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The Enlightenment revival of the Epicurean history of language and civilisation

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Eighteenth-century thinkers renowned as physicists, mathematicians, political economists, aestheticians and theologians all took part in intense debates over the emergence of language as a social phenomenon and a cognitive tool. A very selective list of authors of essays on the origin of language would include Condillac, Diderot, Turgot, Smith, Rousseau and Herder. Language might have been the domain where crucial topics could be put to the test less dangerously than in other fields, as the issues involved in discussions of the origin of language were similar to those preoccupying authors of treatises on ethics, revealed religion and politics: human agency in relation to providence and grace, natural emergence versus supernatural formation, or convention and arbitrariness compared to pre-established social values and cultural meanings. Language also played a major role in enquiries into the origins of society as a prerequisite for the emergence of politics, commerce, the arts and the sciences; discussions of the origin of language exemplified contemporary attempts to draw the fine line between the natural and the artificial (or socially developed) traits of man.

A common presupposition in most works on the topic was that language did have an origin, divine or natural. According to Genesis, it was God who endowed Adam with language; this perfect idiom, in which Adam named the beasts according to their nature, gave rise to early modern attempts to recuperate or recreate a universal language reflecting the essence of things. Towards the end of the seventeenth century Adam's wisdom and his linguistic capacity were increasingly questioned, and an alternative account came to the fore: that of mute human beings, naturally arising from the depths of the earth, creating language and extending their mental operations with no supernatural assistance. This narrative was closely modelled on the ancient Epicurean account of the emergence of language, a pivotal tenet of a more general history of civilisation. The revival of this ancient thesis of linguistic origins had significant implications in contemporary discussions of the evolution of human society and culture.

This article begins with a brief introduction of the ancient scene, where Plato's mythical name-givers were to Epicurus what Adam's perfect language would be to Enlightenment Epicureans. I shall then examine the first of two vital aspects of the revival of the Epicurean history of language, namely the attempt to fuse the ancient naturalist theory with the biblical narrative of a supernatural creation. Closer attention will be paid to the second axis of the Epicurean revival, attempts to clarify the difficult transition from natural signs to arbitrary words. The incommensurability of these two categories persistently haunted Enlightenment thinkers such as Condillac, Rousseau and Mendelssohn. Even if projected over a long span of time, the passage from the natural to the artificial was deemed problematic if not inexplicable. This challenge was closely paralleled in social theory, ethics and natural law: in all these domains, the transition from barbarism to civilisation challenged Enlightenment thinkers to reconcile the natural and essential with the historical and contingent. After a presentation of the theoretical impasse confronting the Epicurean history of language around the middle of the eighteenth century, the final part of this essay reviews tentative contemporary solutions.

Contesting supernatural origins: Epicurus and his predecessors on language

The aversion of some Enlightenment thinkers to direct divine intervention in human affairs, or to a supernatural *fiat* at the beginning of history, had its parallel in the ancient world. Epicurus of Samos rewrote existing accounts of the origins of natural phenomena and human institutions, seeking to limit the inexplicable and the extraordinary. Unnatural rational agencies were denied a constitutive role in the evolution of civilisation. Myths of miraculous creation were thus reduced in Epicurean philosophy to minimal human discoveries or traced back to simple causes, such as natural effects and instinctive reactions, developed over time into more complex objects, customs and mental operations.[1]

On the question of the genesis of language, Epicurus directly confronted Plato – or at least what had been widely perceived as the latter's view of the origin of language. Several of the crucial problems tackled by Enlightenment thinkers had already been discussed in detail in Plato's dialogue *Cratylus*, particularly the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign and the extent to which language represented reality. As in some other Platonic dialogues, in *Cratylus* Socrates promoted a compromise between his interlocutors by confronting them with logical impasses. To Hermogenes' theory of the complete arbitrariness of words (signs having no fixed relation to the things they denote), Socrates retorted that this would have rendered communication impossible. Even without a deeper connection between words and things, Socrates argued, human beings must rely on fixed meanings in their use of language if they wish to be understood. The Socratic reply was more nuanced in the case of Cratylus' thesis that words perfectly reflected the nature of denoted objects. According to Socrates, this would have logically entailed an identity between words and things (upon uttering 'my dog' we would necessarily see that particular dog; complete imitation of a thing would result in its actual duplication rather than in its representation).[2] Socrates pointed out that etymologically some sounds had natural meanings, but it would be difficult to generalise from such examples because sound patterns were inconsistent. Though words might naturally correspond to reality, as they could have done initially, Socrates unwillingly admitted that convention did play a role in the daily function of language.[3]

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[1] For the relationship between the Epicurean and other ancient 'rationalist' traditions, see Thomas Cole, *Democritus and the sources of Greek anthropology* (Cleveland, OH, 1967); on possible sources for Epicurus' history of language, see Alexander Verlinsky, 'Epicurus and his predecessors on the origin of language', in *Language and learning: philosophy of language in the Hellenistic age*, ed. Dorothea Frede and Brian Inwood (Cambridge, 2005), p.56-100. More generally on ancient, medieval and early modern accounts of the origins of language, see Arno Borst, *Der Turmbau von Babel*, 4 vols in 6 (Stuttgart, 1957-1963).

To account for the desirable congruence between words and things, Socrates appealed to name-givers, mythical heroes or demigods who might have set the basic rules and first vocabularies of languages. Just as laws had to be drafted by knowledgeable lawgivers, according to Plato, language and naming were a specialised craft to be mastered only by the wise and the skilful.[4] Each language had at its origin a legendary name-giver who directly perceived reality and coined names correspondingly. Subsequent historical evolution introduced convention and arbitrary changes into the history of language until it reached its present unsatisfactory condition.

Though Cratylus' vision of a perfect correlation between words and things was found impracticable, in the ideal language words would indeed reflect the essence of things, as pre-conceived wisely by a name-giver. Demonstrating Plato's general distinction between corrupt earthly imitations and perfect heavenly forms, his *Cratylus* contrasted daily language, full of 'this worthless thing, convention', with a perfect language correctly reflecting the essence of things, a real instrument of knowledge devised by a mythical figure.[5] Aristotle, on the contrary, was not so disturbed by the conventional features of language; in part 2 of *On interpretation*, Aristotle went as far as arguing that names signifed only by convention. There were no such things as natural meanings directly linking words and objects.[6]

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[2] Plato, *Cratylus*, translated by C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis, IN, 1999), 432d, p.82.

