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The Early Modern Epicurean Revival and the History of Relativism

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(Received 28 March 2025; revised 24 December 2025; accepted 14 February 2026)

This article surveys the history of relativism in the years from 1640 to 1710, connecting it to the revival of Epicurean thought in France and Britain. During these decades, a Christianized Epicureanism, elaborated by Pierre Gassendi and divulged by French and British sympathizers, coexisted with a libertine Epicureanism carrying Cyrenaic and naturalist overtones. Both fostered the development of relativist theses. Philosophers and imaginative authors responsible for the Epicurean revival—from Gassendi and the Earl of Rochester to Madame Deshoulières and Margaret Cavendish—derived relativistic conclusions from the Epicurean theory of justice to Epicurus’ hedonism, atomic theory, and sensationalist epistemology. They often brought relativism under control by recommending conformity to local norms, but some took Epicurean relativism in a reformist direction, making cases against homophobia, anthropocentrism, social inequality, and religious persecution. This phase in the history of relativism accordingly anticipates the popularization and politicization of heterodox ideas usually associated with the Enlightenment.

The history of relativism in early modern Europe is currently a work in progress. There is as yet no global account of the topic tracing its development between Michel de Montaigne and the Marquis de Sade. What we do have is a number of threads explored in isolation to various degrees of depth. To begin with, a substantive body of scholarship has identified (and contested) elements of relativism in prominent philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Montesquieu.¹ Each of them recognized that value judgments (especially about ethics) could be relative to historical, material, and psychological circumstances, but in each case their commitment to relativism was either qualified or questionable. Montaigne’s case is representative. As Tzvetan Todorov

¹The classic case for seeing Hobbes as a relativist was made by Richard Tuck, in *Hobbes* (Oxford, 1989). See also Christian Lazzeri, “Hobbes et la question du relativisme,” *Dix-septième siècle* 226 (2005), 55–73; and Michel Verdon, “On the Laws of Physical and Human Nature: Hobbes’ Physical and Social Cosmologies,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 43/4 (1982), 653–63. In turn, Quentin Skinner, in *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge, 1996), 8–9, has argued that Hobbes had little interest in relativism. On Locke’s relationship to relativism see Daniel Carey, *Locke, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson: Contesting Diversity in the Enlightenment and Beyond* (Cambridge, 2006); for Montesquieu see Joshua Bandoch, *The Politics of Place: Montesquieu, Particularism, and the Pursuit of Liberty* (Rochester, 2017).

puts it, although Montaigne “wants to be a relativist,” he “has never stopped being a universalist.”² If we look beyond the high philosophical canon, historians of religion as well as literary and intellectual historians have drawn attention to relativistic insights in a number of seventeenth-century domains, from the sectarian writings of the Ranters and Levelers to libertine poetry and the learned (or “erudite”) libertinism of François de la Mothe Le Vayer.³ Moving from the seventeenth century to the eighteenth, Enlightenment scholars have identified strains of relativism in empiricist ethics and aesthetics, in sociology and political theory, and in studies of imperialism.⁴ There have been studies of relativism as a form of historicism, with dedicated attention to Giambattista Vico and Johann Gottfried von Herder.⁵ In short, existing studies have identified multiple iterations of the phenomenon, which were not necessarily pieces of a single puzzle. They emerged out of different intellectual and religious traditions and were often discontinuous in time. While the relativism sometimes attributed to Montaigne had roots in ancient skepticism and accounts of the New World, that of the Ranters derived from Protestant soteriology, while Hobbes and La Mettrie worked from contractual political theory and materialist determinism. A global history of early modern relativism, accordingly, would need to map out and connect its different expressions while keeping them grounded in intellectual contexts specific to each of them.

This work still needs to be done. The present article pursues a cross-section of it by attending to a period and context mostly absent from the existing historiography.

²Tzvetan Todorov, *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA, 1993), 32, 42. For more on Montaigne’s presumable relativism see Miranda Fricker, “Styles of Moral Relativism: A Critical Family Tree,” in Roger Crips, ed., *Oxford Handbook of the History of Ethics* (Oxford, 2003), 793–817; Susan R. Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture* (New York, 1987), 33–43; and Agnès Minazzoli, *L’homme sans image: Une anthropologie négative* (Paris, 1996), 101–6.

³On relativism among the Levelers and Ranters see Nigel Smith, “The Charge of Atheism and the Language of Radical Speculation, 1640–1660,” in Michael Hunter and David Wootton, eds., *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 1992), 131–58; and Nigel Smith, ed., *A Collection of Ranter Writings: Spiritual Liberty and Sexual Freedom in the English Revolution* (London, 2014). On the relativism of the learned libertines see Isabelle Moreau, “Sceptics and Free-Thinkers,” in Michael Moriarty and Jeremy Jennings, eds., *The Cambridge History of French Thought* (Cambridge, 2019), 110–23; and Moreau, *Guérir du sot: Les stratégies d’écriture des libertins à l’âge classique* (Paris, 2007).

⁴For shorter surveys see Roger Maioli, “Relativism in the British and French Enlightenment,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 57/3 (2024), 281–300; Bernd Irlenborn, *Relativismus* (Berlin, 2016); and Maria Baghramian, “A Brief History of Relativism,” in Michael Krausz, ed., *Relativism: A Contemporary Anthology* (New York, 2010), 31–50. A more extended study is Lester K. Born, *An Age of Crisis: Man and World in Eighteenth-Century French Thought* (Baltimore, 1959). For the case of aesthetics see Wilfried Floeck, *Esthétique de la diversité: Pour une histoire du baroque littéraire en France*, trans. Gilles Floret (Paris, 1989). For the connection with imperialism see Claudia Moscovici, *Double Dialectics between Universalism and Relativism in Enlightenment and Postmodern Thought* (New York, 2002); Larry Wolff and Marco Cipolloni, eds., *The Anthropology of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, 2007); and Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire* (Princeton, 2003).

⁵John D. Schaeffer, *Sensus Communis: Vico, Rhetoric, and the Limits of Relativism* (Durham, NC, 1990); Sonia Sikka, *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference: Enlightened Relativism* (Cambridge, 2011). Isaiah Berlin has questioned the status of these two thinkers as relativists, in “Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century European Thought,” in John Banville, ed., *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (Princeton, 1990), 73–94.

The period can be broadly defined as the 1640s to 1710s, with its center of gravity in the second half of the seventeenth century—the decades between Hobbes and Locke, or between Le Vayer and Pierre Bayle. The context, in turn, is the revival of Epicureanism in France and Britain. In itself, the Epicurean revival has been amply documented in both contexts, with dedicated studies focusing on the impact of a reconstructed Epicureanism on empirical science, matter theory, ethics, and social and political thought.⁶ What I add to this picture is the role of Epicureanism as a catalyst for relativistic thinking—a source of assumptions about justice, physics, psychology, and ethics that called into question the objectivity or universality of value distinctions. The assumptions in question will appear from the analysis that follows; for now, suffice it to say that Epicurean principles allowed a range of very different authors, from philosophers like Pierre Gassendi and Margaret Cavendish to imaginative writers such as Cyrano de Bergerac, Antoinette Deshoulières, and the Earl of Rochester, to assert the relativity of justice, morals, and knowledge, which they made conditional on a variety of reference frames (such as historical periods, customs, and individual perception).

Two qualifications are in order before I turn to my primary sources. The first is that the articulations of relativism emerging from such varied quarters were not the most philosophically robust on record. The authors I consider discussed the relativity of values without the thoroughness of Le Vayer or the analytical depth of Ralph Cudworth. With a few exceptions, their reflections tended to be brief and inconsistent, lacking the interrogation of premises one would expect of systematic philosophers. The second is that few of them could be unproblematically described as “Epicureans.” The Epicureanism of seventeenth-century authors was either a reconstructed philosophy that purged the original doctrine of its unchristian assumptions or a syncretic mix that admitted elements from extraneous bodies of thought, such as Cyrenaic hedonism or Italian naturalism. That said, this tradition, despite its fragmentariness and doctrinal impurity, played an important role in the history of relativism. On the one hand, the Epicurean revival reveals the slow diffusion of relativistic premises beyond the domains of moral philosophy or learned culture. Because Epicureanism, as flexibly reinterpreted, found a welcome in worldly circles, we find its fingerprints not only in theological and philosophical tracts, but also in poetry, drama, letters, and prose fiction. This phase of the history of relativism accordingly anticipates the popularization of unorthodox thinking usually associated with the High Enlightenment.⁷ On the other

⁶The bibliography is too extensive to list in full. General accounts include Bruno Roche, *Lumières épicuriennes au XVII^e siècle: La Mothe Le Vayer, Molière et la Fontaine, lecteurs et continuateurs de Lucrèce* (Paris, 2020); Alan Charles Kors, *Epicureans and Atheists in France, 1650–1729* (Cambridge, 2016); Catherine Wilson, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity* (Oxford, 2008); and Howard Jones, *The Epicurean Tradition* (New York, 1989). For discussions focused on empirical science see Dmitri Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom in the Age of the New Science* (Cambridge, 2017); and Margaret J. Osler, ed., *Atoms, Pneuma, and Tranquillity: Epicurean and Stoic Themes in European Thought* (Cambridge, 1991). For Epicurean ethics see Lisa T. Sarasohn, *Gassendi's Ethics: Freedom in a Mechanistic Universe* (Ithaca, 1996). For a social and political reading see Gianni Paganini, “Gassendi and Hobbes in Dialogue on Psychology, Ethics, and Politics,” in Phillip Mitsis, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Epicurus and Epicureanism* (Oxford, 2020), 671–710; and Richard W. F. Kroll, *The Material World: Literate Culture in the Restoration and Early Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore, 1991). A classic study is Thomas Franklin Mayo, *Epicurus in England (1650–1725)* (Dallas, 1934).

