’101 Though wishing to point out the logical errors in La Mettrie’s thinking, Reimarus’s criticism also attempts to play down the reputation for permissiveness that the Frenchman had acquired.

D’Holbach’s *Système Social* (1773), was reviewed by Feder, who favourably described its anonymous author as a ‘Feind des Aberglaubens und des Despotismus’, yet also judged his moral system to be defective because of its reliance on personal interest and labelled d’Holbach a ‘Feind des moralischen Gefühls.’102 In 1777, Feder also reviewed d’Holbach’s *Morale Universelle* (1776), praising the desire for a secular ethics and seeing the advantages of being able to teach morality without religion, and the author’s ‘große Kenntnis vom Detail der Tugenden und Laster.’103 The *Système de la Nature*, on the contrary, was utterly condemned as lacking in any morality (see pp. 76-78).

As for Helvétius, Knabe has shown that his moral theories were subject to strong criticism in the *GGA*, with reviews rejecting the use of *amour de soi* and the passions as a basis of morality.104 Thomas Aquinas Jost (1731-1797), a (Dominican) Catholic who wrote a range of short texts directed against several freethinkers (d’Argens, Voltaire, and Bayle, for example), used Helvétius as a representative of

100 On the differences between Sade and La Mettrie, see Kathleen Anne Wellman, *La Mettrie: Medicine, Philosophy, and Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), pp. 235-38.
102 Feder, ‘London’, *GGA* (1773), 1290-1295 (p. 1291), (F12).
103 Feder, ‘Amsterdam’, *GGA* (1777), 130-32 (p. 131), (F17). The diffusion of *La Morale Universelle* later benefitted from a partial translation by Johann Adam Emmrich in 1781 (A40).
104 Knabe, p. 151.
materialism to counter materialist morality. Jost claims that Helvétius’s rejection of the immortality of the soul equates to a rejection of laws and morality: ‘alle Materialisten […] weilen sie keine Unsterblichkeit der menschlichen Seele zulassen, wollen auch von keinem Gesetze etwas wissen.’\textsuperscript{105} Such reviews and critiques suggest the marginalisation of the moral systems posited by French materialists. Yet this did not prevent productive German engagement with their ideas, as we will show.

**German reception of French materialist ideas on morality**

Analysis of the German context of debates on morality reveals a strong religious influence on notions of morality. In a letter to Samuel Clarke, Leibniz declared that materialism leads to irreligion: ‘les principes des matérialistes contribuent beaucoup à entretenir l’impitoyabilité.’\textsuperscript{106} In eighteenth-century Germany, the cultivation of virtue and the shaping of moral life was a public affair, which also spread through the secular channels of moral weekly newspapers.\textsuperscript{107} This does not mean, however, that the morality to be found in such publications was itself secular. On the contrary, a study of these newspapers concludes that this morality was in complete accordance with orthodox religion. Wolfgang Martens characterises the newspapers as holding religion to be the only tool capable of assuring the respect of moral norms: ‘ohne Religion keine Rechtschaffenheit, dahin geht die Überzeugung aller Moralischen Wochenschriften.’\textsuperscript{108} For moralists, religion was a useful tool for morality, which thus had to conform to religious doctrines, even if they were not themselves fighting over particular dogmas: ‘sie wollten sich nicht in die Belange des geistlichen Amtes mengen, und wenn sie die Tugendlehre nur nach den Gründen der Weltweisheit vortragen, so kehren sie doch damit der Religion keineswegs den Rücken. Sie

\textsuperscript{107} See Gerhard Sauder, ‘Moralische Wochenschriften’, in *Hansers Sozialgeschichte*, III, 267-79.
betrachten sich, es muß wiederholt werden, als Verbündete der Religion.’

Public morality was thus disseminated by those who were in sympathy with the Church’s teaching. This reinforces the idea that the German public sphere was very much underpinned by religious concerns. Yet not all thinkers concurred, not even those within religious institutions, as the case of Johann Heinrich Schulz shows.

Schulz

Schulz is the most striking case of a German thinker advocating a materialist morality. He places happiness at the centre of man’s concerns. His fatalism was criticised by Kant, and his criticism of the Church and religion, even from within the institution, was stringent and sustained. His praise of ‘Mirabaud’ (the pseudonym used by d’Holbach), makes clear the inspiration for his thought. His defence of atheism takes Moses Mendelssohn’s attack on atheists as its trigger, but in essence, it serves to give greater exposure to the ideas of the French materialists.

Schulz subscribed wholeheartedly to the system of necessity he found in d’Holbach’s Système de la Nature (see above, p. 141). This embrace of determinism caused problems with the authorities. In his anonymously published Versuch einer Anleitung zur Sittenlehre für alle Menschen ohne Unterschied der Religionen (1783), he concluded: ‘so sind ja, sage ich, alle meine Entschliessungen und Handlungen ohne Unterschied und ohne die mindeste Ausnahme, unwidersprechlich gewiß dem allerstrengsten Gesze de der Nothwendigkeit unterworfen.’ Determinism, as construed by d’Holbach, is here explicitly repeated.

In his Philosophische Betrachtung über Theologie und Religion überhaupt (1784), Schulz supported materialist claims that human behaviour was determined by the senses, and the pursuit of happiness: ‘alles, was den Menschen handelnd macht oder ihn zu irgendeiner Art von Handlungen, sie mögen sein, welche sie wollen, nur einzig und allein antreiben kann, nichts anderes sei und sein könne als die jedesmaligen Empfindungen und Vorstellungen, die der Mensch von seinem

109 Martens, p. 185.
110 Saine, p. 286.
111 [Schulz], Versuch einer Anleitung zur Sittenlehre für alle Menschen ohne Unterschied der Religionen, 4 vols (Berlin: Stahlbaum, 1783), I, 74.
Glücke hat.’

The passions, defined as ‘Bedürfnisse’ and ‘Triebkraft’, allied with intellectual qualities like judgment and experience, are the factors which determine how man seeks to attain happiness: ‘sie sind auch die Lehrmeister, die ihn unterrichten, wie er zu seinem Glücke zu handeln habe.’

The impact of Schulz’s reading of d’Holbach is perhaps allied with an unverifiable influence of La Mettrie, possibly alluded to in the following: ‘Diese Bedürfnisse sind die Triebfedern, durch welche meine Maschine genugsam aufgezogen ist; um, solange sie selbst da ist, in beständiger Bewegung sein zu müssen.’

He adopts Helvétius’ position that humans act out of self-interest, and *amour de soi*, attributing actions to: ‘Triebe der Selbstliebe oder des Eigennützes.’ Schulz extends this to religious beliefs. Asking why Moses Mendelssohn goes to the synagogue and why he prays, Schulz explains these actions as self-interest: ‘weil die Selbstliebe die einzige nur mögliche Triebfeder aller unserer Handlungen ist.’

This rationalisation of religious practices undermines the ‘truth’ of religion.

Where Schulz’s use of French materialists can be separated from his contemporaries is in its transfer of antagonism towards organised religion, which was truly a remarkable position to adopt, given his employment as a priest. Others like Spazier or Hißmann were critical of religious institutions and beliefs, but lacked the vituperative tone Schulz adopted in denouncing the stupidity of people and exploitation by clerics. Schulz aims for a complete separation of theology and morality, in the same way the French materialists did. In his *Erweis des himmelweiten Unterschieds der Moral von der Religion* (1788), Schulz makes this into a political statement, criticising the verticality of power structures in religion, compared to the horizontal power structures of a natural law system: ‘Seitwärts dem Menschen steht ihm sein Nebenmensch und die Gesellschaft! Und hier ist das Gebiet der Moral. Wenn also die Theologie und Religion ihre Richtung vertikal und zum Zenith hinaufnehmen, so nimmt hingegen die Moral die ihrige horizontal.’

The *Erweis* is vituperative and acerbically anticlerical: ‘Die Priesterschaft schlägt, durch

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115 Schulz, *Philosophische*, p. 204.
ihre Orakeltheologie und Religion den von Natur ganz gesunden Menschen erst selbst blutende Wunden, um hernach, etwas an ihnen zu heilen zu haben.\textsuperscript{118} For Schulz, revealed religion is based on blind faith and fantasy, whereas nature itself can provide a system of human morality:

Die Moral hingegen leitet ihre Vorschriften aus der Natur des Menschen, und der übrigen Geschöpfe, auf welche sie sich bezieht, her: in so weit nemlich diese Naturen den menschlichen Sinnen vorliegen, von denselben empfunden, von dem menschlichen Verstande erkannt, und von der menschlichen Vernunft beurtheilt werden können.\textsuperscript{119}

It is particularly notable that the senses are so fundamental to Schulz, and thus that sensualism is a key component of his materialism.