[3] 'I myself prefer the view that names should be as much like things as possible, but I fear that defending this view is like hauling a ship up a sticky ramp, as Hermogenes suggested, and that we have to make use of this worthless thing, convention, in the correctness of names' (*Cratylus*, 435c, p.87).

[4] 'It follows that it is not every man who can give names, Hermogenes, but only a name-maker, and he, it seems, is a rule-setter – the kind of craftsman most rarely found among human beings' (*Cratylus*, 388e-389a, p.11).

The ancient Epicureans found both views wanting. The Aristotelian theory, they argued, did not explain the emergence of language: how could there be any mutual accord about the meaning of words if language had not already existed to enable such an agreement? The alternative account of mythical name-giving made no sense within the Epicurean framework, where civilisation gradually emerged over time. In Epicurus' 'Letter to Herodotus', language originated in a two-pronged process: an animal-like expression of feelings and impressions was followed by the conscious modification of the initial sounds to distinguish between different objects, to clarify references, and eventually to denote abstract entities. In this account, the initial cries and gestures differed among human tribes or races according to particular circumstances and environments. The same tree would have been denoted by different sounds if it had first been encountered in the desert, next to a waterfall, surrounded by sheep or in the midst of a thunderstorm. After some time and due to social interaction, human beings grew used to such sounds as names for the corresponding objects (mostly related to sharp perceptions such as 'pain', 'horse', 'red', 'cold'). Only later was human convention introduced into this process: after knowledge had been gradually accumulated, language became enriched by analogy, abstract terms and additional categories (pronouns, prepositions).[7]

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5. Recent interpretations have questioned the common reading of *Cratylus* as advocating the 'mimetic principle' of a strong correspondence between words and things. See particularly Bernard Williams, 'Cratylus' theory of names and its refutation', in *Language and logos*, ed. Malcolm Schofield and Martha Nussbaum (Cambridge, 1982), p.83-93. Most early modern readers, however, as will be argued below, saw Plato's dialogue as endorsing a natural link between words and things. This may also be attributed to the Stoic interpretation of *Cratylus*; see A. A. Long, *Hellenistic philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics* (Berkeley, CA, and Los Angeles, 1974), p.131-39.
6. 'We have already said that a noun signifies this or that by convention. No sound is by nature a noun: it becomes one, becoming a symbol. Inarticulate sounds mean something – for instance, those made by brute beasts. But no noises of this kind are nouns', Aristotle, *The Organon I: The Categories, On interpretation, Prior analytics*, translated by Harold Cook and Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge, MA, 1938), p.117.
7. 'Thus names too did not originally come into being by coining, but men's own natures underwent feelings and received impressions which varied particularly from tribe to

Though differing substantially from Plato and Aristotle's accounts, Epicurus' history of language also combined central features from both. The Cratylian advocates of a natural link between words and things could be placated by Epicurus' opinion that words did not emerge arbitrarily; initially, sounds did have natural meanings.[8] Human convention, however, played a major role in the Epicurean account beyond the level of quasi-bestial communication, and there was no room for name-givers, rule-setters or lawgivers of any kind. This became the crux of Lucretius' version of the emergence of language in *De rerum natura*, book 5.

> Therefore to suppose that someone then distributed names amongst things, and that from him men learnt their first words, is folly. For why should he have been able to mark all things with titles and to utter the various sounds of the tongue, and at the same time others not be thought able to have done it? Besides, if others had not also used these terms in their intercourse, whence was that foreknowledge of usefulness implanted in him, and whence did he first gain such power, as to know what he wanted to do and to see it in his mind's eye?[9]

Lucretius highlighted the paradoxical implications of the invention of language by a name-giver. In order for such a person or demigod to communicate with human beings, some rudimentary form of language must have already existed. But if this had been the case, there would have been no need at all for language to be miraculously invented. Moreover, if necessity had been at stake, each and every one of the primitive human beings could have equally invented language.

The Epicurean theory of the origin of language made room for both convention and a primordial connection between words and things,

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tribe, and each of the individual feelings and impressions caused them to exhale breath peculiarly, according also to the racial differences from place to place. Later, particular coinings were made by consensus within the individual races, so as to make the designations less ambiguous and more concisely expressed', Epicurus, 'Letter to Herodotus', in *The Hellenistic philosophers*, translated by A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, vol.1 (Cambridge, 1987), p.97.

[8] 'Natural' could have different senses in relation to linguistic meaning or to the origin of language. 'Natural meaning' entailed a connection between word and nature (contrary to mere convention), while 'natural emergence' referred to the human development of language with no supernatural aid. As will be elaborated below, theories of natural emergence usually included an initial stage at which words had natural meanings, later overlain by convention and arbitrariness.

[9] Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, ed. Martin Ferguson Smith, translated by W. H. D. Rouse (Cambridge, MA, 1982), V.1041-1055, p.459-61. See also the Epicurean inscription of Diogenes of Oenoanda: 'For it is absurd, indeed absurder than any absurdity, not to mention impossible, that someone should have all on his own have assembled all those multitudes [...] – and having assembled them, instructed them like a schoolteacher, holding a rod, and touching each thing have said "Let this be called 'stone', this 'stick', this 'man', or 'dog'"' (Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic philosophers*, vol.1, p.98).

while simultaneously accounting for the diversity of languages. Unlike early modern Hermeticists, Cabbalists and Paracelsians who tried to recover a single perfect language, the ancient Epicureans believed there was a natural link between reality and language in all human tongues. Due to environmental and physical differences between tribes, their feelings and impressions were likely to prompt distinct sounds in various contexts. Therefore, simple nouns and verbs enjoyed a natural meaning in each language, though over time it became superimposed by metaphorical and abstract senses. It was particularly the historical perspective added by Epicurus and Lucretius to a theory of natural origin that allowed for a measure of contingency to emerge in the further evolution of language. This creative hypothesis, a third way between linguistic conventionality and a supernatural congruence between words and things, re-emerged in the early modern period in attempts to reconcile a natural history of language with the biblical account of Adamic name-giving.[10]

