

Introduction

On August 13, 1698, at the dawn of what would later be christened the age of lights, the Parlement of Dijon condemned one Philibert Robert, a local priest turned fugitive from justice. Tried in absentia, he was to be burnt at the stake for professing “Quietism,” a heretical form of mysticism, and for engaging in “spiritual incest,” a legal term referring to sexual relations between a priest and a layperson under his direction.¹ The offenses were considered symptomatic of the Quietists’ broader disregard for all spiritual goods, even salvation, with the ultimate aim of purging themselves of every trace of desire, will, and personal identity. In separate proceedings, the court turned its attention to Robert’s disciples, who likewise stood accused of practicing a “prayer of annihilation” that left the soul “immobile, thinking nothing, saying nothing, doing nothing,” and entirely “abandoned to God.” Those who entered this state believed themselves to have become “impeccable,” and thus capable of engaging in “illicit exchanges” without incurring the stain of sin.² At the trial’s conclusion in 1700, the magistrates sentenced several local clerics and their alleged female accomplices to penalties ranging from banishment to death by hanging.³

Over three-quarters of a century later, in 1776, the Parlement of Paris found itself embroiled in a controversy that, at first glance, would seem quite different in nature. That year, as part of sweeping reforms aimed at liberalizing agriculture, manufacturing, and commerce, the recently crowned Louis XVI approved the plan of his controller-general, Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, to abolish the corporate bodies that enjoyed exclusive rights to practice specific trades.⁴ The decision triggered a wave of outcries from French subjects who believed that their livelihoods, and even their identities, had come under assault. The glove makers of Paris contended that since “each person has an existence only through the corporate

body [*corps*] to which he is attached,” the edict did violence to their members’ very sense of self.⁵

Not all petitioners, however, made their claims exclusively in terms defending the integrity of the society of orders. For instance, representatives of the powerful Six Corps of Paris (consisting of drapers, furriers, hosiers, goldsmiths, grocers, and mercers) asserted that their privileges constituted a property as real as that held in land, and thus could not be lawfully stripped from them. Drawing on a rationale influenced by John Locke, they argued that investments of mental and physical labor legitimized ownership of their possessions. A manufacturer’s efforts earned him not only “honorable distinctions,” such as affiliation with the crown, but also “the exclusive right” to associate his product with his own name as an extension of his personal and professional identity.⁶ Echoing these protests, hat makers pleaded that a “mastership can be regarded as a property,” and thus deserved protection as a “sacred thing.”⁷

The Parlement of Paris vigorously remonstrated against the edicts. According to the judges, Turgot’s reforms would render “each manufacturer, each artist, each worker [. . .] an isolated being, dependent on himself alone,” thus compromising the moral and social cohesion of the kingdom. The measures unjustly deprived the master not only of his “estate, which was guaranteed to him by the laws,” but also, as the Six Corps had alleged, of “a part of his property.” The magistrates had a duty, then, to call attention to the defects in the legislation, which threatened to “alter the constitution of the state and undermine the authority of the throne.”⁸

The cases before the Parlements of Dijon and Paris were considered at different times, in different places, and for different reasons. Yet the issues at stake in both centered on the same overarching problem: the self’s relationship to spiritual, existential, and material possessions. Thinking about selfhood also entailed thinking about property—what one owned, or could claim to own, defined who and what one was. For increasing numbers of French subjects, the divinely ordained and royally sanctioned order appeared inadequate to the task of orienting oneself in a world of goods. Once identity was unmoored from previously sacrosanct political, social, and economic realities, it became necessary to articulate new ways of relating the human person to God, to nature, and to the body politic. The various means by which men and women in eighteenth-century France strove to do so are the subject of this book.

The self’s highly contested status during the eighteenth century stemmed from profound uncertainties about the extent to which one could claim one’s identity, salvation, earthly belongings, or even one’s ideas and actions as one’s own. This was no mere theoretical issue. It was debated in the highest echelons of Church and state in matters of crucial importance

to the kingdom. It was fought over in books, pamphlets, plays, memoirs, newspapers, the corridors of Versailles, and the streets of Paris. It had a profound impact on the daily lives of men and women: what they bought and sold, their beliefs about God, their political convictions, their social identities, and, indeed, their most fundamental sense of where they stood in the world. Those who openly challenged the prevailing wisdom concerning the self's possessive character found themselves targets of religious and political persecution and were subject to imprisonment, torture, and even death.

