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## Theophrastus redivivus



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### Introduction: seventeenth-century clandestine atheism

According to their approach to the philosophical and religious issues, we can classify the clandestine philosophical manuscripts roughly into three large families: the deist, the pantheist, and the atheist one (see “► [Clandestine Philosophy](#),” here). The third group has as archetype the big treatise entitled *Theophrastus redivivus*, anonymous and dated to 1659, conserved in four different manuscripts, all in Latin, and not published until 1981–1982 (Canziani and Paganini 1981–1982: hereafter TR). This work is still little known and almost unknown in the Anglophone world, even though among the first scholars to deal with it one was an American (Wade 1938, pp. 222–228) and the other was English (Spink 1937, 1960, pp. 66–71). The first comprehensive studies, however, and the first and critical edition are due to Italian scholars (Gregory 1979; Canziani 1981, 1985; Paganini 1981, 1985a). French scholars have been following in

the footsteps (Gengoux 2014a, b), whereas it still seems that Anglo-American scholars have not realized yet or have underestimated the importance of this text.

### The First Philosophical Treatise of Atheism

*Theophrastus redivivus* is one of the longest, most ponderous, and most reasoned clandestine philosophical manuscripts (1090 folios, 900 pages in the printed edition) and also the first systematic and explicit treatise of atheism in the entire history of philosophy, both ancient and early modern, even though the author rarely uses the words “atheism” or “atheist” (Paganini 2013a), borrowing them from Jean Bodin’s *République*. It was present as a model and as a “myth” in the clandestine sphere, but it also acted as a truly influential stimulus, for example, in the formation of ideas contained in *Triregno di Pietro Giannone* (1676–1748; see Paganini 1985b). In fact, this text is even more relevant for two other reasons, besides being the first philosophical treatise of atheism. First, it shows how, through strict anonymity, it was possible to communicate explicitly, by means of the manuscript, ideas that seventeenth-century “libertines” had been forced to transmit in printed texts only in an ambiguous and often encrypted way, using a very limited and confidential diffusion (it seems that the printed copies of La Mothe Le Vayer’s *Dialogues* or of

Gabriel Naudé's *Political Considerations on Coups d'état* were reduced to a few dozens of copies). Second, the very way in which the text was constructed by its anonymous author, working with a wise collage of many classical and Renaissance sources interpreted in a heterodox manner, shows that, as early as the seventeenth century, a reading "between the lines" of other texts was consciously practiced in order to unveil the "truth" concealed by authors fearing persecution and censure. For instance, *Theophrastus redivivus* reads "between the lines" not only Aristotle, which was already suspected because of its theses about mortality of the soul and eternity of the world, but also Plato. The latter is discovered to have been a hidden but "absolute atheist" (TR 29) as he made recourse to myths instead of rational arguments and stressed the political relevance of religion for the political cohesion of any society. It can be said that *Theophrastus redivivus* inaugurated a sort of "ideological" criticism of philosophy, motivated both by the awareness of the social utility of beliefs (religion is considered "a strong bond of society, the only government of the state and the soul of all the laws, without which any society would dissolve almost like an empty body," TR 87) and by the conviction that only a "false reason" could endorse religion. Therefore, criticism of philosophies would appeal not only to arguments taken from "natural reason" but also to considerations that explain the take of "opinions," according to the social and political role of their authors.

Despite all these evidences, it is surprising that *Theophrastus redivivus* has not taken his right place in the history of philosophical atheism, except for the valuable work of Winfried Schröder (1998, pp. 404–408 but see now Paganini, Jacob, Laursen 2019, pp. 37–85).

## The Main Contents

*Theophrastus redivivus* contests religion in general and especially the four main historical religions (paganism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam), with a comparative view on Asian and American

religions. Finally, the author aims to replace religion by a positive atheist philosophy articulated in epistemology, psychology, cosmology, morals, and politics. We therefore see three different aspects in the same work: the *destructive* aspect of radical criticism; the *constructive* aspect of a philosophical alternative, based on what the author calls "true and natural reason" ("vera et naturalis ratio"); and, finally, the *reconstructive* aspect that aims at explaining the history of religions. Facing the errors of philosophy and religion, *Theophrastus* tries to explain their origins and developments, turning to history, psychology, and politics. So doing and owing to his completely human and fact-based approach, the author actually brings out the first "natural history of religion" (even though this expression is not used by TR), long before that Hume's work would render this kind of analysis famous.