Historicising Adam's words: how to marry Epicurus and Genesis

The evolution of language was a central component of the Epicurean history of mankind, where human beings naturally emerged from the earth and developed civilisation on their own. It seems there could have been no greater contrast between such a narrative and the biblical one, where man was supernaturally created, commanding a language that reflected the essence of things. Early modern observations of nature and man seemed to contradict the existence of a perfect human being at the starting point of history; Isaac La Peyrère, for example, argued for the existence of men before Adam in his *Praeadamitae* (1655) – to the fury of orthodox theologians.[11] If one wished to maintain the biblical account of Creation, the alternative was to relativise the significance and wisdom of Adam.

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[10] My discussion has been deliberately limited to the issue of nature and convention in the origin of language. On this topic, and on the more general Epicurean theory of meaning, see Stephen Everson, 'Epicurus on mind and language', in *Companions to ancient thought*, vol.3: *Language*, ed. S. Everson (Cambridge, 1994), p.74-108; Jonathan Barnes, 'Epicurus: meaning and thinking', in *Epicureismo greco e romano*, ed. Gabriele Giannantoni and Marcello Gigante, 3 vols (Naples, 1996), vol.1, p.197-220; Gordon Campbell, *Lucretius on creation and evolution: a commentary on De rerum natura book V, lines 772-1104* (Oxford, 2003); Brooke Holmes, '*Daedala lingua*: crafted speech in *De rerum natura*', *American journal of philology* 126 (2005), p.527-85.

[11] Richard Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère (1596-1676): his life, work and influence* (Leiden, 1987); Alain Schnapp, 'The Pre-adamites: an abortive attempt to invent pre-history in the seventeenth century?', in *History of scholarship*, ed. Christopher Ligota and Jean-Louis Quantin (Oxford, 2006), p.399-412.

The downgrading of Adam's mental capacities entailed the questioning of the status of his language, in which he allegedly named the beasts according to their nature (Genesis 2.19-20).[12] For Thomas Hobbes, man's characteristic faculties were acquired over time, gradually laying the foundations for culture, science and social interaction. By seeing language as an artificial construct, naturally developed by human beings, Hobbes implicitly criticised in *Leviathan* (1651) contemporary views of Adam's perfect idiom. Though he paid tribute to Genesis in his account of the origin of language, Adam appeared there as God's problematic pupil rather than a wise name-giver.

> The first author of Speech was *God* himself, that instructed *Adam* how to name such creatures as he presented to his sight; For the Scripture goeth no further in this matter. But this was sufficient to direct him to add more names, as the experience and use of the creatures should give him occasion; and to join them in such manner by degrees, as to make himself understood; and so by succession of time, so much language might be gotten, as he had found use for; though not so copious, as an Orator or Philosopher has need of. For I do not find any thing in the Scripture, out of which, directly or by consequence can be gathered, that Adam was taught the names of all Figures, Numbers, Measures, Colours, Sounds, Fancies, Relations [...].[13]

According to Hobbes, God was still the 'author of speech' but creation endowed Adam with rudimentary faculties to be perfected by mankind itself over time, especially after the confusion of tongues at Babel.

A similar argument was made by Samuel Pufendorf in *De jure naturae et gentium* (1672). Conceding that Adam might have named animals and things according to their essences, Pufendorf suggested that the basic elements of Adam's own words were arbitrary.[14] In all languages, Pufendorf observed, 'things allied by nature are usually allied by name', but this did not mean that their names were perfect or divine. In line with his emphasis on the conventional and even contractual origin of language, Pufendorf espoused explicitly a version of Hermogenes' view of the arbitrariness of the sign in Plato's *Cratylus*. This entailed a clear rejection of the invention of language either by God or by a human name-giver.

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[12] For early modern views of Adam's language, see Hans Aarsleff, 'The rise and decline of Adam and his *Ursprache*', in *The Language of Adam – Die Sprache Adams*, ed. Allison Coudert (Wiesbaden, 1999), p.277-95.

[13] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge, 1996), ch.4, p.24-25. In *De homine* (1658) Hobbes suggested that Adam could have imposed some names on animals, but he simultaneously problematised this assertion by pointing out that after the confusion of tongues at Babel 'the origins of languages are diverse and have been brought by single men to single peoples'. In all these languages names never corresponded to the nature of things; Hobbes, *Man and citizen*, translated by C. T. Wood, T. S. K. Scott-Craig and B. Gert (Indianapolis, IN, 1991), ch.10, p.38-39.

[14] 'For although we should grant that the Names set on Animals, and some other things (for no Man can easily prove this of *all*,) were such as denoted their Genius and Disposition, or their principal Affection; yet those very *Primitives* whence these Names were derived, signify merely at Pleasure', Pufendorf, *Of the law of nature and nations*, translated by Basil Kennett (Oxford, A. and J. Churchill, 1710), book 4, ch.1, p.249, original emphases.

