

JOURNAL OF INTERDISCIPLINARY HISTORY OF IDEAS



2021

Volume 10 Issue 19

Item 2

– Section 2: Articles –

A Complete Atheist

Jean Meslier's Political Philosophy

by

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JJHI 2021

Volume 10 Issue 19

Section 1: Editorials

1. *Next Call for Papers: Hybridization in the History of Ideas* (JJHI)

Section 2: Articles

2. *A Complete Atheist: Jean Meslier's Political Philosophy* (C. Develennes)
3. *Comment évaluer la discrimination raciale et ethnique sur le marché du travail. L'usage de la régression multiple aux Etats-Unis depuis les années 1960* (C. A. Brochier)
4. *De l'intérêt égoïste à l'empathie : vers de nouveaux fondements pour l'économie politique?* (E. Blanc)

Section 3: Notes

5. *Research Report | The Radical Translations Project: Some Challenges in Using Translation as an Approach to Revolutionary History* (S. Perovic)
6. *Founding Stone: A discussion of Charles T. Wolfe's Lire le matérialisme* (P. D. Omodeo, C. Wolfe)

Section 4: Reviews

7. *Quelle est la nature du tournant économique?* Essay/Review (A. Tiran)
 8. *Book Reviews* (A. Mattana, M. Morabito, A. Skornicki, R. Tortajada)
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A Complete Atheist

Jean Meslier's Political Philosophy

Charles Develennes *

Jean Meslier, a largely forgotten figure of the history of political thought, is a radical thinker of the Enlightenment, and one who best illustrates Israel's thesis about the period. This article, which proposes to set Meslier's work in his intellectual context, will show just how radical this Catholic priest really was. It details the intellectual journey in Meslier's works leading to the affirmation of his own atheism and shows how this atheism then sets the stage for the development of a proto-utilitarian doctrine. This doctrine then has consequences for political thought more widely. Against the dominant reading in the literature, which portrays Meslier as an early communist thinker, this article shows that he is best understood as a radical republican thinker. This further helps nuance the Israel's Enlightenment thesis, by showing how republicanism (as opposed to a theory of 'democracy') is a better fit for the works of some radical thinkers of the period.

1. Introduction

The question of what constitutes the Enlightenment has been a conundrum for philosophers and historians alike at least since the 18th century.¹ Jonathan Israel's trilogy (Israel 2001; 2006; 2012), which aims to situate a *radical* Enlightenment which is at the origin of modern political culture has brought a recent

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¹ Kant's ([1784] 1991) famous essay "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" provides a self-reflective account of the Enlightenment on itself. Yet as Gay (1966, 103) notes, there is a form of self-consciousness that spans the entire Enlightenment period. 'We' do not call these thinkers enlightened, *they* did. Whether it is called the *siècle des lumières*, the *Aufklärung* or the *Enlightenment*; these are not labels imposed by their contemporary critics or present-day historians, these are terms used by the *philosophes* themselves as a description of their own activity.

controversial turn within this debate. Reviving Peter Gay's modernisation thesis (1966), Israel wishes to uncover the origins of the principles of universality, equality, and democracy that we hold as our own today. Starting with Spinoza, Israel (2001) identifies a tradition that challenges the privileges of the aristocracy and the clergy, a movement which matures into the late Enlightenment philosophy of Holbach and Diderot. Israel's critics, even those who are sympathetic to his aims, have shown the limitations of such an approach (Kors 2003; La Vopa 2009; de Dijn 2012). Israel's work, in particular, is conceived as too generalising, and does not sufficiently accommodate for the radical nature of Hobbes', Hume's, or Boulanger's works. Yet Israel's thesis is perhaps nowhere better supported than in the work of Jean Meslier, as I will demonstrate in this article. Meslier, Israel points out, is a materialist thinker who can be properly labelled as one of the *Spinozistes modernes* (Israel 2006, 49). The radical nature of his atheistic thought, as I will show, is even more potent than Israel points out. His political theory, grounded in a universalist defence of equality, along with his radical republicanism, certainly fits the model of the radicals that Israel portrays in his work. Where Israel comes short is not so much that he has exaggerated the radical nature of Meslier's thought, but rather than he has underplayed it. Meslier's flirtations with extreme left ideas may prove too radical for Israel's rather liberal conception of radicalism in the Enlightenment.

Meslier, despite an excellent critical edition of his works in French (Meslier 1970) and a recent English translation of his *Memoir* (Meslier 2009), is little known outside specialist Enlightenment scholarship, though his critique of religion had raised some attention in atheist circles. Meslier's context is more firmly anchored in a Cartesian framework than Israel's Spinozist hypothesis allows for, hence Meslier's failure to fully separate his thought from that of Descartes, Fénelon, and Malebranche will be explained. It is furthermore through a utilitarian critique that Meslier attempts to ground his political thought and led to his attempt to link his religious critique with a political critique. Finally, I will show that French reception of Meslier's work from the 1960s onwards has been centred on the 'communist hypothesis', and that the extreme left wing of the radical Enlightenment may prove too radical for Israel himself.