Schulz’s criticism of religion takes up the terminology of d’Holbach’s \textit{Système de la Nature}, considering God as ‘ein bloßes, von Geistlichen ergauckeltes Phantom, das sonst nirgends als nur in der Phantasie der Menschen, die sich diese Chimäre von den Priestern haben aufbinden lassen, sein zusammengelogenes Daseyn habe.’\textsuperscript{120} He criticises the weakness of the believers who allow themselves to be placed ‘in sklavischer Unterwürfigkeit,’\textsuperscript{121} and sees the whole system of religion as a political tool of oppression, ‘als des besten und leichtesten Mittels, sich das leichtgläubige Volk zu unterjochen.’\textsuperscript{122} This theme is emphasised in the sections of the \textit{Philosophische Betrachtung} which analyse the \textit{Système de la Nature}, a work which Schulz discusses in order to counter Mendelssohn’s attack – a ‘bodenloseste Verleumdung’ – on atheists.\textsuperscript{123} In answer to the charge that atheists act only according to ‘Eigennuz’, self-interest, Schulz affirms that all animals and humans are constantly doing so, and that religious people do the same.\textsuperscript{124}

The political use of religion, Schulz believes, has corrupted morals. He regards this as an inherent characteristic of organised religion, and on this basis

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{118} Schulz, \textit{Erweis}, p. 309.
\item \textsuperscript{119} Schulz, \textit{Erweis}, p. 66.
\item \textsuperscript{120} Schulz, \textit{Erweis}, p. 190.
\item \textsuperscript{121} Schulz, \textit{Erweis}, p. 200.
\item \textsuperscript{122} Schulz, \textit{Erweis}, p. 192.
\item \textsuperscript{123} Schulz, \textit{Philosophische}, p. 51. See above, p. 170-71.
\item \textsuperscript{124} Schulz, \textit{Philosophische}, p. 203.
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advocates the complete separation of morality from theology, pleading for a secular system of morality, disconnected from political control. Religious belief can continue, but must remain a ‘Privatsache’ without state interference.\textsuperscript{125} Schulz’s central argument is that reasoned moral systems must be derived independently of religious thought. He views the \textit{Système de la Nature}’s notion of ‘Energie der Natur’ as a better basis for morality than notions of divinity. He pronounces an atheist morality to be superior to the blinding effects of a religious morality, arguing:

\begin{quote}
\noindent \textit{daß eine vernünftige Moral überhaupt von Religionsbekenntnissen unabhängig sei, daß je mehr Ansehen eine Religion in der Gesellschaft an sich gerissen habe und behaupte, desto weniger eine wohlthätige Moral neben jener aufkommen könne und daß, je bündiger der Atheismus sei, eine desto reinere vortrefflichere und bündigere Moral auch zu erwarten stehe.}\textsuperscript{126}
\end{quote}

Schulz, as a pastor, was not absolute in his dismissal of religion, understanding its positive aspects. Yet he sees that these can be achieved without religion, replacing them with other forms of community. The crux of his argument is that the state should not interfere in religious affairs. Whatever the intention of the state is in meddling in beliefs, it should resist the temptation to intervene: ‘Der Staat kann keine positive Religion anbefehlen.’\textsuperscript{127} In his concluding remarks, Schulz points out that politics and religion have become enmeshed in the interest of furthering the aims of both parties, mutually supporting their respective institutions.\textsuperscript{128} In summary, Schulz uses his reading of the \textit{Système de la Nature} and other French materialist texts to buttress his own refutation of Mendelssohn, and defend atheism. He also goes further by criticizing \textit{ancien régime} power structures, employing the arguments of French materialists. This case of cultural transfer shows that radical use was made of d’Holbach’s texts in Germany. By following d’Holbach’s transition from natural sciences to social criticism, Schulz’s path is similar to that of the psychologist Hißmann.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[125] Schulz, \textit{Erweis}, p. 77 and passim.
\item[126] Schulz, \textit{Philosophische}, pp. 201-2.
\item[127] Schulz, \textit{Philosophische}, p. 233.
\end{footnotes}
Hißmann

Hißmann adopted a materialist morality, based on his reading of French materialists. His *Anleitung zur Kenntniss der auserlesenen Litteratur in allen theilen der Philosophie* (1778) lists d’Holbach’s anonymous *La Morale Universelle* (1776) as a source. Under this reference, the German philosopher comments: ‘Je mehr der philosophische Moralist die Verbindlichkeit zur Befolgung seiner Vorschriften von theologischen Gründen d.h. von von Rücksichten auf das Daseyn Gottes, und auf die Unsterblichkeit der Seele, unabhängig macht, desto vollkommener ist sein philosophisches System.’

So Hißmann argues, in the manner of materialists, for the separation of theology and morality, a position he derives from the natural sciences, viewing the physiology of man – sometimes considered as a ‘Maschiene’ – in the manner of La Mettrie and Diderot: ‘Aber der Philosoph müßte Arzt, und der Arzt Philosoph seyn.’

To support his argument, Hißmann writes in his *Psychologische Versuche* that theoretically derived morality systems are ineffective, based as they are on notions of ‘künftige Strafe,’ from which he diagnoses religion’s inefficacy, its ‘Inconsequenz.’ Hißmann adopts French materialist arguments that it is society which has created and defined vice and virtue – the notions are ‘vergesellschaftet.’

He also mounts a defence of atheism, against Mendelssohn, and against theologians, particularly in the opening to the *Briefe über die Gegenstände der Philosophie* (1778), where he labels them ‘Väter der Barberei.’ The oppressive environment created by religion has hindered philosophical progress. Who, asks Hißmann, can deny dogma, ‘ohne verdammt zu werden?’ This state of unchallenged, enforced falsehood leads to corruption.

131 Hißmann, *Psychologische*, p. 22.
133 Hißmann, *Psychologische*, p. 73.
137 Hißmann, *Psychologische*, p. 15.
Religion, with its morality predicated on reward and punishment, is slavery: ‘Hinsicht auf ewige Strafe oder Lohn fesselt und macht Sklaven.’ Regardless of religious belief, people are impelled to act virtuously because virtue is a guarantee of happiness: ‘so müste ich doch tugendhaft seyn; denn ich will glücklich seyn. Tugend ist für mich liebenswürdig, ohne Rücksicht auf Lohn und Strafe.’ Defining virtue as for and of itself can be traced back through the French materialists to Pierre Bayle’s writings on the paradox of the virtuous atheist and the unvirtuous Christian. Section 117 of the *Anleitung* constitutes a rehabilitation of atheists, whose virtue is defended by Hißmann: ‘Die meisten, die sich von der Partei der Gottesverehrer absonderten, waren rechtschaffene, gute Menschen. Die Moral fällt auch in der Tat nicht mit der Lehre von Gott dahin […] Von allen Seiten betrachtet, erscheint der Atheist nicht so schwarz, wie er nach dem ersten Gemälde abscheulich ist.’ This separation of morality from a divinity is used to show that it is not religion which determines the behaviour of humans. There are, for Hißmann, ‘sehr aufgeklärte Gottesläugner’ who can behave just as well as a believer in a ‘einen höchsten Weltschöpfer’. Conversely, there is also the example of the ‘unausgebildete[r] Atheisten,’ whom ‘sein theoretischer Unglaube gewiß zu den abscheulichsten Ungerechtigkeiten und Schandthaten verleiten kann.’ This comparison shows the lack of a link between belief and behaviour. Consequently, Hißmann advocates the use of a secular legal framework, informed by natural sciences (above all those offering insight into human physiology and psychology), as the way to achieve a well-functioning society. There is a clear political aspect to Hißmann’s conclusion: ‘Die Moral fällt auch in der That mit der Lehre von Gott nicht dahin.’ Hißmann’s writings show clear evidence that the French materialist writings were subject to intensive reading and substantial support in Germany (see above, p. 112-17 and 164-

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139 Ibid.
141 Hißmann, *Anleitung*, p. 284. That is, for the function of morality, Christianity is the same as deist belief.
142 Ibid. 
143 This was first established by Pierre Bayle, *Pensées diverses sur la comète*, pp. 307-308, who states that ‘la foi que l’on a pour une religion n’est pas la règle de la conduite de l’homme,’ (§143). He also takes up this theme in the title of §176: ‘Que l’homme ne règle pas sa vie sur ses opinions,’ (p. 370). D’Holbach quotes §143 in the *Système*, II, 375.
Hißmann was not alone in his stringent secularism, as the political writings of Heinrich Friedrich Diez will show.

**Diez**

Diez, the great collector of philosophical *clandestina*, and reader of French materialists, also adopted some of the strategies of La Mettrie, Diderot, Helvétius, and d’Holbach. In illustrating this reception, Diez echoes La Mettrie by denying that there is a stable, universal meaning of moral, or virtue: ‘Das Wort Moralisch wird so vermischt gebraucht, daß man nach den Gesprächen der Welt nicht weiß, welchen Begriff man ihm geben soll […] Tugend oder Laster sind […] wieder unbestimmt.’

Highlighting a criticism repeatedly made by the empiricist French materialists, Diez takes aim at abstract ideas and reasoning: ‘Wie den auch die metaphysische Compendien in vielen Lehrsätzen bezeugen, daß abstractum das genennet werde, dessen Concreta nicht zu finden sind.’ The critique of theological teachings as playing with abstract ideas is, as we have seen, a leitmotif of French materialism as represented by Diderot, La Mettrie and d’Holbach.