⁷“High Enlightenment philosophy,” runs a characteristic statement, “was thus constituted by the wide publication of hitherto clandestine ideas.” Antony McKenna, “Clandestine Literature,” in *Encyclopedia of the*

hand, the decades under survey show relativistic arguments transcending the realm of moral or aesthetic theory to find a political edge. Some of the authors I study appealed to the relativity of values to make cases against homophobia, religious intolerance, and the oppression of animals. The popularization and politicization of relativistic arguments, once started in the late 1600s, would then persist in the High Enlightenment, as I briefly note in my conclusion.

The Epicurean theory of justice

Of the ancient schools of philosophy to have experienced a revival after the Renaissance, Epicureanism was the last to regain favor. It was the hardest to reconcile with a dominant Christian tradition that had long incorporated elements of Aristotelianism and, subsequently, Platonism and Stoicism. During the Middle Ages, Epicureanism suffered from negative characterizations inherited from Cicero and deepened by prominent patristic authors such as Lactantius and Arnobius. It also suffered from conflation with less moderate forms of hedonism. For centuries, Epicurus was predominantly regarded as an apologist for vice, a godless philosopher who advocated for the limitless pursuit of pleasure.⁸ Interest in his views perked up in Italy after the rediscovery, in 1417, of Lucretius' *De rerum natura*. The unorthodox contents of the poem did not prevent it from becoming an object of fascination for pious Renaissance readers. As Ada Palmer has shown by examining annotated manuscripts and early print copies, the drive to recover a lost classic as well as interest in the less unorthodox aspects of Epicureanism secured a wide audience for Lucretius.⁹ This brought *De rerum natura* to the attention of thinkers such as Machiavelli and, eventually, Montaigne, who would become a vector for the transmission of Epicurean thought in France.¹⁰ By the seventeenth century, Lucretius had become widely known among learned French readers, who complemented their knowledge of Epicurean thought through classical loci such as Cicero and, most notably, Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* (third century CE). By the 1640s Epicureanism had found a welcome in unorthodox quarters, especially among libertine readers of Montaigne and exiled English royalists mingling with the Parisian intelligentsia.¹¹

But Epicurus' rehabilitation as a philosopher worthy of a Christian hearing only really happened in the 1640s, as natural philosophers started seeking alternatives to

Enlightenment (Oxford, 2005), at www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195104301.001.0001/acref-9780195104301-e-129.

⁸See Kors, *Epicureans and Atheists in France*, 15–17.

⁹Ada Palmer, *Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA, 2014).

¹⁰For Montaigne's role in transmitting Epicureanism see Jean-Charles Darmon, *Philosophie épicurienne et littérature au XVII^e siècle: Études sur Gassendi, Cyrano de Bergerac, La Fontaine, Saint-Évremond* (Paris, 1998), 19; Kors, *Epicureans and Atheists in France*, 20; and Bruno Roche, *Lumières épicuriennes*, 30. For a detailed analysis of Montaigne's engagement with Lucretius see Palmer, *Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance*, 214 ff.

¹¹For the currency of Epicureanism prior to its rehabilitation see Reid Barbour, "The Early Stuart Epicure," *English Literary Renaissance* 23/1 (1993), 170–200; Barbour, *English Epicures and Stoics: Ancient Legacies in Early Stuart Culture* (Amherst, 1998); Lynn S. Joy, "Epicureanism in Renaissance Moral and Natural Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53/4 (1992), 573–83; and Simone Fraisse, *Une conquête du Rationalisme: L'influence de Lucrèce en France au seizième siècle* (Paris, 1962).

Aristotelian physics. There is broad consensus that Pierre Gassendi kick-started the shift, by writing a laudatory account of Epicurus' life in 1647 and then, in a succession of works, cleansing Epicurean physics, epistemology, and ethics of their un-Christian elements.¹² For Epicurus and Lucretius, atoms were infinite, uncreated, and self-moving; empty space was the only immaterial entity; the soul, made of subtler atoms, was mortal; and the gods had no interest in human affairs. In Gassendi's Christianized version, atoms are finite and created by God, who exerts providential care over his creation, while the soul is immaterial and immortal. In ethics, Gassendi removed the old layers of misrepresentation and reminded readers that Epicurus had been a pious man: the original doctrine, while grounding happiness in individual pleasure, recommended the quiet delights of the mind over the unhealthy excesses of the body. Epicurean happiness boiled down to the entwined pleasures of mental tranquility (*ataraxia*) and the absence of pain (*aponia*).

Once initiated by Gassendi, the recovery of Epicureanism advanced simultaneously in France and in England, thanks to intellectual connections established during the Interregnum. While Gassendi's impact has been a matter of debate, Epicurean doctrines entered wider circulation thanks to a range of sympathizers, many of whom were directly influenced by Gassendi.¹³ These included the polymath François Bernier, who popularized Gassendism through his multivolume *Abrégé de la philosophie de Gassendi* (1674–84). They also included English exiles such as the future Duchess of Newcastle, Margaret Cavendish (discussed below), and Thomas Hobbes, who was entertained by the Cavendish circle and knew Gassendi in person. Cavendish's friend, the physician and natural philosopher Walter Charleton, would expand on Gassendi's Epicureanism in multiple publications starting in 1654.¹⁴ The almost simultaneous foundation of the Royal Society in London (1662) and the Académie des sciences in Paris (1666) secured a scientific interest in atomistic physics, while Thomas Stanley, in his multivolume *History of Philosophy* (1660), offered an unabridged English translation of Gassendi's *Life of Epicurus*. In tandem with these developments, Lucretius' *De rerum natura* became available in languages other than Latin. A full translation by Michel de Marolles reached French readers in 1650, while Thomas Creech's full English translation appeared in 1682. Several partial translations pre-dated them, some by notable authors like John Dryden and Molière (whose version is now lost), while a

¹²The most important of these works are Pierre Gassendi, *De vita et moribus Epicuri libri octo* (Lyon, 1647); Gassendi, *Animadversiones in decimum librum Diogenis Laertii, qui est de vita, moribus, placitisque Epicuri* (Lyon, 1649); Gassendi, *Syntagma philosophiae Epicuri* (Lyon, 1649); and Gassendi, *Syntagma philosophicum*, in Gassendi, *Opera omnia*, 6 vols. (Lyon, 1658), vols. 1, 2. For the thesis that Gassendi "baptized" Epicureanism see Margaret Osler, *Divine Will and the Mechanical Philosophy: Gassendi and Descartes on Contingency and Necessity in the Created World* (Cambridge, 1994), 36–79.

¹³For the reach and limits of Gassendi's influence see Thomas M. Lennon, *The Battle of the Gods and Giants: The Legacies of Descartes and Gassendi, 1655–1715* (Princeton, 1993); Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom*, Ch. 5; Kors, *Epicureans and Atheists in France*, 51 ff; and Kroll, *The Material World*, 142 ff.

¹⁴For Charleton see G. A. John Rogers, "Charleton, Gassendi et la réception de l'atomisme épicurien en Angleterre," in Sylvia Murr, ed., *Gassendi et l'Europe (1592–1792)* (Paris, 1997), 213–25; Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom*, 338 ff.

few complete translations remained unpublished (such as the one by Lucy Hutchinson) or were published only partially (such as the one by John Evelyn).¹⁵

The Epicureanism circulating through these channels was not, in principle, relativist. As noted above, Epicurus had a clear idea of the highest good: it consisted in happiness (*eudaimonia*), to be attained through tranquility of mind and bodily health.¹⁶ This norm applied universally, overruling the opinions of anybody who happened to lean towards more fleeting and unhealthy pleasures. Gassendi made sure to stress the moderation of Epicurean *eudaimonia*, as did Bernier and Charleton, among others. But even in classical articulations, Epicurus' views posed challenges to the universality of values. An appealing feature of his doctrine, for its early modern admirers, was its rejection of Aristotelian teleology. There were no final causes for Epicurus, nor any intrinsic purpose to the eternal dance of atoms. Lucretius illustrated the point with the example of bodily organs: "Nothing in the body was created for our use; instead, its existence produces the use."¹⁷ We may see with eyes, but this does not mean that eyes were designed for seeing with; rather, they emerged by chance as random products of matter in motion and happened to be capable of sight. To claim that use is evidence of purpose, as the Epicurean anatomist Guillaume Lamy put it in 1675, would be to indict Nature with criminal intentions. Relaying the rumors that women with large clitorises had been using them as penises, Lamy asked defenders of teleology "if they would conclude that nature has given women a clitoris so they could put it to such uses."¹⁸ Bodies, Lamy insisted in Lucretian fashion, have no preassigned functions. Historians of philosophy have a name for this thesis—antifinalism—and Epicurus had applied it to domains beyond physiology. The relevant example, for my purposes, is his theory of justice. Conceptions of justice, like eyes, were not divinely designed with a preassigned purpose; they were, for Epicurus, contingent products of human compacts, which in themselves were products of matter in motion. According to Epicurus' so-called "sovrain maxims," preserved by Diogenes Laertius, "there never was an absolute justice, but only an agreement made in reciprocal intercourse in whatever localities now and again from time to time, providing against the infliction of suffering or harm." Outside this compact, talk of justice is meaningless. There is no justice or injustice

¹⁵ See the essays in Philippe Chométy and Michèle Rosellini, eds., *Traduire Lucrèce: Pour une histoire de la réception française du De Rerum Natura (XVIe–XVIIIe siècle)* (Paris, 2017).

¹⁶ Diogenes Laertius provides a detailed account of Epicurus' views in this regard. See the life of Epicurus in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R. D. Hicks, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA, 1925), 2: 649–63.

¹⁷ Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse (Cambridge, MA, 1924), 342: "Nil ... natumst in corpore ut uti possemus, sed quod natumst id procreat usum." My translation.