These pressing questions related to being and having a self, I argue, can be seen as giving rise to opposing cultures of personhood that cut across doctrinal, philosophical, and political lines. On one side, orthodox Catholic theologians, mainstream philosophes, and apologists for venal officeholding and luxury consumption defended a multifaceted *culture of self-ownership*, according to which men and women were thought to possess and stand accountable for themselves and their actions. Proponents of self-ownership, despite their many differences on other fronts, shared a common commitment to notions of identity and autonomy that would, after years of controversy, underwrite the concept of the modern, individualist subject. Yet this struggle was not for individualism per se (the term did not gain wide usage in France until the nineteenth century).⁹ Rather, the primary point of contention was the self's attachment to its existence as a form of property, which in turn made possible the accumulation of other goods—including spiritual gifts, moral autonomy, privileges in hereditary office, and the ever-expanding array of consumer products available in the eighteenth century.

This understanding of personhood has been commented on from various perspectives by a host of scholars, perhaps most notably by C. B. Macpherson.¹⁰ None of these studies, however, has placed primary emphasis on the French case or examined the links between theological, existential, and material possession that gave it its distinctive dimensions. As indicated by the Quietist trials in Dijon, moreover, what I have termed the culture of self-ownership did not enjoy universal assent. On the contrary, it faced sustained criticism throughout the eighteenth century. Detractors ranged across the cultural terrain of the Old Regime and the French Revolution, to include the grandest of prelates, the most notorious of philosophes, and the most powerful of political figures. The history of the challenge they posed to the possessive, acquisitive, individualist self—from its complex origins to its enduring legacies—has never been told.

Central to my argument, then, is the recovery of a distinctively anti-individualist strain of thinking that infiltrated theology, philosophy, and politics during the long eighteenth century, from the final years of the

reign of Louis XIV through the Revolution of 1789. Its partisans sought, in word and deed, to strip the subject of its property, its personality, even its very existence as an individual. Their views formed a wide-ranging but coherent *culture of dispossession* that valorized the human person's loss of ownership over itself and external objects. An unholy trinity subscribed to this position. Radical Christian mystics were aligned with radical materialist philosophes and political thinkers in denouncing as illogical and immoral all claims that the self had to property in its person or in material things. Although they diverged at many points, most obviously in matters of faith, the works of these thinkers similarly sought to reduce men and women to mere objects of totalizing forces outside the self—at first identified with the God of mystical devotion, and ultimately situated in Enlightenment conceptions of nature and the revolutionary body politic. Efforts to apply these dispossessive ideals led to extraordinary practices, scandals, and upheavals. Men and women joined illicit mystic cults that engaged in rituals of physical mortification and sexual abandon, committed suicide out of materialist fatalism, sought to induce mind-altering dreams to satisfy their lust for scientific and carnal knowledge, railed against the degrading effects of luxury, and even renounced the feudal privileges that had defined their social existence for centuries.

The Polemics of Personhood

The cultures of self-ownership and dispossession clashed throughout the eighteenth century in seminal controversies over venal officeholding, Christian mysticism, atheistic materialism, the dream state, luxury consumption, and civil and political rights. The sheer variety of concerns shows that the understandings of personhood implicated in these debates did not remain static. For defenders of self-ownership, there were significant shifts in the nature of the goods by which the human person defined itself, from the divine to the mundane. In the case of dispossession, as noted above, the totalizing force to which the self submitted changed over the course of the century from the God of Christianity, who transcended nature and ruled beyond it, to the novel political regime of the French Revolution, which its framers believed to be grounded in natural law. The chapters of this book, similarly, are organized into sections, each of which emphasizes one of the dominant frameworks—from the theological to the philosophical to the political—within which the polemics over personhood successively formed.

Part I of *The Virtues of Abandon* charts the emergence of Enlightenment-era cultures of personhood out of conflicts in the religious sphere. These conflicts were not exclusively theological in origin, but rather figured in a wider

assault on corporate social structures under the Old Regime. In particular, the French crown's reliance on the sale of offices and letters of ennoblement to fund its policies of domestic and international expansion severed traditional ties linking personal virtue and social status. In response, theologians and philosophers formulated two conflicting positions. By emphasizing the self's possessive attachment to its ideas, actions, and material belongings, post-Tridentine Catholic reformers, Cartesians, and Jansenist moral philosophers affirmed that the individual person—rather than the estate—was the foundation of identity. In opposition, growing numbers of Christian mystics rejected spiritual self-ownership and enlightened self-interest, urging virtuous souls to abandon themselves entirely to God.

These developments anticipated the so-called Quietist affair, a controversy that pitted the leading theological lights of the seventeenth century, François de Fénelon and Jacques Bénigne Bossuet, against each other over the orthodoxy of the notorious mystic Jeanne-Marie Guyon. At issue in the quarrel, which preoccupied Louis XIV, Pope Innocent XII, and much of the Gallican ecclesiastical establishment, were the dispensability of spiritual goods and the limits of self-interest in Christian devotion. Bossuet held that the soul's longing to possess spiritual goods was a natural and necessary desire, fully in keeping with God's will. In contrast, Fénelon and Guyon denounced this position as mercenary, and advocated instead that the soul sever its possessive attachment to all things, even to itself and its own hopes for salvation. While Bossuet's doctrinal stance cast a relatively positive light on the Sun King's pursuit of glory and the earthly prosperity of his subjects, Fénelon surrounded himself with like-minded mystics, who sought drastic changes, not only in French economic and military policy, but also in the system of government.