Diez, echoing La Mettrie and d’Holbach, claims that we cannot overcome the passions: ‘der gepriesene Sieg über Leidenschaften ist eine Chimäre.’ The passions are also defended as having a function in the moral system of nature: ‘Leidenschaften haben in der sittlichen Natur ihren Grund.’ The passions are divided into three categories, ‘Eigennuss’, ‘Wollust’ and ‘Ehrgeiz’. This mirrors the French materialist terms of debate *intérêt personnel*, *volupté* and *réputation*. Diez elevates self-interest to an ultimate infallible value: ‘Der Eigennuzze in seinem Wesen, da er sich mit der feinen Selbstliebe verbindet, hat nichts fehlerhaftes. Sein Gesetz ist: Der Mensch suche Vollkommenheiten, die ihn vergnügen und ihm nützen, und so wird das Leben mit allen Erfordernissen in seiner Dauer erhalten.’

Though Diez states nature to be the basis of his philosophy and, in the manner of La Mettrie and d’Holbach, considers nature to be eternal and self-regulating, nature is

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146 Diez, *Beobachtungen*, p. 29.
149 Diez, *Beobachtungen*, p. 41.
not the source of morality in the sense of natural law – it is human societies which must create social laws. Universal laws derived from the providence of revealed religion are rejected because laws must be made by people: ‘Die Natur ist ewig, aber sie weiß nichts von sittlichen Gesetzen. Nur ihre Bürger schaffen dergleichen, und zwar nach Verschiedenheit der Personen und Erdstriche. So vielfach die Gesellschaften, so vielfach und modifikabel sind die Gesetze der Natur.’

This relativist position on morality is reminiscent of La Mettrie’s relativist arguments, which are based on the variety of customs and the evolving state of moral systems across different continents. It is a rejection of a universal natural law. For, asks Diez, ‘wo sollen denn die natürlichen Gesetze herkommen, denen man sich einmüthig untergeben würde?’

Though the title of his work, Der Stand der Natur, could be influenced by d’Holbach’s Système de la Nature, Diez seems to have followed La Mettrie more closely than d’Holbach here. Where La Mettrie’s potential influence becomes more pronounced is in Diez’s discussion of ‘Wollust’: ‘Wir sind zu schwach, über unsre Bedürfnisse zu herrschen. Dies sind die Stützen aller Wollüste, die unser Jahrhundert so ausnehmend bezeichnen.’

The reference to the century being characterised by ‘Wollüste’, though an exaggeration, may well be an allusion to La Mettrie’s ‘volupté’.

Humans have desires which naturally conflict with religion: ‘Ihr [humans’] Hauptgegenstand, die Wollust, ist gerade so beschaffen, daß er der religiösen Ehrbarkeit oder vielmehr der Gottseligkeit so ganz widerstreitet.’ This consideration of marriage and sexual pleasure perhaps suggests a reading of La Mettrie, and is posited on a physiological understanding of the urges of man, which are viewed as incompatible with religious teaching. Diez therefore advocates removing religious controls on the passions, and allowing for civil, secular laws to legislate for human behaviour. The kinship between his opinions and those of French materialists adds weight to efforts to highlight the existence of a radical strand within the generally conservative Aufklärung, by accounting for the reception of radical foreign texts, which had their German followers.

150 Diez, Der Stand der Natur (1775), DFS, pp. 129-30.
151 Diez, Stand, p. 130.
152 Diez, Stand, p. 135.
In the more politically oriented *Apologie der Duldung u. Preßfreiheit* (1781), Diez also attempts to sideline the Church, and his writings on nature and morality acquire a moderately anticlerical stance: ‘Die Religion, wie sie jetzt ist, kann nicht als eine Staatssache betrachtet werden, weil ihre Lehren und ihr Gottesdienst nicht zum bürgerlichen Gesetz gemacht sind. Sie ist ein bloß moralisches Institut.’ In the course of his defence of a free press, which clearly adopts the position of wishing to spread Enlightenment, and advocating public engagement in philosophy, Diez pleads for liberty of conscience and the press. He relegates religion to a simple matter of opinion, which hence deserves no reverence:

Religion, wie sie seit Jahrhunderten in Deutschland gestanden hat, ist weiter nichts, als eine philosophische Meinung. Und in Meinungssachen kann der Staat oder das Volk von Mitbürgern oder Fremden keine Ehrfurcht fordern, weil jeder selbst für seine Meinungen haften muß.

The prevailing system of *cuius regio, eius religio*, inherited from the Peace of Westphalia, imposed one state-endorsed religion on each principality. This leads Diez to point out that a variety of (competing or conflicting) beliefs can inhibit a shared social sphere, and that laws and the definitions of virtue must therefore be secular: ‘Religion und Tugend aber haben unter einander keine Gemeinschaft.’ This would have been an immensely controversial statement to put forward, but one which French materialists had long since advocated. An article reviewing Diez’s *Apologie*, published in a journal linked to the radical Dessau-based group of ‘Gelehrte’, echoed Diez’s sentiment: ‘Selbst Atheismus verdirbt die Sitten nicht.’ This acceptance of the possibility of virtuous atheism illustrates the effectiveness of Diez’s publication strategy, and also indicates a constellation of like-minded thinkers, keen to support this drive for the political implementation of a materialist morality.

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156 Ibid.
Diez, who admits Helvétius’s influence on his ideas, quotes from the German translation of *De l’homme* at length, from a section where a virtuous atheist arrives in heaven to the great confusion of the gatekeeper, the apostle St. Peter, who tells the virtuous man that he may enter, and may choose his place next to those who seem the most reasonable. This lightly parodistic parable is an example of Diez’s general chiding of the church, encouraged by his reading of French materialists. In an article about marriage, which Diez claims should be a wholly secular institution, he accuses the Church of constantly interfering in domains beyond its remit: ‘Die Heiligkeit der Ehe (in kirchlicher Bedeutung) gehört zu den lächerlichsten Dingen, die der Mensch ersonnen hat. Der Kirche muß man es verzeihen, daß sie sich in die Ehe gemischt hat, denn es war immer ihre Art, um sich zu greifen.’ Diez embraced the materialist call for the instruments of civil society to control and channel human urges, and this in the absence of religion: ‘Der Staat kann den Unglauben so gut nutzen wie die Religion. Es kommt alles auf die Kunst an, die Menschen nach ihren Gesinnungen zu regieren.’

The similarity of views, given the references to Helvétius and the library of French texts Diez possessed, cannot be dismissed as coincidence. Diez is resolutely secular in his outlook, defining virtue along the social lines common to all materialists:


This accusation of hypocrisy levelled at the Church is underlined when Diez, though respecting a Christian position, denies the superior virtue of the believer and insists

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that a non-believer such as himself can be equally virtuous: ‘Ich ehre gleichwohl die Tugend redlicher Christen, ob ich gleich fühle, daß ihre Tugend, was soll ichs verschweigen! um keinen Grad höher ist, als die meinige.’\(^{162}\) It would appear that for Diez, as for Helvétius, the key to the good functioning of a society is education: ‘Die Erziehung ist es, welche den natürlichen Menschen bildet.’\(^{163}\) This kinship of outlook with the author of De l’Esprit, a French text that was widely diffused, both in the original and in translation, demonstrates that there was significant interest in French materialist ideas on morality in the German Enlightenment. Diez, in correspondence with Jakob Mauvillon, admitted his stance as a materialist: ‘Meine Meinung ist natürlicherweise Materialismus, doch letzterer von ganz besonderer Art.’\(^{164}\) That Diez, in private at least, admits his materialism (albeit qualified) is evidence of a constellation of German materialists, of which Spazier, a Dessau resident, was also a part.

**Spazier**

Spazier, who endorsed French materialist ideas when countering Mendelssohn’s support for the immortality of the soul, also embraced ideas of secular morality, defined on a materialist basis. Born in Berlin in 1761, Spazier was an orphan raised in a Pietist environment, before studying philosophy and theology at Halle. It is very much a philosophical form of reasoning that he applies to the notions of morality. Spazier announces at the start of his *Antiphädon* (1785) that he aims to show the link between a materialist understanding of the soul on one hand and morality and happiness on the other: ‘Mein Hauptzweck darin soll der sein zu zeigen, […] wie weit von der Überzeugung dieser Wahrheiten [of the simplicity and immortality of the soul] unsere Moralität, unsere Ruhe und Glückseligkeit abhängt.’\(^{165}\) As seen in the previous chapter, Spazier rejects the notion of an immaterial and immortal soul. Following this, he adopts a materialist morality. Yet in doing so, Spazier is careful not to incense the religious authorities. Moreover, Spazier uses a range of arguments against existing moral systems, drawn from

\(^{162}\) Diez, *Apologie*, p. 191.

\(^{163}\) Diez, Vortheile Geheimer Gesellschaften für die Welt (Halle: Carl Hermann Hemmerde, 1772), DFS, p. 20.

\(^{164}\) Diez, letter to Mauvillon, 16 October 1773, *Mauvillons Briefwechsel*, p. 79.