¹⁸ Guillaume Lamy, *Discours anatomiques* (1675) and *Explication mécanique et physique des fonctions de l'âme sensitive* (1677), ed. Anna Minerbi Belgrado (Oxford, 1996), 87: "Le clitoris ... devient quelquefois si long qu'elles en abusent ... Je voudrais demander en passant à messieurs nos antagonistes s'ils voudroient conclure que la nature a donné le clitoris aux femmes pour s'en servir ainsi." Lamy leaves the "use" implicit, but this was a well-known concern regarding clitoral hypertrophy among seventeenth-century anatomists. See Elizabeth Susan Wahl, *Invisible Relations: Representations of Female Intimacy in the Age of Enlightenment* (Stanford, 1999), 25–32.

among animals, or among tribes that have not formed covenants. And because justice is contractual, it “varies under different circumstances.”¹⁹

Normatively speaking, such an account of justice is procedural rather than substantive. It asserts that laws are just not because they express a given standard of rightness, but because they pass the ephemeral test of expediency: “Wherever the laws have ceased to be expedient in consequence of a change in circumstances, in that case the laws were for that time being just when they were expedient ... and subsequently they ceased to be just when they ceased to be expedient.”²⁰ This makes justice relative to ephemeral conditions that may change capriciously. For early modern critics, Epicurus was leaving the definitions of just and unjust at the mercy of custom. Writing in the 1630s, the humanist Meric Casaubon raised alarm about this issue by coupling Epicurus’ account of justice with the Tenth Mode of Sextus Empiricus—the skeptical argument derived from the variety of customs:

For the *Custom* of men, which they live and are guided by, being different according to differences of places and nations ... will it not hence necessarily follow, that what is right in one place, is in another wrong: what at one time is reason and Truth; at another time is both false and absurd? And what is this, but to make Truth changeable, *Protheus* like; and applicable to all times and places? That is, in effect, to say ... with *Epicurus*, that ... righteousness of its selfe is nothing, but that whatsoever is expedient for the present, as long as it is expedient, it is just; and no longer just, then it is expedient.²¹

Casaubon identifies here a worrisome alignment between the skeptical and Epicurean traditions, as Montaigne had before him and the French libertines would after him. In response, he argues that custom cannot make right or truth, since there are “many Lawes and *customs* in all countries, which ... cannot bee practized by particular men ... with a good conscience.”²² To believe that values are merely relative to ever-shifting contexts, Casaubon insisted, is to go against the laws of nature and reason.

Casaubon made these arguments one decade before Gassendi’s rehabilitation of Epicurus, which he would vigorously oppose. Dmitri Levitin offers a detailed account of their differences, which had to do, above all, with issues in moral philosophy and theology.²³ To these I would add that Gassendi’s interpretation of Epicurus retained—and embraced—the relativistic assumptions denounced by Casaubon. Gassendi’s *Treatise of Epicurus’s Philosophy* (1649), delivered in Epicurus’ own voice, states that all goods besides happiness, including justice, are determined by utility. For something to be just, in Gassendi’s gloss, it must meet two conditions: “One, that it be useful, that is, that it

¹⁹Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 2: 675.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹Meric Casaubon, *A Treatise of Use and Custom* (London, 1638), 15–16.

²²*Ibid.*, 140.

²³Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom*, 339–46.

aim at common utility, or security; the other, that it be prescribed by the common consent of society.”²⁴ It just turns out that different societies have a different sense of the useful, and hence the just: “So when one asks whether the same thing is just or right for everybody, I answer that it is, generally speaking, the same—namely, whatever is useful in a society governed by mutuality—but, in fact, if we consider individual countries and the various circumstances within each, it turns out not to be the same for all.”²⁵ The variety in conceptions of justice bespeaks their relativity to local contexts:

There are, indeed, those who believe that just things are just according to their own invariable nature ... But the fact of the matter is otherwise ... Shouldn't they see that those things constituted by laws, and hence considered legitimate, are not constituted and accepted in the same way by all nations, but are by some neglected as indifferent, and by others rejected as harmful and regarded as unjust?²⁶

Maybe sensing that such an account of justice might discredit local laws as arbitrary, Gassendi clarifies that one ought strictly to observe the laws of one's country. After all, if all rules were to be thrown away, “we would live the life of beasts, and any man coming across another would all but devour him.”²⁷ Gassendi's ethics, accordingly, comes with safeguards against the relativity of justice. As Lisa Sarasohn argued in her full-length study of the topic, “while Gassendi, like Hobbes, believed that there are no universal principles with a reified existence, he did find a kind of universalism in human nature itself.”²⁸ The Epicureans, Gianni Paganini contended more recently, “looked for a ‘weak’ but ‘natural’ foundation of the social contract ... based on utility,” unlike the Sophists, who “emphasized the conventional aspects [of the theory of justice] so far as to be open to the charge of pure relativism.”²⁹ On Gassendi's theory, laws may not be universal, but they all express (and promote) the common human tendency towards sociability, as best encapsulated in the golden rule.

In practice, what this meant is that the fundamental relativity of all laws should not be taken as a ground for challenging existing laws. Like Montaigne, Charron, and Le Vayer, Gassendi advocated for the *vita contemplativa* over the active ideals of civic

²⁴Gassendi, *Traité de la philosophie d'Épicure. IIIe partie: L'éthique ou la morale*, in Jacques Prévot, ed., *Libertins du XVIIe siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1998–2004), 1: 597–745, at 715: “Unum, ut utile sit, seu ad communem utilitatem, hoc est securitatem, spectet, alterum, ut sit ex communi societatis consensus praescriptum.”

²⁵*Ibid.*, 717: “Atque ita dum quaeritur idemne apud omnes sit jus sive justum, respondeo, generatim quidem esse idem—utile nempe aliquid in societate mutua—, verum spectatis singulatim tum regionibus, tum causis apud varias variis, fieri ut non sit idem apud omnes.”

²⁶*Ibid.*, 716: “Ac sunt quidem, qui existiment ea, quae justa sunt, esse secundum propriam invariataque naturam justa ... Verum res non ita se habet ... Annon pervidere deberent ea, quae sunt legibus constituta, ac idcirco legitima justave habentur, non esse perinde apud omnes nationes constituta atque recepta, sed partim quidem ut indifferentia a plerisque negligi, partim ut noxia a ceteris respui ac injusta censerent?”

²⁷*Ibid.*, 658: “Vitam viveremus ferarum, et qui alium haberet obvium, ipsum tantum non devoraret.”

²⁸Sarasohn, *Gassendi's Ethics*, 161.

²⁹Gianni Paganini, “Early Modern Epicureanism: Gassendi and Hobbes in Dialogue on Psychology, Ethics, and Politics,” in Philip Mitsis (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Epicurus and Epicureanism* (Oxford, 2020), 671–710, at 674.

humanism.³⁰ Another way of putting this would be to say that Gassendi, like other innovators in seventeenth-century ethics, dissociated freedom of thought from license of action. Following the Lucretian principle that the happy life involves disengagement from the troubles of the world, he prescribed conformity to established forms. But in theory, at least, Gassendi reproduced Epicurus' relativism about justice without sanitizing it, and his account would reappear in Bernier's widely popular *Abrégé* and in Thomas Stanley's equally successful *History of Philosophy*.³¹

Libertine Epicureanism in France

Seventeenth-century Epicureanism, Bruno Roche has shown, involved "complex phenomena of syncretism, to such an extent that it is sometimes difficult to attribute a given argument to this or that philosophical school or religious current."³² As a result, Gassendi's construal of the doctrine came to share space with less orthodox varieties that had preexisted in French and English culture; these varieties, which often tended towards atheism, gained momentum thanks to the popularity of their Christianized cousin.³³ Now, just as Gassendi did not have a monopoly over seventeenth-century Epicureanism, the theory of justice was not the only Epicurean principle to tend in relativistic directions at the time. Other elements did so as well, especially when modified by accretions alien to the classical doctrine—especially principles originating in ancient skepticism, Cyrenaic hedonism, and Paduan naturalism.

The theory of pleasure is a case in point. In Gassendi's reconstruction of Epicurean hedonism, the pleasures serve a providential function: they are devices by means of which God pursues his eternal decrees.³⁴ Within this theological framework the highest pleasures are altruistic and even ascetic, in contrast with the centuries-old tendency to conflate Epicurean and Cyrenaic hedonism. The latter was described most fully in Diogenes Laertius' biography of the sophist Aristippus, its founding figure. In the Cyrenaic tradition, Diogenes explains, pleasure is desirable for its own sake and not for any greater good: "bodily pleasures are far better than mental pleasures," and "pleasure is good even if it proceed from the most unseemly conduct."³⁵ Whether or not an object causes pleasure depends on how rare or abundant it is, and the Cyrenaics denied "that there is anything naturally pleasant or unpleasant."³⁶ Moreover, they combined their hedonism with a sensationalist moral epistemology according to which "mental affections can be known, but not the objects from which they come," and

³⁰See Lisa Sarasohn, "Epicureanism and the Creation of a Privatist Ethic in Early Seventeenth-Century France," in Osler, *Atoms, Pneuma, and Tranquillity*, 175–95. For the seventeenth-century discourse of retreat see Bernard Beugnot, *Le discours de la retraite au XVIIe siècle: Loin du monde et du bruit* (Paris, 1996).

³¹The theory of justice reappears in François Bernier, *Abrégé de la philosophie de Gassendi*, vol. 7 (Paris, 1992), 324; and in Thomas Stanley, *The History of Philosophy, The Fifth Part: Containing the Epicurean Sect* (London, 1659), 267.

³²Roche, *Lumières épicuriennes*, 27.

³³Kors, *Epicureans and Atheists in France*, 49.

³⁴Sarasohn, *Gassendi's Ethics*, 51, 61–3.

³⁵Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 1: 219, 217.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 223.

“nothing is just or honourable or base by nature, but only by convention and custom.”³⁷ The upshot of this theory is that the good, anchored in individual pleasure, is always relative to individual perception and material contingency. Early modern efforts to vindicate Epicurus sought to finally emancipate him from Cyrenaic ethics. In his *History of Philosophy*, Thomas Stanley reproduced Diogenes’ account and carefully distinguished between Epicurus’ and Aristippus’ hedonism.³⁸ But that distinction was ignored by (or lost on) many other seventeenth-century writers, who attributed Cyrenaic principles to Epicurus.

