Behold it next, with various Life endu’d,
Press to one Centre still, the Gen’ral Good.
See dying Vegetables Life sustain,
See Life dissolving vegetate again.
All Forms that perish other Forms supply,
By turns they catch the vital Breath, and die;
Like Bubbles on the Sea of Matter born,
They rise, they break, and to that Sea return.
—Alexander Pope, An Essay on Man

ELIHU Palmer held the new book in his hands, felt the heft of more than three hundred pages, and ran his fingertips over the cloth cover and leather spine. Though Palmer was blind and could not see the book he had authored, his steadfast collaborator and fellow freethinker, Mary Powell, had described its brown binding and clean print. Principles of Nature had five new chapters in it, and Palmer felt confident enough of

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its merits to send the volume to a man known for his erudition and his library. A note would accompany the gift, and Mary sat at the desk, quill in hand, ready to take dictation. “Sir,” Palmer began in his fine speaking voice. “I send you a Copy of the Second Edition of my Principles of Nature. I beg that you would accept of it as a mark of that profound respect which I entertain for premient”—perhaps he said preeminent—“talants and Virtue.” Palmer chose modest words next. “I know that the Book which I send you contains nothing new to you and furnishes only an evidence of sincere attachment to you and the Principles for which you have contended.” Palmer signed off with “Health & Respect” and gave his address in lower Manhattan. The recipient duly noted the letter’s arrival (December 19, 1802) and marked the book with his initials: T and I, the Latin equivalent to J. He later shelved Palmer’s book in his library’s section on moral philosophy alongside volumes from ancient Greece and Rome, deist tracts from England, and works by the inimitable Benedict de Spinoza and French philosophes. President Thomas Jefferson knew a work of freethought when he saw one.2

Palmer’s Principles of Nature appears, most immediately, as a full-throated critique of Christianity and an endorsement of a deist conception of God. The work of a benevolent Creator-God could be seen in the natural world, deists believed, and never in the fabricated revelations or miracles relayed in scripture. Deists rejected the idea that an original sin guaranteed the innate depravity of humankind, just as they spurned the notion that salvation might come through belief in Jesus as the resurrected son of God. They believed instead that the divine gift of reason should be employed in improving the human condition and ensuring greater happiness in this lifetime rather than focusing on what might follow death. For more than a decade, Palmer worked as a freelance speaker to share these ideas. Even after he lost his eyesight to yellow fever in 1793, Palmer continued to travel up and down the coast, lecturing against revealed religion and supporting freethinking societies in New York City, Newburgh (sixty miles north of Manhattan), Philadelphia, and Baltimore. Listeners commented on his resonant voice and his eloquent tirades against religious superstition.

and its self-serving clergy. Critics lambasted him in newspapers for his immoral and dangerous opposition to Christianity.³

Though Palmer’s deism sounded an easily recognizable note, he also pursued ideas that were less familiar in his day and arguably far more radical. Palmer did not invent these theories himself—they were “nothing new,” he admitted in his letter to Jefferson—but having learned of them from conversation partners and from books, he pondered these concepts at length and made the case for them in his own work.⁴ In addition to promoting deism, Palmer’s Principles of Nature describes a radically unorthodox conception of the makeup of the natural world: a cosmology that envisioned a divine power—a life force—working only from within the material substance that comprises all living things. This cosmology differed from conventional deism with its transcendent and personal God, but neither was it atheism, Palmer insisted. The vital principle within matter was eternal, omnipresent, and mysterious, qualities he associated with the divine. It merited gratitude and elicited awe. But the life force was also a matter of scientific fact, not religious doctrine; it required no worship from human beings and might not even be sentient in the way of a personal God. Palmer found these ideas difficult to express, but he tried over and over again. The effort was worth it, Palmer thought, for the results would be transformative. Widespread recognition of a life force within all matter would, he believed, result in a shared feeling of universal benevolence toward all living things. As people embarked on a new way of being in


⁴ Palmer to Jefferson, Sept. 1, 1802, TJP, [1].
the world, they would feel compelled to end slavery, wars, and oppression of every kind. Social, political, and religious institutions would change completely. All this would follow from the perception of a life force within matter.

