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Superstitio: an Introduction to the Special Section

1. The following contributions stem from a Call for Papers on “*Superstitio* from Ancient to Early Modern: Philosophy, Lexicography, and History of Ideas” that was presented in the previous issue of *Lexicon Philosophicum* (8, 2020). While historians have often studied ‘superstition’ tracing past practices of now sunken beliefs and systems of belief, we were especially interested in charting the intricate lexical and semantic field that originates from and surrounds ‘superstition’: the web of word usages, associations, and meanings, as well as of connected terms and concepts, that arose in the early modern reception of ancient debates and in the transformation, extensions, and innovations that modernity brought about in this domain.

2. Terms such as the Greek *deisidaimonía* (δεισιδαιμονία), the Latin *superstitio* and its Neolatin derivatives, and the German *Aberglaube*, although not numerous, present us with complicated and multifarious developments and a varied semantic field. Δεισιδαιμονία, in particular, sees its initial meaning turned upside down: the earliest examples – e.g. Xenophon – have the favorable sense of a pious and legitimate fear of the gods, but eventually it will be used both for forms of popular religion and for an exaggerated devotion inspired by a terror of the gods. In the latter meaning, it becomes identified with religious attitudes and beliefs that give a sacred character to vain practices – Theophrastus’ ‘Superstitious’ character who is affected by “a sort of cowardice with respect to the divine”, and “if a cat cross his path he will not proceed on his way till someone else be gone by, or he have cast three stones across the street” (*Char.* XVI; tr. Edmonds).

In the end, δεισιδαιμονία may also be opposed to true religion¹ – as empty credulity instead of spiritual faith, or as a fear of ‘demons’ instead of a proper awe of gods. Thus Plutarch² always extols anyone who slashes superstitious usages. He treats δεισιδαιμονία at different times, most famously in *De superstitione* and *Non posse suaviter vivi secundum Epicurum*. In the first, superstition is deemed worse than atheism, since the superstitious, on the one hand, refuse responsibility for their actions in favor of preposterous and escapist beliefs, and, on the other hand, they extend their inordinate fears even beyond the end of life; while in the latter he intends to stigmatize

1. For the Stoic “Trennung von Religion und Aberglaube”, see Mora 1999.

2. See among others Veyne 1999.



the impiety of the Epicurean rather than the miserable condition of the superstitious. But the atheist and the superstitious ultimately share, according to him, a negative attitude toward the gods. In *De Iside*, superstition is seen as a ‘quagmire’, atheism a ‘precipice’, the former ‘a not less evil’ than the latter.

In *De superstitione* Plutarch is keen, in accord with an Aristotelian tradition, to place pioussness (εὐσέβεια) as the mean between atheism – or impiety (ἄσεβεια) – and superstition. In the same venue, Philo of Alexandria (Philo Judaeus) juxtaposes the opposed excesses of temerity and cowardice, lavishness and miserliness, superstition (δεισιδαιμονία) and impiety: all additions to and subtractions from the mean, that in the latter case is εὐσέβεια (*De imm. Dei* IV). Eventually the term, in this disparaging sense, would also be used to discredit Jewish piety³ and Christian rites. Pliny the Younger’s letter to the Emperor Adrian *Ep.* 10.96, as well as Tacitus in the *Annales* (*Ann.* 15.44), see the Christian faith as a “contagious superstition”, a political disease, dangerous because it could spread among Roman citizens a barbarian and unauthorized religion, thereby becoming a *coniuratio*.⁴ Likewise, Christian authors used it as they equated the gods of paganism with evil spirits.⁵

Any point of view can, of course, have its own reversals. Thus Polybius, in a passage that would have much influence on Early-Modern political thought, states “that it is the very thing which among other peoples is an object of reproach, I mean *superstition*, which maintains the cohesion of the Roman State”. It is a course the Roman elites adopted “for the sake of the common people”: the unreasoned passions of the multitude can be kept at bay only by the invisible terrors that religious credulity instills (*Hist.* VI, 56; tr. Paton).