As a case in point, consider two French libertine poets who were also close friends: Charles-Auguste, Marquis de La Fare (1644–1712), and Guillaume Anfrue, Abbé de Chaulieu (1639–1720). Both were high-society poets active in the late seventeenth century and the early eighteenth, and both moved within reach of Gassendi’s influence. Chaulieu’s informal master, the poet Claude Emmanuel Luillier de Chapelle (1626–86), was a committed Epicurean who had studied under Gassendi, in the company of Molière, Bernier, and Cyrano de Bergerac.³⁹ Chaulieu himself has been described as “the recognized master of the disciples of Gassendi,” and “a teacher of the philosophy of Epicurus.”⁴⁰ He and La Fare were regulars at several of the courtly entourages and literary salons of the time, and their poetry, written for manuscript circulation beginning in the 1670s, bears witness to the worldly diffusion of Epicureanism. They labeled themselves and several of their contemporaries and predecessors as Epicureans; they celebrated *voluptas* (or pleasure) as the highest good, writing variations on Lucretius’ praise of Epicurus and on his invocation to Venus; and they coupled Epicurus’ defense of pleasure with Horace’s famous injunction to “seize the day, and trust little to the future.”⁴¹ But La Fare and Chaulieu gave different expressions to their hedonism. Except for his celebrations of infidelity, La Fare steered closer to Epicurus’ emphasis on durable pleasures. In a characteristic ode, entitled “The Beatitudes of This World,” he runs through a set of familiar Epicurean themes, downplaying the fear of death, advising conformity to the ways of one’s country, and recommending tranquil retirement and moderation in one’s pleasures: “Happy are those who have no other desires / than ones they can satisfy without trouble.”⁴² The passions, for La Fare, must be bridled by reason, and are better fulfilled in a state of lasting calmness. His ode “On Laziness,” addressed to Chaulieu, celebrates indolence for putting “a just brake on the wildest passions.”⁴³

Chaulieu, by contrast, expresses the Epicurean doctrine in a Cyrenaic key. In his late “Epistle to M. Le Chevalier de Bouillon,” written in the early eighteenth century,

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 221.

³⁸ Thomas Stanley, *The History of Philosophy, the Second Volume* (London, 1656), 4–5.

³⁹ For a detailed account see René Pintard, *Le libertinage érudit dans la première moitié du XVII^e siècle* (Paris, 1943), 327 ff. The story of these meetings was originally told by Molière’s first biographer, Jean-Léonor Le Gallois de Grimarest, in *La vie de Mr. de Molière*, 2nd edn (Amsterdam, 1705), 6–9.

⁴⁰ E. Bird, “‘Precieux’ or Epicurean? The Abbé de Chaulieu,” *Modern Language Review* 57/3 (1962), 340–49, at 342–3.

⁴¹ Horace, *Odes and Epodes*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge, MA, 2004), 44: “Carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero.”

⁴² Abbé de Chaulieu and Marquis de La Fare, *Poésies*, ed. Constance Griffioen-Cavatorta (Paris, 2014), 480: “Heureux qui n’a d’autres désirs / Que ceux qu’il peut sans trouble aisément satisfaire.”

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 437.

he recommends the untrammelled pursuit of pleasures, but does so in the name of Epicurus:

Élève que j'ai fait en la loi d'Épicure ...
 Philosophe formé des mains de la Nature,
 Qui, sans rien emprunter de tes réflexions,
 Prends pour guide les passions,
 Et les satisfais sans mesure ...
 Heureux libertin, qui ne fais
 Jamais rien que ce que tu désires
 Et désires tout ce que tu fais!

[My disciple in Epicurus' law ...
 Philosopher formed by Nature's hands,
 Who, borrowing nothing from your reflections,
 Take the passions for your guides
 And satisfy them without measure ...
 Happy libertine, who do nothing
 But what you desire
 And desire all you do!]⁴⁴

The emphasis, here, is not on durable but on fleeting pleasures, the ones Epicurus had warned against. As Constance Griffejoen-Cavatorta notes, "this interpretation of the Epicurean doctrine is rather 'libertine,' to the extent that it cares little for exactness ... In fact, the idea of satisfying the passions 'without measure' is diametrically opposed to the metriopathy promoted by the philosopher."⁴⁵ Tellingly, Chaulieu's poetry is suffused with celebrations of the bed and the bottle. Nature, he sings, spoke through Epicurus' mouth to free the Greeks from the terrors of the afterlife and reconcile them with the brute truth of their physicality.⁴⁶ The passions are superior to reason, while the wisdom of animals demonstrates that our "natural penchants are wiser than all laws."⁴⁷

Although he was a disciple of Chapelle, who learned his Epicureanism directly from Gassendi, Chaulieu was indebted to an older Epicurean undercurrent common in French libertine poetry, dating back to Théophile de Viau in the 1620s. It is generally accepted that Théophile took Lucretian lessons from Montaigne's *Essays* and influenced other courtly poets from his generation.⁴⁸ In his classic study of early French freethinking, Antoine Adam claimed that poets like Théophile, Des Barreaux, and Saint-Amant aimed "to push such epicureanism and such a theory of fate to their logical ends, in order to emancipate themselves from all dogma."⁴⁹ According to a recent study, they demonstrated their Epicureanism "by their tendency to follow nature, which was a guarantee of a free and full life, assuming the continuity between man and the animal

⁴⁴ Ibid., 239.

⁴⁵ Constance Griffejoen-Cavatorta, "Introduction," in Chaulieu and La Fare, *Poésies*, 7–73, at 51.

⁴⁶ Abbé de Chaulieu, "À Madame la Duchesse de Bouillon," in Chaulieu and La Fare, *Poésies*, 93.

⁴⁷ From the "Ode contre l'Esprit," in *ibid.*, 110: "Demande aux hôtes de ces bois / Si la guide la plus fidèle / N'est pas la pente naturelle, / Plus sage que toutes les lois."

⁴⁸ Chométy and Rosellini, *Traduire Lucrèce*, 28–9.

⁴⁹ Antoine Adam, *Théophile de Viau et la libre pensée française en 1620* (1935) (Geneva, 2008), 132–3.

kingdom and seeking pleasure as the only tangible good.”⁵⁰ Already in Théophile the Epicurean stress on moderation was discarded in the name of unrestrained pleasure seeking, with an emphasis on the inconstancy of perceptions. This, in turn, has relativistic implications. Théophile realized, in the words of Wilfried Floeck, “the relativity of knowledge as well as that of aesthetics; the image man has of truth is just as subjective and personal as the image of beauty.”⁵¹ In this tradition, the Epicurean injunction to follow nature received a libertine inflection that made nature’s laws relative to the pleasures of the individual.

There is a sense in which such libertine Epicureanism anticipated later developments in the history of ethics. Alasdair MacIntyre has famously argued that the key event in Enlightenment ethics was the dissolution of a tripartite Aristotelian schema in which human nature and moral rules were reconciled by a supervening purpose: the *telos* of human flourishing, or *eudaimonia*. On this account, Enlightenment thinkers rejected the *telos* only to be left with two components that no longer worked together: a set of received moral rules and an untutored human nature that rebelled against them.⁵² Enlightenment ethics, for MacIntyre, had no resources to show why one should endeavor to follow the rules in the absence of an ulterior purpose. Libertines from Théophile to Chaulieu were already confronting this problem. In theory, Epicurus agreed with Aristotle that *eudaimonia* was the highest good. But, as an antifinalist, he recast this principle in terms of efficient causation. We pursue happiness not because we tend towards it as a *telos*, but because we are driven by a desire for pleasure. Gassendi brought the *telos* back by making the pleasures instruments of God’s providence. But on the libertine interpretation, which sticks to the original antifinalism and ignores the distinction between higher and lower pleasures, the natural desire for pleasure is legitimized as a moral authority. The gap between rules and nature, left by the ejection of purpose, can only be closed if we take our rules directly from nature—which is to say, from our appetites.

Whether or not this leads to relativism is a matter of emphasis. In an important sense, the libertines were universalists. There was, after all, a higher court of appeal (nature) to adjudicate between competing moral outlooks. Such appeals to nature had a venerable ancestry, reaching early modern culture in Stoic and Aristotelian varieties—the latter sometimes inflected by the naturalism of the Paduan school.⁵³ The libertine injunction to follow nature wasn’t free of inconsistency. Authors attracted to the antifinalism of *De rerum natura* often reinvested nature with desires, wisdom, and purposes. They argued, in the same breath, that everything is indifferent

⁵⁰Philippe Chométy and Michèle Rosellini, “Traduire Lucrèce à l’âge classique: un défi impossible?”, in Chométy and Rosellini, *Traduire Lucrèce*, 15–100, at 29.

⁵¹Floek, *Esthétique de la diversité*, 77.

⁵²Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, 1981), 53.

⁵³For medieval versions of appeals to nature see the essays in Lorraine Daston and Fernando Vidal, eds., *The Moral Authority of Nature* (Chicago, 2004). For the early modern period see Jean Ehrard, *L’idée de nature en France dans la première moitié du XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1994). For the legacy of Paduan naturalism in libertine thought see Tullio Gregory, *Etica e religione nella critica libertina* (Naples, 1986); and Gregory, *Genèse de la raison classique de Charron à Descartes*, trans. Marilène Raiola (Paris, 2000).

from the standpoint of nature and that nature hates constraint. Libertine universalism, however, did not entail universal rules of conduct, since nature's pronouncements were often described as inconstant. "These appetites," according to the anonymous author of the *Theophrastus Redivivus* (1659), "inhere differently in each person ... All appetites are good ... and may seem evil only relatively speaking."⁵⁴ Chaulieu, following this tradition, describes the lives of humans and animals as a state of ceaseless volatility:

Si Nature, mère sage
De tous ces êtres divers,
Dans ses goûts n'était volage,
Que deviendrait l'univers? ...
La beauté qui vous fait naître,
Amour, passe en un moment;
Pourquoi voudriez-vous être
Moins sujet au changement?