2. Anti-religious thought

Meslier's anti-religious thought was widely known in the 18th century. Voltaire, despite his drastic editorial judgments, did have the merit of popularising the first five proofs of the *curé's* work. Meslier's arguments against religion are diverse and varied but can be categorised and simplified. There are *hermeneutic* arguments based on a close reading of the Bible, *logical* arguments based on inconsistency with the Bible or between the Bible and the subsequent Christian traditions. Broadly speaking, these arguments can be seen to aim at introducing doubt and scepticism in the reader's mind, as Benítez (2011) notes. If there are inconsistencies in the Holy texts and in doctrine, its claims to perfection grow thinner, and Meslier's attempt at persuasion must be put in his Catholic context. They also aim to place Christianity on a par with other religions. If one is dismissive of most religious traditions practiced in the world, what evidence is there to sustain such a dismissal? Or better still, why not reject *all* religions if none of them have sufficient proofs in their favour? Alongside these arguments is an attempt to *historicise* Christianity. The historical method contextualises Christianity, showing that it shares more than it admits with prior religions and is relatively insignificant given the vast differences in religious beliefs throughout the ages (Morehouse 1936, 2). And the history of Christianity is not more accommodating of claims to divine inspiration, as Meslier (2009, 114) notes the late decision that constituted the Holy texts (at the council of Carthage in 397CE). The selection of the Holy texts being contingent on human decisions, helps to shed doubt on the claims of the Church. Taken together, these arguments pose important questions for Meslier. Why do we still follow Christian teaching if they can no longer sustain a claim to universal truth? Why not get inspired by other traditions since Christianity is just as contingent? At the very least, Christianity and religious teaching in general are on a par with other attempts to understand the world, including non-religious philosophies.

Alongside these hermeneutic, logical, and historical arguments in Meslier's proofs, there are a plethora of *political* arguments. These further radicalise the contextualisation of the previously mentioned arguments. Essentially, Meslier's claim is that religious belief, and Christian belief in particular, has a negative effect on politics. From the very beginning of his *Memoir*, Meslier is adamant that religion and politics are intimately intertwined. How else could one explain the survival of false beliefs throughout the ages? It is because of an alliance between the political rulers and the priests—who have a vested interest in maintaining their privileged positions, that Meslier perceives the origin and continuation of religion. Pagan religions as well as the monotheistic ones exhibit signs of these kleptocratic tendencies. There has been, and still is, for Meslier, a conspiracy of prince and priest. One of his most notorious sentences, which was taken up by Diderot much later in his poem *Les Eleuthéromanes* (Pellerin 2003), is worth quoting. “I remember the wish of a man a while back who had no culture or education, but who, to all appearances, did not lack the common sense to pass sound judgments on all these detestable abuses and tyrannies. (...) His wish was that all the rulers of the earth and all the nobles be hanged and strangled with the guts of priests” (Meslier 2009, 37).

This collusion of rulers and priests is blameworthy, but not exactly in the manner advocated by this man of no culture or education. For Meslier (2009, 38) would prefer to “have the arm, strength, courage, and body of Hercules to purge the world of all vices and iniquities”. It is gross inequalities that are being attacked here. Continuing with Israel's thesis of the *Radical Enlightenment*, Meslier was largely concerned with the *political* consequences of religion. At least in theory, a benign religion would not have attracted his wrath. Meslier's fondness for the social role of the lower clergy and for the organization of the monastic orders testifies to this possibility. However, in practice, all existing religions are critiqued together for their shortcomings. It is even more troubling that religions, which should have offered relief from the abuses of political power and stood up for the people against tyrants, have so often collaborated with their abuses.

Meslier's strongest critique of religion is surely his *moral reversal* of Christianity. As is evident from the works of Bayle, the critical issue at the turn of the 17th century was whether atheists could be trusted to be moral persons, or indeed whether they could be trusted at all. Bayle had already challenged

this conception, by showing that belief (or lack thereof) in an afterlife had little to do with moral behavior (Bayle [1683] 1994, §§ 131 and 136; [1740] 1995, artt. Knuzen and Spinoza; Schröder 2004). Meslier accepts this argument even though his knowledge of Bayle's work is most likely second-hand, as he was keen to use this insight to his advantage. The unorthodox believer, or the atheist, is perfectly capable of moral behavior founded in social utility. But Meslier does not stop here and pushes the argument much further than Bayle had. If it is true that the atheist is immune to arguments in favor of ethical behavior founded in an afterlife, Meslier argues, it is also true that religion has provided many sectarian arguments in favor of persecution of unorthodox thinkers, heretics, believers of other religions, and atheists. Against the potential benefits for morals of believing in an afterlife, Meslier retorts that religious beliefs have provided many detrimental effects in the here-and-now. The question of the possibility of a virtuous atheist is thus turned around on its head by Meslier: is it possible to have a virtuous believer? Meslier's rhetoric does not go so far as to deny ethical behaviour from believers though. Many believers have also been virtuous people, and there is little doubt that those who are immune to the most doctrinal and superstitious elements of religious belief are capable of promoting social virtue. But religious belief has the potential for danger, especially when education is monopolised by priests. The central reversal, from Bayle's thought to Meslier's, is on the role that *faith* plays (Logins 2012; McKenna 2001). For Bayle, faith in the Scriptures had been a fallback position in the face of uncertainty raised by skepticism. For Meslier (2009, 72), however, faith is "blind belief" and justifies moral discrimination on those of a different faith. In the first instance, it leads to ignorance through refusal to engage with facts that contradict one's faith; and in the second it leads to sectarian attitudes. Since Meslier rests his morals in social utility, faith has little to contribute to it. It keeps one in ignorance rather than enlightens, and it divides rather than unites. Reason is a much better guide, and is for Meslier (2009, 586-7) the best guide for moral behavior. And what reason teaches us, Meslier further claims to put a final nail in the coffin of Christian morals, is that even if we were to return to the maxim of Christ, purified from the negative influence of his followers and the Church, we would not find a moral doctrine in line with social utility. Christianity in its purest form, which blesses the poor and the persecuted, idealises suffering whilst it denies the pleasures of this world. This goes against the

utilitarian arguments that are underlying Meslier's ethical reasoning: pleasures should not be avoided when they create no subsequent pain. Christianity has a superstitious attitude towards the pleasures of the flesh, once again contradicting Meslier's underlying utilitarian thought. Lastly, even the maxim to love one's enemies, for Meslier, is against rational morals. Not resisting evil leads to passivity, idleness, and uselessness. It leads to injustice and no society would survive without some sense that justice is being rendered. These three critiques of the purest forms of Christianity, based on its cultivation of suffering, aversion for sexual pleasures, and inversion of justice, illustrate the radical critique that Meslier had proposed of religion. And many of these arguments, though certainly not all, were accepted by his readers throughout the 18th century, including many who were critical of his conclusion: that there is no God.