Palmer did not have a single label for this cosmology, but sometime after 1800 the term *vitalism* became a shorthand in Europe for the notion that a vital power animated the tiniest particles of matter. It was a new word for an old concept—one with roots in ancient India, Egypt, and Greece—that had seen a revival in Palmer’s lifetime. Since the mid-eighteenth century, natural philosophers in the medical schools of Edinburgh, Montpellier, Paris, and elsewhere had peered through microscopes at moving cells and sensitive nerve endings, hoping to identify the driving force behind the chemical and biological processes of life. As with Isaac Newton’s gravitational force, the vital principle could be seen only in its effects. And like Newton, who famously said he would “feign no hypothesis” regarding the underlying cause of gravity, the empiricists researching the life force did not claim to understand the properties or the ultimate cause of the vital principle they saw in action. Pressing questions remained unanswered. Was it an ethereal fluid, perhaps, or was it more like electricity? How, precisely, did the vital principle inhabit the tiniest particles and produce their endless reconfiguration through all the stages of life, growth, death, and new life? Though in pursuit of an elusive quarry, vitalism remained, into the 1830s, a viable strand of mainstream scientific discourse.5

Men with microscopes were not the only ones who found vitalist theories compelling. Poets writing verse in London, Paris, and Weimar and *philosophes* gathered in evening salons engaged in sometimes scientific but also literary and philosophical discussions of “*vitalisme*.” In Paris, Denis Diderot was among the many taken by the image of a mysterious vital force that infused the material world and made it go. His *D'Alembert's Dream* offers a whimsical exploration of vitalism, and Diderot gave the idea strong representation in the *Encyclopédie* that he edited for two decades. Well beyond medical circles, vitalism gained recognition in Europe as the multivalent articulation of the idea of a life force within matter, a promising way to reconsider nature, the cosmos, and the divine.6


6 Denis Diderot, *Rameau’s Nephew and D’Alembert’s Dream*, trans. L. W. Tancock (Harmondsworth, U.K., 1966); Diderot and Jean d’Alembert, eds., *Encyclopédie*, ou
We know less about the presence of vitalist ideas in America, although fruitful analyses have focused on vitalist conceptions of the natural world that developed within a scientifically minded Christian framework. Jonathan Edwards, for example, rebuffed mechanistic explanations of the world by describing a Calvinist God working within and communicating himself through the processes of nature. With God present in the natural world, Edwards thought, nature became a site of divine revelation. The pious Quaker botanists John Bartram and his son William observed in natural processes the “immediate finger of God” (John) and the “secret divine influence” (William) that showed God to be immanent in nature as well as the transcendent Creator of it. Dr. Benjamin Rush combined his devout faith in a transcendent God with the vitalist medical theories he studied for two years in Edinburgh. Benjamin Franklin’s musings about electrical currents as akin to vital fluids melded with his deistic understanding of divine power. Scientific investigations of a life force folded easily into a theism that saw God’s hand in nature. An immanent vital power need not conflict with a personal God, whether Christian or deist.7

Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers. . . . (Paris, 1751–72). On the import of hundreds of vitalist entries in the Encyclopédie, see Williams, Cultural History of Medical Vitalism, chap. 4. Catherine Packham’s multifaceted Eighteenth-Century Vitalism studies the language of vital nature in literature and poetry but also in moral philosophy, economics, and political writing. Peter Hans Reill argues for a specifically eighteenth-century vitalist language of nature that should not be confused with either the mechanistic philosophy that preceded it or the romantic transcendentalism that followed. See Reill, Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment (Berkeley, Calif., 2005). On nineteenth-century versions of the idea that a creative force courses through a unified, harmonious universe, see Sharon Ruston, Shelley and Vitality (Houndsmill, U.K., 2003); Catherine L. Albanese, A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion (New Haven, Conn., 2007); Denise Gigante, Life: Organic Form and Romanticism (New Haven, Conn., 2009). Jessica Riskin challenges histories that confine vitalist thought to a particular moment in Enlightenment science in Riskin, The Restless Clock: A History of the Centuries-Long Argument over What Makes Living Things Tick (Chicago, 2016). She demonstrates that mechanistic science (which seeks to explain natural phenomena without appealing to religious or mystical explanations) has, from Gottfried Leibniz to the present day, had two strands, one of which, “eclipsed but still working from the shadows,” allows for “perception, will, purpose, [and] agency” within matter. Ibid., 7.

But European vitalism, especially the philosophical kind, could also offer a radical alternative to theism, and this was the sort of vitalism that Palmer encountered and promoted. Roderick S. French noticed this in 1979 and described Palmer as the “outstanding indigenous exponent” of “philosophical naturalism in America.” Palmer envisioned a system of “secular, humanist ethics,” French wrote, one “without any theistic presuppositions,” which placed him “in advance of all the major American intellectuals of his period.” French called for a study of Palmer, who had “arrived at positions distinctly novel in American thought up to his time.”