[If Nature, wise mother
of all such diverse beings,
was not voluble in her tastes,
what would become of the universe? ...
The beauty that gives you birth,
O love, is gone in a moment;
Why would you want yourself
to be less subject to change?]⁵⁵

Written in 1700, this ode follows the tradition of the eulogy to inconstancy, also practiced by earlier poets like Ben Jonson and Théophile, and its import is to legitimize the mutability of human desires. This is closer to Cyrenaic than to Epicurean hedonism, and it reflects the inherent relativism of the former. Because our natural penchants are erratic, Chaulieu suggests, we should reject all attempts to codify rules of behavior in the form of religious dogma or human opinion. Originating in the individual desire for happiness, but inflected by echoes of Aristippus and by a libertine naturalism of Paduan origins, moral norms lose their objectivity; they become, for Chaulieu, local misconceptions bred by national prejudices and the lies of priests.

Before Chaulieu, this view had appealed to the generations of queer poets moving in Parisian high circles. Same-sex intercourse, whether between men or women, had

⁵⁴ Anonymous, *Theophrastus Redivivus. IVe Traité: De la vie selon la nature*, in Prévot, *Libertins du XVIIe siècle*, 2: 217–404, at 226, 232: "Verum appetitiones istae ... aliis aliter insunt ... Igitur quaelibet appetitiones bonae sunt et ... quamvis mala videantur, non sunt talia tamen nisi respective." The *Theophrastus* is a thousand-page anonymous Latin tract often credited as a founding document in the history of atheism. It was recently attributed to Gassendi's friend Guy Patin by Gianluca Mori, in *Athéisme et dissimulation au XVIIe siècle: Guy Patin et le Theophrastus Redivivus* (Paris, 2022).

⁵⁵ Abbé de Chaulieu, "Apologie de l'Inconstance," in Chaulieu and La Fare, *Poésies*, 193.

long been a capital crime in France, and although the laws applied erratically, they condemned an estimated 150 people to death in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁵⁶ The lowly-born were especially vulnerable to the strictures of the law. The young poet Claude Le Petit was one of several *roturiers* burned at the stake for sodomy in the 1660s and 1670s.⁵⁷ Lamenting the recent execution of a schoolmaster, Denis Sanguin de Saint-Pavin (1595–1670), a poet from Gassendi's generation, wrote, "How unfortunate is a prick to perk up in a country / Where such noble appetites are punished by fire!"⁵⁸ Aristocrats like Saint-Pavin, the son of a cardinal, enjoyed a modicum of tolerance as well as de facto immunity from prosecution. Despite the dilettante ease of his poems, which generally eschew philosophical earnestness, he was conversant in Epicureanism, whose libertine construal subtly pervades his work. Nicholas Hammond highlights "the important presence of Théophile de Viau's Epicurean philosophy in Saint-Pavin's poetry," which runs over the usual tropes: the contempt of death, the denial of the after-life with its attendant rewards and punishments, the yearning for social retreat, and the independence associated with the individual pursuit of pleasure.⁵⁹ Saint-Pavin declares himself "equally unencumbered by the future as by the past," stating that "without curbing my desires I give myself entirely to pleasure."⁶⁰ Epicurean hedonism, associated with the naturalism of the libertines, yields a defense of same-sex desire:

N'écoute guère la Morale;
 La Nature, plus libérale,
 Nous accorde, le plus souvent,
 Cent choses que l'on nous défend.
 Elle seule, dans son grand livre,
 Nous enseigne comme il faut vivre.
 Suivons-la donc.

[Pay no heed to morality;
 Nature, more liberal,
 Grants us, most often,
 One hundred forbidden things.
 She alone, in her great book,
 Teaches us how to live.
 Let us follow her then.]⁶¹

⁵⁶Louis Crompton, *Homosexuality and Civilization* (Cambridge, MA, 2003), 321–60; Jeffrey Merrick, "Chaussons in the Streets: Sodomy in Seventeenth-Century Paris," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 15/2 (2006), 167–203.

⁵⁷See the entry on "Homosexualité" in Lucien Bély, ed., *Dictionnaire Louis XIV* (Paris, 2015), 634–9.

⁵⁸Denis Sanguin de Saint-Pavin, *Poésies*, ed. Nicholas Hammond (Paris, 2012), 70: "Qu'un vit est malheureux d'arcer dans un pays / Où l'on punit du feu ces nobles appétits."

⁵⁹Nicholas Hammond, "Introduction," in Saint-Pavin, *Poésies*, 7–40, at 39.

⁶⁰Saint-Pavin, *Poésies*, 190: "Du futur, comme du passé, Également débarassé ... Et sans contraindre mes désirs, Je me donne entier aux plaisirs."

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 186.

Saint-Pavin asks, rhetorically, “Does nature forbid that we admire a handsome youth?”⁶² It doesn’t: such bans come not from nature but from Christian morality, which projects prejudices onto morally indifferent acts. Underneath the layers of culture, Saint-Pavin suggests, everything is permissible:

Enfin, je trouve tout égal,
Et je ne fais ni bien, ni mal.
La coutume, à qui l’on défère,
Comme l’enfant fait à sa mère,
Ne peut, toute forte qu’elle est,
M’entraîner qu’à ce qui me plaît.

[To me it is all the same,
And I do neither good nor evil.
Custom, to which one defers,
Like a child to a mother,
Cannot, for all its power,
compel me except to what pleases me.]⁶³

Here we find the Cyrenaic principle that “nothing is just or honourable or base by nature, but only by convention and custom.”⁶⁴ Custom, in turn, can be ignored precisely because it distances us from nature. Saint-Pavin reclaims the right to an unconstrained love life in the name of the human drives, which are pre-cultural; and he affirms his freedom from moral norms by alleging their arbitrariness and coerciveness.

Under the surface of Saint-Pavin’s verses is the view that moral values are conventional and relative. This point was made more explicitly by the most complex libertine of the late seventeenth century: Antoinette du Ligier de la Garde, Madame Deshoulières (1638–94). Like Chaulieu, she was within reach of Gassendi’s orbit through her mentor Jean Dehénault, who was Chapelle’s friend as well as the author of a partial translation of Lucretius; and, like La Fare, she rewrote Lucretius’ invocation to Venus.⁶⁵ But, compared to them, Deshoulières was a more somber and philosophical poet. Sometime affiliated with the Jansenist circles of La Rochefoucauld, she brings Augustinian leanings to bear on common Lucretian themes: the fleetingness of life, the nothingness of death, the priority of sense over reason, the wisdom of nature, the hypocrisy of religion. Her poetry channels these principles into a far-reaching critique of the status quo. Laws, private property, social ranks, rules of behavior, and moral strictures feature in her poems as assaults on nature. Except for pain, Deshoulières wrote,

⁶²Ibid., 75: “La nature nous défend-elle / De regarder un beau garçon?”

⁶³Ibid., 188–9.

⁶⁴Ibid., 221.

⁶⁵For Deshoulières’s indebtedness to Gassendi see Volker Schröder, “Verse and Versatility: The Poetry of Antoinette Deshoulières,” in Faith E. Beasley, ed., *Teaching Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century French Women Writers* (New York, 2011), 242–9; for her rewriting of Lucretius see Philippe Chométy, “Du clinamen au galimatias: L’imitation de Lucrèce d’Antoinette Deshoulières,” in Chométy and Rosellini, *Traduire Lucrèce*, 257–85; for Dehénault see Ira O. Wade, *The Intellectual Development of Voltaire* (Princeton, 1969), 51.

the evils that haunted the imagination of French elites (meanness of birth, social contempt, poverty, exile) were mere products of opinion.⁶⁶ So were cultural norms, which in Deshoulières's poems are anomalies setting us apart from nature. Since the distortion happens differently by time and place, systems of value are relative, even with regard to things like incest, theft, or parricide:

Non moins diverse en chaque République
Est la Coutume; ici punir on voit
Sœur avec qui son Frère prévarique,
Et la Persane en son Lit le reçoit ...
Subtil larcin Lacédémone absout.
Où le Soleil monte sur l'Hémisphère
Par pitié le Fils meurtrit son père ;
Opinion chez les Hommes fait tout.

[No less diverse in each republic
Is custom; here one sees a sister punished
For liberties taken by her brother,
While a Persian woman receives him in her bed ...
Sly theft Sparta forgives.
In the land of the rising sun,
The son kills his father out of pity;
Opinion does everything among men.]

All moral rules are matters of opinion. Like other seventeenth-century naturalists, Deshoulières sometimes teeters on the edge of nihilism. "There is nothing solid in this vast universe," she writes, "and nothing certain; / Fortune decides of earthly things / by wavering caprice."⁶⁷ The Augustinian undertones of these reflections are unmistakable, and they work in cooperation with a critique of custom derived from libertine Epicureanism. As caprice wavers, fashions and values ebb and flow in and out of existence.

Such a characterization of custom extends the principles of relativism beyond the domains of justice and pleasure. For Deshoulières, as for other libertines, what lies underneath custom is the truth of nature. But her emphasis is less on nature as instinct—or on the legitimacy of the desire for pleasure—than on nature as the material substratum of life. Put another way, her dismissal of human conventions is less indebted to hedonism than to other elements in the Epicurean doctrine: the atomic theory, which reduces all material beings to compounds of the same elemental stuff, and the critique of anthropocentrism, which denies the special status of human beings. As atoms fly in and out of material compounds, her poetry suggests, we come into being for a brief spell before our bodies dissolve and reenter the indifferent flow of matter.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Madame Deshoulières, *Poésies*, ed. Sophie Tonolo (Paris, 2010), 243.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 125: "Il n'est dans ce vaste Univers / Rien d'assuré, rien de solide; / Des choses d'ici-bas la Fortune décide / Selon ses caprices divers."

⁶⁸ Ibid., 246.

All qualitative distinctions, whether between actions or between beings, are passing mirages, attempts to cover over the fundamental sameness of all things:

Qu'on ne me vante point ces Biens imaginaires,
Ces Prérogatives, ces Droits,
Qu'inventa notre orgueil pour masquer nos misères ...
Si tout est fait pour nous, s'il ne faut que vouloir,
Que n'employons-nous mieux ce souverain pouvoir? ...
Mais hélas ! de ses sens Esclave malheureux,
L'Homme ose se dire le Maître
Des Animaux, qui sont peut-être
Plus libres qu'il ne l'est, plus doux, plus généreux,
Et dont la faiblesse a fait naître
Cet Empire insolent qu'il usurpe sur eux.⁶⁹

[Let no one boast of those imaginary goods,
Those prerogatives, those rights,
Devised by our pride to disguise our miseries ...
If all is made for us, if all we need is to wish,
Then why not make better use of such sovereign power? ...
But alas, a wretched slave of his own senses,
Man dares to assert mastery
Over animals, who may well be
Freer than he is, sweeter, and more generous,
And whose weakness alone has given rise
To the insolent empire man usurps over them.]