3. This is all well known, in the end, as it is known that in the Roman world those originary duplicity and complexity are expressed, simplified, and stabilized in the couple *religiō/superstitio*. Again a word that may have had an originally positive meaning – that of the *superstes*, the witness of a fact who privilegedly knows how it happened – becomes a name for spurious vaticinators, like Ennius’s *superstitiosi vates*, quoted by Cicero (*De div.* I, 132).⁶ To gain their pseudo-knowledge – that in some interpretations concerns or comes from the *super instans* (Lucr. *De rer. nat.* I, 65) or *superstans*, the ‘above’ – they have a maniacal attention to irrelevant events similar to that of Theophrastus’s and, just like him, they propagate fear: *metus* and *timor inanis* (Cic. *De nat. deor.* I, 45 and 117). But while Cicero will insist that battling superstition does not entail a refusal of indispensable *pietas*, *cultus*, and religion, “nec vero [...] superstitione tollenda religio

3. A use repelled, for instance, by Josephus Flavius, *Ant. Jud.* II, 9 and XII, 1, *Contra Ap.* I, 208 ff., who nonetheless seems to accept its employment to mark the excesses of such piety.

4. Nagy 2002.

5. And Christian writers, since at least Eusebius of Caesarea, will be obsessed with the superstition of the Jews (*superstitio Iudaeorum*, an expression, anyway, that dates back to Quintilian, III, 7) well into the Early-Modern age.

6. Still useful are Janssen 1975, 1979; see also Sachot 1991, Gothóni 1994.

tollitur” (*De Div.* II, 148)⁷, Lucretius extends this spuriousness to *religio* itself, and to the human oppression “gravi sub religione” (I, 63). Manuel Galzerano’s paper proposes an intertextual analysis of Lucretius’ first eulogy of Epicurus in *De rerum natura*, showing its relation to the so-called Sisyphus-fragment (D.-K. 88B25), which represents a summa of ancient atheism, and is used by Lucretius to frame his *pars destruens* against ancient religious beliefs and Roman public religion, in order to make space for a new Epicurean theology. The unmasking of the ‘sweet lie’ divulged by the ‘shrewd man’ who convinced humanity of the gods’ existence, summarized in the famous “tantum religio potuit suadere malorum”, does nonetheless subvert traditional religion.

In 15th-century Italy, Bartholomew Platina will offer this two-sided advice to his readers: “Do not waste your time with superstitions, do not let hypocrites deceive you” (“duo [...] maxime attendenda sunt, unum ne superstitione tempus teras, alterum ne ab hypocritis decipiari”⁸). Rather than Lucretius, Platina quotes, as it was customary, the dual authority of Cicero and Lactantius, whose definitions of *superstitio* (as opposed to *religio*) and of *falsa* and *vera religio* (*Inst. div.* IV, 28) had framed the idea for centuries. But the triptych irreligion-religion-superstition had also been codified by Thomas Aquinas, again along the Aristotelian pattern of defect-mean-excess, in the *Summa theologiae*. In the long section on *superstitio* in the *Secunda Secundae* (qq. 92-96), with regard to the definitions of Lactantius, Augustine, and Isidore, Thomas himself initiates, to some extent, a new approach and lexicalization of superstition and classical Ciceronian sites. The following two centuries will see an ample literary production on superstition by churchmen all over Europe.⁹ Thus, alongside classical sources, Augustinian and Thomistic understanding of *superstitio* will also be channeled, directly or through later Scholastics, to Humanism and Renaissance.