3. Atheism

Meslier's atheism was so radical that Voltaire felt compelled to hide it when he published his *Extrait* of Meslier's works. Purged from the "poison of atheism",¹ the *curé's* work could thus be used by Voltaire in his struggle against *l'infâme*. This injustice needs to be remedied, and Meslier's anti-religious thought read in the light of a positive doctrine of atheism. The portrayal of atheism as a parasitic doctrine, as Michael Buckley's (1990) thesis goes, is unconvincing as it does not take the arguments of self-avowed atheists seriously enough. One needs to read past the negation of belief in God in order to understand atheistic claims.

Meslier's negation of religious belief can best be summarised by his use of two neologisms: *christicoles* and *emphdèicoles*—and their fusion into the word *déichristicoles*. The first term (*christicoles*) refers to the 'adorers of Christ', from the Latin—a term used by non-Christians to pejoratively refer to them in the ancient world. *Déicole*, on the other hand, is usually a positive term, and is a synonym of *theist*. It is not a term imposed by one's adversaries, but a term claimed by those who render a cult to God.² For Meslier, however, this use is

¹ Letter from Voltaire to the Prince of Brunswick, reproduced in Meslier (1970, 3:487).

² See the respective entries in Littré (1874).

turned around, no longer signifying the cult of the *correct* God, but every cult of a god or goddess, including pagan cults rejected by Christianity. The Christ-cultists and God-cultists, as Michael Shreve translates the terms (Meslier 2009, 349-351), are fused into the *déichristicoles*, the GodChrist-cultists (Meslier 2009, 221): those who adore Christ as their God. Meslier is already far from being a theist, but similar critiques could have been put forward by either a sceptic, a deist or a pantheist.

Meslier's subtitle for his *Memoir* is clear: he seeks to show *Clear and Evident Proofs of the Vanity and Falsity of All the Divinities and of All the Religions of the World* (Meslier 2009, 5). He knows full well that he will be called an atheist but claims that "it will not bother me in the least" (Meslier 2009, 43). This is significant given the seriousness of the accusation in his day, what happened to Vanini, that "famous atheist" as Meslier notes (2009, 343), tortured and burnt at the stake in Toulouse—despite his repudiation of atheism. Meslier, furthermore, rejects the accusation of impiety—which he associates with bad morals—while he embraces the atheistic position. Meslier's seventh proof clearly and unambiguously states his atheism: "there is no such being, i.e., *there is no God*" (2009, 341). The statement is reiterated throughout the seventh and eighth proofs (the ones Voltaire has cut out from his edition), as well as in the *Anti-Fénelon*. Yet Meslier's list of unorthodox religious thinkers is too vague to be of much help for defining atheism. He cites Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, Diagoras, Pythagoras, Vanini, Theodorus, Jozias, Aetius, Averroës, Pline, Tribonian, Lucian, Rabelais, Spinoza, the popes Julius III and Leo X, as well as Philippe, duke of Orleans and Regent of France until 1723. Meslier, in other words, is unaware of his own originality. He does not know that he is formulating, for the first time, a theory of self-avowed atheism that none of these thinkers had developed themselves.

One needs to piece together the allusions to atheists in Meslier and the differences between that position and other unorthodox religious beliefs. Both atheists and god-cultists agree, he says, that there is infinity. However, they disagree on what that infinity is. "[T]he god-cultists call it 'God' and that atheists call it 'Nature' or 'material being' or simply 'matter'" (Meslier 2009, 382). Meslier's atheism is thus a materialist doctrine, where matter possesses movement within itself and no longer needs to receive it from an immaterial being. The debate of the time was about the possibility of moving, but also of *thinking* matter. His contrast with the theist position is clear, but so is a contrast with a

deist position. Matter does not need a prime mover, an intelligent architect or designer. It moves itself and is capable, on its own, of producing thought.

So much for the materialist doctrine—it remains to be seen what is *atheistic* about Meslier’s thought. There are three categories of ‘deniers’ or ‘doubters’ of the existence of God according to Meslier. There are 1) those who have never known divinities, 2) those who have called it into question, and 3) those who have denied it completely (Meslier 2009, 343-4). Simplifying, we could call them 1) primitive atheists, 2) sceptics (one is tempted to use the anachronism ‘agnostics’), and 3) complete atheists (paraphrasing the accusation brought against Socrates at his trial—τό παράπαν ἄθεος). Meslier’s categorisation is indeed an expression, *avant la lettre* of a complex typology of religious disbelief.

Yet the above arguments are compatible with a pantheistic position *à la* Spinoza. One needs to go into the *Anti-Fénelon* to find the clearest contrast between Meslier and this position. Meslier’s critique of Fénelon establishes that the pantheist position cannot be so easily dismissed. For if God exists without being anything in particular, as Fénelon claims, Meslier says that “it must be either everything that is, or nothing at all” (Meslier 1970, 3:318; my translation). To rephrase this in terms that are not his: the God hypothesis can be answered in one of two ways: either the pantheist answer—everything is God—or the atheist answer—God is nothing. A few pages later, Meslier writes that atheism “is certain” (2009, 337), and dismisses conceptions of infinity and substance that seek to define matter as perfect (Meslier 2009, 325). The pantheist alternative is dismissed, certainly unfairly as no arguments are given beyond this vague critique of perfection. But Meslier’s refusal of the Spinozist alternative is not done against Spinoza’s text, it is done against a Cartesian’s critique of Spinoza. Meslier, it seems, had never read the famous radical Dutch philosopher directly, and his defense of atheism contra Spinoza remains unconvincing because of this.



