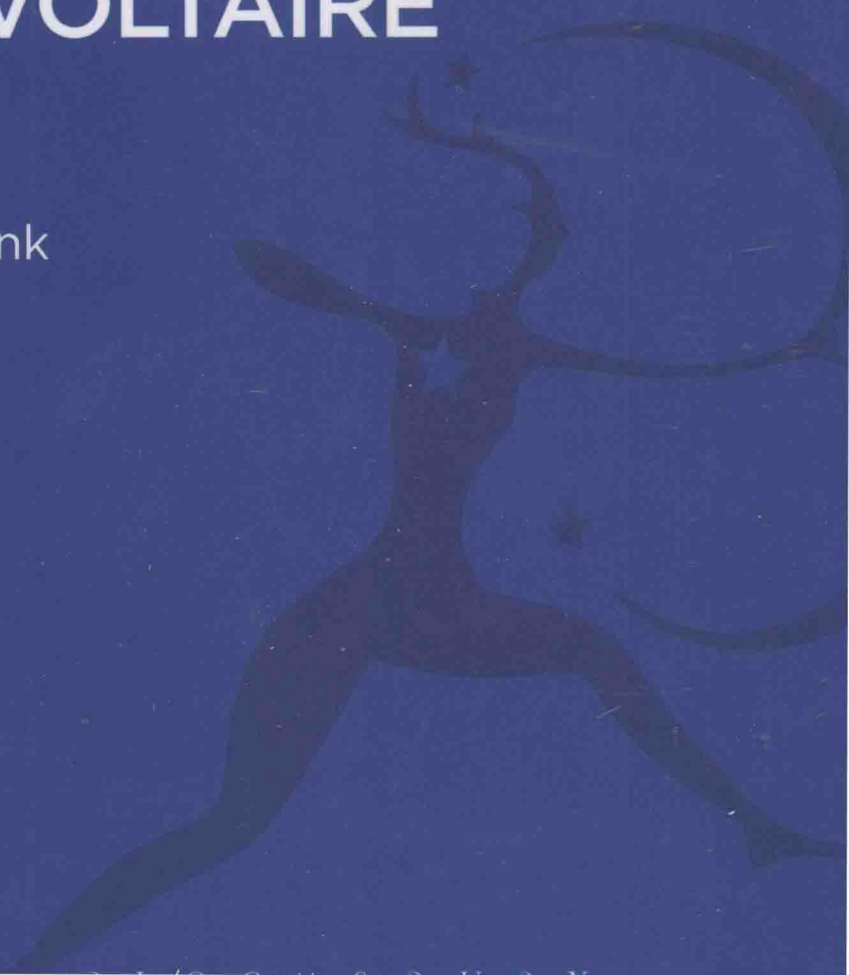


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# FRENCH FREE-THOUGHT FROM GASSENDI TO VOLTAIRE

J. S. Spink



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# **FRENCH FREE- THOUGHT FROM GASSENDI TO VOLTAIRE**

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*French Free-Thought  
from Gassendi to Voltaire*

# French Free-Thought from Gassendi to Voltaire

by  
J. S. SPINK

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## Foreword

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FRENCH free-thought was remarkably consistent and substantial during the century which preceded the main manifestations of the Enlightenment. It evolved, but it evolved according to its own inner nature. It was never dependent upon foreign inspiration. Even the ideas received from sixteenth-century Italy were rigorously trimmed according to a peculiarly French model, whilst Spinoza can hardly be said to have been acclimatized at all and in Locke the French 'libertins' found only what they already knew. That is not to say that French free-thought was inflexible or impervious to new matter. It assimilated the information produced in the laboratories and studies of Europe, keeping well abreast at a time when the total sum of sound knowledge was rapidly increasing from decade to decade. It never petrified into a creed. The original scepticism gave ground at first to Epicurean empiricism and Cartesian rationalism, but by the end of the century these three elements had amalgamated to form the rational scepticism of Bayle and Fontenelle. Free-thought was neither aggressive nor dogmatic, though constantly faced with aggressive and violent enemies who had the civil power at their disposal. The main effect it had on the intellects which surrendered to it was to keep them open, flexible and mobile. It was this very mobility, this readiness to question accepted beliefs time and time again and constantly reassess them, which enabled the French 'philosophes' to become Europe's purveyors of general ideas. England provided more sound knowledge than did the French, both in the sciences and in scholarship, but the French were none the less destined to hold the intellectual hegemony of Europe. Their books, clearly written, with a minimum of jargon and specialized vocabulary, handled general ideas courageously and radically, with the lucidity of mind and expression which the 'libertins' had created. French free-thought was essentially *social* at all times. This does not mean that it was the attribute of a particular class, at least not in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries—later in the eighteenth century it was adopted by the financial, commercial and industrial 'bourgeoisie'; nor does it mean that free-thought was a by-product of a

drawing-room culture: it was the creation of men of science and men of learning and of an intelligentsia which kept closely in touch with men of science and men of learning, but it readily found expression in the assemblies, academies, salons, taverns and coffee-houses, where ideas were an eagerly accepted currency. In spite of a repressive censorship, it produced an intellectual environment in which men of genius could flourish.

