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THE GENESIS OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

[The following advance reading for the October is excerpted from Dan Edelstein's new book manuscript, *The Genesis of the Enlightenment*, currently under review at the University of Chicago Press. Not for citation or attribution without the express permission from the author]

2. A Map of the Enlightenment: Wither France?

Forty years ago, it was deemed redundant to bother qualifying the Enlightenment as French. “The proper noun in *Greek* philosophy is only an inessential tag, as it is in *French* Enlightenment,” intoned one critic.¹ This assumption that the *philosophes*—only the French word would do—embodied and to an extent owned the Enlightenment was enshrined in countless histories of the age, perhaps most notably Peter Gay's monumental, two-volume *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*. While occasionally glancing westward to the American colonies, north to England and the United Provinces, south to Tuscany, and East to Prussia, Sweden, and Russia, Gay's focus was firmly on the “little flock” of French thinkers who resided, for the most part, in Paris. Even the dates he chose to demarcate this era were French, from the birth of Montesquieu (1689) to the French Revolution, a century later.²

Today the place of France has greatly dwindled on the scholarly map of the Enlightenment. In its place, three main narratives vie for attention. The first still holds that “the European Enlightenment begins in 1689,” but in England, in the context of the Glorious Revolution.³ The second narrative, not incompatible with the first, emphasizes

¹ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 153.

² Gay, *The Enlightenment*, 1:17.

³ See Margaret Jacob, *Radical Enlightenment*, 84 for quote; see also Porter, *Creation of the Modern World*. For a more general treatment of space and ideas during this period, see Charles W. J. Withers, *Placing the Enlightenment: Thinking Geographically about the Age of Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

the role played by the Dutch Provinces and the Anglo-Dutch Republic of Letters;⁴ whereas the third narrative, defended most prominently by Jonathan Israel, largely ignores the English, and focuses instead on a single Dutch philosopher, Spinoza.⁵

Each of these narratives ultimately concludes in France, which remains the *terminus ad quem* of Enlightenment studies. But the new scholarship locates the cultural and intellectual legwork that made the Enlightenment possible elsewhere. In so doing, it has drastically rewritten the way in which we think about the Enlightenment. The key figures are no longer Bayle, Montesquieu, and Voltaire, but rather Spinoza, Newton, and Locke. Moreover, even the later French Enlightenment no longer enjoys anything like the privilege it once had: scholars have turned their attention to other national Enlightenments, ranging from England to Russia. In his *Case for the Enlightenment*, John Robertson skips over France entirely, jumping from Scotland to Naples. Interest in the French *philosophes* has not disappeared completely: Israel's latest second volume deals predominantly with the politics and philosophies of Gay's little flock.⁶ But France only features as a latecomer in this and most other accounts. The *philosophes* may have been the loudest champions of Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, but they were not, apparently, the first—or even the most important.

While most of these revisions have been driven by scholarly inquiry, a certain degree of nationalist pride still lingers around the issue of who “owns” the Enlightenment. Such nationalist concerns were more fully on display in the earlier literature: in his study of the origins of *l'esprit philosophique*, Gustave Lanson happily reassured his readers that they need not look to perfidious Albion to discover the intellectual sources of the Enlightenment.⁷ This pride of place is not entirely absent from recent works on the subject, either, such as Roy Porter's *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World*, whose title alone is, as they say on the other side of the Channel, *tout un programme*. The *philosophes*' fall from favor, finally, may also be due to certain geopolitical reasons, as well as academic politics: France is no longer perceived

⁴ See in particular Jacob, *Radical Enlightenment*; Pocock, *Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon*; and Marshall, *John Locke, Toleration, and Early Enlightenment Culture*.

⁵ Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*.

⁶ Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*.

⁷ Lanson, *Origines et premières manifestations de l'esprit philosophique dans la littérature française de 1675 à 1748* (1908-10; New York: B. Franklin, 1973). Even today, it is unusual to find any discussion of English or Dutch influences in the French scholarship on the Enlightenment.

as strategically (or even culturally) all that central, a fact which often translates into fewer students studying French, and thus going on to study French history; fewer Francophone students in turn means fewer hires for faculty specializing in French studies. Anglo-American studies, in the meantime, reign triumphant on U.S. campuses.⁸

While I have no sentimental or personal ties to France (beyond my professional affiliation), the objective of this book is to demonstrate that the genealogy of the Enlightenment narrative is primarily a French one. My argument does not rest on any specifically French ideas, events, or great men: the Orléaniste Regency does not take the place of the Glorious Revolution, Malebranche does not replace Newton. Although I focus on a similar period as the earlier historiography—roughly 1675-1730—my protagonists are not, for the most part, canonical *philosophes*. Instead, I argue that it was within the confines of the French royal academies (primarily the Académie des sciences, the Académie française, and the Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres), and in the context of a very specific academic debate—the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns—that the terms, but also the narrative, used to identify and define what we now call “the Enlightenment” were first put into circulation.⁹ By emphasizing the role played by the French Academies, I do not mean to downplay the importance of Dutch or English writers in the history of ideas, even in the history of Enlightenment ideas. My claim is simply that the narrative of the Enlightenment developed independently from these intellectual currents.

In addition to the specific stakes of the Quarrel, these French authors were reacting to what they perceived to be a dramatic change in society: increasingly, they found, scholars, professors, writers, aristocrats, ministers, educated women, and even some priests were thinking, conversing, writing, and behaving in novel ways. The Enlightenment might thus appear, in this reading, to be essentially a social phenomenon,

⁸ For instance, nearly every contributor to the recent volume on *The Atlantic Enlightenment*, ed. Susan Manning and Francis D. Cogliano (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008) is a scholar of American or British studies.

⁹ In the earlier literature, the place of the Quarrel in the genealogy of the Enlightenment was commonly acknowledged: see for instance Ira Wade, *The Intellectual Origins of the French Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 624-31. See also Céline Spector’s article, cited above, “Les lumières avant les Lumières.” For additional secondary sources on the Quarrel, see below.

since only the social dimension of this change was considered truly new.¹⁰ In fact, what was truly novel at the time was less these social transformations per se, than the new *idea* of society that was emerging. As we will see below, the most original feature of the Enlightenment narrative was to be found in its dramatis personae, rather than its plot: where earlier historical narratives had focused on the deeds of heroes and sages, it celebrated instead the achievements of civil society. In this regard, it offered a fully secularized narrative of human history.

The chronological outlines of this narrative are fairly clear. The present appeared as the moment when the “philosophical spirit” of the early seventeenth century (which itself dispelled the “darkness” of Scholasticism) had been so successfully assimilated that society had reached a tipping point. This process of dissemination, moreover, would—barring catastrophe—only accelerate over time, thus promising an even more “philosophical” future. What this narrative highlights is how the first theories of the Enlightenment started out as celebratory histories of (what would become known as) the Scientific Revolution.¹¹ The Enlightenment was not only a development of the anti-Scholastic principles of Bacon, Descartes, and others: it was first and foremost a historical interpretation of the meaning and influence of these principles.

Complicating matters, however, this great esteem for the recent breakthroughs in science and philosophy went along with an equally high regard for another exceptional moment: Antiquity.¹² From the first embryonic theories of the Enlightenment to its best-known mid-century celebrations (such as the *Encyclopédie*), the Ancients were consistently presented as worthy models, and even, in some cases, masters. While appropriating the Modern celebration of the new science, the *philosophes* may have ultimately been more indebted to the party of the Ancients, who demonstrated how the

¹⁰ Daniel Mornet already argued in 1926 that “Almost all the ideas that are dear to the ‘philosophers’ of the eighteenth century had been outlined or suggested as early as the beginning of the seventeenth,” *French Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, trans. Lawrence Levin (New York: Archon Books, 1969), 42; much of this work is also dedicated to the question of the diffusion of (pre-)Enlightenment ideas. More recently, see Peter Hanns Reill, “The Legacy of the ‘Scientific Revolution:’ Science and the Enlightenment,” in *The Cambridge History of Science*, ed. Roy Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 23-43.