4. In the Early Modern age, the parlance of *superstitio* develops firstly in the context of moral, theological, and religious discourse. Superstition is a vice, an excess in attributing unnatural causes to rare or adverse occurrences and, for this reason, a deviation from proper religious practices and beliefs. At the same time, the ‘superstitious’ is a human type, as in Theophrastus’ character: “Superstitionem sane definire possumus meticulosum erga numen affectum”, in Casaubon’s widely circulated Latin translation (1592). It is an emotional state that induces pusillanimity and the meticulous observance of detailed practices dictated by the fear of the divine, a prototype both of the irrational rejection of the scientific search for natural causes of phenomena and of the easy subjection to heterodox and demonic cults.

7. And: “Divinatio [...] perspicue tollitur, deos esse retinendum est” (*De div.* II, 48). Augustine (*De civ. Dei* IV, 30) comments that Cicero is trying to separate the religion of his ancestors from superstition, but *quomodo id faciat*, he cannot find: when his character Balbus deplors superstition, he is implicitly condemning the practices of those very ancestors, as well as their present continuation, and himself, who would not dare speak in public against it. Only the Christian god, according to Augustine, solves this conundrum of paganism, upending it both in religious hearts and in the temples of superstition. See also Margel 2006.

8. *De principe* I, 3; Platina 1979: 61.

9. See Bailey 2009.

Superstition is also addressed in texts of political philosophy concerned with the relation between political and religious institutions and the consensual and legitimate forms of worship, that is, with the modern reshaping of the relationship of *lex* and *religio*. The question of the social and political role of *superstitio* – either as a disruptive factor or as an aggregating factor in political life – is thus revived. The political discourse on superstition is often centered on the atheism-superstition dichotomy, taking up the terms of the question as it had been posed by Plutarch, whose writings circulated in various forms, and predominantly, since the second half of the 16th century, in Xylander’s Latin translation (1570) and Amyot’s French one (1572). About Plutarch’s *De superstitione*, the cautious Amyot warns the reader: “Ce traité est dangereux à lire, et contient une doctrine faulse: car il est certain que la Superstition est moins mauuaise, et approche plus pres du milieu de la vraye Religion, que ne fait l’impieté et Atheisme”.¹⁰ Along the lines of apologetic writers and, indeed, of other essays of Plutarch’s, Amyot prefers superstition, as an excess of redeemable faith, to atheism; but the Plutarchean text ties in with the context of political and social reflections on superstition.¹¹

Looking at this period, Laura Cesco-Frere considers and analyzes the occurrences of the term *superstitio* in Girolamo Cardano’s philosophical works. While the term is not exceedingly frequent, Cardano refers to it in combination, on the one hand, with some of the fundamental aspects of his own philosophical reflection (*utilitas*, the centrality of deception, the role of *experientia*, the search for the causes of prodigious events, the methodical effort to predict the future), and on the other hand, as an element inherent in human nature. In the author’s view, Cardano offers an original perspective on superstition, although he deliberately avoids its use in confessionally compromising contexts, choosing not to take part in the clash between Catholics and Reformed that strongly animated 16th-century debates: in the specific case of superstition, in the fiery confessional confrontation of the period, Cardano is careful not to side with either one or the other.

This epoch-making conflict is the background to Marco Albertoni’s paper on 17th-century Venice. The Nunciature in Venice represented for the Papacy not only an important observatory on the political and religious life of the Republic, but also a social and cultural barometer. The *nuncio* presided over the tribunal of the Holy Office, where he often came into direct contact with those who nourished the patchwork of superstitious beliefs that challenged the monopoly of the otherworldly, which he was called upon to defend. The trials make it possible today to observe and examine curious syncretisms, and the involvement of the clergy in the spread of ‘superstitious’ practices in Venice. In the eyes of some who carried out ‘occult’ rituals and arts, they were not necessarily an alternative to orthodox faith. Books and pamphlets that were printed or copied by hand, read in the backrooms of booksellers, barbers, and apothecaries, who in turn were willing to take some risks in order to round out their earnings, show

10. Amyot 1572: I, 119v.

11. From Medina’s *Christiana paraenesis* (1564) to Mersenne’s *Quaestiones celeberrimae in Genesim* (1623). See also in this regard the conservative theses in the 5th dialogue of Bodin’s *Colloquium heptaplomeres*.

the traces of Christianity, Judaism, and Greek schism, mixed with hermetic, cabalistic, astrological culture, in turn contaminated by rudiments of herbalism, chemistry, medicine, geometry, astrology and, last but not least, a good dose of inventiveness. The rites themselves thus represent yet another mirror of 17th-century Venetian culture and its continuous hybridization.

