

ADAM DROZDEK  
Duquesne University Pittsburgh  
ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8639-2727>  
drozdek@duq.edu

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## Clément de Boissy and the Authorship of Nature

The eighteenth century was a time of great popularity in Europe of physico-theology which tried to theologially capitalize on the explosion of scientific research that erupted with the invention of the telescope and microscope at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Physico-theologians were very successful in using scientific research to make theological points, as indicated by the great popularity of authors such as William Derham in England, Noël-Antoine Pluche in France, Bernard Nieuwentijt in Holland, and Johann Albert Fabricius in Germany. Clément de Boissy is a lesser-known author who made some contribution to physico-theology.

Not much is known about the life of Athanase Alexandre Clément de Boissy (1716–1793). He became a conseiller maître in 1745 in la Chambre des Comptes (the Court of Accounts), a financial institution where he worked probably until his death<sup>1</sup>, leaving behind a very much appreciated legacy.<sup>2</sup> The *Privilege de roi* in his *Auteur de la nature* says “Notre cher & bien Amé, le sieur CLEMENT DE BOISSY, notre Conseiller en nos Conseils, Maître ordinaire en notre Chambre des Comptes de Paris”; not a small thing to be addressed by the king Louis XVI as “dear and beloved.” In his service, he authored numerous publications related to fiscal policies, but as a firm believer, he was also interested in theological issues and published a three-volume work, *The Author of Nature* (1782) which had a modicum of success since it had two more editions (in 1785 and 1787).

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<sup>1</sup> In 1789, four years before his death, he wrote: after 45 years of service in the Chambre des Comptes, etc., C. de Boissy, *Fragment d’une lettre à M. de Laborde, député à l’assemblée nationale*, Paris 1789, p. 1. In a pamphlet published three years before his death, he wrote his title as, Maître des Comptes, Clément de Boissy, *Suppression de la mendicité*, Paris 1790, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Some information about his work in the Chambre des Comptes can be found in: A.M. Boislisle, *Chambre des Comptes de Paris: Pièces justificatives pour servir à l’histoire des premiers presidents (1506–1791)*, Nogent-le-Rotrou 1873; C. Couderc, *Inventaire sommaire de la collection Clément de Boissy: sur la juridiction et la jurisprudence de la Chambre des Comptes*, Paris 1895.

### Physico-theology

The main goal that de Boissy set for himself was “to show the grandeur of God, to worship him and his goodness, to love him and to confound the Unbelievers who attack him even in his Sanctuary” (1.iii).<sup>3</sup> However, for those who doubted the existence of God, there would be the second goal, showing through the magnificence of the makeup of nature that God exists since another possibility would be that the world and everything in it was the result of chance. In this way, *The Author of Nature* was very well situated in physico-theology.

In his work, following the example of Derham and Pluche, de Boissy gave a grand tour through all of reality showing the ubiquity of the presence and providence of God. He described the elements and phenomena in the natural world, including inanimate and animate nature, to show elements of purposefulness and design that, in his mind, could only have come from a supernatural Author of nature. He described in great detail the makeup of the earth and various minerals; for example, he said that six metals are normally distinguished: lead, pewter/tin, iron, copper, silver, and gold (1.314); there are semimetals (322): antimony, arsenic, bismuth, cobalt, platinum, zinc, and mercury (323), and other minerals: clay, sand, stones, salts (327); many subdivisions follow, particularly of stones, each accompanied with detailed description.

De Boissy described the flora saying, for example, that there are plants for all situations: some need the sun, some need shadow, some grow in mountains, some grow in valleys, etc. (1.362).<sup>4</sup> The enormous quantity of plants was composed by an infinite wisdom. The smallest detail of a plant “was formed on a particular plan and by special will of the Author, just as the entire world”<sup>5</sup>; all these plants with their particular colors, smells, medicinal values, the plants such that “none varies with the revolution of time: we can always count with certainty on their nature” (398).