¹¹ See Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 6; see also J. B. Shank, *The Newton Wars and the Beginning of the French Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 35; on this work, see below.

¹² My account of how the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns fits into the genealogy of the Enlightenment departs in this respect from the standard account, which usually traces the views of the *philosophes* back to the Modern camp: see most recently Stuurman, *François Poulain de la Barre*.

faith in progress was not incompatible with an admiration for the philosophers of old. I will show how on a number of other subjects as well, the *philosophes* took their lead from the Ancients.

But how can we know that it was precisely at this particular moment and in this particular context that the defining concept of Enlightenment was devised?¹³ There are plenty of texts in other traditions that employ many of the same terms as the French. *Lumière* has a long history as a metaphor for the intellect (and for religious grace), and there were *philosophes* before *les philosophes*.¹⁴ A variety of works produced independently or even before the moment I am privileging may appear or sound equally “enlightened” to us. Pointing to the presence of similar keywords or philosophical content as proof of a clear and distinct idea of Enlightenment, however, is to presume that the Enlightenment was first and foremost an intellectual affair. Not only does it then become difficult to draw any line between Enlightenment and pre-Enlightenment texts (Bacon, Descartes, Gassendi, or others can sound enlightened, too), but this assumption rests on questionable methodological grounds. Indeed, there is much evidence to suggest that the Enlightenment started out as an interpretation—an intellectual activity, to be sure—but of *social* phenomena. As noted in the previous section, the defining feature of the Enlightenment was not so much a new outlook on the world, but a new outlook on the way in which certain people—scholars, government officials, the educated elite—looked at the world. To paraphrase Molière, one can thus imagine a *philosophe malgré lui*; Bayle might be a good candidate.¹⁵ But the existence of such forerunners and forward-looking texts does not entail that the Enlightenment emerged fully armed, say, from the arsenal of Bayle’s mind. It took a complex interpretative operation to arrive at this enlightened understanding of society; it is the history of this operation that I recount in the following sections.

¹³ The following paragraph was prompted by an exchange with John Pocock during the History seminar at Johns Hopkins University: I am grateful for his challenging questions. Pocock’s views on this matter and his examples were most recently expressed in his article on “Historiography and Enlightenment.”

¹⁴ For a history of the light metaphor, see Mortier, “‘Lumière’ et ‘lumières’”; on the different incarnations of *philosophes*, see Gumbrecht, “Who Were the *Philosophes*?”

¹⁵ See James Swenson, “Critique, Progress, Autonomy,” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 36, no. 1 (2007): 1-11.

3. The Spirit of the Moderns: From the New Science to the Enlightenment

In 1719, the abbé Jean-Baptiste Dubos, who would be elected to the *Académie française* the following year, and would subsequently serve as its perpetual secretary, surveyed the current state of artistic and intellectual life in France (and beyond), in what would become one of the most influential eighteenth-century treatises on aesthetics: the *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture*.¹⁶ Voltaire would later call this work “the most useful book ever written on such subjects in any European nation.”¹⁷ The *encyclopédistes* must have agreed, as they excerpted passages from this work in close to 80 articles.¹⁸ It is also one of the first works to define the contemporary arts and sciences according to their *esprit philosophique*, an expression that appears seven times in the text.

Dubos’s usage suggests that he did not coin this term, but that it was already in circulation at this time: on one occasion, he speaks of “this superiority of reason, which we call philosophical spirit.”¹⁹ The term indeed crops up in other works composed around this time, notably Fontenelle’s *Eloge de monsieur Leibnitz* (1717), and Nicolas Fréret’s

¹⁶ Dubos (sometimes spelled Du Bos), *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture* (Paris: Mariette, 1719), 2 vols.; I will also provide page references for the 1733 edition (same publisher), which is much more commonly available, notably in full-text digital form on both ARTFL and Gallica. For convenience, I have cited from electronic editions where available. On Dubos’s life, see the entry in Michaud’s *Biographie universelle* (Paris: A. Thoisnier Desplaces, 1843-), 45 vols., 11:366-67; see also Alfred Lombard, *La querelle des Anciens et des Modernes: l’Abbé Du Bos* (1908; Geneva: Slatkine, 1969); Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. James P. Pettegrove and Fritz C. A. Koelin (1932; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968); Charlotte Hogsett, “Jean Baptiste Dubos on art as illusion,” *SVEC* 73 (1970): 147-64; René Pomeau and Jean Ehrard, *De Fénelon à Voltaire* (Paris: Flammarion, 1988), 97-101; Joseph M. Donohue, “The Paradox of Passion in the Abbé Du Bos’s *Réflexions Critiques*,” *SVEC* 2001.12 (2001): 417-421; and Dominique Désirat, “Le sixième sens de l’Abbé Dubos,” *La Licorne* 23 (2005): <http://edel.univ-poitiers.fr/licorne/document.php?id=280>. See also Rémy G. Saisselin, “Genius,” in *The Rule of Reason and the Ruses of the Heart: A Philosophical Dictionary of Classical French Criticism, Critics, and Aesthetic Issues* (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University, 1970), 89-96, on Diderot’s debt to Dubos.

¹⁷ Voltaire, *Siècle de Louis XIV*, “Catalogue des écrivains” [VOLTAIRE]. Voltaire later defended Dubos against Montesquieu’s attacks on his *Histoire critique de l’établissement de la monarchie française dans les Gaules* (1734): see his *Questions sur l’Encyclopédie*, s.v. “Lois.” Voltaire initiated a brief correspondence with Dubos in 1738, on the subject of his *Siècle*: their exchange, laced with flatteries, contains some illuminating remarks on both sides about historiography.

¹⁸ Results obtained through a prototype search engine developed by the ARTFL Project at the University of Chicago, which finds matching passages through sequence alignment (the same kind of program used in plagiarism software).

¹⁹ *Réflexions critiques*, 2:446 (2:478 in 1733 ed.); of course, Dubos may have been employing the authorial *nous* in this passage.

Réflexion générale sur l'étude des anciennes histoires (1724).²⁰ In Dubos's work, however, it forms part of a whole constellation of keywords, which taken together come very close to designating what we would now identify as "the Enlightenment." In a typical passage, for example, Dubos remarks on "the enlightenment [*les lumières*] which the philosophical spirit has spread [*répandu*] throughout our century."²¹ While terms such as "light," "reason," and "philosophy" all had a history of being employed to characterize the innovations brought about by the "new science," with Dubos these (and other) keywords produced a network and a narrative that would remain surprisingly stable for the following fifty years. As we will see, Dubos had many reservations about the effects of what he designated as *l'esprit philosophique* on art and culture: "the philosophical spirit that makes men so reasonable, and, so to speak, *consequential* [*conséquents*], will soon turn a large part of Europe into what the Goths and Vandals once made of it."²² But like it or not, this *esprit* was the spirit of the age.²³

Fontenelle, Dubos, and Fréret were writing at a time traditionally associated with the birth of the Enlightenment: Regency France (1715-23). This period of looser governmental censure is often seen as providing the necessary political and social conditions for such seminal Enlightenment texts as Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721) or Voltaire's slightly later *Lettres philosophiques* (1734).²⁴ This last text, in particular, is invoked to validate *translatio studii*-like histories of the Enlightenment, as it imported wholesale English, and more importantly Newtonian and Lockean, ideas into France.

But none of the initial trio of writers discussed above, nor Montesquieu for that matter, fit neatly within this genealogy. To begin with, they were not "Newtonians" in

²⁰ Fontenelle wrote, "One can tell that Mr. Leibniz disdained nothing in his vast reading; and it is astonishing how many mediocre or nearly ignored books he was gracious enough to read; but what is even more so is that he could place so much philosophical spirit [*mettre autant d'esprit philosophique*] in such an unphilosophical matter," in *Eloges des académiciens de l'académie royale des sciences, morts depuis l'an 1699* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1989-1997), 382 [CORPUS]. On Fréret's *Réflexion générale*, see below.