The Augustinian and Epicurean outlooks are combined, here, into an assault on human pride. Goods, rights, and prerogatives—like conceptions of justice—are ephemeral human inventions, and this includes all imagined hierarchies between species. The outlook is partly Lucretian. In his imaginary travelogues to the Moon and the Sun, Deshoulières's contemporary Cyrano de Bergerac (1619–55) appealed to Lucretius' antifinalism and the theory of atoms to poke fun at human pretensions, imagining a race of solar birds who looked down on any creatures devoid of beak and feathers.⁷⁰ Despite Cyrano's playfulness, wrote Thomas Lennon, "one could not have missed his expressions of relativism in moral matters."⁷¹ Analogously, Deshoulières portrays moral and natural hierarchies as self-serving products of human cultures, and as sources of oppression and self-deceit. Lording over others, humans are victims of their

⁶⁹ Ibid., 217–18.

⁷⁰ Cyrano de Bergerac, *Les États et empires du Soleil*, ed. Bérengère Parmentier (Paris, 2003), 134.

⁷¹ Lennon, *The Battle of the Gods and the Giants*, 104. For a relativist interpretation of Cyrano's novels see Jean-Charles Darmon, "Ironie et relativisme: Remarques sur leurs affinités diffuse dans l'horizon du libertinage érudit et dans les fictions cyraniennes," in Patricia Harry, Alain Mothu, and Philippe Sellier, eds., *Dissidents, excentriques et marginaux de l'Âge classique: Autour de Cyrano de Bergerac* (Paris, 2006), 399–453. See also Darmon, *Philosophie épicurienne et littérature au XVIIe siècle*, 236 and *passim*.

own delusions of grandeur, living at odds with the rules they impose on themselves. “Always vain, always false, always full of injustice / we incessantly cry / against the passions, foibles, and vices / to which we succumb every day.”⁷² Ultimately, it costs us too much to be virtuous, towards ourselves or other species, when nature has given us a penchant for pleasure.⁷³

Despite such denunciations, Deshoulières, like other Epicureans, did not call for social change. Instead, she entertained fantasies of retreat, yearning for a pastoral Golden Age without property, without ranks, and without rules.⁷⁴ In this egalitarian utopia she would mingle with the sheep, nightingales, and creeks of her famous “Idylls.” In her final years, tormented by the breast cancer that would end her life, Deshoulières tried to make peace with the God she had offended all along, and even wrote against libertines who dared to disown all laws. But rather than retracting her old views, she organized two collections of her poems, which were published in 1688 and, posthumously, in 1695.

Across the channel: Epicureanism and relativity in Britain

Both the Christianized and the libertine interpretations of Epicurus spread from France to Britain around the mid-century. As Charles Kay Smith has shown, a decade before Walter Charleton divulged Gassendi’s thought in his *Physiologia Epicuro-Gassendo-Charletoniana* (1654), royalist poets such as William Davenant and Abraham Cowley, who accompanied Queen Henrietta Maria into exile, brought along a tradition of Epicurean libertinism they had found in France.⁷⁵ French libertines like Théophile and Saint-Amant had visited England between the 1620s and the 1640s, and their poems were translated in the late 1640s by the poetic circle formed under the patronage of Thomas Stanley, the eventual author of the *History of Philosophy*. As Nicholas MacDowell has argued, “Stanley’s interest in bringing French *libertin* verse into the English poetic tradition anticipates his later project of disseminating Gassendi’s systematic efforts to rehabilitate Epicurean philosophy.”⁷⁶ At some distance from these circles, the Duchess of Newcastle, Margaret Cavendish, brought to English verse the newly prestigious theory of atoms, drawing on her encounters with Gassendi at her Parisian salon in 1645–8.⁷⁷ Just as the Duchess of Bouillon held a salon in

⁷² Madame Deshoulières, *Poésies*, 344: “Toujours vains, toujours faux, toujours pleins d’injustices / Nous crions dans tous nos discours / Contre les passions, les faiblesses, les vices, / Où nous succombons tous les jours.”

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 367.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 243, 261.

⁷⁵ Charles Kay Smith, “French Philosophy and English Politics in Interregnum Poetry,” in R. Malcolm Smuts, ed., *The Stuart Court and Europe: Essays in Politics and Political Culture* (Cambridge, 1996), 177–209.

⁷⁶ Nicholas McDowell, “Marvell’s French Spirit,” in Martin Dzelzainis and Edward Holberton, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Andrew Marvell* (Oxford, 2019), 614–34, at 619. See also Giulio Pertile, “Marvell as *Libertin*: Upon Appleton House and the Legacy of Théophile de Viau,” *The Seventeenth Century* 28/4 (2013), 395–417.

⁷⁷ Line Cottegnies, “Le ‘renouveau’ de l’épicurisme en Angleterre au milieu du dix-septième siècle de Walter Charleton à Margaret Cavendish: Une histoire francobritannique,” *Études épistémè* 14 (2008), 1–43.

Paris frequented by, among others, Chaulieu, La Fare, and Deshoulières, her sister the Duchess of Mazarin hosted a salon in London extending hospitality to French and English Epicureans, from the exile Charles de Saint-Évremond to the poet Edmund Waller.

Just how “Epicurean” these circles were has been the subject of debate. Dmitri Levitin has warned that “there was no such thing as ‘Epicureanism’ in seventeenth-century England, only attitudes to Epicurus ... mediated through many layers of humanist historiographical tradition.”⁷⁸ Levitin has in mind the response to Epicurean matter theory by practicing natural philosophers, but the same applies to the reception of Epicurean ethics. Just as French Epicureanism was often mixed with Cyrenaic and Italian naturalistic principles, English Epicureanism was almost always a syncretic amalgamation of heterodox views, involving elements from Spinozism, deism, and so-called “Hobbiism,” the popular (mis)construal of Hobbes’s moral and political theory.⁷⁹ This amorphous matrix of ethical theories was targeted, satirized, and occasionally championed in a variety of genres—sermons, moral treatises, novels, and Restoration poetry and drama. It met strenuous opposition on both sides of the Channel, not least for the challenges it posed to the objectivity of morals. Lucy Hutchinson refrained from publishing her translation of Lucretius on the grounds of “all the Atheisme and impieties in it.”⁸⁰ Calling Lucretius a dog, Hutchinson claimed that *De rerum natura* would teach young minds that “their wisdom is folly, their most vertuous and pure morality fowle defilement, their knowledge ignorance [and] all their attainments cheats and delusions.”⁸¹ Decades later, William Dobson, the English translator of Cardinal Polignac’s *Anti-Lucretius*, recommended the poem for showing that “Epicurus’s plan for subverting Religion and cultivating Pleasure, is favourable only to Lust and Iniquity; but destructive to sound Morals, to human Society, to Virtue and Reason.”⁸² Epicurus’ denial of the afterlife as well as his conventionalist account of justice were denounced as heralding the end of social life. If “there is *no reckoning or account* hereafter,” Joseph Glanvill warned, “every man may say, and testifie, what is for the advantage of his Lusts (for no *humane* Laws can reach him) and *then* Laws will be useless, or hurtful;

⁷⁸ Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom*, 4.

⁷⁹ For Hobbiism see Jon Parkin, *Taming the Leviathan: The Reception of the Political and Religious Ideas of Thomas Hobbes in England 1640–1700* (Cambridge, 2007); and Elad Carmel, *Anticlerical Legacies: The Deistic Reception of Thomas Hobbes, c.1670–1740* (Manchester, 2024). A classic study is Samuel I. Mintz, *The Hunting of Leviathan: Seventeenth-Century Reactions to the Materialism and Moral Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes* (Cambridge, 1962).

⁸⁰ Lucy Hutchinson, *Lucy Hutchinson’s Translation of Lucretius: De Rerum Natura*, ed. Hugh de Quehen (London, 1996), 23.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 24. For a discussion of Hutchinson see David Hopkins, “The English Voices of Lucretius from Lucy Hutchinson to John Mason Good,” in Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius* (Cambridge, 2007), 254–73.

⁸² Melchior de Polignac, *Anti-Lucretius or God and Nature, a Poem*, trans. William Dobson (London, 1757), xii. This was a 12,000-verse Latin poem targeting several varieties of seventeenth-century materialism. For its contents and publication history see Édith Flamation, “L’*Anti-Lucretius* sive de Deo et natura libri novem de Polignac,” in Rémy Poignault, ed., *Présence de Lucrèce: Actes du colloque tenu à Tours (3–5 décembre 1998)* (Tours, 1999), 361–80.

and all Government will quickly be at an end.”⁸³ For Samuel Parker, who was himself often accused of Hobbism, such principles would open the gates of sin, as they taught “that there is nothing just, or unjust in it self; that all Right and Wrong is the Result of Humane Contracts; and that the Laws of Nature are nothing but Maxims and Principles of self-interest!”⁸⁴ Close to the surface of these statements is the perception that laws and moral values, on the Epicurean view, are merely relative to ever-shifting contexts and proclivities.