4. Cartesianism

Meslier's radical reading of Cartesian philosophers has led some commentators to label him an 'extreme-left Malebranchist', in the words of his 20th-century editor (Meslier 1970, 1:xxxviii). In many ways, Meslier remains indebted to Cartesian philosophy. He lacks the conceptual tools to free himself from clear and distinct ideas, for example, or from the speculation about how matter moves in 'whirlwind' motions. What is most relevant here is to look at the differences between Meslier and Cartesians. The main difference remains that Meslier is that he is a materialist and an atheist—and his critiques of Descartes, Fénelon, and Malebranche are focused on those two aspects.

As Deprun notes, Meslier remains indebted to the system of Descartes. Meslier's references to Cartesian philosophy were through the works of Malebranche and Fénelon. Despite his criticism of them, Cartesians remain "the most sensible among *déicole* philosophers" for Meslier (1970, 1:xxxviii, my translation), and there are numerous areas where he accepts the Cartesian method and philosophy. But he never does so uncritically. He accepts the conclusion that one can demonstrate the existence of a being of which we have a clear and distinct idea but refuses that this applies to God (Meslier 1970, 375). He accepts that clear and distinct ideas can make us demonstrate a triple infinity: spatial, temporal and numerical infinities (Buckley 1990, 269), but he refuses to accept that infinity proves anything beyond infinite matter. Meslier turns Cartesianism against itself, refusing to accept its dualism in favour of a purely material explanation—a materialist monism, if such Spinozist echoes are appropriate.

One passage best illustrates the indebtedness that Meslier can never free himself from when it comes to Cartesian philosophy. Clear and distinct ideas, Meslier concedes, are independent from material reality. "We can even say that truth, generally speaking, is so independent of everything we can think or imagine that although there be no body or mind, no form or matter, no creator or creature, even not a thing in the world, there would still at least be a truth because in this case, it would be true that there was nothing" (Meslier 1970, 380). The ambiguity that this poses for the materialist philosopher is clear: he needs to concede that we have clear and distinct ideas of truth, even if that truth would be a lack of matter. Later materialist philosophers such as Holbach or Diderot, building on the sensualism of Locke will side-step this issue, but Meslier, with

the strong links to Cartesian method, is unable to provide a thorough critique of this conception of truth (Holbach [1770] 1999, 214).

What Meslier manages to do, in contradiction with Cartesian philosophy, is to argue convincingly (from within the bounds of his natural philosophy) that matter is not created, but that it has existed forever. Against Descartes' *cogito*, that seeks to explain existence from thought, Meslier formulates his own *cogito*. Our thoughts, he argues, are mere modifications of matter. They cannot prove the existence of the world around us, but various ways of being, on the other hand, show that matter *can* think (Meslier 2009, 538). Various modifications of matter, in particular animals, show that they have sensations, and most importantly feel pleasure and pain. Against "gentlemen Cartesians" who speculate that animals have no soul and thus feel nothing, Meslier opposes the wisdom of peasants who understand that other material beings are just as capable of feeling. We no longer have the 'I think therefore I am' of Descartes, but we have the 'I am therefore I think' of Meslier—and animals are the key to understanding our relation to being in general. The Cartesian heritage is thinner already.

A parenthesis on Meslier's defence of animal rights illustrates the radical nature of his thought. There is a material equality between men and animals for Meslier, in that they are composed of the same bodily organs than us, meaning that "all animals are capable of knowledge and feeling like us" (Meslier 2009, 553). If equality between human beings is based on similar capacities and material needs, as we saw above, then there is no good reason to exclude animals from some form of basic equality. It is a direct consequence of his materialist ontology that leads Meslier to this conclusion. Since matter is capable of moving itself, and additionally of thought through particular modifications located in the brain, it is clear that animals with brains are capable of thought. The Cartesians, who deny animal knowledge, but also the capacity for sensation—pleasure and pain—"are obviously ridiculous" for Meslier (2009, 558). Animals are not the "pure machines" (Meslier 2009, 559) of Cartesians, since they are capable of sentiments, knowledge, since they possess a language, are capable of sociability, love, hatred, happiness, fear, etc. Instead of our "feelings of gentleness, kindness, compassion" towards animals, such philosophical speculation justifies the most vicious of behaviors against our animal companions (Meslier 2009, 562). Railing against the practice of cat-burning, still practiced in his time,

Meslier (2009, 563) attacks these “brutal, cruel, and detestable” pleasures. Such cruelty against animals leads to vices in those that perform and witness the cruelty against living beings, and as such it enters Meslier’s moral critique. Meslier phrases it in terms of injustice and is clear that his criteria for justice (natural equity, personal merit, and punishment of injustice), apply in this case. It is because of our equal capacity to feel pleasure and pain because animals are often useful to our life and work that any injustice against them should be punished: “cursed be the nations who treat them cruelly, who tyrannize them, who love to spill their blood and who are hungry for their flesh” (Meslier 2009, 146). Although not a vegetarian himself, Meslier clearly defends the position here. The only reason he gives for not being one himself is that he is not “superstitious or inclined to the bigotry of religion”, otherwise he “would have surely joined the party of those who make it a religion to never kill innocent beasts and never eat their flesh” (Meslier 2009, 146-7). The deontological interdiction is too strong for the consequentialist thinker: surely there are times when eating animal’s flesh satisfies his criteria of justice. Nonetheless, he clarifies that he had “never done anything with so much repugnance” as to have an animal killed for his food (Meslier 2009, 146).