²¹ *Réflexions critiques*, 2:454 (2:487 in 1733 ed.), emphasis added.

²² *Réflexions critiques*, 2:424 (2:455 in 1733 ed.).

²³ I return below to the tension between Ancients and Moderns in Dubos's *Réflexions critiques*.

²⁴ For a typical example, see Abraham Keller's assessment that "the moral licence which characterized the last years of Louis XIV's reign and the period of the Regency naturally encouraged irreverent thoughts [and] there was a general receptiveness which militated in favour of new standards," *Prelude to Enlightenment: French Literature, 1690-1740* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1970), 11.

any meaningful sense of the term. As J.B. Shank argues in a remarkable new study, Newton was read and understood almost immediately in France (no small feat), yet while his *mechanical* findings were roundly praised, his *physics* was found lacking.²⁵ The problem lay not in “any blind adherence to Descartes or his vortical system,” Shank explains, but rather to “the radically idiosyncratic scientific epistemology used in the *Principia*.”²⁶ It was only in the 1720’s that *Newtonianism* emerged (in France, at least) as a coherent physical and metaphysical philosophy, and only in the 1730’s that one began to find self-identifying French “Newtonians.”²⁷ But none of them were to be found among our academicians: Fontenelle remained throughout his long life the most famous defender of Cartesian physics in France; Fréret was one of Newton’s chief antagonists in the discipline of universal chronology; whereas for Dubos, Newton was simply the product of his age.²⁸ Given that he apparently only mentioned Newton once in his early work, and not a single time in the *Persian Letters*, it is hard to see how Montesquieu can be dubbed “a representative of the Newtonian Enlightenment,” at least before his visit to England (in 1729).²⁹ He was, however, friends with Fréret by at least 1716, as well as with Fontenelle (to whom he pays tribute in the *Persian Letters*).³⁰ Dubos could have been a prime conduit for English and Dutch ideas into France, having traveled in both countries, and corresponded with Locke, Bayle, and Jean Le Clerc; he is even considered to have been “one of the first French to learn English.”³¹ But if his *Réflexions critiques* do

²⁵ Shank, “‘There Was No Such Thing as the ‘Newtonian Revolution,’ and the French Initiated It:’ Eighteenth-Century Mechanics In France Before Maupertuis,” *Early Science and Medicine* 9.3 (2004): 257-92, and *The Newton Wars*, part I.

²⁶ Shank, *Newton Wars*, 55.

²⁷ Shank, *Newton Wars*, 112, 231, and *passim*.

²⁸ See Leonard M. Marsak, *Bernard de Fontenelle: The Idea of Science in the French Enlightenment* (Philadelphia: Transactions of American Philosophical Society, 1959); more generally, see Alain Niderst, *Fontenelle à la recherche de lui-même (1657-1702)* (Paris: Nizet, 1972); Dagen, *Histoire de l’esprit humain*; Roger Marchal, *Fontenelle à l’aube des Lumières* (Paris: Champion, 1997). On Fréret and Newton, see Frank Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959). For Dubos’s comparison of Newton and Archimedes, see *Réflexions critiques*, 2:448 (2:481 in 1733 ed.).

²⁹ Jacob, *Radical Enlightenment*, 197; see also 146. Montesquieu mentions Newton’s experiments on optics in his 1716 *Discours de réception à l’Académie des sciences de Bordeaux* [ARTFL].

³⁰ See Robert Shackleton, *Montesquieu: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 10-11. The “philosophe très-galant” in the *Persian Letters* (XXXVIII) is usually read as a reference to Fontenelle. Montesquieu also knew Dubos, who frequented Mme de Lambert’s salon: see Shackleton, *Montesquieu*, 56, 303. He would of course later criticize Dubos’s history of the French monarchy at length in *De l’esprit des lois* (see esp. 6.30.12).

³¹ Pomeau and Ehrard, *Fénelon à Voltaire*, 98.

exhibit a sensationalist epistemology, perhaps in part inspired by the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (which Dubos was instrumental in having published in French translation), his aesthetics can equally well be defined by a “rediscovery of the principles of the ancients,” as Ross Hutchinson observed.³² More proximately, his definition of sentiment owes a great deal to Malebranche’s theory of a “*sentiment intérieur*.”³³

It is equally difficult to identify any strong Dutch influence on the French writers of this period. With the exception of Fontenelle’s *Histoire des oracles* (1687), few writings by the academic trio are particularly indebted to Pierre Bayle,³⁴ and Montesquieu’s trip to the Low Countries seems to have turned him *against* republican politics and radical philosophy.³⁵ Dubos would pen one of the most unconditional defenses of the *thèse royale* (justifying absolutism), in reaction to Boulainvilliers’s aristocratic-republican *thèse nobiliaire* on the origins of the French monarchy.³⁶ Indeed, none of these writers can readily be associated with the “Radical Enlightenment.” Though Jonathan Israel would have us believe that Fontenelle “was more radical privately than he could disclose publicly,” he presents no evidence that compels us to revise Leonard Marsak’s conclusion that “Fontenelle had more than a measure of belief,”

³² See Hutchinson, *Locke in France, 1688-1734* (Oxford: SVEC 290/Voltaire Foundation, 1991), 86-88. Locke is never mentioned in the *Réflexions critiques*. D’Alembert similarly regards the empiricist postulate as a “principle of the first [i.e., Ancient] Philosophers:” see the “Discours préliminaire des éditeurs” to the *Encyclopédie*, 1:ii. A similar opinion was held by Fontenelle: see Niderst, *Fontenelle à la recherche de lui-même*, 54. The “Lockean” adage, *nil in intellectu nisi prius in sensu*, was also a staple of Scholasticism, featuring notably in Aquinas’s *Summa*.

³³ See Emmanuel Bury, *Littérature et politesse: l’invention de l’honnête homme, 1580-1750* (Paris: PUF, 1996), 217. On Malebranche, Dubos, and sentiment, see also Katherine J. Hamerton, “Malebranche, Taste, and Sensibility: The Origins of Sensitive Taste and a Reconsideration of Cartesianism’s Feminist Potential,” *JHI* 69 (2008): 533-58. My thanks to J.B. Shank for this reference.

³⁴ On Fontenelle’s debt to Bayle’s *Pensées diverses sur la comète*, see Mornet, *French Thought*, 47. Renée Simon debunks the myth that Fréret read Bayle’s *Dictionnaire historique et critique* while locked up in the Bastille: see Nicolas Fréret, *académicien*, in *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 17 (1961), 173; see also Pierre Rétat, *Le ‘Dictionnaire’ de Bayle et la lutte philosophique au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1971), 228.

³⁵ See Joseph Dedieu, *Montesquieu et la tradition politique anglaise en France: les sources anglaises de ‘l’Esprit des lois’* (1909; Manchester: Ayer Publishing, 1969), 139-40. According to Dedieu, it was during his travels to Rome and the Dutch provinces that Montesquieu shook off the youthful republican sympathies, evident in many of his *Persians Letters*.

³⁶ See his *Histoire critique de l’établissement de la monarchie française dans les Gaules* (Paris: Osmont, 1734), and Thomas E. Kaiser, “The abbé Dubos and the Historical Defence of Monarchy in Early Eighteenth Century France,” *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 267 (1989): 77-102. On Boulainvilliers, see Harold Ellis, *Boulainvilliers and the French Monarchy: Aristocratic Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

and simply “hoped that theology could keep abreast of civilization.”³⁷ Fontenelle’s best biographer noted many years ago that, if Fontenelle probably read Spinoza’s *Tractatus*, his freethinking spirit (which was much more influenced by such French *libertins* as Charles de Saint-Évremond) was balanced by a penchant for Jesuit theology.³⁸ Israel similarly places far too much credit in the attribution of the *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*, a materialist pamphlet, to Nicolas Fréret.³⁹ As for Dubos, he does not figure in either of Israel’s two volumes.

