## Review of Alan Charles Kors, Naturalism and Unbelief in France, 1650-1729

By Charles Devellennes

Alan Charles Kors’ *Naturalism and Unbelief in France, 1650-1729* proposes a wonderfully erudite, detailed and complex account of often convoluted debates occurring during this period around the question of atheism. The present work has performed a historical study of the period that is unprecedented and unparalleled, and which will save scholars of the period countless fastidious hours going over the primary archival material themselves. Any specialist of the period, as well non-specialists with an interest in French thought in the early modern period, will appreciate the level of scholarship contained in this volume, and would value its addition to their collection. One could be forgiven for thinking that the present volume is a continuation of Kors’ excellent 1990 book: *Atheism in France 1650-1729, Volume I: The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief* – but it is not. In volume I, Kors had promised a volume II that “will explore the actual atheism that arose in the early eighteenth-century”[[1]](#footnote-1), but this work was subsequently published in 2016 under the title *Epicureans and Atheists in France, 1650-1729*, and is not reviewed here. The present work acts as an in-between of the enormous work undertaken almost three decades ago and now completed by Kors. Many of the themes present in volume I are repeated in the present work, expanded upon, and treated with a different emphasis. A full comparison will not be made here, suffice to say that over and above some overlaps, the present volume includes many more polemicists of the period, is much more detailed in its treatment of some others such as Spinoza and Bayle, and enriches the previous work in important ways.

*Naturalism and Unbelief*’s central thesis is that the Christian learned world, particularly in France during this period, had always contained the atheist as an interlocutor, and used atheism as a concept despite the fact that there were no self-avowed atheists. The problem of naturalism, in other words, was an important part of learned debates, in theological treatises, reviews and journals, and formed an important part of learned Christian thinking at the time, as they struggled to address the conceptual problem that it raised. But what is “naturalism”? In chapter one, Kors addresses this issue head on and defends his approach of not providing a clear definition of the term. Preferring to leave the question open, Kors uses naturalism as a phenomenon: “in early-modern philosophical and theological use, the limitation of reality (and of our knowledge of reality) to matter-in-motion conceived of as wholly independent of any superior being of its original and continued existence, its activity, and its ways and forms of being.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This thesis immediately clashes with the uses of the term described in that period. For naturalism is used as an epithet of accusation towards others who do not share one’s perspective on the limits one admits to how much can be explained by “nature”. For as Kors himself points out on numerous occasions in the work, many of the polemicists who accused others of naturalism admitted themselves that many phenomena could be explained “naturally”. Natural philosophy (what we now call physics) was a point of fascination for many learned Christian authors, natural law was growing in importance and popularity, natural theology formed an important part of that world, including for Newton, and natural morality was to become a cornerstone of Bayle’s thought. Naturalism, as an accusation, was thus not as straightforward as Kors suggests as first: it cannot simply be a synonym for atheism[[3]](#footnote-3), materialism[[4]](#footnote-4), Spinozism[[5]](#footnote-5), or monism[[6]](#footnote-6). If all of these words are used as synonym, what is the conceptual different between naturalism, the focus of this work, and atheism, the focus of one of Kors’ previous works?

The fact is that polemicists during this period use the term *naturalism* in all of the different ways illustrated above. This somewhat shows the poverty of the concept, which was thrown around by all against all. Kors’ third chapter, which details the debate between Aristotelians and Cartesians, illustrates this wonderfully. Both sides would throw the accusation of naturalism at one another, spilling much ink to prove that others were as bad a naturalists and atheists, and that their philosophical systems would necessarily destroy Christianity as we know it. In addition to Epicureans, we now need to add the Scholastics and readers of Descartes, as well as Malebranche and his followers to the list of those accused of naturalism. Similarly, in the fourth chapter, the debate around Malebranche’s philosophy similarly saw accusations of naturalism flying between the various sides of the debate. This is despite the fact that, as Kors shows at length, that most of these would have spent their time showing how their systems depended on a superior being. Kors, a favourable reader of these polemicists, perceives the complexity of the debate as a sign of the richness of the debates raging at the time. A less favourable reader would read those authors as providing confused accusations that lacked the intellectual generosity and spirit of scholarship we would otherwise expect in the *Republic of Letters*. In short, Kors’ work provides a fascinating and exhaustive account of the incredible prejudice of French learned society during the period, which could only conceive of someone else’s speculations on nature and the divine as atheistic and as a challenge to society as we know it.

This brings me to something that is missing from the present volume. The challenge that naturalism and atheism posed to the very fabric of society is largely obscured by the theological debates brought to the fore in this book. It may seem unfair to criticise a book for what it has *not* done, but Kors had promised both a philosophical and theological account, and large parts of philosophy are missing here; namely its ethical, social, and political dimensions. Where Kors debates the problem of Evil in theological terms in chapter five, the debate’s ethical considerations are largely absent. This is odd, considering the centrality that Bayle has acquired in Kors’ thought since 1990, and the importance that ethics plays in Bayle’s *œuvre*. There is no mention of the virtuous atheist here, or of the centrality of toleration in Bayle’s political thought. Bayle is portrayed as a straightforward fideist (despite fierce recent debate on this point in the literature which Kors references but does not engage with), and the role of reason in gaining us access to a *natural* practical morality silenced. This is a shame, exacerbated by Kors’ repeated attacks in chapter two on later atheists such as Meslier, Holbach, and Diderot, considered void of any originality[[7]](#footnote-7), and his dismissal of Jonathan Israel’s *Radical Enlightenment* thesis. For all its flaws, Israel’s work has brought to the fore the importance of political debates during this period[[8]](#footnote-8), and the present work reads as a volume that has largely ignored this insight and chosen to stick to the pre-existing thesis, articulated by Michael Buckley, that one can know atheists and unbelievers by looking at their critics and portraying atheism as internal to debates in theology[[9]](#footnote-9). One can only hope that Kors’ *Epicureans and Atheists* addresses this issue head on, as had been promised back in 1990. Finally, although the book itself is rife with issues of contemporary importance (the controversy over atheism, the issue of creationism, the problem of evil), Kors does not deviate an iota from his historical work, and offers no hint of the importance of these issues to a contemporary reader. It will remain an invaluable book for specialists, yet largely inaccessible to a wider audience, providing exquisite details on a narrow debate.

1. Alan Charles Kors (1990) *Atheism in France 1650-1729. Volume I: The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p.ix. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Alan Charles Kors (2016) *Naturalism and Unbelief in France, 1650-1729.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kors, *Naturalism and Unbelief in France,* p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kors, *Naturalism and Unbelief in France,* p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Kors, *Naturalism and Unbelief in France,* p. 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Kors, *Naturalism and Unbelief in France,* p. 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Kors, *Naturalism and Unbelief in France,* p. 62-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Jonathan Israel (2001) *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750.* Oxford, Oxford University Press; Jonathan Israel (2006) *Enlightenment Contested. Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Michael J. Buckley (1990) *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*. New Haven: Yale University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)