Meslier did not have access to Spinoza’s work as Geneviève Artigas-Menant (2013) notes, and does not cite Bayle directly, though many of his arguments reproduce Bayle’s work leading Mori (2000) to conclude that the relationship between Meslier and Bayle is “purely contextual”. Bayle meant something quite different from Meslier, however, when he spoke of atheism. As Israel shows, Bayle “defines ‘atheism’ to mean denial of divine Providence and reward and punishment in the hereafter” (Israel 2001, 9). We are far from the *complete atheism* of Meslier! But Bayle had argued that atheists can be virtuous, just as much as Christians can be vicious. Bayle argues that the field of moral worth is independent from that of belief, an argument that Meslier accepts and develops. Although he is happy to accept the label of the ‘atheist’, Meslier is not content to be called ‘impious’ [*impie*]. The latter label, for him, signifies the iniquities and injustices done by one person on another. Whereas atheism is based on a materialist concept of being which includes a natural moral duty to take into account the pleasure and pain of others, the impious is the one that treats others unjustly. The divorce between these terms follows the distinction made by Bayle. The virtuous atheist is no longer a theoretical possibility, he is mate-

rialised in the figure of Jean Meslier himself, who sought to rid the world of some of its injustices.

5. Proto-utility

Meslier's radical thought is dominated by an attack on the inequalities between the different *États* of the *Ancien Régime*. The kleptocratic alliance between nobles and priests reflects the domination of the populace by a powerful minority in his time. Meslier's thought is certainly grounded in an appeal to equality but phrased in terms of justice and *utility*. It is the injustice arising from the gross inequalities that anger the *curé*, and in particular when the *least useful* of society seem to benefit the most. References to utility are rampant throughout the *Memoir*, and best illustrated by two sections of the sixth prof. Sections 44 and 45 have unfortunately lost somewhat of their utilitarian twist in Shreve's translation. Whilst the French text is clearly *proto-utilitarian*, using variations of utility thirteen times in three pages, the English translator's use of variations of the word 'useful' loses that theoretical edge.¹ In section 44, it is the rich and the privileged that attract Meslier's wrath. There are the ones who "trample, pillage, and oppress the people", whether they are noble themselves or accomplices to the rule of the nobility, who live from their rents and annual incomes. Those who are of no utility [*d'aucune utilité*], "they must necessarily be a public burden since they only live off the work of others" and must be "severely punished" (Meslier 2009, 281-2). For one's utility to fellow-citizens is clearly *the* criterion, for Meslier, of justice. Section 45 makes this abundantly clear. Bishops, priests, and vicars are useless in their theological functions, but they have a clear utility when it comes to teaching the moral virtues. If only they were to give up their useless functions, they could focus on their role as moral educators. There is hope, thus, for the utility of the clergy in Meslier's thought. There is a role for them in a just republic, but their role will be significantly redefined. Since all must share equally in various types of work, and since there is utility in work of the body and mind [*util travail du corp ou de*

¹ Variations in French include *utilité* (6 times), *inutilement* (twice), *utilement*, *utile(s)* (3 times) and *inutiles* (Meslier 1970, 2:29-32). For the English translation, see Meslier (2009, 281-3).

l'esprit], a certain *spiritual* dimension—albeit understood within Meslier's materialist framework—is not excluded (Meslier 1970, 2:74; 2009, 303). Utility is central, but not yet understood in terms of a utilitarian calculus of various actions, as it includes the works of the body and *esprit* that are beneficial to the social body. Whilst Meslier's utilitarian arguments remain relatively undeveloped, they do occupy a central place in his conception of justice, and his insistence on the utility of social work has been instrumental in his reception in the 20th century by communist authors, as we will see.

What this proto-utilitarian grounding for ethics does is to continue in the line of argument present in Bayle, and to give it another direction than Bayle's ultimate return to faith. Morality is not based on one's beliefs, creed, or lack thereof. Morality is based on tangible virtues in human beings. All human beings, whether they are Christian, Muslim, Jews, or atheists, are thus capable of virtuous behavior. Utility is a means to ground a conception of morality in a principle even more tangible, as it is at least observable through the medium of work. And the model is as radical as it gets in the *Ancien Régime*, a social structure still based on aristocratic principles of inheritance. While Meslier may fail to convince that utility provides the sure foundation for morality he thought he had found, it does propose an egalitarian means of promoting social justice.



6. Political thought

In many ways, Meslier's political thought is an extension of his anti-religious, materialist, and atheist philosophy. Meslier struggles to establish clear lines of difference between his critique of religion and politics, and he certainly generalises tremendously. There is a little more subtlety when it comes to the role of the priesthood, as we have just seen, whose members may be salvaged because of their social utility. But only those who have proven their utility to their

parishioners are included here, which excludes the useless upper clergy. When it comes to political rulers, Meslier's anti-monarchical thought is (almost) unequivocal. The tyrants of the earth are his targets, accompanied by their legions of servants. Most importantly, it seems that Meslier has inherited La Boétie's critique—though again he most likely did not read the text directly. The latter's famous *Discourse on voluntary servitude* finds echoes in Meslier's work. La Boétie had argued that "A people enslaves itself, cuts its own throat, when, having a choice between being vassals and being free men, it deserts its liberties and takes on the yoke, gives consent to its own misery, or, rather, apparently welcomes it" (La Boétie [1576] 1997, 44). As for Meslier, he repeats this argument by saying that "It is only from the people (whom they care so little about) that they get all their grandeur, riches, and power. In a word, they would be nothing but weak, little men like you if you did not support their grandeur" (Meslier 2009, 304). The kings, or rather the tyrants that rule over people, are the summit of this pyramid of injustice in Meslier's thought. They are tyrants everywhere and provide little utility to their citizens. The injustice of this stratified social structure bears close resemblance to the model of a tyrannical, all-powerful God promoted by the kleptocratic alliance. Believing in an all-powerful God, for Meslier, is the first step towards accepting tyrannical rule. It is, for him, a logical consequence of his materialism and atheism that there should be a more equal set of social relations, since the current order is based on false hypothesis of absolute rule—by God or the king. Meslier even goes as far as to promote tyrannicide. Meslier particularly praises this practice of the ancients as an act of courage and devotion to the common good. Against the cowardice of his contemporaries, who merely suffer injustices rather than resist them, according to the maxim of Christ, he advocates for a return to more spirited acts of resistance. Meslier does not hesitate to place Ravallac, murder of Henri IV and perceived as a religious fanatic even in Meslier's time, among those who have freed peoples of earth from tyrannical dominations. Meslier's preaching style is apparent here, as in so many other places in the *Memoir*, and the message is crystal clear. The injustice of tyrants needs to be resisted, by whatever means possible. He is even willing to put aside religious differences to support those who act for social utility. And killing the tyrant does not suffice. It is widespread revolution that is being advocated by Meslier. Domination needs to be overthrown, by violent means if necessary. The *Memoir's* conclusion is crystal clear on this:

Work to unite all of you, as many as you are, you and your fellow men, to completely shake off the yoke of the tyrannical domination of your kings and princes. Overthrow the thrones of injustice and impiety everywhere! Break all the crowned heads! (Meslier 2009, 581)

One does not get much more radical than that.



As such, fears by anti-atheist polemicists have come to materialise themselves. It turns out that challenging the existence of God does lead—at least in Meslier—to a threat to political authority—including the threat of death and revolution. Of course, this is not necessarily the case, as others will either develop apolitical consequences of their disbelief—such as La Mettrie—or have much milder political consequences in mind—such as Holbach. But for Meslier the complete and utter revolution of social structures is a direct consequence of his atheism. Once one has broken the Divine hierarchy, one breaks the Church’s hierarchy and political domination to create a free and equal society based on shared work aimed at common utility.

7. Communism

It is of little wonder, thus, that Meslier has been co-opted by many communist authors; or that he was accused of communism by others. Maurice Dommanget is the clearest defender of this hypothesis. Himself a French syndicalist and author of many books on revolutionary figures, his interest in Meslier’s radical political thought is of no surprise. The subtitle of his book, *athée, communiste et révolutionnaire sous Louis XIV*, points out the radical nature of his thought (Dommanget 1965). Of course, one needs to be very careful of anachronisms, and the label of ‘communist’ is not easily applied to the *curé*. Dommanget further claims that Meslier’s atheism is only secondary to his communism, as the

social critique takes precedence over the theological and philosophical concerns. Meslier, for Dommanget, is no less than a precursor to Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto*. He has invented the theory of the general strike (Dommanget 1965, 299). Meslier is "an ancestor of revolutionary socialism and of communism" (1965, 7), his *Memoir* is a socialist and revolutionary programme (1965, 105), Meslier formulates a communist theory with the village or the parish at its centre, and Meslier carries the flag of ideological communism (1965, 346). Dommanget's own analysis, though, finds some contradictions between Meslier's political thought and Marx's. Meslier's socialism is not yet "scientific" but no longer "utopian" (1965, 273), Meslier—unlike Marx—is concerned with the agrarian class (1965, 281); he defends a role for the priesthood (1965, 316); and he nowhere addresses the problems of equality of women or of "people of colour" (1965, 350). Dommanget, in other words, is at pains to reconcile his own bias with the works of Meslier, and Dommanget's anachronistic labelling is a problem even within his own framework.

But the label stuck, as it is used by most commentators since. Jean Deprun, Roland Desné, and Albert Soboul, the three editors of Meslier's complete works, defend a similar thesis. A little more nuanced than Dommanget, they see Meslier's communism as "cosubstantial with his atheism" (Meslier 1970, 1:ci), and thus no longer primary. But it is not less teleological in their analysis, as in it "the perspective is already open which, linking communism with materialism, will end up with Marx" (Meslier 1970, 1:ci). Luciano Verona (1975) continues with this thesis, changing only slightly the terminology to call Meslier a "revolutionary socialist" who had "revolutionary clairvoyance", and many of the passages of the *Memoir* "presage Karl Marx". More recently, Geneviève Moëne, Alain Sandrier, Michel Onfray, Miguel Benítez, and Serge Deruette have taken up this label, with only minor qualifications. For Moëne (2003, 114) it is a "rural communism", for Sandrier (2004, 64) a "violent communism", for Deruette (2008, 30) "the first atheist communist", for Benítez (2012, 94) he is a communist who "universalises work", and for Onfray (2006, 5) he is a "political communalist". Despite the anachronism, there are good reasons why this label has survived in the literature.

It is Meslier's universalisation of work that has been instrumental in his reception in the 20th century. The sixth proof, discussing the roots of tyranny, provides a list of "abuses" that the Christian religion tolerates. The first abuse

sets the ground for the uncompromising theory of equality that Meslier purports: “All men are equal by nature; they all hold equally the right to live and to walk upon the earth, the right to enjoy their natural liberty and to share in the goods of the land, with everyone working usefully to have the things that are necessary and useful in life” (Meslier 2009, 273).



Meslier qualifies this uncompromising equality—as I will later show—but it nonetheless serves as a basis for the entire sixth proof—if not the *Memoir* as a whole. The first abuse, then, is that Christianity has allowed for a “huge disproportion” between persons—some born to be masters, some to be slaves. Meslier’s alternative is clear: natural equality and liberty are incompatible with the existing inequalities of the *Ancien Régime*, and with any other kind of pronounced inegalitarian social structure. Once again, it is the nobility and the clergy that form the brunt of the social critique. The hierarchical structure justified under aristocratic principles is critiqued for its vicious genealogy; “a criminal and fateful birth and source” (Meslier 2009, 277). And the Christian religion is not only passively culpable, for Meslier, but actively promotes similar principles among its own ranks. The monastic orders are pointed out as the culmination of this ethic of uselessness [*inutilité*], as highlighted above, which Meslier so forceful disapproves of. The hypocrisy of the monastic orders is all-the-more shocking, as they collectively possess great wealth despite their individual vows of poverty. Such practices, tolerated and actively promoted by the Catholic Church, lead to great inequalities, which for Meslier are so contrary to natural justice. A just society cannot emerge when these social classes (the “disproportion of the state and conditions of men”, Meslier 2009, 273) persist. Justice can only be reached when all work together towards the common good, not when some are exempt from this requirement by appeals to ancient or spiritual privileges.