\(^{165}\) Spazier, *Antiphädon*, p. 33.
reason and logic, rather than for a new morality derived from the consequences of belief in a material soul. In this way, Spazier admits the comfort of believing in an immortal soul, though ultimately sees it as damaging:

Und in der Tat bin ich schon längst auf dem Wege gewesen zu glauben, daß der Glaube an eine ewige Fortdauer – so beseeligend er auch in gewissen Lagen und Umständen für einen einzelnen Menschen sein kann – doch dem menschlichen Geschlecht überhaupt wirklich nicht den Nutzen verschaft hat, den man von ihm erwarten sollte; daß er vielmehr demselben in mancher Hinsicht schädlich gewesen ist.\textsuperscript{166}

This quotation thus makes a concession to religious belief in that it deems it calming and comforting. However, Spazier then shows that this comfort is damaging because it leads to people not living for the present on earth: ‘der Mensch lies bei der Aussicht einer grenzenlosen Ewigkeit, die er vor sich hingezaubert fand, zu viel Zeit in diesem Leben verloren gehen, die er besser hätte anwenden konnen.’\textsuperscript{167} Thus the belief in immortality is damaging for morality: ‘die Moralität hat nicht wenig darunter gelitten.’\textsuperscript{168} The criticism of belief in the immortality of the soul develops into a criticism of the institutions of religion. As discussed in the previous chapter, Spazier claims that belief in immortal souls and in the role of a transcendent God in regulating human behaviour means that human systems of regulation are powerless: ‘Dem Lasterhaften wurde das Laster darum weniger schreklich, weil er seine Reue bis auf das Sterbebette verschieben [konnte].’\textsuperscript{169} Spazier’s argument shows that morality should not be erected on the basis of reward in an afterlife, as this negates the morality of a virtuous act. If one acts virtuously only for a promised reward, the intention to act virtuously for the sake of virtue is negated. Spazier’s comments thus show that the critique of religious moral systems by French materialists was taken up by German critics of religious ideas.

Indeed, Spazier takes aim at the defenders of religious ideas in Germany. Mendelssohn, the principal target of the \textit{Antiphädon}, is joined by Albrecht von

\textsuperscript{166} Spazier, \textit{Antiphädon}, p. 47.
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid.
Haller in being criticised by Spazier. Haller, referred to mockingly as the ‘große und unsterbliche Haller’ (he died in 1777!), is criticised as a member of the ‘establishment’ which wants at all costs to prove the immortality of the soul, in order to retain the existing moral teachings, for fear that any concession to materialism would immediately bring about the collapse of civilisation. Spazier considers Haller’s scientific undertakings flawed because of their motivation to prove immateriality, ‘[d]a vollends die Furcht vor schädlichen Folgen für die Moral und für die Lehre von der Bestimmung des Menschen – eine Lehre, die unter die wichtigsten, praktischsten und schwersten gehört – sich mit einmische.’

Spazier refashions materialist logic and arguments into a form designed to be acceptable to German Aufklärer. He turns anticlerical and radical, militant ideas into a plea for a more reasoned public sphere, which would allow individuals to hold their own beliefs, as long as they conform to all aspects of secular morality. Spazier’s later works all continue in this direction. The review in the Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek of the first of these titles praises the work as ‘wirksame Mittel wider zunehmende Irreligion und Unmoralität in Vorschlag zu bringen.’ Yet in the book, Spazier does not readily accept the thesis of declining religiosity or increasing immorality, or indeed the link between the two. There is no evident influence of French materialism in these later works. Indeed, after using the ideas of French materialists in the Antiphädon and integrating them into his own thought, Spazier tends to head gradually back towards religion, finding a unique position where he claims to be promoting religious belief whilst all the same making consistently secular arguments. He allows for secular morality which is compatible with private belief and Church-based community. As such, though Spazier definitely embraces radically secular morality based on materialist premises, he sees the only way of advancing these ideas is within the confines of the Protestant environment, not outside of the establishment. Spazier is no acolyte of militant French anticlericalism. Instead, he employs materialist ideas in the German context with the aim of refining

170 Spazier, Antiphädon, p. 93.
171 Spazier, Antiphädon, p. 162-63.
172 Spazier, Freymüthige Gedanken über die Gottesverehrungen der Protestanten (Gotha: Ettinger, 1788), Versuch einer kurzen und faßlichen Darstellung der teleologischen Principien (Neuwied: 1791); Das Theater der Religionen, oder Apologie des Heidenthums (Athen [Leipzig] 1791).
religion and rationalising belief, in order to separate the spheres of private and public reason. This strategy stands in stark contrast to another example of German reception of French materialism, Karl von Knoblauch.

**Knoblauch**

Knoblauch, who as we saw in previous chapters was not such an advocate of compromise as Spazier was, adopted materialist ideas on morality in relation to physiology, man’s sociability and the dependent social determinism of personal interest, the necessity of secular legislation, and a defence of atheism. Crucially for the thesis that this is a result of cultural transfer, Knoblauch quotes all four of our French materialists on these matters.

As noted above, Knoblauch quotes La Mettrie’s contention that ‘le matérialisme est l’antidote de la misanthropie’ in his own translation in *Das graue Ungeheuer*. Yet he adopts a rhetorical strategy when doing this: ‘La Mettrie war ein Narr. Man kann seinem System nicht Beifall geben. Aber hatte er eben Unrecht wenn er sagt, Materialism sei das Gegengift der Misanthropie?’.

Knoblauch attempts to gain some support for his position, in agreement with La Mettrie, by appealing to what all ‘reasonable’ people think, i.e. that La Mettrie was an idiot. Strangely enough, in the first volume of the *Hyperboreische Briefe* one year later, Knoblauch, again quoting La Mettrie, writes: ‘La Mettrie, der nicht immer ein Narr war […]’. This could be considered a campaign to slowly rehabilitate the scandalous French doctor’s legacy.

In regard to morality, the strongest influence on Knoblauch was Helvétius, as Mondot has noted. The principle of personal interest was endorsed by Knoblauch, in full recognition of the role played by Helvétius in promoting the idea: ‘Die Religionisten werfen oft den Philosophen das System des Eigennutzes vor, dessen Apostel Helvetius war.’ *Intérêt personnel* and *amour de soi* are both terms used (in their German translations) by Knoblauch, with direct reference to Helvétius:

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174 [Knoblauch], ‘No title’, *Das graue Ungeheuer*, XI (1787), 161.
175 [Knoblauch], ‘Wahrmund an Wißlieb’ *Hyperboreische Briefe*, I (1788), 131.
177 [Knoblauch], ‘No title’, *Das graue Ungeheuer*, VIII (1786), 288.
‘Man hat Rochefoucault und Helvet deklamiert, weil sie Eigenliebe zum Ressort der moralischen Welt machten, wie Bewegung die Seele der physischen ist.’

Knoblauch explains that this theory has been misunderstood. Those opposing the theory of personal interest have apparently argued it means that any act of goodwill towards a fellow man is in fact a sacrifice, thus allegedly disproving the theory because people do not always act in their own (immediate) interest. Thus, for critics, ‘die Erhabenheit des zärtlichsten Wohlwollens gegen Andere’ is dismissed as ‘die Aufopferung des Lebens für Andere, welche die uneigennützigste Handlung zu seyn scheint.’

Yet Knoblauch rejects this position, pointing out that this argument is put forward in the self-interest of the religious believers who oppose Helvétius’s ideas. That is, by refuting the idea, apologists were conforming to it, by privileging their own personal interests.

Knoblauch follows Helvétius in wanting to shape personal interest and the passions to promote virtue in all humans, leading to a harmonious utilitarian society. In agreement with all the materialists we have studied, Knoblauch sees that passions cannot be destroyed: ‘Zernichte können unsere Gesetzgeber unsre Leidenschaften nicht, wohl aber – unter gewißen Bedingungen – ihnen eine veränderte, dem Endzweck der Societät angemessene Richtung geben.’

This is precisely the argument made by the French materialists, particularly d’Holbach and Helvétius, as noted. The passions cannot be overcome. However, the instruments of society can be directed to promote the happiness and safety of all. After all, given that sociability is considered as a constituent value of humans, personal (private) interest is seen to be indivisible from public interest: ‘unser Privatinteresse läßt sich vom öffentlichen Interesse nicht trennen.’

This yoking together of personal and public interest, in a mutually beneficial cooperation, is exactly the type of constitutive sociability to be found in the texts of d’Holbach and Helvétius.