Regarding fauna, which includes animals ranging from microscopic to the elephant-sized, de Boissy described the anatomy, physiology, and living habits. For example, the makeup of the fly and the gnat is striking (2.36). “The wing of a gnat, which only appears on the outside like a little whitish rag, & without beauty, seen with the microscope, is as smooth as a mirror, & shining like the rainbow. God also clothed these insects with complacency, lavishing in their dresses, on their wings, & in the ornaments of their heads, the azure, the green, the red, the gold & the silver, even the diamonds, the fringes, the egrets, the plumes; however, they are treated with contempt, & with no concern” (37-38).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> References can be found in: Clément de Boissy, *Auteur de la nature*, Paris 1782, vols. 1–3. Translation from French into English was made by the author of the article.

<sup>4</sup> [J.J. Duguet], *Explication du livre de la Genèse*, Paris 1732, vol. 1, p. 88.

<sup>5</sup> [N.A. Pluche], *Spectacle de la nature*, Paris 1732, vol. 1, p. 409.

<sup>6</sup> [N.A. Pluche], *Spectacle de la nature*, op. cit., pp. 3, 8.

Finally, de Boissy spoke about the human being who, in God's plan, is the center of the universe (3.1). De Boissy described human anatomy and physiology, the kind of work people do, and included a discussion of the mind-body problem.

The investigation of nature led de Boissy to the statement that "the more we go into the enormous detail of these forms of animals, the more we will see that it is right to worship the Author of nature, to praise his wisdom, his greatness, his omnipotence in his magnificent works." (2.32).

For de Boissy, there is no limit to admiring the work of God, although sometimes even the staunchest believer may not be so disposed. When speaking about the grass-snake covered with scales, he exclaimed, "Immense Author of nature, one cannot cease to be ecstatic at the presence of your works! What detail!" (2.103), and, again, about serpents, "into what deep astonishment man must fall when he sees this immense crowd of beauties, varied on animals which live in the obscurity of deserts, & the majority of which cannot be in the society of man!" (111). Not many people after being stung by a gnat would rhapsodize, "With what industry the *gnat* is armed with a stinger to pierce the skin. The Author of nature, so great in the smallest things, as in the largest, has given this little javelin dual use, making it sharp to pierce, & hollow to suck blood, as through a pipe" (260; cf. p. 10 and a reference to Pliny).

If God's greatness can be seen in nature, then this is certainly a good incentive to investigate it. This is true – to some extent. There are two qualifications. There is a perilous temptation of curiosity that fills human life by continuous application of oneself to the secrets of nature.<sup>7</sup> This can be taken to mean that there are limits to human knowledge. Humans can know some secrets of nature, but not all of them. For example, we really don't know the nature of air. "Let's be satisfied to enjoy the benefits that the Author of nature presented to us by such a precious fluid and don't seek to fathom the secrets that he reserved to himself" (1.250). "The ultimate reasons for refraction [of light] are covered by an impenetrable curtain that God put over the eyes of man as to the primal causes" (149), and the same can be said pretty much about an ultimate reason for anything. Closer to home, "God reserved to himself the secret on the way that the soul acts on nerves and the nerves act on the soul" (3.135). And there is also a problem: man is an inexplicable enigma; his reason not only does not prepare any light to know himself but throws him into obscurity that frightens him, and the more he reflects on himself, the more he sees himself as a bizarre and monstrous mixture of good and evil.<sup>8</sup>

The second qualification in the encouragement of the investigation of nature is the fact that this investigation should not be conducted for its own sake. Arts and sciences owe their birth to humans to penetrate the works of God who are

<sup>7</sup> De Fontenay [C. de Boissy], *Jesus-Christ notre amour*, Paris 1788, p. 383 cf. [P. Quesnel], *Le bonheur de la mort chrétienne*, Paris 1693<sup>2</sup>, p. 166.