It is in the third abuse of the sixth proof that one finds another argument in favor of Meslier’s early ‘communism’. It is a thorough critique of the “individ-

ual appropriation that men make of the goods and riches of the land, instead of, as they should, possessing them in common” (Meslier 2009, 295). This critique of private ownership of land—the primary means of production in Meslier’s time—clearly possesses radical potential. The organisation of such an economic system is even spelled out, if only in schematic terms. Men and women will unite, Meslier says, according to territorial units of proximity (“a city, town, village, or parish and community”, Meslier 2009, 295) where they will all regard one another as “brothers and sisters” and conclude alliances with neighbouring communities. This, Meslier speculates, will allow them to have “the same or similar food and being all equally well clothed, well housed, well bedded, and well heated, and applying themselves also equally to the labor, i.e., to the work or to some honest and useful job” (Meslier 2009, 295). This ideal of small, autonomous communities collaborating with one another where shared work forms the principle of the association and material well-being the goal is indeed not far removed from a form of early communism. The models Meslier has in mind are—ironically—the form of the early communities of Christians, or the organisation promoted in monastic orders (Meslier 2009, 309-11). Meslier interprets the “communion of saints” to mean the common ownership of goods among these early Christians, but the model has been corrupted and largely destroyed. Even its monastic incarnation renders monks unhappy because of its attitude to the pleasures of the flesh. The early Christian communities may point the way to the possibilities of common ownership, but they are not a model worth following. But the “people”, Meslier claims, could do better than the monks. They could build “solid houses to live in comfortably with their flocks”, “construct pleasant, useful gardens and orchards”, “carefully cultivate the land”, and “obtain everywhere an abundance of all goods” (Meslier 2009, 311). The agrarian ideal of common ownership is the only one that Meslier can conceive of—unsurprisingly given his context.

What this critique of private property and defence of common ownership points out, as many commentators highlight, is Meslier’s materialist philosophy. Meslier’s materialist conception of nature—with matter being capable of movement and of thought, has direct consequences for his political thought. It is, after all, the material conditions of the people that Meslier was worried about. Feeding, housing, heating, and working conditions are explicitly mentioned. It follows that if matter is capable of thought, it certainly needs particular mate-

rial conditions to do so. Without access to these basic goods, human beings are not capable of personal development. Since the political conditions of the *Ancien Régime* tolerate and promote inequalities that prevent many people from having these basic goods, it no longer fulfills the conditions of the materialist philosophy of Meslier.

Given this unjust political order, resistance is justified. Tyrannicide is not excluded, as we have seen, but resistance is much wider than this single act of political violence. Deruette, following Dommanget, hypothesises that Meslier is the first to come up with a “theory of the general strike as a revolutionary weapon” (Dommanget 1965, 299; Deruette 2008, 31). This is certainly an overstatement, but Meslier does theorise the link between the work of the people and the power of their masters. “For, it is only from the fruit of your hard work that all these people live” (Meslier 2009, 304). Power is conceptualised much more subtly in this sixth proof than it had been earlier in the *Memoir*. The so-called power the greatest prince is entirely dependent on the work of the people: “they would not have more power or authority than you if you did not want to submit to their laws and will” (Meslier 2009, 304). Combined with the concluding thoughts of the *Memoir*, where Meslier shames those who “cowardly submit themselves to unjust laws” (Meslier 2009, 581), the revolutionary potential of his thought is complete. But it is La Boétie ([1576] 1997), rather than Meslier, who had formulated this idea in the first instance. His *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude* had made the argument that it is the people themselves who are responsible for their own misery, since they so easily submit to the will of their masters and take for natural a condition that is only social.

8. Radical republicanism

Meslier’s radical political thought does promote a certain conception of a just republic, over and above the arguments discussed above. Israel’s framework of the radical Enlightenment, built on the values of universality, equality, and democracy, is an excellent fit for Meslier’s thought. Yet as Israel notes, if Meslier is highly critical of the wide inequalities of the *Ancien Régime*, he is not against all forms of inequality (Israel 2006, 555). Just after having declared the fundamental equality of all men cited above, Meslier adds: “But since they

live in society and since a society or community of men cannot be ruled well or maintained in good order without some kind of dependence and subordination between them, it is absolutely necessary for the good of human society that there be some kind of dependence and subordination among them” (Meslier 2009, 273).

This subordination, Meslier continues, “should be just and well proportioned” (Meslier 2009, 274), even if the precise terms of this just inequality is never fully discussed. In the conclusion, Meslier adds that his contemporaries will only be happy when delivered from tyranny and superstition, and “governed only by good and wise magistrates” (Meslier 2009, 582). There are some who deserve to rule over others, as magistrates, based upon their personal merit and virtue. It is, Meslier further states, those with an even better knowledge of injustices than he has who should be entrusted with the ruling of such a republic (Meslier 2009, 590). The institutional discussion is inexistent, but the message is clear: political power has only one basis, and that is to contribute to the preservation of a sense of justice in the republic.

In the absence of Divine justice, Meslier attempted to find grounds for earthly justice. His conception of justice can be broken down in three different parts: natural equity, personal merit, and punishment of injustice. Of these three, the topic of natural equity has already been discussed above and is the basis of his critique of the social classes of his time, as well as his defence of the equal sharing of work by all. Meslier had vehemently protested against miracles in the second proof on the ground that it favors certain peoples over others. These “exceptions of peoples” are rejected by Meslier on the ground that they would be fundamentally unjust, since they apply with complete disregard for personal merit, judging entire peoples simultaneously (Meslier 2009, 116). Any sense of justice needs to incorporate this sense of merit, to promote virtue and deter vice. It is the worldly concerns of a moral education that drive Meslier to this conclusion. The same reason that had led him to defend a role for the clergy in terms of moral and spiritual education of the populace leads him to formulate a general theory of justice. Since we cannot expect this justice to come on its own, it needs to be enacted by the judges and magistrates of the republic. These magistrates, “who were established to suppress vices, to maintain justice and good order everywhere, and to severely punish the guilty and wicked, do not dare to do anything about the vices and injustices of kings” (Meslier 2009, 335).