178 [Knoblauch], ‘No title’, Das graue Ungeheuer, VIII (1786), 325.
179 [Knoblauch], ‘No title’, Das graue Ungeheuer, VIII (1786), 325. On the next page, Knoblauch uses Goethe’s Die Leiden des jungen Werther to show that all actions, including suicide, are in the person’s interest, as ending his own life allowed Werther to escape pain and suffering.
180 [Knoblauch], ‘No title’, Das graue Ungeheuer, IX (1786), 201.
181 [Knoblauch], ‘No title’, Das graue Ungeheuer, IX (1786), 214.
Knoblauch’s influences and sources are varied. He is not simply an acolyte of French materialists. He often discusses Hobbes, Hume, Spinoza and others. Yet his positions and style show his interest and embrace of French materialism. In *Das graue Ungeheuer*, he translated thought nine of Diderot’s *Pensées philosophiques*:

Nach dem Gemälde, welches man mir vom höchsten Wesen macht, nach seinem Hang zum Zorn, zur Strenge, zur Rache [...] Man würde ruhig genug in dieser Welt seyn, wenn man nur versichert wäre, daß man in der andern Nichts zu fürchten hat. Der Gedanke, daß kein Gott ist, hat nie Jemand erschrekt, wol aber der Gedanke, daß es einen giebt, so wie man ihn mir schildert.\footnote{[Knoblauch], ‘An das graue Ungeheuer’, *Das graue Ungeheuer*, XII (1787), 263.}

He then makes it clear that Diderot is a great thinker who should be followed and admired. The dialogue continues with a rhetorical question: ‘Hat dein und mein Freund Diderot Unrecht, mein Liebchen? Du bist zu klug, um nicht eben so zu denken, wie Er – zu naif, um nicht zu sagen, wie du denkst.’\footnote{Ibid.} Knoblauch thus says Diderot is right: ideas of an afterlife decided by God can only deform life on earth. Knoblauch uses Diderot’s name as an act of rhetoric, to convey radicalism.

Knoblauch argues that there is no reason to expect rules to be provided by the transcendental sources of revealed religion. Just as the laws of mathematics can be discovered, so too can universal morality: ‘haben wir die Algeber erfinden können, ohne daß uns die Götter sie lehrten, so konnten wir auch den Kateschism der socialen Pflichten schreiben, die Maximen der Moral entdecken, ohne daß ein Gott uns dort die Feder führte, und uns hier die Kenntnis des Rechts und Unrechts einblies.’\footnote{[Knoblauch], ‘No title’, *Das graue Ungeheuer*, IX (1786), 214.} Ignoring religious morality and developing secular laws is part of Knoblauch’s rejection of religion. Moreover, inspired by Helvétius, he defends the argument of the superior efficacy of secular legislators and systems of rewards and punishments: ‘Haben, fragt Helvétius, die Maréchaussées nicht mehr Räuber und Mörder entwaffnet als die Religion?’\footnote{[Knoblauch], ‘Meine Dames und Herren’, *Hyperboreische Briefe*, IV (1789), 310.} Here, Knoblauch uses Helvétius as a figure.
of authority, thus modifying his standing in German philosophy, attempting to rehabilitate him from earlier controversy.

The pragmatism of arguments about efficacy is also reflected in Knoblauch’s style by his use of rhetorical strategies to make his point. Where Knoblauch has elsewhere argued strongly against theological teachings, he seemingly mimics a religious voice in a dialogue in the *Hyperboreische Briefe* in 1789. This is a surprising use of anonymity. He can adopt and refute the same ideas in different writings without being accused of inconsistency. When considering his writings historically, we can see that this eclectic approach is part of a consistent overall strategy of attacking the role of organised religion in society. Knoblauch systematically wrote about different topics as part of a guerrilla attack on the edifice of the eighteenth-century German religious establishment. Knoblauch claims not to doubt the truth of religion: ‘Die Wahrheit der theologischen Lehre bezweifle ich nicht. Sie ist [...] gründlich bewiesen worden.’ This disingenuous avowal of faith is not only contradicted by his other texts, but by the terms he lays out in this same article. This dialectic working out of problems is suited to the dialogue form Knoblauch often uses. His concern here, he writes, is simply the effect of religion on society. Yet to set out his case, he takes the theologians’ argument about growing irreligion and uses it against them: ‘Nur vom politischen Nuzen ist die Frage. Nichts kan meines Erachtens gegründeter seyn, als die Klagen unserer Geistlichen über den wenigen Eindruck, den die geheiligten Lehren der Religion auf die Gemüter des größern Theils machen.’ So religion is making no impact on most people. Knoblauch parodies the complaints of theologians about declining religiosity, but is in fact arguing that secular morality is much more effective:

In dem Laufe seines unruhvollen Lebens, bei der steten Sorgfalt für seinen zeitlichen Nuzen [...] denkt der Mensch freilich nur selten an Gott und Ewigkeit. Es ist gewiß, und die Erfahrung beweist es, leider,

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187 Ibid.
Adopting the sarcastic and parodying style of d’Holbach’s *Théologie portative*, Knoblauch consistently makes the case for a secular and atheistic morality which understands man as a material, social being. Mondot has noted some instances of Knoblauch’s use of such rhetorical strategies, labelling them ‘précautions oratories, des prudences rhétoriques destinées à désarmer d’éventuels censeurs.’ Yet as we have shown, adopting the voice of a theologian is also a dialectical strategy, devised not in order to argue seriously for faith, but to underline the contradictions of the theological position. Otto Finger has pointed out the similarity of the effect of Knoblauch’s writings to that produced by the writings of the French atheists: ‘Wir lernen mit den Schriften Knoblauchs bis zu einem gewissen Grade eine deutsche Parallele zur französischen atheistischen Publizistik des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts kennen.’ Indeed, they constitute not only a parallel to, but are strongly influenced by the writings of the French materialists. It is above all d’Holbach’s anonymous publication campaign which inspires Knoblauch, though he draws on all four French materialists studied here.

**Provisional conclusion**

Whaley has rejected a persistent idée reçue that German public debate before 1789 was ‘unpolitical’. The research which we present here supports Whaley’s position in a number of ways, showing that radical support for, and use of, French materialists, aimed very much at political ends, particularly with regard to moral systems and the critique of the control exerted by power structures like the Church and the monarchy. The reception of French materialist thought on morality, secular laws and the possibility of virtuous atheism led some enthusiasts of these writings to advocate political and social change in Germany. They discussed the role of the state

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188 [Knoblauch], ‘Kallisthen’, *Hyperboreische Briefe*, v (1789), 253.
191 Whaley, *Germany*, i, 493.
in implementing laws and challenging the hegemony of the Church and monarchy in setting codes of conduct.

Despite the differences between the moral systems of La Mettrie, Diderot, Helvétius and d’Holbach, their shared materialist secular basis unites them in opposition to moral systems based on religion which were firmly established across Europe. Their theories are all based on a physiological understanding of man and the ultimate aim of human life being happiness. This can be achieved only by virtuous means, mostly defined as not harming other humans’ freedom to pursue happiness.

German reviews of French materialists generally criticised them for ignoring religious teaching, for viewing man as self-interested, and for their understanding of pleasure and pain as mechanistic. Yet Schulz, the Prussian priest, demonstrates an understanding of d’Holbach’s attack on all forms of religion and affirms d’Holbach’s view of the role of priests as corrupters of man. Hißmann’s embrace of sensualism, derived from Helvétius and La Mettrie, leads to a more politically-oriented rehabilitation of atheism and the expression of his preference for a secularized version of virtue. Knoblauch, developing his materialist conception of man, conducted an anonymous publishing campaign consisting of attacks on religion, heavily featuring French materialist ideas of morality (sociability, self-interest, anticlericalism) and aimed at undermining the hold of religion on eighteenth-century German society and politics. The complete separation of religion and virtue advocated by all four French materialists is understood and repeated by Diez, Hißmann, Schulz, Spazier and Knoblauch alike, each further spreading the ideas of the French thinkers in Germany.
**Conclusion**

On the basis of the research presented in this thesis, it would be easy to overstate the extent of support for the materialist ideas of La Mettrie, Diderot, Helvétius and d’Holbach in eighteenth-century Germany. It must be acknowledged that we have investigated a particular set of German thinkers who *did* seek to support materialism. As stated from the outset, this thesis deals with the peripheries of German philosophy and publishing. German university teaching was not suddenly transformed into a hotbed of materialism. Canonical philosophers did not declare their admiration for the boldness of the author of the *Système de la Nature*. Indeed, they largely condemned such works, and guarded the ‘public sphere’ against them. Yet there was interest in the writings of French materialists, at all levels of the reading public, including aristocrats (Knoblauch, Diez), a university professor (Hißmann), a pastor (Schulz), and a private tutor (Spazier).

As regards the aims set out in the introduction, the first objective of mapping the bibliographical basis of transfer has been fulfilled. This reveals a German book trade which offered access to a whole range of controversial French philosophy, often in the French original and in German translation. Booksellers in Holland and Switzerland were keen to trade with German traders, and fair catalogues, bookseller inventories, sales catalogues, private library catalogues and correspondence all reveal a healthy supply of French-language books in Germany. The research conducted into German translations of French materialist writers reveals that, after a slow start, increasing interest created a market of readers impatient to acquire the latest scandalous French texts as news of burnings and bans in Paris travelled fast. The apparatus of the German book trade developed from commercialising an occasional work of French philosophy (complete with a preface justifying such an action), to a situation where controversial writers were almost systematically translated in the 1760s and 1770s. We have even found a previously unattributed translation of d’Holbach’s *Théologie portative*, the anonymous German *Theologische Charlatanerien*.

The publishing environment in Germany displays a number of ambiguities. The journal reactions show a willingness to engage openly with materialist texts, in
order to (attempt to) refute them on substantial matters. There were even some translations published, with accompanying refutations, as with Diderot’s *Pensées philosophiques*. The likes of Formey, Siegmund Baumgarten, Nicolai, even Haller, were keen for French texts to be discussed, on condition that they were shown to be wrong on matters of the mind-body problem and the immortality of the soul. Yet they were also keen to label these views as dangerous and vilify the proponents, rhetorically excluding them from ‘respectable’ learning. However, the research presented here also shows that such marginalisation led to increased diffusion, and that texts benefited from this discussion.