<sup>8</sup> De Fontenay [C. de Boissy], *Manuel des Saintes Écritures*, Paris 1888–1889, vol. 1, pp. 18–19 cf. [F.P. Mésenguy], *Abrégé de l'histoire de l'ancien Testament*, Paris, vol. 1, 1747<sup>2</sup> [1737], pp. 64–65.

able, although imperfectly, to see God's designs (3.15).<sup>9</sup> Science should be a form of getting closer to God by the appreciation of His work. Such an attitude should be instilled in children. In his Latin textbook written as "a father for his six-year-old son," at the end of the book, there are biblical verses related to studying, divided into sections that speak, for instance, that science is nothing without piety and can be even dangerous without piety. There are also prayers to be said by a child before lessons including Latin and geography.<sup>10</sup>

### Teleology

Since the most critical part of physico-theology is to show the design in nature, de Boissy tried to do just that. We learn, for example, that winds refresh and purify air, dissipate heat, make water healthy, bring rain to dry lands, and are good for maritime commerce (1.241–243). Winds also allow people to travel through seas (9). Clouds give rain, air transmits sound (10). "All the different natures of water give us great advantages. The snows fertilize our lands; the rains water all the plants; the rivers quench our thirst. [There is at play] the circulation of the waters of the earth which rise in the air to fall again in rains; [there are] underground waters of the wells which compensate us for the deprivation of the rivers; the sea, an immense source of commerce, this vast reservoir which provides us with fish of all species, the spectacle so interesting; all of it requires of us the most vivid acknowledgment, and leads to the deepest admiration" (284). Volcanoes serve to purge the interior of the earth. Mountains draw and absorb all vapors from the air, vapors coming from the earth and from seas, and inside of mountains there are reservoirs of water (300). "The Author of nature wanted all Elements, each in a fixed and constant proportion, to contribute to the birth of plants by a magnificent and vast combination" (14). The number of plants is regulated according to the needs of people: enough grain for food, trees for buildings, etc., and their growth is coordinated with the needs of animals (15).

Not infrequently, doubts have been raised about the reason for the existence of some elements of creation. There is a great deal of cruelty in the animal world. However, for example, in water, in spite of "the war, so vast and so general", no species disappear or change, but "God amply provided for the conservation of all species of fish by giving to the weakest the lightness and foresight; & more so, by multiplying them in such a prodigious manner that their fecundity surpasses the natural ardor of the ones that want to devour them" (2.211, 426). After the inundation of the Nile, the ground was covered with frogs and insects. Birds arrive from Greece "to deliver the land from this inconvenience."<sup>11</sup> This "army of birds" (211)

<sup>9</sup> J.B. Bossuet, *Traité de la connaissance de Dieu et de soi-même* (1677) 1.15.

<sup>10</sup> [C. de Boissy], *Grammaire latine, contenant le rudiment et la syntaxe et une méthode françoise-latine, précédée d'une introduction aux langues, mise à la portée des enfans*, Paris 1776, pp. 3, iv, v, vii, xiii, xiv.

<sup>11</sup> [J.] Sauri, *Précis d'histoire naturelle*, Paris 1778, vol. 1, p. 14.

“is the favor of the Author of nature which deserves our appreciation.” In England once crows were chased away and destroyed since they ate grain. After that, insects appeared and caused more damage to grain and to plants in one day than crows did in one year; people allowed crows to return and the damage caused by insects stopped.<sup>12</sup> There is no animal species that would not be of some use (212). For the Author of nature, the preservation of a species is more important than the preservation of an individual. “An individual means little in the Universe, & the torrent of time absorbs them all, but without changing the species which subsist to the end of times” (213).<sup>13</sup>

### Supported theories

De Boissy was definitely a conservative believer and, not himself a scholar, he often stood on the side of legacy solutions rather than opting for the emerging theories.

In astronomy, “the most exact Observers cannot determine whether the sun moves around the earth or the earth around the sun” (1.93); however, de Boissy supported geocentrism: “I prefer the august simplicity of the physics of Moses. All Works of God seem there to have been done for man and it is most natural that the torch moves around those that it should make visible and it is unlikely that those who should be made visible should turn around the torch. The Scholars prefer to turn around the sun” (94). He recognized the fact that the stars are so distant from the earth that no parallax can detect their distance, the stars being fiery bodies put in the sky for ornamental purposes (86), although the possibility was acknowledged that there were perhaps planets turning around the stars (89, 121).<sup>14</sup> And yet, he said that the stars move around the earth (88). That would require an enormous speed of motion of the stars. True, but everything is possible for God (94). The stars, “these dazzling lamps by which the vault of the sky is ornamented, pour into heart fires of zeal and Religion, yes, this Temple preaches about God that it contains: with what eloquence the night shows him to my heart! Religion is a daughter of Astronomy. An Astronomer-Atheist can only be insane” (122).<sup>15</sup>