Although Pope Innocent XII would ultimately condemn Fénelon in 1699, the latter's teachings continued to reverberate in subsequent trials, scandals, and causes célèbres during the first third of the eighteenth century. There were lengthy prosecutions of supposed Quietists in Dijon, Paris, Rodez, and Toulon. These episodes provide insight into how men and women attempted to put the mystical ideal of self-abandon into practice through prayer manuals, liturgical rites, and public demonstrations. Religious and scientific authorities took issue with these acts on medical as well as theological grounds. In so doing, they bore witness to a shift whereby the dispossession of self would increasingly be seen not merely as a spiritual state, but also as a somatic condition that could be treated accordingly.

By the 1730s, Christian apologists had become acutely aware of the challenges posed by radical philosophy to their doctrine of spiritual self-ownership. Part II of the book begins by exploring the ways in which

Baruch Spinoza's materialist heirs in France sought to topple God from the throne of creation and undermine human pretensions to possess distinct agency and identity. Their virulent writings so devalued the self that they even drove the occasional reader to suicide. A more measured and far-reaching response was to discern from nature's laws a new ethics and even a new social order, based on collective rather than individualist principles. Baron Paul Henri Dietrich d'Holbach's *Système de la nature* (1770), one of the most popular philosophical treatises of the Enlightenment, exemplified this approach. The writings of d'Holbach and other philosophical materialists served as primary vehicles for elaborating the culture of dispossession in the middle decades of the eighteenth century. Orthodox theologians, not unlike mainstream philosophes, deployed charges previously aimed at heretical mystics to denounce this new threat. Whereas controversies over mysticism were sparked by disputes over the virtues of spiritual abandon to God, debates surrounding radical philosophy focused on the self's indebtedness to nature, which Spinozists and materialists extended to the point of almost total dependency. This shift was recognized by Voltaire, who likened the followers of Spinoza to those of Fénelon, since both thinkers advocated selflessness as an ethical ideal.

Other radical materialists sought to construct a more positive form of dispossessive personhood. Most notably, Denis Diderot appropriated the language of Quietism in his philosophical and aesthetic writings to describe a spectrum of dispossessive states—from simple distraction to absorption to madness—with the aim of framing an alternative to the self-possessed subject of Enlightenment orthodoxy and its detached, objectifying stance toward the world. In this enterprise he was joined by expert physicians and charlatans alike, who prepared manuals on how to diagnose, induce, and direct the self in dreaming. Such approaches treated the dispossession of the self as a physiological and psychological phenomenon, not a miraculous occurrence. For Diderot in particular, altered states of consciousness offered insight into the true nature of things. He told, for instance, of how a well-crafted work of art could take him out of himself and into a scene being depicted. In response to the potentially reifying effects of objects produced for the market, Diderot developed a materialist aesthetics predicated on communion rather than exploitation.

Diderot's musings took on heightened relevance during a period when French men and women had greater access to a disorienting array of goods with which to fashion their existence. Another aim of Part II, then, is to address the implications of disputes over economic and political reform for understanding the self. The consumer revolution of the eighteenth century provoked dread as well as satisfaction. Proponents of the liberalization of trade in grain and other commodities frequently stressed the human

being's status as a pleasure-seeking subject. The logic of their claims had a moral valence as well, since the enjoyment derived from consumption was regarded as a means of securing personal contentment through productive engagements with other social actors. Critics of economic self-ownership, led by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, made use of the arguments honed by Fénelon during the Quietist affair. In a series of influential publications, Rousseau criticized the possessive subject as a mere plaything of objects that were of its own making and yet beyond its control. Although he attempted to salvage self-ownership as an ideal, his ultimate political response to this problem placed stark limits on any exercise of personal autonomy that lacked the consent of the body politic as a whole.

Rousseau's halting efforts to apply the ideal of dispossessive personhood to the political sphere were taken up by his self-professed followers during the French Revolution, as men and women attempted to reconcile a commitment to individual rights with calls for self-sacrifice to the new regime. Leading politicians persistently subjected the prerogatives of individuals to the needs of the body politic, from the frenzied alienation of seigniorial privileges during the night of August 4, 1789, to the cult of martyrs that arose during the Terror. The culture of dispossession waned with the fall of Maximilien Robespierre, but its aims lived on among early socialists such as Gracchus Babeuf, who sought to reform, if not eliminate, private property and the despotic brand of egoism that it sustained.