What we have termed ‘mainstream’ German philosophy, the Leibnizio-Wolffian tradition and even crypto-deist philosophers like Reimarus and Lessing, was not supportive of materialist writings by *philosophes* embroiled in scandal. Even so, the cultural transfer of these French writers created a situation which modified the contours of German debate. Reimarus and other proponents of natural religion were forced into (or took advantage of) distancing their own ideas from these materialist ideas, potentially destructive of any religion, in order to consolidate their own reforming position. Neologians, as we saw, were keen to protect their own moderate reforms of theology, given its divergence from orthodox teachings. Thus they demarcated themselves from such scandalous views as materialism, and impeded the positive reception of Helvétius’s writings, for example. Mendelssohn too, though he sometimes denies having read the French materialists, acknowledged the increasing prominence of materialist ideas in Germany, and was at pains to defend immaterial ideas of mind, the soul’s immortality, and the necessity of religion for moral life.

We have analysed four key pillars of materialist thought in the writings of La Mettrie, Diderot, Helvétius and d’Holbach. By concentrating on common ideas, we have been able to isolate philosophical and moral principles which materialists adhered to. In turn, we have shown how each of these aspects was debated in Germany, and how a group of German marginal figures appropriated these ideas for their own writings. Chronologically, this uptake is surprising. This group of Germans were particularly active from the mid-1770s, long after the death of La
Mettrie and the controversy of Diderot’s early writings. Helvétius’s death in 1771 was no barrier to the diffusion of his ideas in the decades which followed. The constellation of thinkers who embraced materialism was able to read the French ideas years after the publication of their writings because of the continued scandal surrounding them.

The individual French authors had differing fortunes. Helvétius, it seems, was more easily rehabilitated, treated more as a scientific thinker than the provocative La Mettrie and d’Holbach. Diderot, it must be acknowledged, was not as consistent an influence on the materialism of German readers as others, since the mass of texts upon which modern scholars rely to reconstitute his materialism remained unpublished in his lifetime. Yet there are times when key notions are transferred from Diderot’s available texts, and cited as such. Knoblauch, by translating excerpts from Diderot, was a particularly active passéur, totally ignored by Mortier.

La Mettrie was utterly condemned. Despite the lack of a German translation of *L’Homme machine*, he was so anathematised that his name and ideas survived him. German philosophical discourse regularly mentioned him, and he was certainly not forgotten. When d’Holbach’s *Système de la Nature* encountered similar reactions in the 1770s, the anonymous author was compared to La Mettrie. Yet the cases of Spazier and Knoblauch show that there were efforts to engage seriously with La Mettrie’s work, and he clearly influenced a larger number of heretical thinkers. Hißmann’s ‘secret’ quotation of La Mettrie functioned as a metaphorical wink to like-minded thinkers. By quoting in French, and giving no attribution, Hißmann reveals himself only to a select few as a reader of La Mettrie. Moreover, he indicates the true intent of his work, which was to promote materialist understanding of man, and reorganise the workings of society accordingly.

Overall, materialism, considered as a coherent set of ideas and analysed across all four materialists, was an object of transfer which required German intellectuals to justify their own positions, which, in the case of Diez, Spazier, Schulz, Knoblauch and Hißmann, led to the embrace of materialism, often communicated in a convoluted, veiled way, in order to smuggle materialism into
their writings. This is why it has been useful to appeal to Straussian hermeneutics in our readings of the texts. By considering these German adopters of French materialism as writing under duress, it has been possible to explain the conditional clauses and the disingenuous, often satirical avowals of faith, as in Knoblauch. The question of the impact, in turn, of the writings of Schulz, Knoblauch, Spazier, Hißmann and Diez on public opinion is one which goes beyond the remit of this thesis. Yet the research presented here should inform future investigation of this potential impact. Reactions in periodicals to their writings would be a starting point.

The fact that the positive reception of materialism remained a largely marginal phenomenon says something about the structure of the ‘public’ sphere in Germany. Radicalism did exist in Germany, but it was rarely as militant as in France, despite Schulz and Knoblauch. Yet these isolated voices, all passeurs of French materialists, no doubt contributed to the crackdown on irreligious publishing enacted in the 1788 Wöllner edict. This edict can thus be considered an indirect result of the cultural transfer of French materialism to Germany.
Appendix

All titles are given as they appeared, with the original spelling and any typographical errors included. Where no author’s name appears outside square brackets, the work appeared anonymously. Where works are wrongly ascribed or anonymous, the actual author’s name appears in square brackets.

1. Bibliography of German translations of works by corpus of materialist French writers 1745-1789

For the works of Diderot, Helvétius, La Mettrie and d’Holbach, the reference in square brackets after each edition refers to the corresponding entry in David Adams’s *Bibliographie des œuvres de Denis Diderot 1739-1900*,¹ David Smith’s *Bibliography of the Writings of Helvétius*,² Roger Stoddard’s *Julien Offray de la Mettrie: A Bibliographical Inventory*,³ and Jeroom Vercruysse’s *Bibliographie descriptive des écrits du baron d’Holbach.*⁴ Any works without such a reference have been newly discovered and are held in libraries in Germany.

All works by, or ascribed to, Diderot, Helvétius, La Mettrie and d’Holbach, even if they do not adopt an overtly materialist position, are included in the list of translations published in German up to and including 1789 in order to show how the reputations of these writers developed, regardless of genre. The aim of this bibliography is to show the ways in which the German scholarly community would or could have known of the French writers under consideration.

This bibliography excludes the *Encyclopédie* as it was not solely Diderot’s work. However, separately published extracts and articles ascribed to Diderot are

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² David Smith, *Bibliography of the Writings of Helvétius* (Ferney-Voltaire: Centre international d’étude du XVIIIe siècle, 2001).
³ Roger E. Stoddard, *Julien Offray de La Mettrie, 1709-1751: A Bibliographical Inventory* (Cologne: Jürgen Dinter, 2000). Not all editions are to be found in this work, which Stoddard describes as an ‘inventory’ rather than a complete bibliography (p. 8).
The following titles are listed in chronological order with the aim of allowing the reader to track the progression of interest in these radical writers in Germany.

1747


1748

A2 [Diderot], *Die Philosophische Gedanken mit der Beyschrift: Dieser Fisch ist nicht vor alle*, trans. and ed. by J. Elsner (Halle: Gebauer, 1748) [PD20].

1750

A3 La Mettrie, *Die zu Boden gestürzte Maschine, oder glaubwürdige Nachricht von dem Leben und sonderbaren Ende des berühmten Arztes de La Mettrie* (Frankfurt, Leipzig: n.pub., 1750) [46].

1751

A4 [La Mettrie], *Die Kunst die Wollust zu empfinden aus dem Französischen des Herrn Alethejus Demetrius übersetzt. Mit einer französischen Zuschrift von dem Verfasser, an den Herrn Professor Haller in Göttingen. Et quibus ipsa modis tractetur blanda Voluptas*, trans. by J.L.J. Dedekind (Cythera [Braunschweig], Wolfenbüttel: Meißner, 1751) [53].

A5 La Mettrie, *De Lametherie… Gedanken über die Glückseligkeit* (Halle:

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3 For more on the destiny of the *Encyclopédie* in Germany, see David Adams, ‘Cosmopolitan Book Publishing: The Case of the *Encyclopédie*’, in *Enlightenment Cosmopolitanism*, ed. by Adams and Tihanov, pp. 73-92. Adams concludes ‘that anyone who did not have direct access to the work in French would have known only its aesthetic ideas, and very little of its political, theological or technical content’ (p. 87). Yet for those with access, like Wekhrlin and Knoblauch, it was cherished.
Schwetschke, 1751) [Fromm 14124].

A6 La Mettrie, Das höchste Gut oder des Herrn de la Mettrie Philosophische Gedanken über die Glückseligkeit (Frankfurt, Leipzig: n.pub., 1751) [52].


1756

A8 La Mettrie, Die Kunst, Wollust zu geniessen an Lucinden (Cöthen: n.pub., 1756).

1760

A9 Diderot, Das Theater des Herrn Diderot, trans. by G.E. Lessing, 2 vols (Berlin: Voß, 1760) [C11].

A10 Diderot, Der natürliche Sohn, oder die Proben der Tugend, trans. by G.E. Lessing (Hamburg: C.J. Spiering, 1760) [FN13].


1761

A12 Diderot, Der Hausvater. Ein Lustspiel (Nuremberg: Krauss, 1761) [PF77].

A13 Diderot, Der Hausvater. Ein Lustspiel (Hamburg: Spiering, 1761) [PF78].

1764

1766

A15 Diderot, Unterhaltungen von Herrn Diderot. Richardson's Ehregedächtnis, ed. by J.J. Eschenburg (Hamburg: Bock, 1766) [EB22].