Taking up French’s challenge to study Palmer’s philosophy requires a close investigation of the “principles of nature” that Palmer explicated in his eponymous book. Because Palmer’s vitalist notions are interwoven with, and to our eyes often obscured by, the more familiar deism he also promoted, one must track down the specific sources of Palmer’s vitalism and highlight what he borrowed from others as he worked out his own formulation of these ideas. Three men in particular shaped Palmer’s vitalist thinking: a New York physician, a French philosophe, and an eccentric English traveler. By understanding the ideas of Isaac Ledyard; Constantin-François Chasseboeuf, comte de Volney; and John Stewart and recognizing what Palmer took from them to shape his own cosmology, we can see how vitalist thought traveled across the Atlantic Ocean in the 1790s to become part of the intellectual landscape of the early American Republic.

Doing so, however, still begs the question: why should we care now about Palmer’s vitalist proselytizing when it remained a minority view, failed to start a lasting movement in America, and has been largely overlooked ever since? Given the experiment in democracy taking place in Palmer’s day, it is worth knowing all the options that were on the table. Some historians see in the energetic antiauthoritarianism of the evangelical movements a crucial impetus to the democratizing of American culture before and after the Revolution, while others have noted the conservative tendencies of evangelicalism. Scholars have also revisited deism with an eye to the influence of religious skepticism on the nation’s founding moments. When we add vitalism to the discussion, we can see that some people in America imagined—and openly discussed—democratic possibilities that went far beyond what the nation’s political leaders, whether Christian or

as akin to those of a vitalist substance, see Jessica Riskin, Science in the Age of Sensibility: The Sentimental Empiricists of the French Enlightenment (Chicago, 2002), chap. 3; James Delbourgo, A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders: Electricity and Enlightenment in Early America (Cambridge, Mass., 2006), 45.

deist, envisioned. Palmer promoted some of the most radically iconoclastic and egalitarian ideas available in the new republic. To put these radical ideas briefly: if all living beings, human and otherwise, take shape through the endless reconfiguration of fundamentally equal particles that are kept in motion by a singular life force, then no justification of hierarchy based on purportedly natural, essential differences can stand. Current scholarship suggests that deists such as Jefferson and Thomas Paine occupied the outermost edge of religious freethought in the early United States. Vitalism, by contrast, makes their deism look downright conservative.9

By recognizing that vitalism was among the cosmologies available to people in the early Republic, we can better see the full spectrum of ideas that shaped the debates over religion, democracy, and the direction the new nation should take. In contrast to the flourishing conversations about medical and philosophical vitalism in Europe, the American discussions of these concepts remained marginal, the province of a few, despite the public airing they received from traveling lecturers such as Palmer. As scholars continue to discuss the extent to which America’s revolutionary age was radical, the vitalist road not taken may tell us more about the road that was. Palmer made it his work to share the good news about matter eternally in motion. Understanding how he came to these ideas and what he thought they promised for the United States gives us a new perspective on the path most Americans took instead.

Elihu Palmer’s life began inconspicuously enough, but he soon showed a tendency to freethought. Born in 1764 to a Connecticut farming couple, Palmer attended Dartmouth College on a scholarship and in 1787 commenced his career as a minister. He accepted a call to the First Presbyterian Church of Newtown on Long Island, New York. On

his way there, Palmer preached a thanksgiving day sermon in Sheffield, Massachusetts. One listener complained that Palmer avoided all talk of sin and repentance and instead “exhorted his hearers to spend the day joyfully in innocent festivity, and to render themselves as happy as possible.”10

Once in Newtown, Palmer befriended a physician named Isaac Ledyard (cousin to the better-known explorer John Ledyard), a well-connected Democratic-Republican and freethinker who made a sport out of challenging the newly minted minister on points of Christian doctrine. These conversations fell on fertile ground and encouraged Palmer’s freethinking tendencies.11

Isaac Ledyard must have enjoyed these conversations very much, having found in Palmer a receptive audience for some cherished ideas the physician hesitated to own openly. A few years earlier, in 1784, Ledyard had anonymously published a twenty-six-page pamphlet titled *An Essay on Matter*. Ledyard did not want his authorship known, even though he considered his essay “important information to mankind.” The reason for secrecy had to do with his unconventional notions of matter, humanity, and life itself. More importantly, for a man whose social standing was linked to his church membership and who would marry in the Presbyterian Church of New York City the following year, his work espoused an entirely heretical view of God.12