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As an interpretive prism, the culture of dispossession casts new light, not only on conceptions of the self, but also on the broader social, political, and intellectual landscapes of eighteenth-century France. Indeed, recognizing the problematic origins of individualism reveals a far more nuanced and accurate understanding of the Enlightenment, its intersections with religion, and its role in the emergence of modern economic relations. For instance, we often credit the French Enlightenment with the triumph of autonomous individualism, and the Revolution with inscribing the individual's rights into law. However, these rights arose as much out of violent self-sacrifice as out of the pursuit of happiness. Similarly, it remains a common misperception that the French Enlightenment was avowedly secular from its inception. Yet the movement's religious influences are apparent even where scholars have tended to find them most lacking: among its radical, materialist, atheistic elements. After all, the Old Regime was not only a world of freethinking philosophers, rationally calculating royal administrators, and apologists for property and commerce. It was also the domain of Christian mystics, esoteric seekers, philosophical fatalists, and self-denying republicans. The two spheres frequently clashed, with fateful

consequences for both France and the wider world. Until we grasp the highly charged, contested status of the self during the period, we cannot jettison the idealized portrait of the Enlightenment for a truer history.

The Vicissitudes of Individualism

Much of the scholarship on eighteenth-century selfhood has oscillated between two interpretive extremes. In the classic accounts of C. B. Macpherson, Louis Dumont, and Charles Taylor, the eighteenth century is noted for its pivotal role in producing the modern, secular, autonomous individual—a moral agent in possession of itself and in control of its world.¹¹ Daniel Roche has aptly characterized the position in his summa on Enlightenment-era France. Armed with advanced scientific knowledge and a self-seeking, acquisitive drive, the individual became what Descartes had promised in his *Discours de la méthode*, the “master and possessor” of nature.¹² In sharp contrast, the Enlightenment’s fiercest challengers, from Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno to Michel Foucault, have tended to emphasize the oppressive features of modern subjectivity, and even its impending demise.¹³ This critical stance, frequently associated with “postmodern” currents in philosophy and literary criticism, has approached individualism as a recent invention with a dubious past and an uncertain future.

Writing in the wake of such pronouncements, historians have seized the opportunity to recover the highly contingent course of the modern subject’s emergence. Like recent work by Jan Goldstein, Jerrold Seigel, and Dror Wahrman, this study avoids reducing the history of personhood to that of individualism, thereby allowing overlooked and neglected formulations of the self to come into focus.¹⁴ Yet it also frames a distinct perspective. Rather than characterizing the Enlightenment-era self as indeterminate and unstable, I find French subjects attempting to base their identities on new foundations, which they regarded as more certain than those furnished by the declining corporatist order of the Old Regime.¹⁵ This point becomes all the more apparent if one considers the sharply different alternatives offered by the cultures of self-ownership and dispossession in France. The former, espoused by Montesquieu, Voltaire, and the principal French sensationalists, promised a secure basis for staking individual claims of possession on one’s ideas, actions, and identity. The latter, professed by radical spiritualists and materialists, endorsed the dissolution, and even annihilation, of one’s sense of self.

My inquiry places even greater stress on the multiple, conflicting understandings of selfhood that existed outside conventional frameworks during the eighteenth century. Tentative forms of individualism arose in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but so too did avowedly non-individualist

currents that disputed the human person's powers of appropriation. The two positions both clashed with and influenced each other. Neither the claims in defense of self-ownership nor those in favor of dispossession would have been as extreme, or as clearly articulated, had they not developed in response to the opposing view. While the partisans of self-ownership ultimately saw their doctrines inscribed in the political order, their victory was by no means assured. Quite simply, we cannot understand the multiple twists and turns in the history of individualism without also confronting the struggles out of which it emerged.

Once eighteenth-century debates over the self are restored to their original, overarching context—the problem of relating personhood to property—the Enlightenment seems less a crucible of individualism and more a battleground for deciding its fate. From this perspective, the movement as a whole takes on a different aspect. The *Encyclopédie* famously declared the philosophe to be a rationally calculating, self-governing subject.¹⁶ Few scholars have found reason to question this portrayal, which squares readily with the ideal of Enlightenment sociability as a free exchange between interlocutors.¹⁷ In so doing, it lends support to Jürgen Habermas's influential descriptions of a bourgeois public sphere, the workings of which depend on participants in possession of themselves and with an acute sense of responsibility for their thoughts and actions.¹⁸ Yet it also obscures the actual diversity of thinking about what it meant to live and work as a philosophe, even for the Enlightenment's leading figures. As we shall see, Diderot himself, the co-editor of the *Encyclopédie*, not only called into question the philosophical ideal of self-ownership; he did so by refurbishing dispossessive language derived from heretical branches of mysticism. Furthermore, his eventual understanding of matter as a blind, determining force that negated the real existence of individual beings—an understanding shared by his colleague d'Holbach—cast more than a shadow of a doubt on the axiom that human beings acted as a distinct, autonomous entities in and on the world.