A16 Diderot, Das Theater des Herrn Diderot, trans. by G.E. Lessing, 2 vols (Vienna: Tendler, 1766) [C12].

1767

A17 Boulanger [D’Holbach], Das durch seine Gebräuche aufgedeckte Alterthum. Oder critische Untersuchung der vornehmsten Meynungen, Ceremonien und Einrichtungen der verschiedenen Völker des Erdbodens in Religions- und bürgerlichen Sachen, trans. by J. C. Dähnert (Greifswald: Rösens, 1767) [1767 F1].

1768

A18 Diderot, Entretien sur les lettres, trans. by G.E. Lessing, in Hamburgische Dramaturgie (Hamburg: n.pub., 1768) [BI22].

1770

A19 Diderot, Der Hausvater. Ein Lustspiel (Vienna: J.D.E. Trattern, 1770) [PF81].

A20 Diderot, Der Hausvater. Ein Lustspiel, trans. by G.E. Lessing (Vienna: n.pub., n.d [after 1770]) [PF82].


1772


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7 This work was attributed to Diderot in the title, but in reality had nothing to do with him.
(Zurich: Orell, Gessner, Füssli, 1772) [DD33].

A23 Diderot, Moralische Erzählungen und Idyllen von Diderot und S. Gessner (Zurich: Orell, Gessner, Füssli, 1772) [DD34] (*Re-issue of A22).

A24 Diderot, Des Herrn Diderots Klagen über seinen alten Schlafrock (Karlsruhe: Macklot, 1772) [RB7].

1774


A26 Diderot, Philosophische Werke (Leipzig: Dyck, 1774) [B57].

A27 Diderot, Des Herrn Diderots Klagen über seinen alten Schlafrock (Karlsruhe: Macklot, 1774) [RB8] (*Re-issue of A24).

1775

A28 Diderot, Der natürliche Sohn, oder die Proben der Tugend (Leipzig: Büschel, 1775) [FN 14].

A29 Diderot, Der Hausvater. Ein Lustspiel (Münster: Perrenon 1775) [PF 83].

A30 Diderot, Erzählungen von Diderot (Karlsruhe: C.G. Schmieder, 1775) [DD35].

A31 Diderot, Erzählungen von Diderot (Karlsruhe: C.G. Schmieder, 1775) [DD36].

A32 Diderot, Erzählungen von Diderot (Reuttlingen: J.G. Fleischhauer, 1775) [DD37].

1776

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8 Published before the French version. See Mortier, Diderot, pp. 185-86.
9 The attribution to Helvétius’s father (Johann) in the title was a mistake that did not cause confusion over who had written the work.

A34 Diderot, *Der Hausvater. Ein Lustspiel*, trans. by G.E. Lessing (Vienna: n.pub., 1776) [PF 84].

1777

A35 Abbate Galianis [Diderot], *Dialogen über die Regierungskunst* (Lemgo: Menerische, 1777) [DE6].


A37 Diderot, *Der Hausvater. Ein Lustspiel*, trans. by G.E. Lessing (Vienna: Krauß, 1777) [PF 85].

A38 Diderot, *Erzählungen von Diderot* (Zurich: Orell, Gessner, Füssli, 1777) [DD38].

1780


1781

A40 [D’Holbach], *Über die Erziehung*, trans. by J.A. Emmrich (Meiningen: Hanisch, 1781).

A41 Diderot, *Das Theater des Herrn Diderot*, trans. by G.E. Lessing (Berlin: Voß, 1781) [C13].

1782

A42 [Diderot], *Salomon Gessners sämtliche Schriften* (Karlsruhe: C.G. Schmieder,

A43 Diderot, *Die Zufälle*, trans. by Johann Leonhardi (Berlin: Stahlbaum, 1782) [PF96].

1783


1784

A46 Helvétius [Anon.], *Der wahre Sinn des Natursystems Von Johann Claudius Hadrian Helvétius. Ein hinterlassenes Werk* (Bamberg: Göbhard, 1784) [A8].

A47 Helvétius [Anon.], *Der wahre Sinn des Natursystems Von Johann Claudius Hadrian Helvétius. Ein hinterlassenes Werk* (Bamberg: Göbhard, 1784) [A9].

A48 Diderot, *Erzählungen von Diderot* (Vienna: Trattner, 1784) [DD40].

1785


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10 Not by Helvétius, nor by d’Holbach according to Vercruysse, *Bibliographie*, p. 45.
1787

A52 Helvétius, Discours über den Geist des Menschen, trans. by J.G. Forkert (Leipzig, Liegnitz: Siegert, 1787) [E24].

1788

A53 [D’Holbach], Die gesunde Vernunft oder die übernatürlichen Begriffe im Widerspruche mit den natürlichen (London: n.pub., 1788) [1788 E1].

A54 [D’Holbach], System der bürgerlichen deutschen Gesellschaft oder natürliche Grundsätze der Sittenlehre und Staatskunst: nebst einer Untersuchung über den Einfluss der Regierung auf die Sitten, trans. by F.L. Brunn (Breslau: Meyer, 1788) [1788 E2].

1789

A55 [D’Holbach], Theologische Charlatanerien (Berlin, Leipzig: Mößle, 1789).\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{11}This work is an original discovery, never having been previously attributed as a translation of d’Holbach.
2. Bibliography of Reviews in German Journals

All d’Holbach’s works, many of La Mettrie’s, and some of Diderot’s, appeared anonymously. For Diderot and La Mettrie, news of their authorship was soon known. As such, square brackets will not be used here to indicate anonymity, as this could obscure true knowledge of their works. 12

Diderot


C2 Review of James, Dictionnaire universel de médecine (1746), trans. by Diderot, in Freye Urtheile und Nachrichten, 4 (1747), 151-52.

C3 Review of Diderot, Pensées philosophiques (1746), in Freye Urtheile und Nachrichten, 4 (1747), 708-709.

C4 Review of James, Dictionnaire universel de médecine, trans. by Diderot (1746), I, in Göttingische Zeitungen von gelehrtren Sachen (1747), 322-24.

C5 Review of James, Dictionnaire universel de médecine, trans. by Diderot (1746), II, in Göttingische Zeitungen von gelehrtren Sachen (1747) 330-31.


C7 Review of [Diderot], Pensées philosophiques (1746), in Erlangische gelehrtren Anmerkungen und Nachrichten, 2 (1747), 272-74.

C8 Baumgarten, S.J., review of Diderot, Pensées philosophiques (1746), in Nachrichten von einer Hallischen Bibliothek, 1 (1748), 244-52.


12 Where only the year and no volume number is given, this means that the journal did not use such a category. No issue number is included because pagination was continuous throughout the year.


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13 Two page ranges indicate the review was divided between two numbers of the journal.

C34 Report of *Au petit prophète de Boehmiscbroda* (1753) [attributed to Diderot in the review, in reality by Grimm], in *Das Neueste aus der anmuthigen Gelehrsamkeit*, 3 (1753), 657-65.


C46 Mendelssohn, M., review of Diderot, *Das Theater*, trans. by Lessing (1760), in *Briefe, die Neueste Litteratur betreffend*, 7 (1760), 45-64.


C55 Nicolai, review of Diderot, *Moralische Werke* (1770); *Philosophische Werke* (1774), in *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, 26 (1775), 491-42.


C64 ‘Diderots Andenken geweiht’, *Olla Potrida* (1789), 69-83.

La Mettrie Reviews
D1 Review of La Mettrie, *Lettres ... sur l’art de conserver la santé et de prolonger la vie* (1737), in *Göttingische Zeitungen von gelehrtten Sachen* (1739), 488-89.


D3 Review of La Mettrie, *Description d’une catalepsie hystérique* (1737), in *Nöthiger Beytrag zu den Neuen Zeitungen von gelehrtten Sachen* (1739), 344-45.


D12 Review of [Hollmann, S.C.], _Lettre d’un anonyme pour servir de critique ou de refutation au livre intitulé: L’Homme machine_ (1748), in _Berlinische Bibliothek_, 2 (1748), 797-800.

D13 Review of La Mettrie, _Traité de la vie heureuse_ (1748), in _Berlinische Bibliothek_, 2 (1748), 804-805.


D17 Review of [Luzac], _L’Homme plus que machine_ (1748), in _Göttingische Zeitungen von gelehrten Sachen_ (1748), 486.

D18 Review of [Luzac], _L’Homme plus que machine_ (1748), in _Neuer Büchersaal der schönen Wissenschaften_, 6 (1748), 500-15.

D19 Review of Tralles, _De machina et anima humana_ (1749), in _Neuer Büchersaal der schönen Wissenschaften_, 7 (1748), 283-84.

D20 Review of La Mettrie, _L’Homme plante_ (1748), in _Neuer Büchersaal der schönen Wissenschaften_, 7 (1748), 530-36.


D22 Review of La Mettrie, _L’Homme machine_ (1748), in _Nachrichten von einer Hallischen Bibliothek_, 1 (1748), 75-84.


D30 Review of [Hollmann], *Lettre d’un anonyme pour servir de critique au livre intitulé homme machine* (1749), in *Göttingische Zeitungen von gelehrtten Sachen* (1749), 293.