Who are the philosophical stars, then, in the firmament of these *académiciens*? These authors confound linear intellectual history by peering well behind them into the seventeenth century. The *esprit philosophique* was not a recent development, according to Dubos: it was “born sixty years ago,” he affirmed in 1719, revising this date to “eighty years,” in the second edition of 1732.⁴⁰ He would in fact always remain vague about the exact date (1650’s or 1660’s), noting for instance that it had been about “fifty or sixty years” since “*les lumières* resulting from these prior inventions, having made a certain progress separately, began to combine.”⁴¹ In other words, although this date may reference the foundation of the Royal Society and the Académie des sciences (respectively in 1660 and 1666), it is ultimately pointless to try and identify any particular event or intellectual shift that occurred at this time, given that it did not mark the beginning of a new process, but rather a climax in the history of scientific and philosophical discoveries. The real impetus for these discoveries came earlier: in a move

³⁷ See respectively Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 361, and Marsak, *Bernard de Fontenelle*, 56; see also Marchal, *Fontenelle à l’aube des Lumières*, 138-45.

³⁸ See Niderest, *Fontenelle à la recherche de lui-même*, 187-201.

³⁹ Most scholars doubt this attribution: see Renée Simon, *Nicolas Fréret*, 173ff; Rétat, *Dictionnaire de Bayle*, who notes that “The attribution is so uncertain that in the absence of formal proofs, we must doubt it,” 229; and more recently, Miguel Benítez’s close analysis of this attribution, and his conclusion that “Fréret may perhaps have developed in his youth the early kernel of the work. But others no doubt gave it the form under which it commonly circulated.” “La composition de la *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*: une conjecture raisonnable,” in *Nicolas Fréret: légende et vérité*, ed. Chantal Grell and Catherine Volphilac-Auger (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1994), 192. Israel calls Fréret the “reputed author” of this work in *Radical Enlightenment* (373n104), but in his subsequent *Enlightenment Contested*, Fréret is identified without any qualifications as a member of a “‘determinist,’ anti-scriptural and *matérialiste* grouping” (365), and is unambiguously stated as the author of the *Lettre de Thrasybule* (728).

⁴⁰ *Réflexions critiques*, 2:443; 2:475 in 1733 ed. For a similar chronological revision, cf. 2:432 (or 2:464 in 1733 ed.).

⁴¹ *Réflexions critiques*, 2:439-40; in the 1733 edition, the date is revised to “soixante ou quatre-vingt ans,” 2:471. Dubos himself warned about relying excessively on this chronological marker: “Cette date de soixante ans [increased to “soixante et dix ans” in 1733] qu’on donner pour époque à ce renouvellement prétendu des esprits est mal choisie,” 2:424 (and 2:454, respectively).

which turned out to be already canonical, Dubos credits two philosophers in particular, the “chancellor Bacon,” whose insistence on the need to “see experiments [*voir les expériences*] [...] as they are” had determined the procedures of the new scientific academies; and Descartes, “who is considered to be the father of the new philosophy.”⁴² This last assessment was indeed already commonplace among French scholars at the time: Fontenelle had similarly asserted that it was Descartes who had introduced “this new method of reasoning,” a method which was “much more considerable than his actual Philosophy”;⁴³ and Fréret, though even more critical of Descartes’s philosophy, recognized “the extent of our obligation to this great man, for having led us away from the dark road along which we walked, by showing us, through his method, the path of truth” (*Réflexion générale*, 9-10). This exact same image would later be recycled by Voltaire, who in his unfavorable comparison of Descartes to Newton, acknowledged that “The road that [Descartes] opened has since become immense.”⁴⁴ For all of these commentators, Descartes’s great achievement was to have destroyed “the absurd chimera with which youth was stuffed for two thousand years,” in other words, Scholasticism, which was closely linked to Aristotle.⁴⁵ With Voltaire, Bacon would be fully associated with Descartes as a presiding deity of the *esprit philosophique*,⁴⁶ a position of prestige that would be sealed with the adaptation of his Tree of Learning in the *Encyclopédie*.⁴⁷

This hero-worship is of course well known, and the relationship between the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution is one of the few *topoi* on which scholars

⁴² *Réflexions critiques*, 2:323 for Bacon, and 2:430 for Descartes (or 2:343 and 2:461, in 1733 ed.).

⁴³ Fontenelle, *Digression sur les Anciens et les Modernes* (1688), in Lecoq, ed., *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, 302. In his critical *Voyage au monde de Descartes* (Paris: Vve S. Bernard, 1690), the Jesuit père Gabriel Daniel used the expression “la nouvelle philosophie” on at least ten occasions in reference to Descartes’s system.

⁴⁴ *Lettres philosophiques*, XIV, 94.

⁴⁵ Voltaire, *Lettres philosophiques*, 94. Fréret had described scholastic philosophy very similarly, as “this monstrous assembly of fantasy beings, accidents, qualities, and occults virtues of attraction, sympathy, antipathy, and other feelings that are attributed to the most passive and inanimate beings, or in a word, this heap of *chimeras* which the Peripatetics of the last centuries called Aristotle’s system,” *Réflexion générale sur l’étude des anciennes histoires* [CORPUS], 9, emphasis added.

⁴⁶ On Bacon and Descartes’ status as “the great propagandists of science,” see Gay, *Enlightenment*, 1:310-14. According to Voltaire, Bacon “had disdained from a young age what the universities called philosophy” in order to become himself “the father of experimental philosophy” (*Lettres philosophiques*, XII, 78).

⁴⁷ See d’Alembert’s “Discours préliminaire,” and his later *Essai sur les éléments de philosophie* (1759); on the differences between the epistemologies of Bacon and the *Encyclopédie*, see Martine Groult, “Le système figuré des connaissances humaines □ ou le projet philosophique de l’*Encyclopédie*,” <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/efts/ARTFL/projects/encyc/groult/>.

usually agree. The precise nature of this relationship, however, has proved more difficult to define. What the above citations clearly show is that the key French contribution to the genealogy of the Enlightenment was not philosophical, but interpretative: it simply happened that it was in France that the ramifications of the Scientific Revolution were interpreted as having introduced a philosophical age, defined by a particular *esprit*, and as having a particular impact on society. Given that this interpretation was unrelated to any epistemological change, we ought to stop searching for some intellectual revolution that made, in Paul Hazard's unfortunately catchy phrase, the French go to sleep one night thinking like Bossuet, and wake up the next day thinking like Voltaire.⁴⁸ A slightly more accurate version of this sound-bite might state instead that the French who went to bed thinking like Bossuet woke up thinking like Descartes, yet even this revision masks the critical point.⁴⁹ The *esprit philosophique* was not just a philosophical innovation, but designated a whole range of medical, astronomical, and physical discoveries: Dubos, for instance, points to the gradual acceptance of Harvey's theory of the circulation of blood, as well as of the Copernican system.⁵⁰ The *esprit philosophique* allowed scholars both to identify a unity among the variegated scientific and technological breakthroughs of the seventeenth century—a unity we would come to call the Scientific Revolution—and to describe the transformation caused by the reception and effects of these breakthroughs in contemporary society—a transformation they would define as the Enlightenment. The intellectual source—and it was in many respects a “mythical” source—of the Enlightenment for these French scholars lay far back in the break with Scholastic philosophy. To paraphrase another “night thought:” if the owl of Minerva waits long enough, she can announce a new day.

⁴⁸ Paul Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne* (Paris: Livre de poche, 1935), 26. For an example of this tendency, see most recently Robertson, who focuses on “the encounter between the Augustinian rigorism of Pascal and Port Royal and the revived, supposedly Christianised Epicureanism championed by Gassendi and his followers” as the intellectual crux of the Enlightenment: *Case for the Enlightenment*, 32-33. See also, in a similar vein, Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, part of whose introduction is entitled “The ‘Crisis of the European Mind,’” and, as I argue below, grants an inordinate importance to Spinoza: see notably Margaret Jacob's review of this work in the *Journal of Modern History* 75 (2003): 387-89, and Lilti, “Comment écrit-on l'histoire intellectuelle des Lumières?”