In this book I have attempted to follow the course of French free-thought from the time when Gassendi began to write to the time when Voltaire reached maturity. There are no real beginnings and endings in the constantly-moving panorama of intellectual life, and the dates I have chosen are no more than convenient dates for the making of a book. Before the time of Gassendi the Renaissance mentality is still so involved that a special guide is needed in order to tread its maze;<sup>1</sup> after Voltaire's *Lettres philosophiques* comes the main highway of the Encyclopaedist movement. Between the two lies the open but varied countryside through which French rationalism and naturalism are two roughly parallel, but sometimes divergent, sometimes convergent, sometimes intersecting paths, and these I have attempted to follow.

1959

J. S. S.

<sup>1</sup> The best we have so far are J.-R. Charbonnel's *La Pensée italienne au seizième siècle et le courant libertin* (Paris, 1917) and H. Busson's *Les Sources et le développement du rationalisme dans la littérature française* (Paris, 1922).

# Contents

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## Part One: *Gassendi and the 'Libertins'*

I. THE CRISIS OF 1619-25: THE ERUDITE SCEPTICS	3
The word 'libertin'—free-thinker or profligate?—the true nature of the 'crisis'—Italian influence—Garasse—the erudite sceptics: Gassendi, La Mothe le Vayer, Naudé, Patin, Guyet, Gui de la Brosse, Chantecler, Fortin de la Hoguette	
II. THE CRISIS OF 1619-25: THE RADICAL NATURALISTS	27
Radical negation—Vanini—his life—his condemnation—his pantheistic naturalism—the <i>Amphitheatrum</i> —the <i>De Admirandis</i> —Théophile de Viau—the libertine poets—Théophile's career—his trial—his naturalism—the <i>Anti-Bigot</i> or <i>Quatrains du déiste</i>	
III. THE IDEAS OF CYRANO DE BERGERAC	48
Cardano and Campanella—Cyrano's career—the <i>Etats et Empires de la lune</i> —the <i>Etats et Empires du soleil</i> —his hylopsychism and optimism	
IV. ATHEISM AND POLITICAL RADICALISM	67
The <i>Theophrastus redivivus</i> —scholastic erudition—the eternity of the world—politics the origin of religions—the mortality of the soul—the life according to nature—influence of Hobbes unlikely—Hobbes and the Jansenists—the radicalism of Pascal—Domat moderate by comparison	
V. BETWEEN ARISTOTLE AND EPICURUS: EMMANUEL MAIGNAN	75
Matter and thought—the scale of being—Maignan's <i>Cursus</i> —the vegetative soul—the sensitive soul—the rational soul—sensationism and the spiritual world	
VI. GASSENDI'S ACCOUNT OF THE NATURE OF THINGS	85
The genesis of Gassendi's book on Epicurus—criticism by friends and enemies—the <i>Syntagma philosophicum</i> —the nature of things—the causes of things—the atoms—the existence of God—traces of hylopsychism—'form' equals arrangement—design in the universe—the <i>Anima Mundi</i> —sensationism—Gassendi's moral philosophy	