The Enlightenment and the Sacred

The history of selfhood advanced here directly complicates the long-standing characterization of the Enlightenment as a secularizing force. The once-canonical interpretations of Paul Hazard, Peter Gay, and Michel Vovelle depicted the eighteenth century in terms of encroaching skepticism and declining belief.¹⁹ Research over the past three decades, however, has signaled a return to religion as a subject of fundamental importance in the scholarship on the period. To be sure, religion has long been regarded as a means of differentiating specific national Enlightenments according to

the degree of ecclesiastical participation in the movement.²⁰ David Sorkin has made a still more ambitious case for a pan-European, philosophically pluralist, and state-sanctioned “religious Enlightenment” that buttressed the demands of faith with support from the ideals of reason and toleration. On this view, the Enlightenment not only stood as a complement to doctrinal verities, but in many cases proved functionally indistinguishable from them.²¹ Other scholars have offered various additions and correctives to this line of argumentation, by detailing the ebbs and flows of its Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish iterations.²² Even Jonathan Israel—now perhaps the most outspoken advocate of the Enlightenment as a drive toward “rationalization and secularization”—holds that supporters of its “moderate mainstream,” in contrast to their more radical contemporaries, proved all too willing to accommodate long-standing theological and political axioms.²³

A similar recovery of religion can be detected in specialist scholarship on France, perhaps a surprising development given the notorious anticlericalism that took root there.²⁴ Dale Van Kley has pioneered an approach that stresses the relevance of theological controversies in the age of lights. The tendentious debates between Jesuits and Jansenists, he argues, had far more bearing than Enlightenment philosophy on the political struggles that precipitated the collapse of the Old Regime and foreshadowed the violent conflicts of the Revolution.²⁵ In a similar vein, Jeffrey Burson makes the case for a “Theological Enlightenment,” a Jesuit-engineered amalgam of Lockean sensationalism and Malebranchian occasionalism that facilitated dialogue on topics such as the mind-body problem and the validity of revealed religion. Challenged by Jansenists on one side and skeptical materialists on the other, this precarious synthesis broke apart, however, after the abbé Jean-Martin de Prades was accused of blasphemy for submitting a naturalistic thesis to the Sorbonne, obliging him to flee to the Dutch Republic in 1752 and thence to Prussia. The Prades affair, as it became known, foreclosed possibilities for détente between the philosophes and the ecclesiastical establishment, with the latter accusing the former of plotting to subvert spiritual and political authority.²⁶

On the cultural-historical front, David Bell has argued convincingly that nationalism in France emerged in the eighteenth century as a response to a theological problem—namely, the need to span the perceived distance between a transcendent God and the terrestrial sphere through the invention of new concepts and institutions regarded as independent of divine oversight or legitimation. Moreover, patriotic devotion to the nation was informed by Catholic efforts to forge affective bonds among members of a community.²⁷ Theology, the queen of the sciences, enjoyed a far longer and more eventful reign than scholars were once willing to recognize.

The present study also offers a new assessment of the relationship between the Enlightenment and French Catholicism, by giving sustained consideration, not only to the work of theologians, but also to the philosophes themselves. Previous scholarship has addressed similarities in the arguments made by members of the two camps on a range of issues, but not as regards the self's relationship to spiritual goods and material possessions.²⁸ The conflicting responses to this question reveal connections between heretical mysticism and the materialism of the radical Enlightenment. In the minds of their eighteenth-century opponents, adherents of both views sought to disseminate a form of dispossessive selfhood that threatened to undermine the basis, not only of individual property rights, but also of moral action in this life and the promise of salvation in the next. The affinities between theological and philosophical radicalism, although noted by the likes of Leibniz and Voltaire, have almost entirely escaped scholarly attention.²⁹

Redressing these oversights opens new vistas for considering the theological dimensions of the French Enlightenment, and more broadly, the lines of demarcation between the secular and the sacred. The aim is not to extend the framework now closely associated with the work of Jonathan Israel, which sharply delineates the moderate and the religious from the radical and irreligious, but to reconfigure it in significant ways.³⁰ French mystics and materialists drew on analogous arguments, and at times identical terminologies, in their efforts to undermine the individual's claims to active self-determination. Their writings form part of a broader dispossessive culture that resonated throughout the long eighteenth century. Spinoza himself, whom Israel regards as the harbinger of modernity, equated the highest form of consciousness with the disinterested love of God. When avowed atheists had recourse to theological language, and even to mystical doctrines branded as heretical, their pronouncements would have appeared radical in a double sense. Orthodox theologians and mainstream philosophes found themselves repulsed by the spiritual excesses that marred even what Israel has held out as the purest, most cohesive strand of the Enlightenment. His characterization of the movement as fundamentally secular, then, fails to account for the ways in which religious antecedents continued to inform the thought of the period.