This "natural history" is above all a "history of opinions," although rites, behaviors, and ecclesiastical organization are not left out of the scope. A "history of what has been said about gods, the world, religion, the soul, the afterlife, demons, disregard of death, and life according to nature" thus reads the title page of the manuscripts. Ostensibly, this doxography is presented to the "most learned theologians" for them to rebut, as declared on the frontispiece. In truth, this invitation to debunk atheistic reasons is a pure façade, so tenuous is it as to seem a parody of certain defensive techniques used in the Renaissance and Counter-Reformation to defend the author from the condemnations of Church and Inquisition. For example, Pomponazzi demonstrated the mortality of the soul from the philosophical standpoint throughout the whole text of his *De immortalitate*, but at the end he declared himself to be in matters of religion a faithful believer and to submit to Church authority. In *Theophrastus*'s case, between the very short Preamble dedicated to the theologians and the final Peroration aimed at "real men of wisdom, followers of the Christian religion" (TR 3–8, 930–931) in which the anonymous author professed to be a believer (6 or 7 pages in total), there is the whole body of 900 pages expounding anti-religious theories on all relevant topics

(existence of God, revelation, soul, morals, etc.), upheld with conviction and without a minimum hint of criticism addressed against the unorthodox theses.

Following the order of the treatises in which the work is divided, we can see an outline of the main theories backed by the anonymous author:

- Treatise I (“On Gods”): not only is atheism possible, it is also the necessary conclusion of any sound reasoning. Religious beliefs took their origins from the observation of the constant and regular movement of the celestial bodies: these, not any sort of intelligences, were the first divinities worshipped by men who mistook astral bodies for gods (TR 27–174).
- Treatise II (“On the world”): the world is eternal and not created; the chronicles of all the ancient populations (Chaldeans, Egyptians, Chinese, and Americans) are infinitely longer than the biblical chronology; the supposed beginnings of the world and of humanity are lost in the mists of time. Every postulated origin of the world is a pretense invented by peoples and kingdoms with the aim of boasting about being the first ones (Vico will speak afterward of the arrogance of nations, in a different vein, because his theory is not supposed to back atheistic theses about the eternity of the world, as with *Theophrastus redivivus*) (TR 175–340).
- Treatise III (“On religion”) contains an analysis first of religion in general and then of the four principal religions (paganism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam) with some reflections about their “causes.” Starting from the primitive astral myths, the priesthood has transformed religious beliefs into a tool to control and dominate the people. Religion has thus become a “political art,” “created by men and not delivered by god.” Using a comparative approach, the author deals with the supposed supernatural that can be found in all religions: oracles, miracles, prophecies, and myths of every kind. All these widespread phenomena can be traced back to natural causes (like exhalations for some oracles), imagination, and especially political and profitable exploitation (TR 341–558).
- Treatise IV (“On the soul and the afterlife”): being neither immortal nor spiritual, the soul coincides with the life of the body. Heaven and hell and angels and demons are fantasies invented by theologians and used by priests who lead the people infusing in it fear of punishment and hope for rewards. Anthropocentrism is an illusion; the belief in immortality derives from a thoroughly human and yet excessive passion: “the desire to never cease from existing” (“numquam desinendi libido”) (TR 559–716).
- Treatise V (“That death ought to be despised”): one must not fear but despise death. Life has to be assessed in itself and enjoyed for everything it can give, in spite of mortality. The wise man can commit suicide when it is necessary; but even in this extreme choice, “there is more good than evil” when too much pain is avoided (TR 717–782; for the praise of suicide, see 758–782).
- Treatise VI (“Life according to nature”) is a compendium of morals and politics “according to nature.” The state of nature actually existed; it is not a literary fantasy or myth. The “golden age” is not a metaphor, because at that time men really enjoyed full freedom and equality, without any oppressive authority. While being coarse and primitive, these men used only their “natural intellect” nor were they deceived by any imposture. The first law of nature is self-preservation, in a broader sense, including not only pure life but also pleasure and well-being. In the state of nature, there was neither property nor power; albeit inevitable, conflicts could be resolved following the simple rule of reciprocity (“alteri ne feceris quod tibi fieri non vis”). It was discord and human stupidity that by degrees established disparities, hierarchies, and permanent authorities, which in turn produced new and greater differences of rank and wealth, until societies that are nowadays considered “civil” turned out to be mere agglomerations of “convicts for life.” It was in the civil or political state, and

not in the state of nature, that “man became wolf to man,” so reversing Hobbes’s famous maxim. The anonymous author of *Theophrastus redivivus* applies the phrase (dating back to Plautus) not to the state of nature but to civil society. Religion came into this dark story of degeneration and imposture too, because – the author notes – “it is always easier to command by persuasion than by violence” (TR 783–926).