⁴⁹ Hazard's thesis sparked a lively critical debate that lasted until the 1970's: for an overview of this literature, see Wade, *Intellectual Origins of the French Enlightenment*, 43-52. For another criticism of Hazard, see Gay, *Party of Humanity*, 120.

⁵⁰ *Réflexions critiques*, 2:440-43 on “Harvée” (2:472-74 in 1733 ed.); and 2:444 (or 2:477) for Copernicus.

But why give such weight to these French *histoires*? After all, the French were certainly not alone in celebrating the great men who had overturned the long-held beliefs of the past. Bacon's compatriots were equally prone to aggrandizing their age and its discoveries. The Royal Society in particular was active in promoting this sort of discourse: Thomas Sprat's 1667 *History* of this body (published a mere seven years after its foundation) rhapsodized about how "From these and all long Errors of the Way [...] *Bacon*, like *Moses*, led us forth at last, / The barren Wilderness he past, / Did on the very Border stand / Of the blest promis'd Land."⁵¹ Such encomia no doubt informed the histories of science later narrated by the French academicians; Sprat's work was in fact quickly translated into French. But while this account of the Scientific Revolution shares certain qualities with subsequent French descriptions of the Enlightenment (both are historically situated and highlight the learnedness of their time), the former looks only to philosophers and scientists for signs of present excellence: Sprat in fact laments the absence of "experimental philosophy" in the general instruction of natural philosophy.⁵² Fifty years later, it was the progress of the new science among the educated, not the scholarly, elites that had become the sign of the times. As the following section argues, from a discourse about science, this narrative became a discourse about society. It is with this shift that the possibility of an Enlightenment narrative arose.

4. Society, the Hero of the Modern Story

Celebratory accounts of great rulers and achievements are as old as history; indeed, for a long time they *were* history. These heroic stories were often just as much about the gods (or God) as they were about men: *Gilgamesh*, the *Aeneid*, the *Chanson de Roland*, and Bossuet's *Discours sur l'histoire universelle* all inscribe human events within a divine master narrative.⁵³ To be sure, since Thucydides, historians had also sought to extricate the realm of human activity from that of religion. Throughout the

⁵¹ Sprat, "To the Royal Society," *The History of the Royal Society of London* (London, 1722, 3rd ed.). My thanks to John Marshall to calling this text to my attention.

⁵² *History of the Royal Society of London*, 327. Interestingly, Sprat insists that only natural philosophy will be affected by the new science: "we find nothing will be indanger'd [among "the chief Parts of Education"] but only the *Physics* of *Antiquity*," 328; the *esprit philosophique* diagnosed by Dubos and others, by contrast, affects all areas of learning, science, and the arts.

⁵³ On these "parallel histories of nature, man, and God," see Anthony Grafton, *What Was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 27.

early modern period, however, *universal* histories tended to begin at least with “first principles” and move on from there.⁵⁴

The Enlightenment narrative broke with both of these conventions. First, where English accounts of the new science maintained a theological frame (Sprat exclaims how “God with Design has pickt out you [great Champions of learning] / To do these noble Wonders by a few”),⁵⁵ Dubos’s history of ancient and recent scientific developments makes no mention of divine will. His is a merely human story, from which even the advent of Christianity is excluded. This silence should not be taken as a sign that Dubos was an irreligious unbeliever, only that human history, in this and similar other works of the time, was perceived to unfold in a self-contained sphere. Secondly, rather than commemorate the “great champions” of science *alone* (for they were of course prominently featured), Enlightenment narrative celebrated another hero: society. For Dubos, the *esprit philosophique* not only defined the institutions and the State, but more particularly the public (at least its educated part).⁵⁶ The reign of Louis XIV marked the apogee of human civilization for Voltaire not merely because it gave birth to unparalleled statesmen and writers, but because “a general revolution has taken place in our arts, in our minds [*esprits*], in our culture [*mœurs*], as in our government.”⁵⁷ D’Alembert later spoke of “the general enlightenment [*les lumières générales*] that has spread throughout society.”⁵⁸

The starring role played by society in the enlightened narrative comes as little surprise: historians in recent years have drawn attention to how society during the Enlightenment became “the ontological frame of our human existence,” or, in Dumarsais’s oft-cited words, “a divinity [...] on Earth.”⁵⁹ The growing importance granted to, and cultural work done by, society can be traced through dictionary

⁵⁴ See also Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (1983; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), esp. chp. 12 (notably on Walter Raleigh’s 1614 *History of the World*).

⁵⁵ Sprat, *History of the Royal Society*, “To the Royal Society.” As Margaret Jacob has shown, later defenses of Newtonianism presented him under a Latitudinarian light: see *The Newtonians and the English Revolution, 1689-1720* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976).

⁵⁶ For Dubos, the role of the public was particularly evident in aesthetic matters: see Spector, “Les lumières avant les lumières.”

⁵⁷ *Siècle de Louis XIV*, chap. 1, emphasis added.

⁵⁸ “Discours préliminaire,” *Encyclopédie*, 1:xxxiv.

⁵⁹ “Philosophe,” *Encyclopédie*, 12:510; quoted in Keith Baker, “Enlightenment and the Institution of Society: Notes for a Conceptual History,” *Main Trends in Cultural History*, ed. Willem Melching and Wyger Velema (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), 96.

definitions and word use, as Keith Baker, Daniel Gordon, and more recently Yair Mintzker have shown.⁶⁰ From a term connoting voluntary human associations, society came to designate the world of all human interaction. Céline Spector has further examined how a concept of society, which was fully independent from government, emerged in the works of Hobbes, Pufendorf, Locke, and other political philosophers of the period.⁶¹ When Bayle postulated (in 1683) his famous thesis that even a “Société d’Athées” could live virtuously, he was already using the term in this later, modern understanding.⁶² This new definition is what made it possible, as John Robertson has written, to transfer “the confidence of Galileo and Newton that nature was governed by observable laws [...] to the study of society,” thereby opening the doors to the political economy programs of the Enlightenment.⁶³

The discursive shift in the meaning of “society” was symptomatic of different underlying changes in the philosophical, religious, and political climates of the age. Philosophically, as skepticism and empirical observation challenged the reigning Scholastic doctrines, “society” emerged as one area of human inquiry in which certainty might be obtainable, or at the very least for which knowledge was practical: “This learning,” Locke wrote in reference to Scholastic philosophy, “very little benefits society.”⁶⁴ On the religious front, the Reformation had introduced such a breach between

⁶⁰ In addition to Baker’s “Enlightenment and the Institution of Society,” see Daniel Gordon, *Citizens Without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670-1789* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), and Yair Mintzker, “‘A Word Newly Introduced into Language:’ The Appearance and Spread of ‘Social’ in French Enlightened Thought, 1745–1765,” *History of European Ideas* 34 (2008): 500–513.

⁶¹ See Céline Spector, *Montesquieu: pouvoirs, richesses et sociétés* (Paris: PUF, 2004), 151–66. Hobbes’s 1642 *De Cive* was translated in 1649 by Samuel Sorbière as *Elémens philosophiques du citoyen, traicté politique où les fondemens de la société civile sont découverts* (Amsterdam: J. Blaeu, 1649). The expression “société civile” soon became common in French works; see for instance Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac: “si les hommes ne pouvoient jamais dire la verité, nous serions tous barbares les uns aux autres [...] La société civile se dissoudroit de soy-mesme,” *Dissertations chrestiennes et morales*, in his *Œuvres* (Paris: T. Jolly, 1665), 298 [ARTFL]. Previously this expression had generally been synonymous in French with “polite society.”

⁶² See the “Conjectures sur les mœurs d’une société qui seroit sans Religion,” in *Pensées diverses sur la comète* (Rotterdam: Reinier Leers, 1683), §CXLI: “Il me semble qu’à l’égard des mœurs & des actions civiles, elle seroit toute semblable à une Société de Payens. Il y faudroit à la vérité des loix fort sévères [...] Mais n’en faut-il pas par tout?” (491). On the repercussions of this thesis, see Robertson, *Case for the Enlightenment*, 130, 220, and *passim*.