5. The circulation of Cicero's *De natura deorum* and *De divinatione* and, eventually, of Lucretius, as well as the reception of Plutarch's and Theophrastus' treatments of *δεισιδαιμονία*, provided Early-Modern scholars and clerics with an equally hybrid conceptual framework that could be exploited not only in the new religious conflicts, but also in a vast array of ideal controversies. It covered deviant religious knowledge as well as the demonological sphere and magical, hermetic, cabalistic, and alchemical practices. Luther associated superstition with the 'tyranny of Rome', Hume and Kant with 'enthusiasm' and 'Schwärmerei'; Rousseau with the birth of astronomy, Comte with primitivism – and a German dissertation of 1720 even lambasted the *superstitio medica*.¹²

A complex accumulation of long-lasting debates uprose, giving rise to varied lexica of superstition that combined concepts stemming from individual philosophers, from dynamics of cultural transfer, from debates and controversies, from central works of the Renaissance, such as Giovan Francesco Pico Della Mirandola's *De rerum praenotione [...] contra superstitiosas vanitates* (1506), or from official demonological treatises, such as Martin Antonio Del Rio's infamous *Disquisitiones magicae*, that remained in print from 1599 to mid-18th century and opened their first book with a chapter *De superstitione et eius speciebus*. Along this line, the semantic field of *superstitio* and *religio* would be integrated by a variety of concomitant expressions, primarily by those relating to enthusiasm and fanaticism, as well as prejudice and deception.¹³

A remarkable opposition between, on one side, philosophy and the use of reason, and on the other side superstition and credulity was openly proposed by Pierre Bayle:

Je pretens avoir une vocation legitime pour m'opposer aux progrès des superstitions, des visions, et de la credulité populaire. A qui appartient-il mieux qu'aux personnes de ma profession,¹⁴ de se tenir a la brèche contre les irruptions de ces desordres?¹⁵

In fact, the philosophical cultures of early modernity appropriated the concept with a characteristic focus on the critical use of reason in science, morals and politics – ranging from Hobbes (*Leviathan*) to Bayle's *Pensées diverses sur la comète*, from Van Dale's *De oraculis* (1683) to Shaftesbury (*A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm*, 1708), Toland (*Adeisidaemon, sive Titus Livius a superstitione vindicatus*, 1709), and Collins (*A Discourse of Free-thinking*, 1713), from Hume's essay *Of Superstition and Enthusiasm* (1741) to the various editions of Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764-69; 1775), to Jaucourt's

12. That is, the introduction into medical knowledge and practice of purported supernatural causal factors (Kletschke 1723: 7).

13. For such semantic constellations in, e.g., the German Enlightenment, see Hinske 1985, 1988.

14. "Professeur en Histoire et en Philosophie à Rotterdam" (Bayle 1691b: 1).

15. Bayle 1691a: 287-288.

article for the *Encyclopédie* (1765), and to the famous Kantian formula: *Befreiung vom Aberglauben heißt Aufklärung*,¹⁶ “freedom from superstition is called Enlightenment”.

From Cicero, the humanists had already picked up the idea that superstition is a vice (*De nat. deor.* II, 7) from which one can be delivered (I, 45). The Early Modern philosophical landscape would eventually shift from Cicero’s suggestion (I, 117) that religion delivers from superstition to the most radical 17th- and 18th-century thinkers’ conviction that all religion is superstition.