In physics, he supported the view that there were two kinds of fire. Fire that produces warmth is an impenetrable body of tiny particles that move or rest in the pores of bodies such as lime (1.161). There is also phlogiston or internal fire which can be liberated by, say, rubbing bodies (162, 190). Free fire penetrates bodies, unites with phlogiston, and activates it, allowing it to get out leaving all parts in perfect decomposition. This is done by fire from our fireplace or fire emanating from the sun (191). Internal fire united with external fire consumes substances,

<sup>12</sup> [J.] Sauri, *Précis d'histoire naturelle*, op. cit., pp. 22–23.

<sup>13</sup> [J.] Sauri, *Précis d'histoire naturelle*, op. cit., pp. xxiii, xxiv.

<sup>14</sup> [P.L. Moreau] de Maupertuis, *Essay de cosmologie*, [Amsterdam] 1750, p. 135.

<sup>15</sup> E. Young, *Les nuits*, night/chapter 20.

changes minerals, and gives metallic shine to metals. Substances without phlogiston do not burn (192).<sup>16</sup> Except for fire, or two kinds of fire, there is an independent substance, the light. The matter of light is around us also at night. It is brought to action by the stars and the return of the sun. Light is a subtle fluid that consists of minuscule particles, with no cohesion among them, continually agitated by rapid motion.<sup>17</sup> Humans don't know the nature of light (127–129). Light can be without fire or warmth (132). De Boissy mentioned Descartes as the supporter of the view that light is a fluid of tiny spheres (129–130), but it seems that it was Pluche who motivated de Boissy to accept this view, and the motivation was of a theological nature: by separating light from warmth and fire, he could maintain that the light was created before the sun, whereby the sun was not the source of light.

In biology, he sided with the preformation theory rather than with epigenesis: all plants are generated from seeds, but plants that exist now exist from the beginning of the world (1.366). He accepted the biological theory of *emboîtement* that stated that seeds for following years contain innumerable posterity waiting for the next year to develop new fruit and seeds which include the remaining posterity which will develop to the end of the world. The imagination is astonished to find millions of seeds enclosed one in another in this small seed which is before our eyes, but reason says that this is the way it is; besides, nothing is impossible for the Creator (367).<sup>18</sup> It is thus possible that siding with this view was theologically motivated since the incredible complexity of the seed better pointed to God's wisdom and power than other views, but preformation was also theologically perilous: how can misshapen births be explained?

### Theodicy

The always unsettling problem for believers in the goodness of God is the problem of the existence of evil. De Boissy did not shy away from this issue and addressed the problem in a separate section of the book, entitled ominously, "The creatures sometimes serve God to punish man and make them see that everything is in the hand of God" (3.635). In fact, a section on miracles also includes a subsection on "miracles of punishment" (3.716).

"Man murmurs against a kind of fatality which takes away his labors by the intemperance of the seasons; but let us never forget that nothing happens in nature without the Almighty himself executing it. It is he who destroys the hopes of the tiller, he who stirs up storms against sailors, who directs lightning according to its laws, the bullet which kills the man of war, bad luck which strikes us and kills in our towns in the midst of peace." (3.647, 683). To humiliate sinful humans, God uses insects

<sup>16</sup> [J. Aignan]\_S. de la Fond, *Éléments de physique théorique et expérimentale*, Paris 1777, vol. 4, pp. 4–6.

<sup>17</sup> S. de la Fond, *Éléments de physique...*, op. cit., pp. 44–45.

<sup>18</sup> De Fontenay [C. de Boissy], *Manuel*, p. 18.

to punish them (3.678).<sup>19</sup> “But, after all, these animals that we condemn, because they inconvenience us, are designed to inconvenience us & to make us remember our smallness,” which we should remember when “our rest is disturbed by a gnat” (679).<sup>20</sup> Domestic animals are docile and “if there are some mutinous & vicious animals, it is to teach man what could have happened to all, & that it is a beneficent hand which has instilled so many others with the most perfect docility” (2.470).