⁶³ Robertson, *Case for the Enlightenment*, 32.

⁶⁴ *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), book III, chap. X, §9. Keith Baker makes this argument in *Condorcet: From Natural Philosophy to Social Mathematics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 87–95 and 129–38.

this world and the next that even Catholics (particularly the Jansenists) came to consider the realm of the divine as inherently separate from the world of humans.⁶⁵ Society, in other words, was all that was left once God has departed from the scene. This separation with the otherworldly was a matter of political concern as well, given the devastation caused by the Wars of Religion.⁶⁶ Also (and finally) from a political perspective, the pursuit of absolutist governance may have unwittingly contributed to the perception of society as an independent entity from the state. Institutions such as the French Academy of Sciences were created with the greater glory and power of the State in mind, as the minister Louvois reminded wayward *académiciens* in 1685: “I understand by useful research that which could relate to the service of the King and the State.”⁶⁷ But the “useful research” conducted by the Academy, along with a host of other “useful” institutions sponsored by the crown, also became a end in itself, rather than a mere means to an end.

These two objectives were not necessarily at odds. When the Academy was reformed in 1699, it was both placed more directly under royal supervision, and granted a much more visible role: henceforth it would publish a yearly *Histoire de l'Académie royale des sciences*, which Fontenelle authored until 1740, in an attempt to further public instruction and the advancement of scientific learning.⁶⁸ But these two objectives were not necessarily linked, either. Where the state initially sought to transform society in order to further its political and military ambitions, society (duly “transformed”) subsequently sought to influence those very ambitions, until the state was obliged to acknowledge the force of public opinion at the end of the old regime.⁶⁹

To be sure, one cannot deduce all these later developments from the initial focus by writers such as Fontenelle, Fréret, and Dubos on the social transformations brought

⁶⁵ See in particular Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, trans. Oscar Burge (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); see also Baker, “Enlightenment and the Institution of Society,” 110-14; Dale Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560-1791* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); and Bell, *Cult of the Nation*, chap. 1.

⁶⁶ This point is emphasized by Bell, with reference to Gauchet, in *Cult of the Nation*, 27-32. I am indebted to the author for many of the arguments in this section.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Margaret Jacob, *Strangers Nowhere in the World*, 58.

⁶⁸ See Simone Mazauric, *Fontenelle et l'invention de l'histoire des sciences à l'aube des Lumières* (Paris: Fayard, 2007).

⁶⁹ See Baker, “Public Opinion as Political Invention,” in *Inventing the French Revolution*. Here as well, the argument in this paragraph owes a great deal to conversations with the author.

about by the widespread interest in, and dissemination of, the new science. Religious toleration and freedom of expression, for instance, were obviously not distinctive features of French society between 1685 (the year of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes) and, say, 1717 (when Voltaire was *embastillé* for libeling the Regent).⁷⁰ By making society the hero of their historical narrative, however, these earlier writers nonetheless left a lasting mark on Enlightenment philosophy, in that they introduced the yardstick with which progress, utility, and greatness would henceforth be measured. Their insistence that knowledge be pragmatic was not tantamount to raising a cult to “instrumental reason,” as Horkheimer and Adorno have claimed: the abbé Pluche’s rhapsodic praise of man as “the Master and Monarch of all the Earth,” placed here to profit from “what was made for our Enjoyment” drew mostly mockery.⁷¹ Identifying social improvement as the benchmark for national glory expressed instead a wish that the new science serve to transform human conduct, beliefs, and relations, not to bring about a greater domination of nature.

But why did this interpretation happen to take place in France at this time? There was nothing in the recent French past on which Dubos, Fontenelle, and others focused in particular: for Dubos, there were just as many, if not more, foreign contributors to the general *esprit philosophique* of the seventeenth century as French ones. Contemporary events, such as the Glorious Revolution or the death of Louis XIV, did not factor into their theory of Enlightenment. The new definition of society was readily available in other languages as well. That the fabrication of an Enlightenment narrative took place in France may ultimately have more to do with a domestic academic dispute that quickly spread beyond French borders: the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns. As it turned out, the former had just as much to do with defining the Enlightenment as the latter.

5. Quarrel in the Academy: The Ancients Strike Back

⁷⁰ While it is true that these values were more established in England and the Netherlands at this time, the idea of religious toleration was not exactly new: Henry IV, after all, signed the Edict of Nantes in 1598.

⁷¹ See Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), and Noël Antoine Pluche, *Spectacle de la nature: or, nature display'd. Being discourses on such particulars of natural history as were thought most proper to excite...* (London, 1733; 2nd ed.), 287, 300. For a typical reaction to this work, see Voltaire’s satirical comments in the entry on “Bacon,” in his *Questions pour l’Encyclopédie*; see also Hampson, *Cultural History of the Enlightenment*, 82.

One of the first clues pointing toward this Quarrel can be found in Dubos's *Réflexions critiques*.⁷² Almost the entire discussion of (and references to) the *esprit philosophique* occur in a section of his work arguing that "the good authors of antiquity will always be venerated," and casting doubt on the belief that "we reason better than the ancients" (part 2, sec. 33). As is evident from this title, Dubos sided with the Ancients, but he was a most measured detractor, who has been called "an 'Ancient' with a modern mind."⁷³ In fact, this affiliation with the party of the Ancients adds an important twist to the interpretation of the Enlightenment as an age idolizing only modern progress. As we will see, the *philosophes* themselves ultimately owed more to the Ancients, who could accommodate modern scientific achievements into their platform, than to the Moderns, who could not find any place for Antiquity. This distinction becomes clear when we compare Dubos's arguments to those of his chief antagonist in the *Réflexions critiques*, the Modern responsible for transforming the Quarrel into a full-blown culture war: Charles Perrault.⁷⁴

Perrault launched his frontal assault on the Ancients on January 27, 1687, when his poem celebrating *Le Siècle de Louis le Grand* was read before the French Academy. Its disparaging attitude toward the Ancients and unlimited praise of the Moderns caused a ruckus (Boileau could not contain his rage).⁷⁵ The poem was published that same year, and was followed by Perrault's multi-volume *Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes en*

⁷² For a insightful introduction to the Quarrel, see Marc Fumaroli, "Les abeilles et les araignées," in Anne-Marie Lecoq, ed., *La Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 8-218; see also, among many other works, Joan DeJean, *Ancients Against Moderns: Culture Wars and the Making of a Fin de Siècle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Levent Yilmaz, *Le temps moderne: variations sur les Anciens et les contemporains* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), and for a more *longue durée* study, François Hartog, *Anciens, modernes, sauvages* (Paris: Galaade, 2005). My own understanding of the Quarrel is greatly indebted to Larry F. Norman's forthcoming study, *The Shock of the Ancient*: my utmost thanks to the author for sharing his manuscript with me before its publication. On the English version of the Quarrel, see Joseph Levine, *The Battle of the Books: History and Literature in the Augustan Age* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

⁷³ Pomeau and Ehrard, *Fénelon à Voltaire*, 98. I return to the importance of Dubos's work at the end of this section.

⁷⁴ Dubos mentions Perrault 14 times in his *Réflexions critiques*; while he is generally committed to opposing Perrault's thesis, he nonetheless describes his opponent most honorably (3:188, only in 1733 ed.). For a reading of the Quarrel as culture war, see DeJean, *Ancients Against Moderns*.