Bringing these concerns onto the stage, the rakes of Restoration theater—from Dorimant in Etherege’s *The Man of Mode* (1676) to the monstrous Don Juan in Thomas Shadwell’s *The Libertine* (1675)—marshal similar theses in defense of their crimes. In a synthesis that remains helpful, Dale Underwood noted that the term “Epicurean,” as long as it is handled with care, is not necessarily a misnomer in this context. Beyond the hedonistic ethics, Underwood writes,

the individualistic and egocentric aspects of Epicurean ethics were congenial to the libertine ... There was, for example, the denial of an ordained and fixed order in nature and consequently of any absolute justice and law. On these grounds among others the libertine could dismiss orthodox morality as mere custom ... Again, the Epicurean withdrawal from the duties and activities of citizenship supported the libertine’s similar withdrawal and his scorn of conventional values regarding public life and institutions ... In turn ... the stress upon the senses as a source of knowledge could easily lead to the senses as a source of pleasure, and thence to an ethics of sensualism—an ethics which the libertine could find already formulated in the teachings of the Cyrenaics and which at the popular level had for centuries been associated with Epicurus himself.⁸⁵

This characterization recapitulates, for the English context, the key developments we have seen in France. As in France, we find in England Cyrenaic misreadings of Lucretius. Take, for example, Ned Ward’s mockery of a libertine rant: “O Great *Lucretius*, thou shalt be my Guide, / Like thee I’ll Live, and by thy Rules abide: / Measure my *Pleasures* by my *Appetites*, / And Unconfind, pursue the *Worlds Delights* ... My Native Freedom, therefore I’ll employ, / Chuse what I like, and what I like, Enjoy.”⁸⁶ In its gleeful disregard for Epicurean moderation, this apostrophe to Lucretius echoes the celebration of untrammelled pleasures already found in Chaulieu. Ward’s putative libertine has little interest in sociability, viewing political hierarchies as intrusions upon the individual’s choice of how to behave.

In another example of the continuity between French and English developments, scholars have stressed the indebtedness of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester (1647–80),

⁸³ Joseph Glanvill, *Seasonable Reflections and Discourses in Order to the Conviction, & Cure of the Scoffing, & Infidelity of a Degenerate Age* (London, 1676), 33, original emphasis.

⁸⁴ Samuel Parker, *A Discourse of Ecclesiastical Politie* (London, 1671), xxvi. For Parker’s indebtedness to Gassendi’s Epicureanism see Dmitri Levitin, “Rethinking English Physico-theology: Samuel Parker’s *Tentamina de Deo* (1665),” *Early Science and Medicine* 19/1 (2014), 28–75.

⁸⁵ Dale Underwood, *Etherege and the Seventeenth-Century Comedy of Manners* (New Haven, 1957), 15–16.

⁸⁶ Ned Ward, *The Libertine’s Choice; Or, the Mistaken Happiness of the Fool in Fashion* (n.l., 1704), 11–12, original italics.

to French poets such as Deshoulières and Des Barreaux, known for his love relationships with Théophile and Saint-Pavin.⁸⁷ Rochester's famous *Satyr against Reason, and Mankind* (1674) recapitulates the Lucretian tropes found in his French predecessors, while asserting freedom from arbitrary codes of conduct. The poem stresses the pursuit of pleasure and contempt of death, insists on everyone's right to be villains among cheats, and rejects the reason of theologians for the "reason" of appetites, which "gives us rules of good and ill ... To keep [desires] more in vigour, not to kill."⁸⁸ Moral rules, the *Satyr* implies, are accordingly relative to the promptings of appetite.⁸⁹ Other exponents of Epicurean libertinism in England include John Oldham and Aphra Behn. Oldham's "Satyr against Vertue" (1676) is delivered in the voice of a disgruntled "Court-Hector," who views the distinction between good and evil as a product of "dull Morality and Rules," based on "the vain fantastic Fear / Of Punishments we know not when, or where!"⁹⁰ Nature, and the animals who follow it, are "unconcern'd at Epithets of Ill or Good, / Distinctions, unadul'trate Nature never understood."⁹¹ Behn, in turn, wrote libertine plays and materialist poetry in praise of Lucretius, while dramatizing, in her novella *Oroonoko* (1688), the contest between Christian ethics and pagan notions of honor, eventually to the discredit of the former.⁹²

In these various ways, the neo-Epicureanism embraced by English libertines echoed developments from across the Channel. But the English context also witnessed the extension of Epicurean relativism into domains other than ethics or politics. To begin with, Epicureanism extended to debates in aesthetics. The high age of aesthetic relativism would only come with the late eighteenth century, but the main lines of contention were sketched out during the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns.⁹³ We find an early proponent of aesthetic relativism in Saint-Évremond (1614–1703), one of

⁸⁷Marianne Thormählen, "Rochester and Jealousy: Consistent Inconsistencies," *Durham University Journal* 49/2 (1988), 213–23; Dustin Griffin, *Satires against Man: The Poems of Rochester* (Berkeley, 1973), 172–80.

⁸⁸John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, *Selected Poems*, ed. Paul Davis (Oxford, 2013), 55.

⁸⁹That Rochester views this as a mode of reason suggests, on the other hand, that he might be closer to Epicurean moderation than to libertine excess. Christopher Tilmouth recently argued that Rochester sought a middle ground between Latitudinarian ethics and the immorality of the Cyrenaic tradition. His ethics, for Tilmouth, "whilst still giving primacy to the appetites, affords reason a stabilizing, moderating role." Christopher Tilmouth, *Passion's Triumph over Reason: A History of the Moral Imagination from Spenser to Rochester* (Oxford, 2007), 317.

⁹⁰John Oldham, *Satyrs upon the Jesuits and Some Other Pieces*, ed. Harold F. Brooks and Raman Selden (Oxford, 1997), 57, 62. Oldham subsequently wrote "An Apology for the Foregoing Ode," but Tilmouth, *Passion's Triumph over Reason*, 284, doubts the sincerity of his retraction.

⁹¹Oldham, *Satyrs*, 58.

⁹²Behn is a complex case study requiring more space than I have. For a reading that follows this brief suggestion see Anita Pacheco, "'Little Religion' but 'Admirable Morals': Christianity and Honor in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*," *Modern Philology* 111/2 (2013), 253–80. See also Sarah-Gray Lesley, "The Epicure in Surinam: Lucretian Reception and Skepticism in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*," *Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture, 1660–1700* 43/2 (2019), 75–92.

⁹³See Larry F. Norman, *The Shock of the Ancient: Literature and History in Early Modern France* (Chicago, 2011); Giuseppe Sertoli, "Il gusto nell'Inghilterra del Settecento," in Luigi Russo, ed., *Il Gusto: Storia di una idea estetica* (Palermo, 2000), 129–212.

the century's most vocal Epicureans. Exiled for half of his long life in England, Saint-Évremond knew Gassendi's work through close association with François Bernier. According to Jean-Charles Darmon, he sought to close the gap between Epicurus and Aristippus, or between a Gassendist and a libertine Epicureanism.⁹⁴ In aesthetics, he made an Epicurean case for the moderns, defending those authors who emancipated themselves from ancient models. Values, for Saint-Évremond, change over time. Epicurus embodied this fact in his personal life. Neither the full voluptuary of common fame nor the rigorist praised by Gassendi, Epicurus was, for Saint-Évremond, an inconsistent man whose tastes and values fluctuated. By the same token, we are all different than ourselves, shifting between youth and old age and between yesterday and this morning.⁹⁵ What applies to individuals applies to cultures. The frugality of primitive Christianity no longer has a place in societies that developed norms of politeness.⁹⁶ "Everything is changed: the gods, Nature, politics, mores, taste, manners."⁹⁷ Bringing all this to bear on debates about art, Saint-Évremond denies that France should follow the examples of Greece and Rome: "All times have a character that is proper to them; they have their politics, their interests, their affairs; they have their own morals, in some way, through their defects and virtues. It's always man, but nature varies within man; and art, which is nothing else but an imitation of nature, must vary like her."⁹⁸ The volubility of nature is also that of art and beauty. Judgments in aesthetics, from this standpoint, are relative to sensitivities and initiation rites that shift with the flow of ages and over the course of human lives.⁹⁹

As in aesthetics, so in epistemology. Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle (1623–73), derived from her early interest in Epicurus an unusual form of epistemic relativism. A syncretic thinker, willing to subtly shade back and forth between philosophical enquiry and speculative fiction, Cavendish is challenging to interpret. Some features of her thought are, nonetheless, straightforward. She distanced herself from the theory of atoms not long after defending it, to embrace vitalism and the infinite divisibility of matter; but she remained committed, like her contemporary Cyrano de Bergerac, to Epicurus' materialism and to his denial of anthropocentrism. (In fact, Line Cottegnies has argued that Cavendish owed such aspects of her thought at least in part to Cyrano's Epicurean fiction.)¹⁰⁰ In combining materialist and animist principles,

⁹⁴Darmon, *Philosophie épicurienne et littérature au XVII^e siècle*, 336, 347.

⁹⁵For these arguments see Ninon de Lenclos and Charles de Saint-Évremond, *Lettres sur la vieillesse*, ed. René Bonnette (Toulouse, 2001), 45.

⁹⁶Charles de Saint-Évremond, *Petits traités*, in Prévot, *Libertins du XVII^e siècle*, 2: 649–763, at 691.

⁹⁷Ibid., 750: "Tout est changé: les dieux, la Nature, la politique, les mœurs, le goût, les manières."

⁹⁸Charles de Saint-Évremond, *Oeuvres choisies*, ed. Jacques Prévot (Paris, 2016), 382: "Tous les temps ont un caractère qui leur est propre; ils ont leur politique, leur intérêt, leurs affaires: ils ont leur morale, en quelque façon, ayant leurs défauts et leurs vertus. C'est toujours l'homme, mais la nature se varie dans l'homme; et l'art, qui n'est autre chose qu'une imitation de la nature, se doit varier comme elle."

⁹⁹For more on Saint-Évremond's historicist account of taste see Michael Moriarty, *Taste and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century France* (Cambridge, 1988).

¹⁰⁰Line Cottegnies, "Margaret Cavendish and Cyrano de Bergerac: A Libertine Subtext for Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666)?" *XVII–XVIII: Bulletin de la Société d'études anglo-américaines des XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles* 54 (2002), 165–85.