Ledyard’s essay asserts that only matter exists. Nothing—not even God—transcends matter, nor are there immaterial objects of any kind, such as angels or souls. In his conversations with Palmer, Ledyard would have reiterated to the young minister that everything that exists is comprised of the tiny particles that combine to make all the forms of the cosmos. But this entirely materialist universe is not simply a mechanical one. The main point in Ledyard’s pamphlet, and likely a recurring topic of conversation with Palmer as well, involved a singular and eternal life force that infuses all matter and causes the tiniest particles to go through their constant changes. We know this from the chemists, Ledyard wrote. The


investigations of chemistry demonstrated that “matter and the living principle, therefore, are co-existent: the one as durable as the other, and both from everlasting to everlasting.” There is really no such thing as death, Ledyard explained, only change. Humans misunderstand this process, and when an organism ceases to function and exist as we knew it, we call it dead. But the particles that made up that form live eternally, continually reforming themselves into something new.\textsuperscript{13}

Imagine Ledyard and Palmer in excited, possibly hushed, conversation about the eternal life of matter—and of matter only. The idea diverged sharply from Christian belief in an immaterial and immortal human soul, in Jesus’s resurrection from the dead, and in the promise of eternal life somewhere else. It was heretical in the extreme, yet Ledyard was not an atheist. He believed it was a divine force, after all, ubiquitous and eternal, that causes all forms of creation to go through their perpetual changes. Without a doubt, God exists, Ledyard wrote. “That there is a God we believe from this, That Things Are, And That They Move.” Things cannot move without a cause, and the cause is God. Not the personal God of the Bible, nor the benevolent and generally nonintrusive Creator-God conventionally revered by the deists. It is not the kind of sentient deity one worships. But what is it? This question likely absorbed Palmer and Ledyard for hours.\textsuperscript{14}

Importantly for Palmer’s intellectual development, Ledyard insisted that the nature of the divine must forever defy comprehension because human minds cannot grasp what is infinite. The very structure and functioning of the human brain limits our understanding of reality to only those dimensions we can perceive. Any attempt to define God must fail, leaving only a greater sense of distance, in Ledyard’s opinion. “Whenever I impiously attempt to identify God,—to give him a likeness to any thing which I can conceive of,—to shape him to my comprehension, and fashion him after the frailty of my senses, I cannot feel that satisfaction, love, reverence and devotion; because, in this prophane way of reasoning, I do not find Truth, I do not feel my God.” No person had the power to communicate what God was, a subject best left in thoughts unspoken, as “words only tend to lead us on from error to error.” Intellectual modesty was required here; any dogma was hubris. One could not hope to achieve

\textsuperscript{13} Ledyard, \textit{Essay on Matter}, 7 (quotation). Ledyard claimed not to have read anyone who discussed matter in the way he did; only his own reason, he asserted, brought him to his understanding. His reference to chemists suggests, however, that he knew about medical vitalism of the sort discussed at the medical school at the University of Edinburgh.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 15 (quotation). Catherine L. Albanese’s work on “nature religion” in American history from the colonial period to the present shows the many forms that belief in the sacred within nature can take. Although she does not explicitly discuss vitalism, it is part of this long and varied history. See Albanese, \textit{Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age} (Chicago, 1990).
conceptual clarity or linguistic precision in the face of such overwhelming mystery. Ledyard concluded that “Matter, Motion, Life, Spirit, Soul, (or whatever name be given to Motion) is one and the same thing.” It was a monism beyond all naming, beyond the grasp of human intellect. At the same time that Ledyard saw the vital force as a fully material scientific fact, he also accepted the inability of the finite human mind to comprehend this eternal and infinite power. “Here then reason art thou bounded!” This was materialism with a mystery, a monotheistic pantheism of sorts, rooted in the belief in a ubiquitous divine power that was nothing like a personal God. In the new United States, these ideas were iconoclastic beyond measure.15

And here was Palmer at age twenty-five, soaking it up. He firmly rejected the doctrines of original sin and the divinity of Jesus and began to imagine God as a mysterious life force within matter, an idea he worked on for the next dozen years. The lasting influence of Ledyard’s revelatory conversations can be seen in the book Palmer sent to Thomas Jefferson in 1802. Toward the end of Principles of Nature, in a chapter he added to the second edition, Palmer wrote: “To corroborate the ideas which have already been suggested upon this subject [of animated matter], the following strong and philosophic reflections are taken from an anonymous pamphlet, entitled, ‘An Essay on Matter.’” Thirty-three sentences from Ledyard’s Essay follow about the “living principle” that animates all matter. Palmer’s debt was real: his own thinking over the years built on the ideas Ledyard shared with him on Long Island.16