In reconstructing the intersections between radical theology and radical Enlightenment during the eighteenth century, I also offer an alternative account of the secularization process. Recent interpretations of the period have emphasized the extent to which theologians' growing perception of a remote God's distance from creation allowed secular concepts and institutions to emerge.³¹ Divine transcendence, in other words, facilitated the rise of an autonomous and desacralized world with only tenuous links to a

supreme being.³² From this perspective, secularization no longer refers to a one-sided departure from religion, but rather to a contingent, multidimensional process that originated within religion itself.

The following study presents a more complex view of this dynamic. Proponents of dispossession responded to the problems posed by a remote and transcendent divinity by stressing that not only God, but also nature and the body politic, wielded an immediate, irresistible power over human minds and bodies. Radical mystics did so by pledging to annihilate their souls before the divine, while radical materialists claimed that it was not God, but nature, that imposed itself on one's every thought and deed. I call this countercurrent of the secularizing process *resacralization*, because it sought to reverse transcendence by valorizing the immanent relations between human beings and the world.³³ While both mystics and materialists engaged in resacralization, they did so with different aims in mind. The former hoped to draw the individual self into close, dispossessive proximity to God; the latter did the same with respect to the impersonal forces of nature. Toward the century's end, radical French political thinkers consecrated the *patrie* as an object of selfless veneration, a site where the powers of God and nature merged in communion with the collective will of the body politic. The Enlightenment did not so much jettison the divine, then, as marshal it to serve new functions. Tracing the ways in which eighteenth-century theology and philosophy endeavored to remap the sacred onto God, nature, and the body politic will serve as a red thread of analysis in the chapters to come.

Homo Economicus, Homo Consumptus

If religion in its various guises remained central to thinking about the self, it was due in large part to the positive stance toward spiritual goods affirmed by the Church at the Council of Trent. It could even be argued, as has Cissie Fairchild, that the ensuing revitalization of spiritual life provided a crucial impetus for expanding consumption in eighteenth-century France by stimulating demand for crucifixes, *pric-dieux*, images, books, and other objects of devotion, which in turn introduced the faithful to a new material world. Indeed, despite the proliferation of curtains, clocks, and tea and coffee sets found in after-death inventories in Paris and Toulouse during the first third of the eighteenth century, the only items encountered with greater frequency than religious objects were mirrors.³⁴ It is difficult to imagine a more powerful indication of the extent to which self-regard and acquisitiveness could go hand in hand. Moreover, the arguments employed by orthodox theologians in defense of spiritual goods—that God desired souls to possess them so that they would

be happy—anticipated arguments that enlightened political economists would make in favor of luxury.

Until recently, historians have tended to insist on the relative backwardness of the French economy, especially when compared to that of Britain.³⁵ A wealth of new research, however, has discredited this interpretation. The eighteenth century witnessed the emergence of mass markets for religious objects, along with all manner of commodities. For example, Daniel Roche's examination of Paris inventories reveals a steady growth in the total number and diversity of articles of clothing owned during the century. This increase, he argues, was part of a gradual shift from dearth to abundance, and from a "sartorial *ancien régime*," in which one's clothing manifested one's social station, to a "culture of appearances" driven by the whims of fashion.³⁶ Fairchild has shown in her study of "populuxe goods" (relatively inexpensive replicas of luxury items) how the desire for objects during the period affected men and women across the social spectrum. In addition to clothing, jewelry, and other adornments, the eighteenth-century consumer increasingly gained access to new foodstuffs, as well as to addictive substances such as coffee and tobacco. One also sees a proliferation of more abstract possessions, from venal offices to stocks in colonial trading companies.³⁷ Reforms were made to existing property rights as well; in the 1770s, for instance, authors acquired exclusive *privilèges* over their work.³⁸ All these examples reinforce the impression that long before the political revolution of 1789, France underwent a consumer revolution that transformed the ways in which men and women oriented themselves toward objects of possession.

Montesquieu and Rousseau acknowledged in the eighteenth century, as Marx would later, that novel goods tend to produce novel needs.³⁹ They also, one might add, produce new formulations of selfhood and new ways of being in the world. Historians have become increasingly interested in uncovering how the changes in what can be owned, and how, correspond to conceptual shifts in the sociopolitical domain.⁴⁰ To cite a significant example, the widespread practice of venality in France hinged on a particular possession, the office, that exhibited its own transformative characteristics—such as the capacity to alter status—yet could also be bought and sold by individuals. Long before the mystifying effects of the commodity became apparent to Marx and other critics of capitalism, French jurists, theologians, and philosophers observed similar effects on the human subject at work in religious, intellectual, and political domains. More generally, the ways in which men and women related to spiritual and material goods show that the attractiveness of the curios of consumer culture depended not only on availability, but also on a highly charged sense among prospective buyers of living by and through possessions. The acquisitive

impulse was in turn intensely scrutinized by critics, who asserted that it rested on a flawed notion of what it meant to be and to have a self.