VII.	LUCRETIVUS AND THE NATURAL PHILOSOPHERS	103
	Gassendi's authority—translations of Lucretius—Bernier's <i>Abrégé</i> —other atomists—experimentalism at the Académie des Sciences—Gassendi's influence: De Launay, Menjot, G. Lamy—the material soul—the naturalism of F. N. P. Colonna—animal spirits—the <i>Ame matérielle</i>	
VIII.	THE REHABILITATION OF EPICURUS	133
	Stoicism and the generation of Louis XIII—the art of living in the reign of Louis XIV—Gassendi's life of Epicurus—opinions favourable to Epicurus (Cotin, Sarasin, De la Valterie, Corbinelli, Méré, La Rochefoucauld, Du Rondel, Le Grand, Saint-Evremond)—the position of Molière—the Epicurean poets: Des Yveteaux, Desbarreaux, Mme Deshoulières, Dehénault, Linières, Choisy, Hamilton, Gramont, Chapelle, La Fare, La Fontaine, Chaulieu	
Part Two: <i>Descartes and the Rationalists</i>		
IX.	NATURE WITHOUT CONSCIOUSNESS	171
	The beginnings of the Method—the first sketch of the Metaphysics, the Physics, the Physiology—the <i>Discours de la Méthode</i> —the <i>Méditations</i> —the debate on the <i>Méditations</i> —the <i>Traité des Passions</i> —the Cartesian controversy	
X.	THE FORTUNES OF DESCARTES	189
	1. THE SCHOOLS AND THE PUBLIC: Descartes excluded from the University of Paris—the Jesuit Colleges—the Oratorian Colleges—the Benedictines—the academic world outside the schools—the educated public—Fontenelle—the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns 2. THE NATURAL SCIENTISTS: Rohault, La Forge, Cordemoy, Régis—Régis and Malebranche—the critics of Descartes—Leibniz 3. THE PHYSIOLOGISTS AND DOCTORS: mechanism and materialism—rapid advance of the medical sciences—the vogue of mechanistic theories—the materialism of Maubec and Gaultier—Coward in France c. 1700—Locke in France c. 1700—physiological materialism distinct from monistic materialism or true atheism	
XI.	ANIMAL AUTOMATISM AND ITS CRITICS	226
	Brute souls material or spiritual?—Bossuet—the Cartesians—their opponents—the Jesuits—the Epicureans—Bayle's article on Rorario—he attacks both sides—he is attracted by Leibniz—Leibniz's solution	
XII.	MONOPSYCHISM AND THE REACTION TO SPINOZA	238
	'Spinozism'—Stoupe's <i>Religion des Hollandais</i> —the <i>Esprit de Spinoza</i> —refutations of the <i>Tractatus</i> —the Spirit of Nature—the Soul of the World—oriental religious beliefs—the Sévarambes—Leibniz and the 'monopsychites'—Bayle and Spinoza's 'Substance'—Spinoza and the immanent Reason—Malebranche and the Chinese 'Li'	

XIII.	LE GRAND TOUT	253
	Spinoza's 'Substance' not the universality of things—Cartesian misrepresentations of Spinoza (Lamy, Wittich, Fénelon, Malebranche, Arnould, Régis, Leclerc, Jaquelot, Jens)—Bayle's article on Spinoza—'Being in general'—Foigny's Australians—Boulainviller's interpretation—Meslier and Fénelon—Meslier's monistic materialism	
XIV.	CLANDESTINE ERUDITION	280
	Rigorous censorship—the clandestine tracts—erudite inquiry—the career of Pierre Bayle—Bayle's attitude—Fontenelle's <i>Histoire des oracles</i> —the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-lettres—Duclos's account of coffee-house debates—biblical criticism—miracles and prophecies—clandestine deistic treatises: the <i>Examen et censure des livres de l'ancien testament</i> , the <i>Difficultés sur la religion proposées au père Malebranche</i> —criticism of <i>Genesis</i> —the <i>Opinions des anciens</i> —the <i>Examen de la religion</i> —the <i>Religion chrétienne analysée</i> —the <i>Examen critique du livre de l'abbé Houtteville</i> —Mme du Châtelet's <i>Examen de la Genèse</i> and <i>Examen du Nouveau Testament</i>	
XV.	CLANDESTINE SOCIOLOGY	300
	The <i>Lettre d'Hypocrate à Damagette</i> —the <i>Recherches curieuses de philosophie</i> —the <i>Suite des pyrrhoniens</i> —the <i>Lettre de Thrasibule à Leucippe</i> —the <i>Traité de la liberté</i> —the <i>Essai sur la recherche de la vérité</i> —the Douai album—the <i>Réflexions sur l'existence de l'âme et sur l'existence de Dieu</i> —the <i>Dissertation sur la formation du monde</i>	
XVI.	VOLTAIRE VERSUS PASCAL	312
	Pascal c. 1700—Voltaire the anti-Jansenist—Voltaire comes early to deism—the anti-clericalism of <i>La Ligue—Le Pour et le Contre</i> —Voltaire and English free-thought—the <i>Lettres philosophiques</i> and the remarks on Pascal's <i>Pensées</i> —the Wager—the Letter on Locke—the <i>Traité de métaphysique</i>	
	POSTSCRIPT	325
	SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY	329
	INDEX	331