Richard Simon too criticised a supernatural interpretation of Genesis, claiming that the biblical account could be read in a naturalist way. In his *Histoire critique du vieux testament* (1678) Simon quoted Epicurus, Lucretius, Diodorus of Sicily and Gregory of Nyssa against the divine origin of language. Equating nature and human reason, Simon explained that God created things, not words to denote them; all languages arose through 'reasonable nature'. His assault on supernatural agencies at the origin of language was completed by turning Plato's name-givers into metaphorical images of human reason. Like Pufendorf, Simon infused Genesis with ancient authors in order to claim there was no contradiction between the biblical account and a natural emergence of language.[15]

John Locke mentioned the biblical account of language origin not so much as a disguise for a naturalist history, but as an introduction to his examination of the operations of language. At the beginning of book 3 ('On words') of his *Essay concerning human understanding* (1689), Locke briefly noted that man was created speaking and sociable, endowed by God with a capacity for language. This endowment was similar to the very basic instrument depicted by Hobbes: God did not give human beings actual words and ideas.[16] There is no detailed account in the *Essay* of the unfolding of language throughout history, as Locke's aim differed from that of eighteenth-century followers of his sensualist psychology, particularly in France. Wishing to combat contemporary beliefs in a perfect accord between words and things, Locke emphasised the arbitrariness of signs, demonstrating the dependence of words on ideas formed in an individual's mind rather than on any correct taxonomy of nature.[17]

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[15] Richard Simon, *Histoire critique du vieux testament, suivant la copie imprimée à Paris*, (Amsterdam, Elzevir, 1680), vol.1, ch.14-15, p.92-101. For further ancient accounts of a natural emergence of language, see Diodorus of Sicily, *Bibliotheca historica*, I.8; Vitruvius, *De architectura*, II.1.1; Cicero, *De inventione*, I.2-3 and *De re publica*, III.2.3; Lactantius, *Divinarum institutionum libri VII*, VI.10.13; Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium II*, ed. Lenka Karfíková, Scot Douglass and Johannes Zachhuber (Leiden, 2007), section 387-444, p.543-53 (on the latter see Borst, *Turmbau von Babel*, vol.1, p.244-46).

[16] 'GOD having designed Man for a sociable Creature, made him not only with an inclination, and under a necessity to have fellowship with those of his own kind; but furnished him also with Language, which was to be the great Instrument, and common Tye of Society. *Man* therefore had by Nature his Organs so fashioned, as to be *fit to frame articulate Sounds*, which we call Words. But this was not enough to produce Language', John Locke, *An Essay concerning human understanding* (1690), ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1979), III.i.1, p.402.

[17] H. Aarsleff, 'Leibniz on Locke on language', *American philosophical quarterly* 1 (1964), p.165-88; Hannah Dawson, *Locke, language and early modern philosophy* (Cambridge, 2007).

A contemporary of Locke tackling the same problem was Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who rejected the strict dichotomy between naturalness and conventionalism in language. Like others who wished to overcome this ancient tension, Leibniz followed Epicurus' lead. He argued that human beings created words according to sense impressions, employing an analogy between the acoustic properties of things and the signs used to denote them. The psychological and environmental circumstances of this act of naming introduced a contingent element into the natural process. Leibniz's Epicurean theory thus allowed languages to retain natural residues while accounting for the different names an object could have in different languages. Since similar circumstances were likely to yield the same responses among the first human beings, some original roots might still be recovered from under the ages of evolution and change.[18]

Bernard Mandeville in *The Fable of the bees* (two volumes: 1723 and 1729) did not even try to clothe his Epicurean account of the origin of language with the biblical narrative. Without mentioning Adam, the deluge or the Tower of Babel, Mandeville projected his history of language onto a large temporal canvas, where emotive cries and gestures gradually turned into articulate speech. As in Lucretius and Hobbes, this process must have occurred naturally.[19] Though the main goal of the invention of speech in Mandeville's treatise was deception and domination rather than social communication, his *Fable* contributed to the propagation of the Epicurean account of the origin of language in eighteenth-century Britain and France (it was translated into French in 1740 and immediately banned).[20]

Giambattista Vico, on a very different intellectual terrain, attempted in his own manner to reconcile Scripture and a naturalist account of the emergence of civilisation. In his *Scienza nuova* (three editions: 1725, 1730, 1748) he placed the long ages of transition from barbarism to culture after the deluge, so as not to compromise Adam's wisdom and perfect language. Furthermore, the ancient Hebrews were excluded from the general dispersion and descent into bestial existence in order to save the uniqueness of their revealed history. For all other nations, the postdiluvian condition was the starting point of a quasi-Epicurean evolution. Human beings with an elementary understanding imagined their gods and simultaneously created language, ascribing divinely animate names to the most striking phenomena. Vico's emphasis on 'gentile humanity' maintained his distinction between the biblical account of Jewish history and the Epicurean emergence of all other nations. According to Vico, only Hebrew resembled Adam's perfect language, bearing no traces of the polytheistic imagination and mythical thought.[21]

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[18] 'It is impossible to say that there is a sure and determinate connection between things and words. But neither is the connection purely arbitrary. [...] Nevertheless, languages have a certain natural source, namely the harmony between sounds and affections which the sight of things excites in the mind', Leibniz, 'De connexione inter res et verba, seu potius de linguarum origine' (n.d.), in *Opuscules et fragments inédits de Leibniz*, ed. Louis Couturat (Paris, 1903), p.151-52; translated by Marcelo Dascal in *Leibniz: language, signs and thought* (Amsterdam, 1987), p.189. See also Stefano Gensini, *'De linguis in universum': on Leibniz's ideas on languages* (Münster, 2000), p.43-96.

[19] '*Horatio*: But if the old Stock would never either be able or willing to acquire Speech, it is impossible they could teach it their Children: Then which way could any Language come into the World from two Savages? *Cleomenes*: By slow degrees, as all other Arts and Sciences have done, and length of time; Agriculture, Physick, Astronomy, Architecture, Painting, &c.', Mandeville, *The Fable of the bees, or Private vices, publick benefits* (1729), ed. F. B. Kaye, 2 vols (Oxford, 1924), vol.2, p.287. See also E. J. Hundert, 'The thread of language and the web of dominion: Mandeville to Rousseau and back', *Eighteenth-century studies* 21 (1987-1988), p.169-91.

[20] F. B. Kaye's introduction in Mandeville, *Fable of the bees*, vol.1, p.cxvi.