In all this, there is a somewhat curious status of animals. God created man immortal, but death entered through the envy of the devil (Wisdom 2:23–24). Illnesses entered the world after the fall (1.475). And animals? De Boissy said that some animals eat other animals according to a general plan; this fact is not the result of the depravation of nature as some say (2.209). God keeps balance between carnivorous animals and the animals serving as food (210). This means that death was part of the originally created world if only limited to animals, although we may assume that plants were not originally eternal, either (3.458). There must be thus a gap between humans and the animal world. Descartes spoke about animals being machines, but de Boissy did not endorse this view. God “imprinted on each species a method which does not get out of order: this is not the intelligence in them, this is not reason. The wisdom that makes them act and which directs their movements resides elsewhere”;<sup>21</sup> they always follow their instinct, sometimes to their peril (2.299; 3.62). Thus, animals are not mere machines, but they are not ensouled creatures, either. Incidentally, if animals had souls, they would be culpable when doing something wrong, but animals do not sin. Therefore, when animals perished in the flood, it was not because they sinned; however, these animals had been soiled by the criminal usage humans made of them. When domestic animals are ill or die, it is humans who are punished. When savage animals perish, it is on account of the plan of God who shows that He wants to preserve kinds, not individuals. If animals could think to a minimum degree, they would be able of “some kind of progress.” Their operations are “mechanical results & purely material” with no spark of spirit (2.579–580).<sup>22</sup>

### The use of sources

De Boissy was not a researcher, not a naturalist, not a scientist; therefore, all information he used had to come from already published sources. This should not surprise anyone. What is rather surprising is the way de Boissy used his sources. In the preface, he stated that “it is proper to pay tribute to the Authors who have been consulted and whose assembly of the lights has contributed in part to this Work” (1.i). Therefore, he mentioned some of the names of the authors he said he consult-

<sup>19</sup> [N.A. Pluche], *Spectacle de la nature*, op. cit., p. 47.

<sup>20</sup> [J.J. Duguet], *Explication du livre...*, op. cit., p. 139.

<sup>21</sup> [N.A. Pluche], *Spectacle de la nature*, op. cit., p. 526.

<sup>22</sup> [G.L. Leclerc] de Buffon, *Histoire naturelle générale et particulière*, Paris 1749, vol. 2, p. 441.

ed, except that this consulting was simply copying. Entire sentences, paragraphs, or sections are copied from various sources without indicating what was copied from which source; some of these sources are indicated in footnotes in the present article. He did it since, in his view, neither readers nor authors were interested in the origin of his information (iii). The readers were not interested because, presumably, they would not recognize most of these names anyway, particularly the intended audience, youth aged 12–15 (vi); the authors – because the constant reference to their publications would be a kind of flattery and thus it would increase their prideful attitude. And so, de Boissy copied entries from current encyclopedic works, such as Valmont de Bomare’s *Dictionnaire raisonné universel d’histoire naturelle*, 6 vols. (1764–1768), *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire universel raisonné des connoissances humaines*, 42 vols. (1710–1775) and Diderot’s *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences des arts et métiers*, 35 vols. (1751–1772), and from specialized manuals and textbooks. However, he did not limit himself to information related to nature but did the same in more philosophically and theologically related fragments. For instance, most of Jacques Bénigne Bossuet’s *Traité de la connaissance de Dieu et de soi-même* (1677) in rearranged fashion is included in the third volume of *The Author of nature*.