⁷⁵ The poem is reprinted in Fumaroli, *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, 256-73; on the Academy seance, see 18-24.

ce qui regards les arts et les sciences.⁷⁶ While the tone of the poem was elegiac, it came at a particularly difficult moment for its author. Perrault had been a protégé of Colbert, and enjoyed great power as the architectural supervisor of the kingdom (*contrôleur général de la surintendance des bâtiments du roi*), until the death of his patron in 1683.⁷⁷ Defenders of the Ancients were then on the ascendant: favored by the king, their “party” leaders, Boileau and Racine, had been named royal historiographers in 1677, a year after the death of the writer Jean Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin, one of the most vocal Moderns. Perrault had been forced out of the petite Académie (the forerunner to the Académie des inscriptions) and lost his position overseeing architectural decisions. Rather than mark a moment of Modern triumph, Perrault’s outburst thus came at a time when the Moderns were seeing their achievements, power, and ideologies weakened, if not rejected. As Jacob Soll argues in a recent work, Colbert had constructed an unrivaled information system that privileged technical knowledge over traditional humanism, *savoir-faire* over *savoir*.⁷⁸ Unfortunately, only he seemed capable of mastering his complex system. It accordingly fell apart with frightening speed, a “catastrophe” which may explain Perrault’s curious insistence that the greatness of the present age may already have peaked.⁷⁹

The persistence of a Colbertian agenda is evident in Perrault’s argumentation. While much of the Quarrel focused on the comparative strengths of Ancient and Modern authors (with Homer serving as the main polarizing figure), Perrault made clear in the *Siècle* that it was primarily on another terrain that he sought to do battle: “We may challenge it [Antiquity] for the prize of science” (*Siècle*, 257). Evidence of the modern superiority in science, he argued, could be found in the technical developments of the preceding decades. The Moderns had, for instance, invented “this admirable glass / Through which nothing on earth or high in the sky / Far as it may be is too far for our eyes” (258), in other words, the telescope, as well a host of other useful devices: “this

⁷⁶ Perrault, *Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes en ce qui regards les arts et les sciences* (1688-97), ed. Hans Robert Jauss (Munich: Eidos Verlag, 1964). Apart from the Preface (which is unpaginated in the original), page references are to the seventeenth-century edition (which Jauss reproduces).

⁷⁷ This brief historical summary of the Quarrel is mostly drawn from Fumaroli, “Les abeilles et les araignées,” *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*.

⁷⁸ Jacob Soll, *The Information Master: Jean-Baptiste Colbert’s Secret State Intelligence System* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

⁷⁹ See DeJean, *Ancients Against Moderns*, 17.

useful heap of things we invent, / Is incessantly sorted or augmented each day” (271). Thanks to this steady stream of scientific innovations, the Modern observer could now enter “into the heart of the smallest beings, / To see the springs of wise Nature, / And glancing into her sanctuary, / Admire the art with which she secretly works.” (259). Since the Ancients never had a microscope for exploring the world, they were necessarily at a disadvantage: even Aristotle, “In this dark night / Where secretive Nature hides from us, / Though he may be the wisest of men / He could only see vain ghosts” (258). Perrault’s discourse was profoundly marked by a Baconian epistemology: the Modern philosopher ought not to remain in the “anterooms of nature,” but must gain admittance to “her inner chambers,” as Bacon had declared in his *Novum Organum*.⁸⁰

Though Perrault played the modern superiority in science as his trump card, it was in fact a bit of a red herring. As admiring of the Classics as they may have been, the Ancients were no Luddites. Larry Norman draws attention to how Boileau himself mocked the universities for resisting Harvey’s new theory, or how Hilaire-Bernard de Longepierre (one of the first to respond to Perrault’s attack) showered praise on the new sciences of physics and astronomy.⁸¹ The battle lines between Ancients and Moderns are not easily drawn; even the names given to the warring sides are misleading. In an elegant study of the Quarrel, Levent Yilmaz argues that it was not so much “a debate or conflict between Ancients and Moderns, but a public spat between two Modern factions.”⁸² Both sides admitted the beneficial effects of progress: the only real difference was that, where Perrault took the thesis that “time perfects everything”⁸³ to include the arts, the Ancients considered the achievements of Homer and other “classics” to be incomparable.

Beyond this artistic debate, what the Moderns brought to the Quarrel was an unabashed celebration of present greatness, in none-too-sly attempts to flatter the greatest of all monarchs, the Sun King Louis XIV. Perrault tirelessly returns to the exceptionality of his century, “*ce siècle où nous sommes*,” or “*notre siècle*” (*Parallèle*, 96-97), tracing the moment of present glory back to Richelieu’s ministry and the establishment of the

⁸⁰ *The New Organon*, trans. and ed. Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 2.7; 107.

⁸¹ See Norman, *Shock of the Ancient*, part I. For Boileau, see his *Arrêt burlesque* (1671), in *Œuvres complètes de Boileau-Despréaux*, ed. P.-C.-F. Daunou (Paris: Dupont, 1825) [Gallica], 3 vols., 3:117; for Longepierre, see his *Discours sur les anciens*, excerpted in *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, 279-93.

⁸² Yilmaz, *Le temps moderne*, 29.

⁸³ *Parallèle*, 5:285.

French Academy.⁸⁴ This genesis would become commonplace and serve to date the mythical founding of the “modern:” Dubos, Voltaire, and countless others, would similarly extend “modernity” only back to the early-to-mid-seventeenth century.⁸⁵ The same cast of characters populate these accounts: Perrault singles out Bacon and, more importantly in his mind, Descartes, as the initiators of the Modern age, while also surveying the field of scholarly and scientific developments more broadly to support his claims (he points, for instance, to advances in medical knowledge).⁸⁶ Without using the expression, his analysis thus highlights a similar *esprit philosophique* uniting these diverse phenomena. Dubos’s adoption of this phrase appears in hindsight as a kind of shorthand by which to designate Perrault’s “useful heap of things we invent,” that is, his body of evidence for the precedence of the Moderns over the Ancients. In this regard, the *Réflexions critiques* absorbed much of the Modern position, even crystallizing some of Perrault’s arguments into a more concise form.

It was precisely this capacity to absorb the Modern narrative that made the Ancient argument all the more powerful. As expressed by Dubos, the so-called Ancient position was in fact a dialectical synthesis between two only apparently opposed claims. Indeed, Dubos had no qualms about adopting most of the Modern *régime d’historicité*, readily granting that “our century is already more enlightened than the centuries of Plato, Augustus, and Leo X” (2:422; 2:453 in 1733 ed.)—the same three “happy ages,” incidentally, that Voltaire would later place alongside the *Siècle de Louis XIV*. And Dubos likewise accepted the Modern theory of progress: “the unique cause of perfection in the natural sciences [...] is that we know more facts than we used to” (2:426; 2:459). But there was more to knowledge than the accumulation of facts. Bacon and Descartes

⁸⁴ *Parallèle*, 96, 97, and 1:54. Joan DeJean has argued that it was only around this time (and perhaps even thanks to Perrault) that “*siècle*” acquired its contemporary meaning of “one hundred years,” as opposed to referring to a monarch’s reign or general epoch: see *Ancients Against Moderns*, 19.

⁸⁵ In the *Siècle de Louis XIV*, Voltaire defends his celebration of Louis’s reign by arguing that “healthy philosophy only became known at this time [...] from the last years of cardinal Richelieu, until those following the death of Louis XIV.” His following commentary on the spread of this “revolution” is most pertinent to the argument developed here: “This fortunate influence did not even stop in France; it spread to England; it triggered a much needed emulation from this spiritual and hearty nation; it brought taste to Germany, sciences to Russia; it even revived a languishing Italy, and Europe owes its politeness and sense of society to the court of Louis XIV,” chp. 1, emphasis added [VOLTAIRE].

⁸⁶ On medicine, see *Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes*, 5:244-45; for the lengthy discussion of Descartes’s philosophy, see 5:156-228. It is worth noting that Perrault is in fact quite critical of Cartesian physics, but like Fréret, Voltaire, d’Alembert, and many others after them, credits Descartes for having shown a new, if not the right, way to explore Nature (5:173).

were not simply dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants: their new method, the vaunted *esprit philosophique*, introduced a radical discontinuity in the history of human knowledge. In this respect, their greatness, which Dubos happily acknowledged, had nothing to do with progress:⁸⁷ theirs was an almost Kuhnian revolution. But they could not, accordingly, lay claim on a categorical advantage over the Ancients: as Dubos argued, “did not the Ancients also know as well as us that this superiority of reason, which we call philosophical spirit, must preside over all sciences and arts?”⁸⁸ Our natural propensity to reason does not vary over time: Perrault himself recognized that “Nature makes the same effort at all times” (*Siècle*, 271). The Moderns could simply not have a monopoly on reason. The *esprit philosophique* was present at all epochs: Machiavelli’s histories may predate the break with Scholasticism, but were still logically sound (2:452; 2:485). In a related vein, Fréret argued that *before* Aristotle, the Greeks had been more knowledgeable: “Aristotle made the Greeks abandon the study of nature, and stopped their progress of philosophical discovery.”⁸⁹ More than a simple catchword summarizing Modern achievements, the concept of an *esprit philosophique* allowed Dubos to perform a kind of intellectual jujitsu on Perrault, using his forceful arguments in favor of the Moderns against him.