D33 Review of Tralles, *De machina et anima humana* (1749), in *Zuverlässige Nachrichten*, 10 (1749), 494-520.


D52 Lessing, G.E., La Mettrie obituary, in *Critische Nachrichten aus dem Reiche der Gelehrsamkeit* (1751), 380-81.

D53 La Mettrie obituary, in *Frye Urtheile und Nachrichten*, 8 (1751), 740-41.


D55 Article on La Mettrie, in *Tübingische Berichte von gelehrten Sachen*, 1 (1752), 26-27.


D58 Review of La Mettrie, *Œuvres de médecine* (1751), in *Göttingische Zeitungen von gelehrten Sachen* (1752), 202-204.


D63 Image of La Mettrie, in *Zuverläßige Nachrichten*, 14 (1753), front matter.


**Helvétius reviews**

E1 Review and extract of Helvétius, *De l’esprit* (1758), in *Das Neueste aus der anmuthigen Gelehrsamkeit*, 8 (1758), 725-34; 848-55.


E6 Translated extract of Helvétius, *De l’esprit* (1758), in *Das Neueste aus der anmuthigen Gelehrsamkeit*, 9 (1759), 45-56; 269-81.


E19 Helvétius [falsely attributed], Der wahre Sinn des Natursystems, ein hinterlassenes Werk (1783), in Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek, 60 (1785), 433.


D’Holbach Reviews


F4 Haller, A.v., review of Voltaire, Dieu. Réponse de M. de Voltaire au système de la nature (1770), in Göttingische Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen (1771), 151-52.

F5 Haller, A.v., review of Allamand, L’Anti-Bernier ou nouveau dictionnaire de théologie, in Göttingische Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen (1771), 244-47.

F6 Haller, A.v., review of Castillon, Observations sur le livre intitulé Système de la nature (1771), in Göttingische Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen (1771), 1106-1112.

F8 Review of Frederick II, *Examen de l’essai sur les préjugés* (1770), in *Neue Critische Nachrichten*, 7 (1771), 103-104.


F14 Feder, J.G.H., review of Hottinger, *De nonnullorum in oppugnanda religione ineptis ac malis artibus, maxime in francogalli cuiusdam pessimo libro, qui systematis naturae nomine fertur, conspicuis* (1774), in *Göttingische Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen* (1775), 197-98.


F16 Meiners, C., review of Pinto, *Précis des argumens contre les matérialistes* (1775), in *Göttingische Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen* (1776), 948-52.


F19 False news of authorship of the *Système de la Nature* and *Système Social* (1773), in *Gothaische gelehrte zeitungen* (1778), 176.¹⁴


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¹⁴ This journal, following the *Mémoires secrets* of 24 January 1773, attributed the *Système de la Nature* and *Système Social* to Mustel (misspelt as Mustrel). The journal saw this as good news, as it exonerated others, even naming the virtually unknown d’Holbach: ‘weil man bisher, in der Ungewißheit des wahren Verfassers, sie [diese zwey Bücher] den Herren Diderot, Helvétius, d’Alembert, Marquis de Chas[tel][lux], und noch neuerlich dem seit langer Zeit in Paris sich aufhaltenden Teutschen, Herrn von Holbach, fälschlich zugeschrieben.’
3. Bibliography of texts by La Mettrie, Helvétius, Diderot and d’Holbach published in Germany

La Mettrie

Given that La Mettrie spent the final years of his life in exile living at the Court of Frederick the Great, it is not surprising that many of his works were published in the original French in Germany. The question of anonymity in La Mettrie is not as troubling as in other authors, as, it was widely and almost immediately known which works he had published, except for the difficult case of *L’Homme plus que machine*. The unknown German origin of some of these editions, signalled by a question mark, follows Stoddard’s findings.

G1 *L’homme plante* (Potsdam: Voss, 1748) [34]

G2 Althesius Demetrius, *Ouvrage de Pénélope, ou le Machiavel en médecine* (Berlin: 1748) [35]

G3 *Traité de la vie heureuse, par Sénèque. Avec un discours du traducteur sur le même sujet* (Potsdam: Voss, 1748) [37]

G4 *Epître à Mlle A.C.P. ou la machine terrassée* ([Germany?] 1749) [38]

G5 *Epitre à mon esprit. Ou l’anonime persiflé* (n.p., [Germany?] n.d.) 1749 [38.5]

G6 *Réponse a l’auteur de la machine terrassée* (n.p. [Germany?]: 1749) [42]

G7 *Les animaux plus que machines* (n.p. [Augsburg?]: 1750) [44]

G8 *Anti-Seneque, ou le souverain bien* (Potsdam: 1750) [45]

G9 *Système d’Epicure* (Berlin: 1750)

G10 Althesius Demetrius, *Ouvrage de Pénélope, ou le Machiavel en médecine*, 2nd edn, 3 vols (Berlin: 1750)

G11 *Réflexions philosophiques sur l’origine des animaux* (Berlin: Nourse, 1750)

G12 *L’Art de jouir* (Cythère [Berlin]: Mai 1751) [50]
Interest in La Mettrie’s work was sustained throughout the century, as illustrated by a further new edition of the Œuvres philosophiques published in 1796, just after the period of this study.

Helvétius


G24 Helvétius, De l’esprit, 2 vols (Amsterdam, Leipzig: Arkstée & Merkus, 1759) [E12]

15 According to Smith, Bibliography, p. 176, this edition was probably actually printed in France.

G26 Helvétius, *De l’esprit*, 3 vols (Paris: Durand; Francfort: Eslinger, 1768) [E 17]

G27 Helvétius, *Le Bonheur* (Londres [Deux-Ponts (Zweibrücken)]: n.pub. [Imprimerie Ducale], 1772) [B1]
4. Other books in Germany providing information on refutations of the key French authors


H2 Formey, *Pensées raisonnables opposées aux pensées philosophiques: avec un essai de critique sur le livre intitulé “Les mœurs”* (Berlin: Voss, 1749)


H5 Balthasar Ludwig Tralles, *De machina et anima humana prorsus a se invicem distinctis commentatio, libello latere amantis auctoris Gallico Homo machina inscripto opposita et ad ... Albertum Haller phil. et med. doct. ... exarata* (Leipzig, Breslau: Michael Hubert, 1749)


H7 Carl Christian Krause, *De Homine Non Machina Disputatio Physica* (Leipzig: Langenheim, 1752)

H8 Giovanni Cattaneo, *La source, la force et le véritable esprit des loix* (Berlin: Voss, 1752)

H10 Catalogue d’une très-considérable Bibliothèque en Livres, de Theologie, de Droit, d’Histoire ... Parmi lesquels se trouvent ceux de Feu Monsieur De La Mettrie, Medecin du Roi, & membre de l’Academie Royale des Sciences de Berlin: Lesquels se vendront le 17eme Avril 1752 & les jours suivans par Jean Neaulme (Berlin: Neaulme, 1752)

H11 Hermann Samuel Reimarus, Abhandlungen von den vornehmsten Wahrheiten der natürlichen Religion (Hamburg: Bohn, 1754)

H12 Johann Anton Trinius, Freydenker-Lexikon, oder Einleitung in die Geschichte der neueren Freygeister, ihrer Schriften, und deren Widerlegungen (Leipzig, Bernburg: Cörner, 1759)

H13 Christian Wilhelm Franz Walch, Disputatur etiam de consensu virtutis moralis et politicae, maxime contra Helvetium (Göttingen: Schultze, 1759)

H14 Gottfried Ploucquet, Animadversiones in principia Dn. Helvetii, quae de natura mentis humanae idem exposuit in libro De l’esprit inscripto, ipso hoc anno Parisiis accusato et Romae condemnato (Tübingen: Bauhof & Franck, 1759)

H15 Franz Neumayr, Frag: Ob Der Mensch weiter nichts seye als eine Machine? Beantworter wider die Freydencker, und Materialisten (Munich, Ingolstadt: Frantz Xaveri Crätz and Thomas Summer, 1761)

H16 [Johann Heinrich Toussaint], Der Mensch, mehr als Maschine (Königsberg: Hartung, 1764)

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16 The Éloge was also published at The Hague by Gosse in 1752 and as part of the Éloges de trois philosophes (Londres: n.pub., 1753).

17 This work is seen as refuting La Mettrie, Buffon, Maupertuis, Rousseau and Lucretius, as its English title made explicit: The principal truths of natural religion defended and illustrated, in nine dissertations: wherein the objections of Lucretius, Buffon, Maupertuis, Rousseau, La Mettrie, and other antient and modern followers of Epicurus are considered, and their doctrines refuted (London: Law, 1766).

H18 Frederick II, *Réfutation du Système de la nature* (Berlin, 1770)


H21 Saint-Lambert, Jean-François de, *Ueber das Leben und die Schriften des Herrn Helvetius* (Gotha: Ettinger, 1773)

H22 Isaac de Pinto, *Der Jude für die Religion oder Kern der Beweisgründe wider die Materialisten* (Frankfurt, Leipzig: Düren, 1776)


H24 [Wilhelm Ludwig Wekhrlin], *Taschenbuch der Philosophie auf das Jahr 1783* (Nuremberg: n.pub., 1782)
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