The Self in Language and in Practice

The arguments outlined above, as well as the claims I make for their significance, rest on a series of interpretive and methodological decisions. When framing terms of art, I have placed a high premium on maintaining fidelity to the language of Enlightenment-era France. To be sure, all historical writing involves some measure of translation: no one in the eighteenth century would have spoken of “cultures of personhood.” Nonetheless, my references to the “self” and the “human person” are rooted whenever possible in the usage of the period. There was no single term for “self” in eighteenth-century French: *âme*, *moi*, *soi*, and *personne* could all refer to an individual being’s attributes and identity. The first of these terms, directly translated as “soul,” had the most marked spiritual connotations. As such, it tended to indicate higher-order states of self-awareness, interiority, and identity. In eighteenth-century writings, *moi* (and less often, *soi*), gradually took on a similar range of meanings. Nevertheless, dictionary entries continued to refer mainly to their grammatical function as pronouns.⁴¹

The term *personne* simultaneously held broader and more precise connotations. It could be used to describe a being’s metaphysical status, as in the cases of the three persons of the Christian God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) or the sacred person of the king. Like *moi*, it could also describe a particular being’s sense of self. For instance *personne* could impute social and moral qualities, as in “a person of merit,” “a person of condition,” or “a very well-intentioned person.” In this case, the term was often paired with possessive pronouns—as in the example “he loves his person, which is to say, he loves his comforts, that he looks after his health, that he has great concern for his body and his appearance.”⁴² *Personne*, then, could be used to describe a specific—and specifically possessive—relationship to oneself. Even before Locke’s formula of the property in one’s person gained wide currency, a similar notion had acknowledged precedents in French.

Adapting eighteenth-century usage, I employ the term “self” in a generic sense, to refer to one’s existence as a particular being distinct from others, while, for the sake of clarity, I tend to reserve “soul” for allusions to the spiritual and religious dimensions of this existence. The terms “person” and “personhood” refer more broadly to the self’s status and essential qualities—whether divine or human, spiritual or material, active or passive, noble or common, good or evil. Different authors defined these attributes in various ways, which often entailed a specific understanding of a person’s capacity for possession. A man or woman could be characterized

as a particular, individual self who held property in and through his or her person, and thus possessed the attributes associated with it. If a self were to lose this existential property, then the kind of person it was would change as well. Throughout the period, what it meant to be a distinctly human person provoked controversies that implicated the self's possessive relationship, not only to personal attributes and belongings, but also to more fundamental properties that defined one metaphysically as a being.

Likewise, the rubrics of self-ownership and dispossession follow from the vocabulary of the eighteenth century. Philosophers, theologians, and political thinkers made frequent reference to *propriété*, *possession*, *biens* (goods), *jouissance* (enjoyment of possession), and their derivatives when describing the human person's relationship to itself and to exterior objects. Unlike the first three of these terms, the use of *jouissance* might seem less evident, given its less pronounced economic valence. Yet successive editions of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* make clear that *jouissance* was invariably defined not only as enjoyment in general, but first and foremost as the "use and possession of something" and "to have full and complete enjoyment of the possession [*la jouissance*] of one's goods."⁴³ Standard definitions implied not only the possession of a given thing, but also a gratifying relationship between the possessor and the possessed. Even so, *jouissance* and related terms remained a source of contention. The proponents of self-ownership employed them in a positive sense, to describe the self's legitimate property in its person. In contrast, partisans of dispossession studded their writings with allusions to *abandon*, *aliénation*, *anéantissement* (annihilation), *désappropriation* (dispossession), *distrac-tion*, *renoncement*, and similar words, all of which described varying degrees of self-loss.

One reason these lexicons proved so useful in debate is that they could simultaneously convey theological, psychological, and economic meanings. A *bien* referred not only to a piece of immoveable or moveable property, but also to spiritual goods granted by God or to a desired moral aim.⁴⁴ Similarly, *aliénation* denoted mental instability as well as the loss of property, while *distrac-tion* applied both to a state of mind (as when one's attention turned unexpectedly from the matter at hand) and, more generally, to the separation of a part from the whole. The latter definition applied directly to economic transactions, as in the case of dividing a piece of land.⁴⁵ As we shall see, Enlightenment-era polemicists frequently exploited the polysemous character of such terminology in their debates. It is precisely during these wars of words, plagued by mutual lapses in comprehension, that the cultures of self-ownership and dispossession come most clearly into view.