Beyond Mandeville's *Fable of the bees*, another English essay exerting profound influence in eighteenth-century France was, perhaps serendipitously, *The Divine legation of Moses* by William Warburton (two volumes: 1738 and 1741). Condillac, Rousseau, Voltaire and authors of articles in the *Encyclopédie* all referred to Warburton's work, exalting its account of the origin of language and the evolution of writing systems. Unfortunately, it was almost the only aspect of the work with which they were acquainted through the partial translation by Marc Antoine Léonard des Malpeines, published in 1744. Though *The Divine legation* had been planned as a refutation of Spinoza and Toland and a vindication of the exceptionality of Hebraic history, its French version was focused on book 4 of Warburton's work, in which he attacked the hypothesis that the ancient Egyptians concealed esoteric wisdom in their hieroglyphs (the French title was, accordingly, *Essai sur les hiéroglyphes des Egyptiens*). Divorced from its theological context, *The Divine legation* could be read as one amongst other Enlightenment essays on the natural transition from barbarism to civilisation.

According to Warburton, Egyptian hieroglyphs were not at all sources of recondite knowledge; they constituted a primitive form of writing by images, intended for popular use and arising out of necessity. Warburton outlined a natural history of language and thought, where the shift from 'speech by action' (gesture, mime) to articulate sounds corresponded to the modification of written forms from images (hieroglyphs) to analogy

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[21] 'For that first language, spoken by the theological poets, was not a language in accord with the nature of things that it dealt with (as must have been the sacred language invented by Adam, to whom God granted divine onomathesia, the giving of names according to the nature of each), but was a fantastic speech making use of physical substances endowed with life and most of them imagined to be divine', Vico, *The New science*, translated by Thomas Bergin and Max Fisch (Ithaca, NY, 1984), p.127-28.

(Chinese characters) and later convention (phonetic alphabets).[22] According to Warburton, the first human beings used concrete images as their symbols just as they spoke in fables before moving on to similes and metaphors. This process occurred unconsciously, aided by nature, custom and practice. Only later, following the development of a phonetic alphabet, did Egyptian priests appropriate the old hieroglyphic system and attribute to it secret truths in order to dominate the people. In a somewhat cumbersome manner, the refutation of the uniqueness of Egyptian religion was supposed to emphasise the workings of providence in the history of the ancient Jews. Warburton combined his view of Egypt with an acknowledgement that the Old Testament lacked a system of future rewards and punishments, usually deemed an indispensable feature of all societies, which allegedly proved the providential exception of God's chosen people. In France, however, *The Divine legation* was received as an attempt to reconcile the biblical narrative with the Epicurean history of language in the tradition of Thomas Hobbes and Richard Simon.

The Epicurean narrative of a natural emergence from bestiality into culture appealed to thinkers such as Vico and Warburton, who wished to uphold religious orthodoxy while taking into account scientific developments and reports on distant civilisations. But reservations and modifications had to be applied to Epicurean prehistory if it was to attain respectability. Not the least among such changes to the Epicurean account was its divorce from other aspects of the ancient philosophical school: materialism, atomism, atheism and their ethical implications. The Epicurean history of civilisation was thus inserted into the narrative of Genesis after the deluge and the Tower of Babel. This postulation of long ages of barbarism at the dawn of history did not necessarily require the diminution of Adam's wisdom and his perfect language, though this was usually part of the fusion between Genesis and Epicurus.

From the natural to the conventional: the trouble with Epicurus

Warburton and Vico employed certain Epicurean elements to reassert Scriptural authority, but the opposite could occur as well: authors who advanced naturalist and materialist systems sometimes retained the biblical chronology in a careful attempt to demonstrate their orthodoxy. This was particularly apparent in the case of Etienne Bonnot de Condillac. In his *Essai sur l'origine des connoissances humaines* (1746), he referred to Warburton as a reliable authority in order to distance himself from heresy. Quoting Warburton's view of Adam's intellectual capacities as 'sterile and limited', Condillac (like Vico before him) used the deluge as the solution to the apparent contradiction between Epicurus and Genesis. As an *abbé*, Condillac might have particularly felt the need to declare he was 'authorised' to pursue the naturalist hypothesis by positioning it after the deluge.[23]

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[22] 'Language, as appears both from Records of Antiquity, and the Nature of the Thing, was at first extremely rude, narrow, and equivocal; [...] Use and Custom, as in most other Circumstances of Life improving what arose out of *Necessity*, into *Ornament*, this Practice subsisted long after the Necessity had ceased', William Warburton, *The Divine legation of Moses*, 2nd edn, 2 vols (London, printed for the executor of Mr. Fletcher Gyles, 1742), vol.2, book 4, p.82-83. See also the influential translation: William Warburthon [*sic*], *Essai sur les hiéroglyphes des Egyptiens*, translated by Marc Antoine Léonard des Malpeines, 2 vols (Paris, Hippolyte-Louis Guerin, 1744), vol.1, p.48-52.

Condillac's *Essai* exemplified the contemporary device of an apparent reverence of the biblical narrative, accompanied by its circumvention and historicisation. The status of Adam's language no longer bothered Condillac and his contemporaries; it became irrelevant through a nonchalant reference to the deluge as the starting point of real (or Epicurean) history. Jean-Jacques Rousseau employed the same method in his *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (1756-1761, published posthumously in 1781). He noted that, although Adam and Noah possessed language, the relevant beginning of human history was the ages of savagery following the deluge. According to Rousseau, this combination of the epicuro-Lucretian narrative with the biblical version was the only way to reconcile Scriptural authority with 'the monuments of antiquity'.[24] In this manner, the conflicting accounts of human history in Epicurus and Genesis seemed to have been successfully merged by the mid-eighteenth century. But neither Rousseau nor Condillac could resolve another serious problem raised by the revival of the Epicurean history of language and civilsation: the transition from the natural to the conventional.

In Condillac's *Essai*, language was not only a human achievement emerging through a slow civilising process; it was the very prerequisite for the development of the mind, social life and all forms of culture. Through the mutual evolution of language and thought, human society acquired a historical perspective on itself, since language allowed experience to be accumulated and transmitted to posterity. At the heart of this account stood, however, a serious problem harking back to the Epicurean response to Plato's *Cratylus*: the combination of naturalism with a diachronic viewpoint. Historical development gave rise to a measure of contingency, whereas a natural origin of language entailed an initial link between words and things beyond arbitrariness or convention.