It is the ability to hold those in power accountable for their actions that makes a just republic. This implies that injustice is worthy of punishment. Not only is it just to discourage vicious behavior, but it is also just to punish those who practice injustice. Against the Christian conception of forgiveness and turning the other cheek, Meslier defends the necessity of retributive justice. The very figure of Christ, the innocent who pays for the crime of the guilty, is against Meslier's conception of justice. Christianity has thus inverted natural justice, but permitting "so many evils, vices, and wickedness for the greatest manifestation of [God's] glory, power, justice, and mercy" (Meslier 2009, 530). Human justice may be imperfect and flawed, it may require retribution, but it has better consequences than Divine justice.

It is ultimately a defence of a consequentialist approach to politics and morality that is defended by Meslier, both in his proto-utilitarian doctrine, and in his radical republican ideals. His "three principal errors of Christian morality" (Meslier 2009, 263) point this direction. Christianity's pursuit of pain and suffering, its condemnation of the pleasures of the flesh, and its pursuit of non-resistance to evil, are attacked for their negative consequences on human happiness. "We cannot deny that pain and suffering, hunger and thirst, harm and persecution are contrary to Nature", Meslier claims (2009, 264). The "greatest good and happiness of man" cannot rest in this principle. But Meslier goes further. Even Christianity's morality attempts to justify itself according to these consequentialist principles, when it claims that rewards will be enjoyed in heaven. Meslier rejects the reality of the rewards, not the consequentialist principle utilised. Meslier rejects Christianity's condemnation of the pleasures of the flesh, though it is not to say, that they are always good. "I am not, however, saying this to approve of or favor in any way the debauchery of men and women who would indiscreetly or excessively abandon themselves to this animal inclination, and I condemn this excess and disorder as well as all other kinds of excess and disorder" (Meslier 2009, 266). His critique of Christian non-resistance provides an additional twist. For Meslier, 'it is obviously a natural right, natural reason, natural equality and justice to preserve our life *and goods* against those who want to take them from us unjustly' (Meslier 2009, 267, emphasis added). Despite his attack on private property illustrated above, Meslier does not disapprove of private possessions. It is only just to have what is ours, but it is the consequences of the wide disproportions of goods that he is critical of. Great inequalities lead

to the shortage of primary material goods that make a happy life impossible. That is not to say that resistance is always necessary. There are times when the consequences of resistance are too harsh, and prudence is warranted (Meslier 2009, 268). Meslier may be defending his own life choices here, as he decided to resist through his *Memoir*, not through more radical actions. The consequences for publishing were radical enough, as the example made of Vanini testifies, and Meslier was coherent in his moral outlook by refusing to suffer a martyr's fate.

Despite Meslier's defense of tyrannicide, he did not advocate for widespread regicide, because of this consequentialist ethic. It is not the presence of a king that is the sole reason for a tyranny. Their claims to receive their authority from privileged—divine—sources play a role in this corruption, as does the randomness of birth coupled with a hereditary throne. Ultimately it is the kings' lack of interest in their subjects' happiness that is attacked vehemently. But there are such things as good princes. Or at least there have been, and Meslier cite Marcus Aurelius as the exemplar (Meslier 2009, 331). And ultimately it is a different concept of republic that Meslier is defending here. For the Roman emperor Antoninus is said to have ruled justly when he stopped paying those he found "useless to the republic" (Meslier 2009, 292). The republic has to be understood as the *res publica*, the public thing, the polity—irrespective of its particular constitutional arrangements. An empire is a republic, just as much as the institutions of "the brave Dutch (...) or the Swiss" (Meslier 2009, 584). Of course, it has to be noted that there are no examples of virtuous princes in Meslier's work that are contemporary to his time. Only these brief mentions of the Dutch and Swiss republics, "who were nobly delivered from tyranny" point towards a model of rule that Meslier approves of in his time.

9. Conclusion

There are good grounds to resist the grand historiographical move of Israel. The dichotomy he proposes, between radical and moderate Enlightenments, is not a steadfast categorisation (even in his work), and many critics have shown that some of the 'moderate' Enlightenment is more radical than Israel allows. Yet the dichotomy manages to illustrate two important poles of thought over

a century and a half of European thought. There are few thinkers, apart perhaps Spinoza himself, who better fit Israel's idea of the radical Enlightenment than Meslier does. The accusation of Spinozism, a synonym of atheism, is one of Meslier's most radical arguments. Indeed, one might argue that he is even more radical than Spinoza here, since he claims atheism as his own. There are of course important nuances to this picture. Meslier is much more indebted to Cartesian thought than Israel's framework allows for. Meslier had not read Spinoza, despite a couple of mentions of his name in his work. He had inherited his Spinozism second-hand. But Meslier did not hesitate to radicalise Bayle's arguments even further. His inversion of Christian morals is a particular testament to this. This article, which details Meslier's political thought, concludes that Israel's framework is helpful in re-conceptualising the *curé's* works not as that of an early communist or a forerunner of Marx, but as a formulation of early theory of radical republicanism, rooted in Enlightenment conceptions of materialism. Other French materialists such as Holbach and Diderot will come to different conclusions than Meslier, but the label of radical Enlightener will find no better match than Meslier's cogitations.



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Upholstered kneeler (<https://pxhere.com/en/photo/1045011>, CCo).