KENNETH NOVIS

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AOS: Early Modern Philosophy, Post-Kantian Philosophy, Ethics
AOC: Philosophy of Religion, Epistemology, Metaphysics

EDUCATION

University of Oxford October 2023 — Present
DPhil Philosophy
Thesis: Spinoza and Bayle: The 'Virtuous Atheism Debate'
Supervisors: A.W. Moore and Caroline Warman

Abstract: In this research, I examine the first, systematic attempts in early modern philosophy to separate morality from religious conviction. Ordinarily, actions motivated by self-love and love of power are not considered morally laudable. But, focussing on Benedict Spinoza and Pierre Bayle, I show how re-evaluating these motives enabled early moderns to recognise the moral merit of individuals' actions irrespective of their faith.

University of Edinburgh September 2021 — December 2022
MSc (Research) Philosophy
Supervisor: David K. Levy

University of Edinburgh September 2017 — July 2021
MA Philosophy
Supervisor: Alasdair Richmond

PUBLICATIONS

Articles and Book Chapters

[4] Simone Weil, Workers' Inquiry, Operaismo — *Simone Weil on Work, Oppression and Emancipation*, Forthcoming
[3] Simone Weil, Gilles Deleuze, and the Politics of Escape — *Deleuze and Guattari Studies,* Forthcoming
[2] Weil and Political Philosophy — *The Routledge Companion to Simone Weil*, 2026
[1] Epistemic Class Injustice: Class Composition and Industrial Action — *Social Epistemology,* 2024

Book Reviews

[4] *Marx with Spinoza: Production, Alienation, History* by Franck Fischbach — *Marx and Philosophy Review of Books*, 2023
Translated: *Marx with Spinoza: Production, Alienation, History.* — *Rev. Filosofía Univ. Costa Rica* (63:167), 2023
[3] *Materialist Phenomenology: A Philosophy of Perception* by Manuel DeLanda — *Phenomenological Reviews*, 2023
[2] *Marx in Movement: Operaismo in Context* by Antonio Negri — *Marx and Philosophy Review of Books*, 2022
[1] *The Ethics of Political Resistance* by Chris Henry — *Marx and Philosophy Review of Books*, 2021

Public Writing

[2] Simone Weil: Biography — *UK Simone Weil Research Network,* 2023
[1] Was Spinoza Actually an Atheist? — *Philosophy Now* (151), 2022

WORKS IN PROGRESS

[5] Democracy and Human Nature: A Puzzle for Spinoza (in preparation)
[4] Spinoza and the Primacy of Desire (in preparation)
[3] Spinoza on Perfection without God (under review)
[2] Spinoza's Genealogical Naturalism (under review)
[1] Pierre Bayle on Atheist Virtue (under review)

PRESENTATIONS

As Organiser

[2] Simone Weil and Spinoza: Influences and Interconnections, May 22nd-23rd 2025
With Christopher Thomas and Oliver Toth
Funding awarded: The MIND Trust, British Society for the History of Philosophy, Deutsche Spinoza Gesellschaft, the University of Oxford Philosophy Department

[1] University of Oxford Student Spinoza Conference, May 7th 2024
With Hannah Laurens and Sebastian Torcatti
Funding awarded: The Analysis Trust, British Society for the History of Philosophy, The Aristotelian Society, the University of Oxford Philosophy Department, Pembroke College Tutorials+ Fund