One of the aims of this book is to recover the linguistic constructions of personhood during the Enlightenment in their original contexts, which

include attempts to put them into effect. Eighteenth-century cultures of personhood were comprised of both discourse and practice.⁴⁶ Readers sought out devotional manuals, philosophical treatises, and literary works, not to find free-floating, disembodied ideas, but to locate operational parameters for religious, aesthetic, political, and economic conduct. Likewise, authors hoped their writings would intervene in the world by directing a specific course of action: how to pray, how to love God, how to believe, how to read a novel or view a painting, how to produce or consume, and how to be a mother, father, or citizen. The cultures of self-ownership and dispossession offered ways to confer significance on these practices both through linguistic and nonlinguistic acts. To return once more to the example that opened this introduction, when Quietist spiritual directors in Dijon seduced their female penitents, they engaged in more than discursive intercourse. Their liaisons willfully exceeded the bounds of the teachings on which they drew and served to embolden critics of the mystical tradition. Their desire to embody spiritual annihilation in sexual rituals also exhibited continuities with later trends in medicine and materialist philosophy that privileged physical explanations of dispossessive states.

Enlightenment-era cultures of personhood, then, did not function as isolated, reified crucibles of meaning. Their logics and lexicons mutated over time—either by their being put into practice or through the ways theologians, philosophers, and political thinkers used them in polemics. Partisans of self-ownership responded to attacks by proponents of dispossession by escalating their rhetoric, and vice versa. It was also possible for a single author to embrace both views at different times, or even in the same work. Rather than representing absolute positions, self-ownership and dispossession operated along a broad spectrum. More generally, these conceptions stood in a dialectical relationship that frequently brought them in close proximity to each other. For example, mystical spiritualists who embraced the loss of reason or will tended to stress the subject's submission to, but also possession by, the totalizing force of divinity at once within and outside the self. Likewise, calls for self-ownership were frequently predicated upon the recognition of prior loss—such as the need for spiritual goods in the wake of humanity's banishment from the Garden of Eden, or the recovery of primordial wholeness after the collapse of the state of nature. Ultimately, the two cultures, which remained relatively distinct in theological disputes, converged in the writings of the philosophes and in the political theology of the Revolution, both of which championed the dispossession of particular individuals as a means of achieving self-ownership on a collective basis. These shifts were not pre-ordained by logical necessity or the cunning of reason, but rather followed the exigencies of men and women seeking to define themselves in relation to spiritual, existential, and material goods.

One final caveat is in order. In deference to the aim of coherence and the limits of my own expertise, the subject matter of this book maintains an almost exclusive focus on metropolitan France. I do not mean to suggest that analogues to the French constellation of mysticism, materialism, and dispossessive thought cannot be located elsewhere in the firmament of eighteenth-century Europe. Historians of the eighteenth century have long traced the itineraries of authors, texts, and ideas across the continent. Jonathan Israel has brought renewed attention to the long shadow cast by Spinozism, and it remains difficult to overestimate the attraction of English thinkers like Locke and Isaac Newton.⁴⁷ Guyon, for her part, found followers among members of Pietist sects in the German-speaking lands.⁴⁸ She also makes a prominent, albeit unflattering, appearance in Karl Philipp Moritz's early psychological novel *Anton Reiser* (1785), where her disciples are noted for seeking the "total mortification of all so-called 'individuality' and 'self-love'" in the pursuit of "a completely disinterested love for God."⁴⁹ In addition, both Hegel and Schopenhauer productively drew on mystical influences to develop philosophies with anti-individualist consequences; the latter even expressed a certain admiration for Guyon.⁵⁰

While the French case might one day form a chapter of a far broader and more intricate narrative, there are compelling reasons—both methodological and historical—for the extended treatment it receives here. Reconstructing cultural schemas over the course of a century, and across multiple domains of activity, not only requires close attention to detail, down to the usage of specific words and expressions, but also involves amassing a considerable store of evidence. Given these exigencies, linguistic and geographical boundaries make it possible to consider the theological and philosophical implications of debates over the self, while also attending to specific political, economic, and social developments. In addition, while French served as the literary language par excellence among intellectual elites in the eighteenth century, the polemics featured in this book were often parochial affairs. Even when participants were not French by birth—Rousseau and d'Holbach immediately spring to mind—they spent much if not most of their lives in and around Paris. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, only in France did revolutionaries launch an unprecedented drive to impose a dispossessive ethos on public life, both in restricting individual property rights and in establishing a cult of patriotic martyrdom that exalted personal sacrifice as an ultimate aim. To the extent that these factors distinguish France in a broader European context, they also raise questions that a focused study can more readily answer.