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[23] 'Adam and Eve did not owe the exercise of the operations of their soul to experience. As they came from the hands of God, they were able, by special assistance, to reflect and communicate their thoughts to each other. But I am assuming that two children, one of either sex, sometime after the deluge, had gotten lost in the desert before they would have known the use of any sign. The fact I have just related gives me the right to make this assumption', Condillac, *Essay on the origin of human knowledge*, translated by Hans Aarsleff (Cambridge, 2001), II.1, p.113.

[24] 'Adam spoke; Noah spoke; granted. [...] Scattered throughout this vast desert of a world, [after the deluge] men relapsed into the dull barbarism they would have been in if they had been born of the earth. By following these entirely natural ideas it is easy to reconcile the authority of Scripture with ancient records, and there is no need to treat as fables traditions that are as old as are the peoples that have handed them down to us', Rousseau, 'Essay on the origin of languages', in *The Discourses and other early political writings*, translated by Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge, 1997), p.270-71.

Condillac seems to have been well aware of this tension between natural origins and historical evolution. In the *Essai*, he distinguished between three classes of signs: *natural* signs instinctively expressed emotions such as joy and pain (they ceased to be natural once deliberately used); *accidental* signs revived unconsciously some ideas under particular circumstances; and *instituted* signs had 'an arbitrary relation to our ideas'.[25] Only such signs could grant man consciousness and command of his cognitive faculties. The first 'instituted' (or conventional) signs were introduced on the basis of a vividly gesticular 'language of action', the original means of communication through natural signs. With the introduction of the first conventional signs, the same idea could be denoted in various ways according to the different circumstances under which it had been first encountered. All languages thus exhibited an initial relation between signs and things (in the Epicurean manner), which might have been lost under layers of human convention.

Already in the *Essai* of 1746 Condillac identified the transition from nature to arbitrariness as a potential paradox: how could human beings use conventional signs if they had no command of the required mental capacities – which, in turn, depended on the use of conventional signs?[26] Condillac's solution was to be found in history. Frequent repetition made the use of natural signs a habit, even in the absence of the accompanying objects and circumstances. Human beings eventually came to do by reflection what they had initially done by instinct.[27] Instead of clarifying the shift from natural signs to arbitrary ones, however, this suggestion merely projected the transition onto a large temporal sweep.

Condillac made another attempt to explain the change from the natural to the arbitrary in his *Grammaire* (1775), where conventional signs were rechristened as 'artificial'. The modification of such signs from 'arbitrary' (in 1746) to 'artificial' (in 1775) was meant to address the apparent incommensurability between natural sounds on the one hand and conventional or 'instituted' signs on the other. Condillac argued that complete arbitrariness was impossible in language, as words had to be understood by the primitive users of natural signs; human intelligence did not allow for pure chance in this domain.[28] This distinction between 'arbitrary' and 'artificial' was made after three decades of intense debate over Condillac's Epicurean account of the history of language. The main objections did not concern the reconciliation of Genesis with *De rerum natura*, or of Adam's perfect language with the initial silence of Lucretian brutes. Critics across Europe levelled their attack at what they perceived as the most vulnerable point of the ancient naturalist thesis and its modern versions: the supposedly smooth transition between two dissimilar categories. No projection over time could merge together incommensurable classes of signs, the objection went, for at some point a qualitative leap must be assumed from the natural to the arbitrary.

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[25] Condillac, *Essay*, I.2.4, p.36.

[26] Condillac, *Essay*, I.2.5, p.42.

[27] Condillac, *Essay*, II.1, p.114-17.

Against Epicurus: towards innatism and back to supernaturalism

At the vanguard of such criticism was, perhaps unsurprisingly, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Though perfectly at ease with the first aspect of the revival of the Epicurean thesis (ages of barbarism inserted into the biblical account), Rousseau cast serious doubt on the naturalist view of the emergence of language. He drew on Condillac's own questioning of the shift from cries and gestures to articulate sounds (either 'arbitrary' or 'artificial'), refusing to recognise slow evolution over time as a solution. In his *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755), Rousseau saw the projection of this transition over a long prehistory as an elegant way to eschew a challenging paradox. The introduction of conventional words required, according to Rousseau, abstraction (thinking in general terms) and a social framework. At the same time, however, language was deemed an essential prerequisite for both conceptual generalisation and the foundation of society.[29] In the

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[28] 'Remarquez bien, Monseigneur, que jue dis de *signes artificiels*, & que je ne dis pas de *signes arbitraries*: car il ne faudroit pas confondre ces deux choses. En effet, qu'est-ce que des signes arbitraires? Des signes choisis sans raison & par caprice. Il ne seroient donc pas entendus. Au contraire, des signes artificiels sont des signes dont le choix est fondé en raison: il doivent être imaginés avec tel art, que l'intelligence en soit préparée par les signes qui sont connus.' Condillac, *Cours d'étude pour l'instruction du prince de Parme*, vol.1: *Grammaire* (Geneva, François Dufart, and Lyon, Bruyset Frères, 1789), p.112; original emphases.

[29] '[E]ven if it were understood how the sounds of voice came to be taken for the conventional interpreters of our ideas, it would still leave open the question of what could have been the interpreters of that convention for ideas which, having no sensible

Discours of 1755, Rousseau's long discussion of the origin of language ended with complete resignation. This was not merely the recognition of a personal failure to explain the shift from the natural to the arbitrary in language; it was read, and probably written, as a crucial challenge to all naturalist attempts to account for the emergence of language 'by purely human means'.[30]

Two contemporary examples in France and Prussia testify to the salience of the debate over convention and arbitrariness in language, following Rousseau's problematisation of the Epicurean theory. Nicolas Beauzée, the prolific author of grammatical entries in the *Encyclopédie*, constructed his own refutation of the naturalist thesis around Rousseau's comments, which he quoted at length. Given the conundrums identified by Rousseau at the core of the Epicurean account, Beauzée drew the conclusion that language must have been divinely pre-programmed into human nature. Beauzée proceeded one step further, focusing on the switch from nature to arbitrariness. If language and society must have conditioned each other's emergence, and if language could not have emerged 'by purely human means', Beauzée asked Rousseau to admit that human society too must have been created by God.[31]

As a *grammairien-philosophe* Beauzée was likely to find Rousseau's comments on language a particularly valuable component of the *Discours sur l'inégalité*. But in Berlin, Moses Mendelssohn was similarly fascinated by Rousseau's problematisation of the Epicurean history of language when he undertook the translation of the *Discours* into German. Mendelssohn addressed Rousseau's conundrums in a 'Letter to Magister Lessing in Leipzig' which he appended to his translation. There Mendelssohn tried to vindicate the natural emergence of language by original examples of the transition from natural signs to arbitrary words, but he too invoked the large span of time during which the smallest changes must have occurred.[32] Rousseau had already rejected the reduction of the shift

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object, could not be pointed to by gesture or by voice, so that it is scarcely possible to form tenable conjectures about the origin of this Art of communicating one's thoughts', Rousseau, 'Discourse on the origins and foundations of inequality among men', in *The Discourses*, p.112-222 (146).