## Part One

### *Gassendi and the 'Libertins'*



# I

## The Crisis of 1619-25: The Erudite Sceptics

BOTH the English word 'libertine' and the French word 'libertin', from which it is derived, were already reserved for the sexually vicious at the time when Richardson created his Lovelace and Laclos his Valmont; the term referred to a man's bad morals and not his mental outlook, although the belief that chastity is a 'prejudice' might conceivably be looked upon as a philosophical tenet.<sup>1</sup> Voltaire referred to Helen of Troy as 'une vieille femme fort libertine'; Rousseau described himself as 'polisson mais non libertin' in his adolescent years. The word 'libertin' had been used to describe loose morals as early as the end of the sixteenth century and the first French-English dictionary, that of Cotgrave, published in 1611, translated 'libertinage' as 'libertinage, Epicurism, sensualitie, licentiousnesse, dissolutenesse', but 'libertinage' was not used only, or even primarily, to speak of depravity at that time, as it was when Malthus wrote, in 1798, of women whose 'libertinage must render them . . . unfit for bearing children'. The dictionaries, both the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Littre*, enable us to follow the semantic development of the words we have mentioned. In the middle of the sixteenth century, the name 'libertins' was given to a Protestant sect, in the Low Countries and northern France, whose characteristic tenet was a belief, based on such texts as Acts xvii. 28 ('. . . in him we live, move and have our being'), that a divine spirit permeates all things and is the cause of all things, so that all that is is good.<sup>2</sup> This theme, reminiscent of ancient Stoicism, reappears

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Duclos: 'Cette vertu, si précieuse à vos yeux, n'est qu'un préjugé chimérique, que les hommes, par un autre préjugé, exigent dans leurs femmes ou dans leurs maîtresses, et dont ils font peu de cas dans les autres.' (*Histoire de madame de Luz, Œuvres*, 1820-1, ii, p. 234) and the marquis de Sade: 'Cette vertu dont vous faites un si grand étalage ne sert à rien dans le monde . . . La chose qui flatte le moins les hommes, celle dont ils font le moins de cas, celle qu'ils méprisent le plus souverainement, c'est la sagesse de votre sexe.' (*Justine*, Paris, 1950, i, p. 22.)

<sup>2</sup> The sect was strongly condemned by Calvin in his *Contre la secte fantastique et furieuse des libertins qui se nomment spirituels*, n.p., 1547 (*Opera*, Amsterdam, 1657, viii, pp. 374-408: *Instructio adversus fanaticam et furiosam sectam libertinorum, qui se spirituales vocant*).



constantly in the history of libertine thought and, in the Netherlands particularly, it was still looked upon, in the second half of the seventeenth century, as the distinguishing feature of the 'libertins',<sup>1</sup> but it is not possible to establish a link between this early use of the term and its more general use in the seventeenth century. From before 1600 until the second half of the seventeenth century, it meant first and foremost a man who refused to accept current beliefs and desired to free himself especially from the bonds of Christian doctrine.<sup>2</sup> From the first, however, the adversaries of the free-thinkers assumed that from free-thinking followed inevitably free living, and in spite of efforts made (by Pierre Bayle in particular) to show that this was a *non-sequitur*, dissolute morals and free-thinking became so firmly associated in the public mind that the term 'libertin' had lost its philosophical sense by the beginning of the eighteenth century and was replaced by the equivalent of the English expression 'free-thinker', namely 'libre penseur', or, quite simply, by the word 'philosophe'. Bayle himself used the term 'libertin d'esprit' to mark the difference, but this expression did not become common and the word 'libertin' came to mean only a debauchee and a profligate. In the early nineteenth century Victor Cousin hinted that even the austere Gassendi was morally suspect. As for Vanini, Cousin believed, on the evidence of a document fabricated by a clever forger, that he was a wanton sodomite, a slur which still clings to Vanini's name, in spite of the fact that such an accusation was not mentioned by Vanini's seventeenth- and eighteenth-century biographers.<sup>3</sup> The morals of the seventeenth century were not, it is true, of the kind that a moralist of Cousin's day was likely to approve of, and one look at the licentious verses composed by such a staid poet as Malherbe is apt to make a modern reader's hair stand on end, if he is not inured to seventeenth-century coarseness and obscenity, but to maintain that speculative beliefs are the cause of good or bad moral conduct would amount merely to re-opening the old question to which Pierre Bayle gave such a telling negative reply in his *Pensées sur la comète de 1680*.<sup>4</sup> Only the negative permits of tolerance: to affirm that a

<sup>1</sup> Stoupe, *La Religion des Hollandais*, Paris, 1672, p. 88.

<sup>2</sup> H. Busson notes examples earlier than those quoted by Littré. Viret used the word 'libertin' in the sense of 'free-thinker' in 1585. (*La Pensée religieuse française de Charron à Pascal*, Paris, 1933, pp. 5-6 and 'Les noms des incrédules au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle', in *Bibliothèque d'humanisme et renaissance*, xvi (1954), p. 281.) <sup>3</sup> See below, p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> This was a century in which the following stories were in circulation; true or false they were told with no obvious anti-clerical intention: 'L'Angeli étant entré un matin