As Speaker

[27] Moral Luck in Pierre Bayle — *University of Oxford DPhil Seminar*, forthcoming
[26] Simone Weil's Critique of First-Personalism in Ethics* — *Oxford Philosophy Society*, forthcoming
[25] Spinoza's Genealogical Naturalism* — *Early Modern Naturalisms*, 2026
[24] Spinoza on the life *not* according to nature — *Ancient Philosophy among the Early Moderns*, 2026
[23] Deleuze and Spinoza: The Primacy of Desire* — *Capitalismo Esquizofrenica*, 2026
[22] A Fiction to Command the Emotions: Du Châtelet and Spinoza — *History of Women in Philosophy*, 2026
[21] Spinoza on Virtue and the Knowledge of God — *Thinking about God: Historical Perspectives*, 2026
[20] Democracy and Human Nature: A Puzzle for Spinoza — *BSHP Annual Conference,* 2026
[19] Extraterrestrials and Ethics in Enlightenment France — *British Postgraduate Philosophy Association,* 2026
[18] The Politics of Environment in Spinoza and Montesquieu — *Cambridge Early Modern Workshop*, 2025
[17] Spinoza's Moral Error Theory* — *University of Groningen Spinoza Fest*, 2025
[16] Spinoza and the Politics of Atheism — *University of OxfordDPhil Seminar*, 2025
[15] Spinoza and the Politics of Atheism — *Oxford Spinoza Conference*, 2025
[14] Extraterrestrials and Ethics in Enlightenment France — *BSHP Annual Conference*, 2025
[13] Pierre Bayle on Atheism, Action, and Belief — *Online Bayle Seminar*, 2025
[12] Workers' Inquiry as Epistemic Resistance — *Historical Materialism,* 2024
[11]Simone Weil and Motivational Kinds — *British Postgraduate Philosophy Association*, 2024
[10] Spinoza and the Social Intolerance of Atheists — *Durham MEMSA Conference*, 2024
[9] Belief and Action in Pierre Bayle — *Society for European Philosophy*, 2024
[8] The Factory Journals as Workers' Inquiry* — *American Weil Society*, 2024
[7] Spinoza's *Ethics* part III, Conatus and Emotions* — *Early Modern Philosophy: Spinoza*, 2024
[6] Virtue and the Birth of Atheism — *St. Hugh's DPhil Seminar*, 2024
[5] Spinoza: A Genealogy of Radicalism — *Historical Materialism*, 2023
[4] Simone Weil, Workers' Inquiry, Operaismo* — *Simone Weil For Our Times*, 2023
[3] Simone Weil's Metaphysics in *The Need for Roots* — *American Weil Society* 2023
[2] Simone Weil and the Limits of Workers' Inquiry — *Historical Materialism*, 2022
[1] *The Need for Roots* in Italy: Lessons For/From Weil — *Warwick Continental Philosophy Conference* 2022

**** = invited talk***

Public Engagement

[5] 'The Desire That You Are': Kenneth Novis on Spinoza — *Return the Key* (podcast), 2026
[4] Realising our Power: The Radical Philosophy of Spinoza — *OxNet Twilight Talks*, 2025
[3] The Thought and Life of Simone Weil — *Lepht Hand* (podcast), 2024
[2] The Thought and Life of Simone Weil — *Sunday Night Speaker Series, Marlborough College*, 2023
[1] Podcast Host — *Zer0 and Repeater Books*, 2022-4

AWARDS

Colin Matthew Travel Grant — St Hugh's College, University of Oxford, 2026
Barbinder Watson Trust Fund — St Hugh's College, University of Oxford, 2025
Skirving Prize — University of Edinburgh, 2021
James Hutchison Stirling Prize — University of Edinburgh, 2019

EXPERIENCE

Teaching

Graduate Tutor (Philosophy) *University of Oxford* — September 2024 — Present
Early Modern Philosophy (x5)
Moral Philosophy (x3)
Post-Kantian Philosophy (x3)
Knowledge and Reality (x3)
Philosophy Finals Revision (x2)
Ethics (x1)
Philosophy of Religion (x1)
The Philosophy of Spinoza (x1)
The Philosophy of Simone Weil (x1)

Graduate Lecturer *University of Oxford* — January 2026 — February 2026
The Philosophy of Benedict Spinoza

Graduate Teaching Assistant, General Philosophy *University of Oxford, LMH* — January 2026 — March 2026

Other

Undergraduate Admissions Assistant, *University of Oxford, Worcester College* — November 2024
Reviewer and Chair, *Oxford Graduate Philosophy Conference* — November 2024
Digital Researcher, *RONIN International* — March 2023 — Present
Journal Reviewer (*Social Epistemology, Sophia*) — Continuous

AFFILIATIONS

The Aristotelian Society
Centre for Early Modern Studies, University of Oxford
Centre for Intellectual History, University of Oxford
British Society for the History of Philosophy
UK Simone Weil Research Network
American Weil Society
British Postgraduate Philosophy Society

REFERENCES

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DISSERTATION

ABSTRACT

Prior to the 17th century, it was rarely thought that anybody could be virtuous if they did not believe that God exists. Following the publication of Pierre Bayle's (1647-1706) Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet in 1682, the possibility of virtuous atheists became the subject of one of the deepest philosophical controversies of the Enlightenment. And, although Baruch Spinoza (1632-77) wrote very little on the subject of atheism, as the most infamous supposed-atheist of the time, his writings were soon thereafter made a major resource within the debate on atheism and virtue. To date, no detailed comparison of Bayle and Spinoza's thoughts on virtuous atheism exists. This thesis offers a rational reconstruction of their (potential) arguments for the possibility of virtuous atheists. I argue that Bayle's arguments have been widely misunderstood, and that Spinoza's philosophy is wrongly taken to be wholly antipathic to atheism. Instead, both Bayle and Spinoza provided powerful arguments for rejecting the assumption that religious belief is a prerequisite for moral virtue. Furthermore, their arguments establish novel positions within a variety of debates that continue to exercise moral philosophers today, especially those concerning the moral quality of egoistic motivation, and the relation of happiness to virtue.