[30] 'As for myself, frightened by the increasing difficulties, and convinced of the impossibility that Languages could have arisen and been established by purely human means, I leave to anyone who wishes to undertake it the discussion of this difficult Problem: which is the more necessary, an already united Society for the institution of Languages, or already invented Languages for the establishment of Society?' (Rousseau, 'Origins of inequality', p.149).

[31] Beauzée, 'Langue', in *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres*, 17 vols (Paris and Neufchâtel, Briasson, 1751-1765), vol.9 (1765), p.249-66 (252).

[32] Mendelssohn, 'Sendschreiben an den Herrn Magister Lessing in Leipzig', in *Gesammelte*

between two incomparable categories to a minute gradual transition, and the same point was made in Berlin by Johann Peter Süßmilch in two papers delivered at the local Academy of Sciences in October 1756 (published in 1766). The explicit target of Süßmilch's attack was the president of the Berlin Academy, Pierre-Louis Moreau de Maupertuis, who had advocated the naturalist emergence of language in a lecture delivered earlier that year.[33] Süßmilch was not disturbed by the potential repercussions of his direct attack on Maupertuis' *Dissertation*; the straightforward title of his essay was *Versuch eines Beweises, daß die erste Sprache ihren Ursprung nicht vom Menschen, sondern allein vom Schöpfer erhalten habe* ('An attempt to prove that the first language had its origin only in the Creator and not in man').

Despite the theological connotations of the title, this was a shrewd attempt to present a persuasive philosophical proof 'from the realm of nature' against the naturalist–Epicurean theory.[34] Süßmilch included in the printed edition numerous references to Rousseau's *Discours sur l'inégalité* and appended to it a response to Mendelssohn. The main thesis of the *Versuch* may be seen as a version of Rousseau's conundrum concerning language and reason: on the one hand language was the sole means for the exercise of reason, but on the other its structure must have required deliberate design by a fully rational mind. Hence language could not have been formed by man, the only alternative being a higher entity whose intellect did not depend on the use of signs.

Süßmilch's originality lay less in the argument itself than in the ingenious employment of the naturalists' own philosophical corpus in his vindication of the divine origin of language. He was well aware that modern thinkers drew on the Epicurean account of human evolution, and mentioned Lucretius, Diodorus of Sicily, Vitruvius and Horace as its main advocates. Süßmilch summarised the Epicurean thesis as resting on four tenets: men initially led a chaotic, rudimentary life; at this stage they were speechless; they came together out of fear and for mutual defence, beginning to communicate by natural signs and gestures; finally they moved on to associate arbitrary signs with things, developing an exten-

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Schriften – Jubiläumsausgabe, vol.2 (*Schriften zur Philosophie und Ästhetik II*), ed. Fritz Bamberger and Leo Strauss (Berlin, 1931), p.83-109.

[33] Maupertuis, 'Dissertation sur les différents moyens dont les hommes se sont servis pour exprimer leurs idées', in *Histoire de l'Académie royale des sciences et belles lettres, année 1754* (Berlin, Haude & Spener, 1756), p.349-64. (Due to delays in editing and printing, recent papers were sometimes incorporated into the proceedings of previous years. This is the case for Maupertuis' essay, delivered in 1756 but printed that year in the volume for 1754.)

[34] Süßmilch, *Versuch eines Beweises, daß die erste Sprache ihren Ursprung nicht vom Menschen, sondern allein vom Schöpfer erhalten habe* (Berlin, Buchladen der Realschule, 1766), p.97.

sive language. The ancient theory, Süßmilch observed, was revived by Richard Simon who assumed that man did not receive a ready-made language on his creation. This powerful argument enabled modern philosophers, either of an atheist bent or committed to the defence of religion to revive the Epicurean naturalist thesis. It now became possible to embrace the biblical account of creation while simultaneously espousing the natural emergence of language. In spite of his religious vocation, Süßmilch did not have much to say about the reconciliation of Genesis with Epicurean prehistory. His main problem with this Enlightenment synthesis was similar to the one troubling Rousseau, the transition between two incommensurable categories: from natural signs such as cries and gestures to arbitrary words. He identified the tendency to stretch this transition over centuries or millennia as an ineffective methodological device, observing that Lucretius and his followers ascribed to 'natural man' too sharp an intellect for the communication of thoughts he could not have had in the state of nature.[35]

Süßmilch particularly criticised the Epicurean assumption that common needs and social interaction could have turned natural signs into arbitrary words. If the original 'language of action' satisfied their initial needs, what could have spurred the first human beings to improve their means of communication? Habitude and comfort, Süßmilch argued, would have impeded any such attempt. If the Lucretian brutes had ever existed, he concluded, they would have been far more content with cries and gestures than the spoiled Europeans were with their articulate language.[36] Playing in the Epicureans' arena, Süßmilch mounted a serious challenge to the naturalist theory of the origin of language. More intricately than Rousseau, he demonstrated that the interdependence of signs and thought could be reclaimed as a central weapon in the arsenal of the divine party. In line with Condillac and Christian Wolff's equation between language and reason, Süßmilch argued that God must have either bestowed them on man upon his creation or not bestowed them at all; in the latter case, human beings would have forever possessed rudimentary, animal-like mental capacities. Philosophers arguing for a natural emergence must have faced the conundrum of primacy and decided what came first, reason or language, an impossible task according to Rousseau, Beauzée and Süßmilch. The only alternative the *Versuch* offered its readers was a supernatural launch of language, reason and society at the same time – the beginning of time.