Though the Quarrel resonated throughout the eighteenth century, with Dubos’s *Réflexions critiques* its more polemical phase came to an end. The Quarrel had flickered out before, when similar resolutions had been reached: Perrault and Boileau famously made peace at a session of the French Academy in 1694.⁹⁰ More critically, the unification of the Ancients and Moderns had been realized in practice by a number of individuals. In his 1716 *Lettre à l’académie*, for instance, Fénelon had traced a *via media* between Ancient and Modern positions, expressing his hope that “the Moderns will surpass the

⁸⁷ Dubos also imposed a starker distinction between the arts and sciences, arguing that since sentiment, not reason, determines the value of poetry, the passage of time and accumulation of experience do not confer any particular advantages to Modern writers (unlike in the sciences).

⁸⁸ *Réflexions critiques*, 2:446; 2:478 in 1733 ed. Dubos had commented previously on “the Philosophical Spirit [...] whose name only would have been new for the Ancients...” 2:470; 2:504-5 in 1733 ed.

⁸⁹ Fréret, *Réflexion générale*, 8. Turgot’s *Philosophical Review of the Successive Advances of the Human Mind* (1750) similarly combines an admiration of the Ancients and a celebration of the Moderns: see *Turgot on Progress, Sociology, and Economics*, trans. and ed. Ronald Meek (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

⁹⁰ Fumaroli, “Les abeilles et les araignées,” 194-96.

Ancients,” and his belief that it was silly to judge a book by the date on its cover.⁹¹ While espousing a number of Modern tenets—yes, he acknowledges, Homer nods—he nonetheless expressed his great admiration for the Ancients, even asserting that the path to potential Modern superiority lead straight through the study of the Ancients: “If you [the Moderns] are ever able to defeat the Ancients, you will owe the glory of your victory to them” (125).

The argument of the *Réflexions critiques* seems significantly indebted to the median position outlined in this short text by Fénelon, with whom Dubos corresponded. This position—which in a slightly different form had been the “Ancient” position all along—would ultimately become the defining attitude of the Enlightenment. When Voltaire revisited the Quarrel in a dictionary entry on “Ancients and Moderns,” he matter-of-factly delivered his Solomonic judgment: “heureux est celui qui dégagé de tous les préjugés, est sensible au mérite des anciens et des modernes, apprécie leurs beautés, connaît leurs fautes, et les pardonne.”⁹² Yet a sense of insecurity often accompanied the *philosophes*’ relation to the past. As Elena Russo acutely observed, “the philosophes became somewhat schizophrenic in their perception of themselves and of their function as writers:” on the one hand, their writings often exhibited the style and spirit of the Moderns, while on the other, they had a “festishistic cult of ancient taste.”⁹³ They were in fact openly hostile to self-proclaimed Moderns, dismissing Marivaux as a mere *bel esprit*, and even teasing Fontenelle.⁹⁴ Even works that presented themselves as more favorable to Moderns revealed Ancient preferences. In his *Persian Letters*, for instance, Montesquieu indulges in many of the common Modern critiques of their opponents: he has a self-proclaimed “scholar” write to Rica, one of his two Persian travelers, to

⁹¹ Fénelon, *Lettre sur l’Académie* (1714; Geneva: Droz, 1970), 122 [ARTFL]. Fénelon goes on to add that “one must be stubborn to judge a text by its date” (124). On this letter, which was written in 1714 and published the year after Fénelon’s death in 1715, see *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, 471-72. My thanks to Larry Norman for emphasizing Fénelon’s dialectical stance.

⁹² See “Anciens et modernes,” *Questions sur l’Encyclopédie*.

⁹³ Russo, *Styles of Enlightenment: Taste, Politics, and Authorship in Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 21 and 261.

⁹⁴ On Marivaux, the *bel esprit*, and the *philosophes*, see Russo, *Style of the Enlightenment*, 62-63 and *passim*. Fontenelle was allegedly deeply insulted by the conclusion of Voltaire’s *Micromégas*, in which the *secrétaire perpétuel* of the Academy of sciences (i.e. Fontenelle) is presented with a book containing the end all of knowledge (“le bout des choses”); when it transpires that the book’s pages are blank, the witty *secrétaire* responds, “Ah! I knew it [*Je m’en étais bien douté*].” La Bruyère had already mocked Fontenelle as a “Cydias *bel esprit*” in *Les caractères ou les mœurs de ce siècle* (1688), in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Julien Benda (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), 172 [ARTFL]; quoted in Fumaroli, “Les abeilles et les araignées,” 185.

complain that he cannot bury his uncle according to “the ceremonials observed by the ancient Greeks and Romans,” having neither “lacrymatories, nor urns, nor ancient lamps.”⁹⁵ And yet on political matters, Montesquieu’s attitude toward Antiquity could not have been more different: in a direct criticism to contemporary France, he has “a man of good sense” argue that “the sanctuary of honor, reputation, and virtue seem to be in republics, and in countries where there is a deep sense of patriotism. In Rome, in Athens, in Sparta, honor was the sole reward for the most signal services.”⁹⁶

As the Quarrel faded into the past, the partisan distinction between Ancients and Moderns became increasingly imperceptible. Perhaps because the *philosophes* no longer felt obliged to take sides, however, we tend to forget the considerable impact that the Quarrel had on eighteenth-century cultural life. In particular, faced with their elegiac praise for the modern *siècle*, we overlook that the *philosophes* could be equally celebratory of—and even dependent on—the Ancients. Voltaire’s famous quip, “Si Dieu n’existait pas, il faudrait l’inventer,” was in fact preceded by a very unjoking passage urging the reader to “Consult Zoroaster, and Minos, and Solon, / And the martyr Socrates, and the great Cicero / They all adored one master, one judge, one father. / This sublime system is necessary to man.”⁹⁷ As we will see in the following sections, trusting the Ancients was not unusual: in the “Discours préliminaire” to the *Encyclopédie*, d’Alembert asserted that “we are now almost all agreed that the Ancients were right [about sensationalism], and this is not the only point on which we are moving closer to them.”⁹⁸ As Dubos before him, d’Alembert subscribed to the intellectual history of the Moderns, all the while extolling the Ancients, even describing Antiquity as the first enlightened centuries, or “*siècles de lumière*” (1:xix).

⁹⁵ *Persian Letters*, trans. Margaret Mauldon (Oxford: Oxford University Press), letter 136 (in standard French editions, letter 142), 194.

⁹⁶ *Persian Letters*, letter 87, 121 (letter 89 for French edition). I return to the place of Antiquity in Montesquieu’s political thought in a subsequent section.

⁹⁷ *Epître à l’auteur du livre des Trois imposteurs*, in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. Louis Moland (Paris: Garnier, 1877-1885), vol. 10 [VOLTAIRE]; in a note to the *Poème sur la loi naturelle*, he had already argued that “Tous les anciens, sans exception, ont cru l’éternité de la matière; c’est presque le seul point sur lequel ils convenaient.” On Voltaire’s use of tradition, see Palmer, *Catholics and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-Century France*, chp. 3.

⁹⁸ *Encyclopédie*, “Discours préliminaire,” 1:ii. I discuss the persistence of the *philosophia perennis* conceit in Enlightenment philosophy in “Introduction to the Super-Enlightenment.”