Cavendish arrived at a panpsychist theory of perception that led her to relativist conclusions. Perception, she came to believe, is a fundamental property of matter. Rocks perceive, as do minerals, leaves, legs, and eyes. In complex sentient creatures, local perceptions unite into general perception. But general perception, precisely because of its material origins, is irreducibly unique. “There is not any different kind of Creature,” Cavendish writes in her *Grounds of Natural Philosophy* (1668), “that can have the like Life, Knowledge, and Perception”; accordingly, “several kinds ... must needs have different Lives, Knowledges, and Perceptions.”¹⁰¹ The upshot is a horizontal distribution of cognitive experiences in which there is neither high nor low:

None can be said to be *least knowing*, or *most knowing*: for, there is (in my opinion) no such thing as *least* and *most*, in Nature: for, several kinds and sorts of Knowledges, make not Knowledge to be more, or less; but only, they are different Knowledges proper to their kind, (as, Animal-kind, Vegetable-kind, Mineral-kind, Elemental-kind) and are also different Knowledges in several sorts: As for example, Man may have a different Knowledge from Beasts, Birds, Fish, Flies, Worms, or the like; and yet be no wiser than those sorts of Animal-kinds.¹⁰²

Knowledge, in short, is relative to the type of entity that possesses it. The panpsychism behind this view is alien to Epicurus; but the rejection of mankind’s centrality in the world of matter is a holdover from Cavendish’s Epicurean phase. She believed that there is something inaccessible but worthy in nonhuman cognition, and that it is foolhardy to assume otherwise. The idea that knowledge is relative to species grounds a strong sense of respect for the sentience of nonhumans, which in turn undergirds Cavendish’s recurring defenses of vegetarianism. “Animals, and so Human Creatures, might feed on [fruits, herbs, milk, and eggs]; but not such Food as is an united Society [such as an animal]: for, the Root and Foundation of any kind and sort of Creature, ought not to be destroyed.”¹⁰³ The argument had already appeared in her *Poems and Fancies* (1652).¹⁰⁴ Men, she writes, unthinkingly approve that “*Appetite*, that feeds on *Flesh*, and *Blood* ... As if that *God* made *Creatures* for *Mans meat*, / To give them *Life*, and *Sense*, for *Man* to eat.”¹⁰⁵ Her *Philosophical Letters* (1664), in turn, contain spirited replies to the Cartesian thesis that animals are mere automata, asserting their equality with humans.¹⁰⁶

The theory of perception also led Cavendish to a relativistic defense of religious tolerance. Cottegny has claimed that “both Cyrano and Cavendish are monists in

¹⁰¹ Margaret Cavendish, *Grounds of Natural Philosophy*, ed. Anne M. Thell (Peterborough, 2020), 74.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 148, original emphasis.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁰⁴ For Cavendish’s place in debates on vegetarianism see Tristram Stuart, *The Bloodless Revolution: A Cultural History of Vegetarianism from 1600 to Modern Times* (New York, 2006), 133.

¹⁰⁵ Margaret Cavendish, *Paper Bodies: A Margaret Cavendish Reader*, ed. Sylvia Bowerbank and Sara Mendelson (Peterborough, 2000), 257–8, original emphasis.

¹⁰⁶ The relevant passages are reproduced in Todd Andrew Borlik, ed., *Literature and Nature in the English Renaissance: An Ecocritical Anthology* (Cambridge, 2019), 103–5.

a broadly Epicurean mould, and both are religious sceptics.”¹⁰⁷ Indeed, her materialism made her lukewarm or omissive in matters of faith. Despite her royalism—which often went along with a distrust of sectarian freedom—she was willing to explain religious division charitably. Perception, for Cavendish, varies as much among humans as it does between species; such variability, in turn, “causes great variety of Religions,” making it “impossible for all Mankind to be of one *Religion*, or Opinion.”¹⁰⁸ Despite the authority of the Ten Commandments, which Cavendish professed to accept, “several kinds and sorts of Creatures, cannot possibly follow one and the same Prescription and Rule,” “so that the several Societies, or Communicants, commit an Error, if not a Sin, to endeavour to compel their Brethren to any particular Opinion.”¹⁰⁹

This desire for tolerance was shared by those who remembered the disastrous effects of religious strife in recent history. In 1685, when the Edict of Nantes was revoked, a new translation of Lucretius by Jacques Parrain, Baron Des Coutures, appeared with a favorable review by Bayle. In this regard, Philippe Chométy and Michèle Rosellini note that “the vindication of the legitimacy of Epicureanism coincides with a defense of the Protestants” against “an intolerant Catholicism rooted in its dogmatic positions.”¹¹⁰ The Marquis de La Fare made a case for religious pluralism on Epicurean and deist principles. Nature, he concurred with Cavendish, delights in diversity, and its very multifariousness comes harmoniously together as a concert in honor of God. Analogously, when mortals “differing in their cults” address their creator, “from the confused medley of their various voices, an even more splendid concert is formed.”¹¹¹ A more robust case for the relativity of religions would have to wait for Bernard Picart and Jean-Frédéric Bernard’s multivolume *Religious Ceremonies of the World* (1723–37), but the outlines were already surfacing.¹¹²

Conclusion

In these various ways, the revival of Epicureanism in the mid-seventeenth century provided new resources for relativistic thinking, which had initially flourished on skeptical grounds. The Epicurean theory of justice, revived by Gassendi, made the notions of just and unjust relative to customs that varied by time and space. Epicurean hedonism, which in libertine culture got mixed with the more unrestrained hedonism of the Cyrenaics, gave normative force to the desire for pleasure while treating laws and rules of conduct as intrusions upon nature—inventions relative to times, religions, and cultures. These tendencies were also favored by the Epicurean denial of purpose as well as by its emphasis on the here and now and its disinvestment in the afterlife. The

¹⁰⁷ Cottegnies, “Margaret Cavendish and Cyrano de Bergerac,” 177.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 190–91, original emphasis.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 190, 191, 192.

¹¹⁰ Chométy and Rosellini, *Traduire Lucrèce*, 61.

¹¹¹ Chaulieu and La Fare, *Poésies*, 483: “Ainsi, quand les mortels remplis d’intelligence, / Qui diffèrent de culte et non de dépendance, / S’adressent à [Dieu] ... / Du mélange confus de leurs voix différentes, / Il se forme un concert encor plus précieux.”

¹¹² See Lynn Hunt, Margaret C. Jacob, and Wijnand Mijnhardt, *The Book That Changed Europe: Picart and Bernard’s Religious Ceremonies of the World* (Cambridge, MA, 2010).

theory of atoms, by reducing all living and nonliving entities to assemblages of particles, denaturalized cosmic hierarchies such as the Great Chain of Being, explaining power relations and qualitative distinctions as matters of contingency. The sensationalist theory of perception, sometimes in Cyrenaic and panpsychist varieties, had a strong subjectivist component, and in Saint-Évremond and Cavendish it resulted in relativistic theories of beauty and knowledge. Not all relativism in this period was Epicurean—François Poulain de la Barre made a relativist case for gender equality on Cartesian grounds¹¹³—and some were Epicurean only in a loose sense of the term. But Epicureanism, thanks to its penetration into worldly circles and imaginative genres, became a particularly fertile ground for moral heterodoxy, not least through relativistic theses. Equally importantly, in this phase of its history we find relativism being marshaled towards sociopolitical ends, in defenses of same-sex relations, religious tolerance, and trans-species equality.

The theory of atoms, after all, fit well with constructivist accounts of values. Early modern Epicureans such as Cyrano, Saint-Pavin, Deshoulières, and Cavendish regarded higher and lower, right and wrong, just and unjust as projections of vertical order onto a fundamentally horizontal nature. Deep down, the theory seemed to say, we are all the same, all actions boiling down to matter in motion, no events or entities being qualitatively better than any other—until human cultures emerged to say so. The revolutionary potential of such views was made clear in a 1656 poem by Edmund Waller celebrating John Evelyn's translation of Lucretius: "No Monarch," Lucretius had allegedly taught, "Rules the Universe; / But chance and Atomes makes *this All* / In Order Democratical, / Where Bodies freely run their course, / Without design, or Fate, or Force."¹¹⁴ Epicurean proponents of relativism revealed its potential for supporting political liberty, sexual freedom, and religious pluralism; for asserting the dignity of animals; and for denouncing the effects of social stratification. To relativize the distinction between right and wrong, for many of them, was also to relativize, or debunk, other types of distinction—whether between genders, cultures, religions, or species. Relativist arguments, in these ways, gave modern Epicureanism a reforming edge distinguishing it from its classical iteration, which emphasized conformity and retreat.¹¹⁵

Despite the opposition it met, relativism would continue to flourish in the eighteenth century, often through reworkings and elaborations of the Epicurean arguments surveyed in this article.¹¹⁶ Gassendi's account of justice anticipates the utilitarian relativism of Helvétius; libertine Epicureanism anticipates the relativism of many a clandestine manuscript, as well as that of materialist tracts by Radicati and La Mettrie; Saint-Évremond's aesthetic historicism anticipates the cultural historicism of Vico and

¹¹³ Marie le Jars de Gournay, Anna Maria van Schurman, and François Poulain de la Barre, *The Equality of the Sexes: Three Feminist Texts of the Seventeenth Century*, trans. Desmond M. Clarke (Oxford, 2013).

¹¹⁴ Cited in Cottagnies, "Le 'renouveau' de l'épicurisme," 10, Waller's emphasis.

¹¹⁵ Paganini, "Early Modern Epicureanism," 675.

¹¹⁶ For the persistence of Epicureanism in the Enlightenment see Neven Leddy and Avi S. Lifschitz, eds., *Epicurus in the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2009); and Ben Dew, "Epicurean and Stoic Enlightenment: The Return of Modern Paganism?", *History Compass* 11/6 (2013), 486–95.

Herder. These, of course, are long-term developments beyond the scope of this article, in which I have sought to sketch out one segment in the complex history of early modern relativism. That longer history still needs to be written.

Acknowledgments. This article has benefited from substantive feedback from Anne Gray Fischer and my other colleagues at Princeton's University Center for Human Values, not least Gwen Bradford, Robert Tsai, and Rahul Sagar. I should also like to thank the center's director, Alan Patten, for the support and marvelous scholarly environment, as well as the staff at the Firestone Library. The two anonymous reviews were indispensably helpful, and I am thankful for them.

Competing interests. The author declares none.