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[35] Süßmilch, *Versuch*, p.5-12, 58-59.

[36] 'If we suppose there had been Lucretian men on earth, who according to Horace could not have been named otherwise than *mutum et turpe pecus*, it follows that they would have not felt any other inclinations than those we perceive in animals. [...] And it cannot at all be explained how further needs could have emerged among them, different from the ones we still see in animals, against which the wisest creator of nature had given them [the Lucretian brutes] resources and weapons' (Gesetzt, daß es lucretianische Menschen auf der Erde gegeben habe, die nach dem Horaz nicht anders als *mutum et turpe pecus* haben können benant werden, so folgt von selbst, daß sie auch keine andre Triebe werden empfunden haben, als die wir bey den Thieren wahrnehmen. [...] und es ist gar nicht einzusehen, wie unter ihnen eine andre Noth hätte entstehen können, als die wir noch bey Thieren antreffen, wogegen ihnen der weiseste Urheber der Natur, Mittel und Waffen gegeben hat (Süßmilch, *Versuch*, p.88-90; my translation)).

For Rousseau, there existed an unbridgeable conceptual abyss between the natural and the arbitrary. Beauzée and Süßmilch concluded that, if human beings had initially lived without a full articulate language, as portrayed in the Epicurean account, they would never have acquired it. Animals and deaf-mutes usually supplied the requisite examples: nothing natural, it was believed, could turn their crude means of communication into a human language. This critical argument was actually heeded by some advocates of the naturalist thesis. In an unpublished essay, possibly drafted as a reply to Süßmilch, Mendelssohn conceded that if our original mental faculties were to be seen as merely bestial, the divine origin of language would be vindicated. The only solution, according to Mendelssohn's modified view, was to assume man had a hard-wired capacity for reason and language, activated by natural circumstances and developed by human means. The Lucretian brutes, therefore, must have had a latent potential for language even if they did not actually speak, just like human infants.[37] Such an innate platform for reason and language ('Vernunftanlage', as Mendelssohn called it) left a theoretical door open both to intelligent design and to natural evolution without direct divine intervention.

Innatism became increasingly influential in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Its traces can be found, among other works, in Herder's famous prize essay on the origin of language (1771). The assumption of an inborn instinct for language and reason could also restore supernaturalism to its traditional prominence. If not literally following the biblical account of Adam and his perfect language, the innatist thesis implicitly suggested a divine answer to questions such as how humans became endowed with a capacity for language and why they were the only species to possess it. As the cases of Beauzée and Süßmilch demonstrate, the answer was usually a synthesis between the divine origin of innate faculties and their human self-activation. This was a considerable shift away from the Epicurean history of language and civilisation, where man was depicted as a chance creation emerging naturally out of the earth alongside animals and monsters; one of

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[37] Mendelssohn, 'Über die Sprache', in *Jubiläumsausgabe*, vol.6.2 (*Kleinere Schriften*), ed. Eva J. Engel and Alexander Altmann (Stuttgart, 1981), p.3-23.

Epicurus' main aims was to explain human emergence in a universe lacking a supernatural masterplan.

Conclusion

The tension between nature and arbitrariness in language has been preoccupying thinkers ever since Plato's *Cratylus*, but in the Enlightenment it had a particularly wide-ranging impact in other philosophical domains. If the vogue for essays on the origin of language can be taken as a guide, by the mid-eighteenth century the Epicurean history of civilisation had become well amalgamated with the biblical account of Creation due to the postulation of long ages of barbarism after the deluge. After several decades of experimentation, however, the synthesis between Genesis and Epicurus ultimately failed to convince contemporaries that the transition from natural signs to conventional words could be achieved smoothly and unproblematically. Attempts to resolve the inherent tension in the Epicurean account stimulated a rich variety of reflections while simultaneously exposing the contradictions involved in the civilising process. Such paradoxes are particularly evident in Rousseau's efforts to reconcile nature and artifice in both language and society.

The revival of the Epicurean history of language could perhaps be portrayed as part of a general contemporary attempt to explain social institutions, linguistic discourse and reason itself as man-made and historically evolved. Far from possessing Adam's wisdom, the first human beings were considered categorically different from modern man, intellectually resembling children and savages. Scriptural chronology was set aside as a superfluous foreword to the Epicurean account, and even advocates of the divine origin of language increasingly resorted to arguments drawn from the arsenal of naturalists and materialists. Man was to be reintegrated into nature, and the Epicurean history of language and civilisation was an obvious means to realise this goal.

Yet such a picture would merely be the façade of the complex appropriation of the Epicurean narrative. Orthodox thinkers could freely apply Epicurean elements in their works, while some of the adherents of the Epicurean thesis eventually became apprehensive about the ancient naturalist theory (as manifest in Condillac and Mendelssohn's revision of their own account of the shift from a primordial 'language of action' to linguistic convention). The frictions within the Epicurean thesis consequently led to a reassessment of the 'natural' in language, simultaneously with similar changes in conjectural histories of society. The resort to an innate linguistic capacity may have been the cognitive counterpart of Adam Ferguson's riposte to Rousseau's conundrum of nature versus arbitrariness. Emphasising the futility of any reconstruction of a state of nature in which human beings were shorn of all their historically evolved characteristics (including language), Ferguson suggested that artifice was man's nature from the outset. As this instinct for artifice had always set mankind apart from pure nature, a human state of nature never existed.[38] Such a critique of the search for ultimate origins implied that the first human beings could have already possessed a fully fledged language, thus pre-empting a history of its mental and social emergence.[39]

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[38] Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the history of civil society* (1767), ed. Fania Oz-Salzberger (Cambridge, 1995), p.12.

[39] I am grateful to Hannah Dawson, Knud Haakonssen, Neven Leddy and John Robertson for invaluable comments on earlier versions of this article.