It appears that this was the way de Boissy envisioned being an author. His three-volume *Manual of Sacred Scriptures* is no manual. Most of it is the Bible with rearranged books, chapters and verses, to, in his mind, better follow the chronology. It is no different with his book, *Jesus Christ, our love*. There are very long sequences of Biblical verses here, but also for example, ch. 2 is a copy of Claude Fleury, *Moeurs des chrétiens* (1682), 1.1; chapter 12 is just a sequence of excerpts from Pasquier Quesnel, *Le bonheur de la mort chrétienne* (1688).<sup>23</sup>

Some of this copying was not entirely well-thought out. After Bossuet’s *Traité* 5.15, de Boissy repeated that the sensitive soul of animals was neither esprit/spirit nor the body, it was a middle nature. It was not immortal (68). What does it mean to be of a middle nature? There is no explanation. Why the middle nature is mortal rather than immortal? There is no explanation. Also, he repeated after one author that nerves were “faithful ministers of the active substance that animates our bodies.”<sup>24</sup> What active substance? Again, no explanation. As already mentioned, he thought that human reason through self-reflection saw itself as a bizarre and monstrous mixture of good and evil. This is difficult to reconcile with the statement copied from Bossuet’s *Traité* 4.5 that “nothing serves better to elevate man to God than the knowledge he has about himself and about the operation of his understanding”

<sup>23</sup> There are also smaller fragments, for instance, pp. 82–83 – [P. Nicole], *Continuation des Essais de morale*, Paris 1715, vol. 13, pp. 494–495; p. 89 – [E. Gaudron], *Instructions sur tous les mystères de Notre Seigneur Jesus-Christ*, Paris 1719, vol. 4, p. 91; pp. 117–118 – [E. Gaudron], *Instructions sur tous les mystères...*, op. cit., p. 335; pp. 178–180 – [N. Le Tourneux], *Abregé des principaux traitez de la theologie*, Paris 1693, pp. 479–480; etc.

<sup>24</sup> [J. Aignan] S. de la Fond, *Leçons sur l’économie animale*, Paris 1767, vol. 2, p. 215.



(3.26). De Boissy said that man's commission was to maintain the order among animals, plants, and minerals dividing the elements of these three realms, combining them and making additions to make the whole even more beautiful and more useful (471).<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, he said that in God's works, "the design, progress, variety is grand, perfect, infinite"<sup>26</sup> and God's wisdom is manifested in perfect agreement of all parts, no part of the universe contradicts the operations of another (303). If everything is already perfect in nature, why do humans have to do anything? Being imperfect beings, they can only spoil this perfection.

### Conclusion

From the perspective of the originality of the work, *The Author of nature* has very little of it relying on sources he incorporated verbatim and without attribution. However, if readers overlook that – and presumably most of them would not even notice de Boissy's generous borrowings – this is a very useful and informative work presenting the state of science at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century even though de Boissy sided with conservative theories. This work also represents very well the then popular approach to theology and hence, the physico-theological message of the divine authorship of nature will not be lost on readers, whether they find it convincing or not.

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<sup>25</sup> *Cours d'histoire naturelle ou tableau de la nature*, Paris 1770, vol. 1, p. viii.

<sup>26</sup> [C.A.] Dulard, *La grandeur de Dieu dans les merveilles de la nature*, Paris 1757<sup>5</sup>, p. 200.

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## Clément de Boissy and the authorship of nature

### Abstract

Clément de Boissy authored a three-volume opus, *The Author of nature*, which is a physico-theological work designed to convince the reader of the existence of God, His majesty, and His providential care for the world. Everything in nature shows the design and purpose of the Creator, even though such a purpose may be invisible or misunderstood by imperfect humans. However, most of the material used by de Boissy is simply copied from various encyclopedias and from natural philosophy and theological treatises.

**Keywords:** physico-theology, natural science, theodicy

## Clément de Boissy i autorstwo natury

### Abstrakt

Clément de Boissy jest autorem trzypięciotomowego dzieła fizyko-teologicznego, „Autor przyrody”, mającego na celu przekonanie czytelnika o istnieniu Boga, Jego majestacie i opatrnościowej opiece nad światem. Wszystko w naturze świadczy o za-

myśle i celu Stwórcy, nawet jeśli ten cel może być niewidoczny lub niezrozumiany przez niedoskonałych ludzi. Jednakże większość materiału wykorzystanego przez de Boissy'ego jest po prostu skopiowana z różnych encyklopedii, filozofii przyrody i traktatów teologicznych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** fizykoteologia, nauki przyrodnicze, teodycea