CHAPTERS

Chapter 1: Pierre Bayle on Atheist Morality

Pierre Bayle's argument that it is possible for atheists to be virtuous is commonly interpreted as turning on the premise that people's beliefs are not causes of their actions. In this chapter, I argue that this interpretation is incorrect. I begin by overviewing how 'virtue' and 'atheism' were commonly understood in Bayle's time: this explains why the notion of atheist virtue was even a problem, as well as the depth of the conceptual transformation that needed to take place in order for the possibility of virtuous atheists to be widely acknowledged, as it is today. In recasting the concepts of both virtue and atheism, Bayle is largely disagreeing with his Augustinian (Jansenist and Calvinist) contemporaries who relied on Saint Augustine's doctrine of splendida peccata. Bayle's anti-Augustinian argument for atheist virtue proceeds in two stages, one negative, and one positive. The negative argument, with which this chapter is largely concerned, seeks to establish that there is nothing which prevents atheists from being virtuous which would not also prevent religious believers from being virtuous.

Chapter 2: Moral Luck and the Passions in Bayle's Ethics

Having formulated Pierre Bayle's negative argument for the possibility of virtuous atheists, this chapter turns towards his positive argument. According to this argument, atheists can be virtuous because people act according to their passions, and the passions which result in virtuous actions may be experienced by atheists and religious believers alike. Bayle does not often explicitly articulate the conception of the passions that he is assuming. In order to draw out his conception, I introduce philosophical theories of the passions from three likely sources: the French moralists, Nicolas Malebranche, and Pierre Nicole. According to all three sources, humans are all (and possibly only) motivated by self-love. However, within the moralist tradition attempts were very often made to accommodate talk of virtue to this supposed fact about human psychology. In the final part of this chapter, I consider how this understanding of virtue and human nature might relate to current philosophical debates on 'moral luck.' I conclude that Bayle is critically aware of the role of luck within morality as he understands it, and anticipates recent 'externalist' approaches to moral luck.

Chapter 3: Affects and *Acquiescentia* in Spinoza

To understand how Spinoza thinks about virtue and atheism, his highly revisionary concept of virtue must be understood.

To this end, the present chapter lays out the justification for, and intention behind Spinoza's significant departures from the common sense concept of virtue. These departures belong to his attempt in the Ethics to discover the optimal way for human beings to live. Because, for Spinoza, virtue is the means by which we achieve the good life, it is helpful to begin by understanding what he understands that good life to look like. To explain this, I begin by laying out Spinoza's theory of the affects from Ethics part III. In the second half of this chapter, I analyse the specific affect which Spinoza thinks defines the good life: acquiescentia. Overall, I show here that affects are variations in our power of action, and that Spinoza believes human lives go the best when the affects we experience are those that relate to both the greatest increases in our power, and the most stable forms of power.

Chapter 4: Virtue, Power, and Atheism

Having set out Spinoza's motivations for revising the concept of virtue, this chapter presents what Spinoza understands by 'virtue' in detail. Spinoza follow the early modern custom of regarding perfection as essential to virtue, while he also departs from this custom. Because of Spinoza's scepticism about perfection, I contend that he should be interpreted as a value projectivist. I spend most of the first half of this chapter defending my projectivist interpretation of Spinoza against three main objections: that Spinoza is a moral realist, that projectivism cannot give us the guidance that Spinoza's virtue is intended to, and that seeing perfection as imaginary dooms Spinoza's metaphysics. In the second half of this chapter, I apply the understanding of virtue previously worked out, in 4 steps. I first present and address the reasons for which Spinoza's philosophy was thought, in his time, to destroy morality. I then show how it has previously been claimed that Spinoza's moral philosophy applies to atheists. My argument here relies, in part, on the claim that an atheist could accept Spinoza's philosophy. I defend this claim by emphasising the role that a concept of God is supposed to play, not in metaphysical explanation, but in human life.

Chapter 5: Virtuous Atheists: A Libertine Revolution

In closing I offer a critical comparison of Spinoza and Bayle's arguments on the possibility of virtuous atheists. From both authors' systems, it follows that there can be virtuous atheists. But what is the upshot of this? I discuss how Spinoza and Bayle's moral philosophies, understood through the lens of virtuous atheism, contribute to several topics in contemporary philosophy. In particular, I explain the critical positions that their philosophies lead them to adopt in relation to the following subjects: virtue and happiness, moral and psychological egoism, and secularism and moral values. Spinoza and Bayle offer somewhat different responses to each of these issues. However, these responses stem from a shared philosophical commitment to extending participation in moral life towards individuals previously excluded from it. For Spinoza, this commitment expresses itself through the blend of egoism, eudaimonism, and perfectionism in his moral philosophy. And for Bayle, it is through a scepticism towards the depth of our knowledge of others, resulting in what has since been termed 'evaluational externalism.'