Benigni’s paper on *atheismus* and *superstitio* in early-18th century debates on spinozism intends to show how the classical distinction between religion and the two moral vices opposed to it, superstition and *irreligiositas*, is reconfigured in the modern age as a discourse on atheism and superstition. In many 17th-century authors, the deeper split is no longer between religion and atheism, but between an inner and rational religiosity, on one side, and any historical, positive religion on the other side. ‘Superstition’ had had an important role as a polemical weapon to be wielded against anyone who thinks otherwise. In this, Hobbes’ lucid diagnosis, that it is always the religion of others that is superstitious (and aberrant with respect to reason), applies. But Hobbes and Spinoza, following Machiavelli’s appropriation of Polybius, give a coup de grâce to religion, when they plainly deem it useful for social cohesion (Spinoza) or political control (Hobbes) but otherwise destitute of significance. Religious rituals and ceremonies are thus downgraded to extrinsic elements, on a par with superstitious practices.

6. Dan Garber argues instead that Spinoza transformed superstition from something that is deeply problematic and irrational, to something positive: the anthropomorphic view of God which, Spinoza argues, is definitive of superstition can lead people to love their neighbors as themselves, an attitude that leads them to cooperate with one another, to the benefit of all. So far from eliminating superstition, Spinoza uses superstition in a positive way. Wondering whether this transformation can be deemed better than eliminating superstition altogether, Garber turns to Hobbes: for him, and maybe for Spinoza as well, the seeds of religion – curiosity, ignorance, and fear – are innate, an inseparable part of human nature.

7. Set on a path that diverges considerably from this landscape, the semantic of *superstitio* in the writings of G. W. Leibniz is studied in Andrea Costa’s article in order to isolate a typically Leibnizian meaning, the originality of which is highlighted by comparison with the main philosophical lexicons of the time. Superstition has its origins in ignorance and fallacious reasoning, and in that aspect there is no difference in kind between superstition and atheism. Leibniz’s conceptualization of the lexeme in the philosophical domain also proves to be functional and effective both in the context of his irenic projects and in its application to historiographical methods. And a double-faced political characterization of *superstitio* allows him to condemn the ‘pagan and superstitious’ of the Ottoman state as well as mitigate the gravity of similar practices traditionally blamed on the Catholic party.

16. *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, §40; AA 5: 294.

8. Yet it is Bacon's approach that especially stands out when seen against its historical background. As Dana Jalobeanu's paper shows, in Bacon's writings 'superstition' designates a type of erroneous doctrines, such as speculative philosophies which mix science (*scientia*) and religion. It is also a label for certain speculative practices ("superstitious philosophy"), i.e., that in which "everyone philosophizes out of the cells of his own fantasy (*phantasiae suae cellulis*)". Last but not least, superstition is also used to designate aspects and qualities of the human mind. The paper surveys the evolution of Bacon's analysis of superstition since the early writings, towards the articulation that Jalobeanu sees, in his late writings, of a "problem of superstition". The capacity of distinguishing between the truth of things (or, in Bacon's words, between the "works of nature") and "superstition and impostures"¹⁷ is central to Bacon's approach, and he casts a specific vocabulary for it, borrowed from the contemporary theology of salvation. To this, yet, a set of collaborative practices that Jalobeanu calls "externalizing assent" must be added, namely those illustrated in Bacon's description of Solomon's House in the *Nova Atlantis*.

The organization of Solomon's House instrumentalizes not only the process of assent, but also the virtue of charity, that since the *Advancement of learning* had been central to Bacon's projects of medicating the mind. But now the "corrective spice of charity" is transformed into procedures for working together in a selfless and collective manner, based both on superior knowledge and an impulse toward the common good.

ABBREVIATIONS

AA = *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by the Akademie der Wissenschaften in Berlin, Berlin, G. Reimer, 1900-1919; De Gruyter, 1920-.

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17. The latter being in its turn a crucial term in anti-religious debates of the following two centuries, that will even tinge Rousseau's critical account of the birth of private property.

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