### Radical Libertinism

Is the modern *Theophrastus* a “radical philosopher”? In what sense? And if this is the case, how far does TR’s radicalism go? Obviously the answer depends largely on the historical meaning we give to this word. One good historical definition has been provided by Jonathan Israel: “the Radical Enlightenment, whether on an atheistic or deistic basis, rejected all compromise with the past and sought to sweep away existing structures entirely, rejecting the Creation as traditionally understood in Judaeo-Christian civilization, and the intervention of a providential God in human affairs, denying the possibility of miracles and reward and punishment in the afterlife, scorning all forms of ecclesiastical authority, and refusing to accept that there is any God-ordained social hierarchy, concentration of privilege or land-ownership in noble hands, or religious sanction for monarchy” Israel 2001, p. 11). It is easy to see that all these requirements are met, and strongly met, by *Theophrastus redivivus* (see also Israel 2006, p. 481).

We suggest, however, that the author is better understood as a “radical libertine” and not as a “radical Enlightenment philosopher,” not only for evident chronological reasons but also because *Theophrastus* had mixed feelings about three basic premises that are usually tightly associated with “radicalism”: the egalitarian concept of reason, the ideal of universal emancipation, and therefore the preference for republican and democratic governments. *Theophrastus* actually neither totally rejects nor totally accepts these

ideas but often qualifies them (cf. Paganini 2013b, 2014).

First, TR is not republican and yet tries to trace the origins of power and its legitimacy not from above, but from below, starting from the state of nature, where everyone is equal to everyone else (TR 841–848). Therefore, human equality is the starting point of the human history, and *Theophrastus* strongly supports the equality of reason, considering that every man is endowed with the same natural intellect and therefore can have easy access to the truth. Thus, two of the three basic requirements are met, at least in principle: the clandestine author supports human equality and thinks the use of reason is open to all and moreover easy to practice. As it is adulterated and the result of artificial techniques, the world of false *opinion*es is extremely complicated, requires particular skill, and presupposes the division of society into different hierarchical groups. On the contrary, “true and natural reason” is an inborn faculty and does not depend on any particular training. Difficulties with its use arise only from prejudices and opinions that have only the appearance of reason (“falsa et degeneris ratio”). If the metaphysical context of the two works were not so different, or rather opposite, one would compare the democratic praise of “vera et naturalis ratio” made by *Theophrastus* with Descartes’s famous claim in *Discours de la méthode*: “le bon sens ou la raison est naturellement égale en tous les hommes.” As in Descartes, there is the other side of the coin, and this is not only about epistemology, like in *Discours*, but involves the whole settlement of our current societies. For Descartes, the variety of opinions and the misuse of reason all depend on not following the right intellectual conduct; for *Theophrastus*, the supremacy of “false reason” is connected to the fact that, in the present situation, the great majority of people are prevented by impostures and illusions from using right reason, and even more they are very hostile to the few philosophers that make use of it. All this has serious consequences for the possibility of spreading right ideas and right use of natural reason. Despite his conviction that in principle truth is easily accessible and within the reach of everyone, the *sapiens* (wise man) in practice will not

popularize his ideas, restraining their circulation to the closed *milieu* of those who in seventeenth-century France were called *esprits forts* or *libertins*. Nearly the same might be said about the idea of freedom: *Theophrastus* claims “absolute freedom” for all (TR 901–902) but only in the state of nature; in the civilized state, he keeps it for himself and for people like him while not opposing the authorities for reasons of prudence and self-preservation. We could consider TR a seventeenth-century libertarian (see Laursen 2014) who tried to experiment with natural reason, equality, and freedom in the closed world of his own private sphere, practicing for the rest of the world an original mix of intellectual radicalism and political realism: TR never gave up criticizing all the aspects of the *ancien régime*, intellectual, religious, social, political ones, yet the author never tried to put in practice this criticism in the open space of the public society.

## Cross-References

- ▶ [Clandestine Philosophy](#)
- ▶ [Libertinism](#)

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