But if conversations with Ledyard excited the young minister, they also made him unfit for his profession. Palmer could no longer speak with conviction or even an easy conscience about the Bible as revelation. After less than a year in the Newtown pulpit, Palmer resigned his post. He moved first to Augusta, Georgia, and then to Philadelphia with his wife and their two young sons. Palmer still preached occasionally as a guest minister to various Baptist congregations, but by this time he had lost all patience with listeners who expected a Calvinist message of human depravity and the need for salvation.17

In search of other freethinkers, Palmer in 1791 joined Philadelphia’s Society of Deist Natural Philosophers, also known as the Universal Society, a club of some thirty members that met weekly for skeptical discussions. Its

17 William H. Henrickson, A Brief History of the First Presbyterian Church of New
town, Long Island (n.p., 1902), 33–34. John Fellows wrote that Palmer “became disgusted with preaching from pulpits, where the morose, vindictive, and uncharitable tenets of Calvin were generally inculcated, and expected by the hearers.” Palmer and Fellows, Posthumous Pieces, 6.
founder, John Fitch, envisioned public meetings of “all Ranks of people” at which “all questions should be freely discoursed even to the denial of the divinity of Moses Jesus Christ or Mahomet.” The Universal Society readily questioned central Christian tenets such as original sin, divine judgment, and eternal damnation, but members were expected to refrain from offering insulting descriptions of orthodox beliefs. Like many freethinkers of the era, most prominently Jefferson and the recently deceased Benjamin Franklin, the members of the Universal Society saw no need to antagonize their pious neighbors. Most Americans subscribed to Protestantism of one sect or another, and many state constitutions had religious tests for public office. In this context, religious freethought should be shared tactfully to avoid needless social strife. 18

Palmer preferred forthright candor. He saw religion not as a matter of polite conversation or idle speculation but as central to the serious business of improving the world. He excelled as a public speaker, drawing large audiences and receiving “great applause amongst all ranks of people.” But there were limits to what he could say. In March 1792 he advertised in Philadelphia’s National Gazette his upcoming sermon against the divinity of Christ. Palmer planned to present the Socinian view that Jesus was entirely human and not part of a triune deity. His announcement prompted a group of Philadelphia’s faithful to take a stand, and on the set date “an immense mob” prevented Palmer from entering the Universalist Church. Palmer fled the scene but soon complained in print about this show of intolerance. Addressing the public in Benjamin Franklin Bache’s General Advertiser, Palmer was “sorry to observe, that notwithstanding the legal and nominal freedom that obtains in this country, the law of opinion, and the internal spirit of persecution, bear hard upon the rights of conscience.” A few days later, Palmer’s letter in the Federal Gazette defended the practice of “fair argumentation,” saying that all religious views should be subject to rational inquiry. Truth can never suffer from “fair and public discussion,” he proclaimed, and beliefs that cannot stand up to rational criticism “ought to fall to the ground.” 19

18 For John Fitch and the Universal Society, see Fitch, The Autobiography of John Fitch, ed. Frank D. Prager (Philadelphia, 1976), 121 (quotations); Morais, Deism in Eighteenth Century America, 130; Schlereth, Age of Infidels, 33–44.

19 For Palmer’s lectures before a large audience and for his announced sermon against the divinity of Jesus, see Fitch, Autobiography of John Fitch, 138–39 (“great applause,” 138); Palmer and Fellows, Posthumous Pieces, 5–6 (“immense,” 6). For Palmer’s address, see Elihu Palmer, [Philadelphia] General Advertiser, Mar. 17, 1792, [1] (“sorry”). When accused of being a turncoat against Christianity, Palmer defended himself. “I never professed to be an advocate for the divinity of Jesus Christ—I have spoken publicly against it, both in Georgia and Connecticut, long before I ever preached in this city [Philadelphia]. And if any one here supposed I believed it, it is because he has not given attention to the public discourses which I have delivered”; see Palmer, Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Daily Advertiser, Mar. 22, 1792, [2]. For Palmer’s ad, see
Freedom of thought and speech were, in Palmer’s view, the necessary precursors to any lasting reform. In a public oration on July 4, 1793, he explained why intellectual liberation was of utmost importance: without religious superstition, he said, “the civil oppressions of the world would long since have tumbled into ruin.” Humanity would have to think its way to a better society, and the time was right. The revolutions in America and France had “awakened in the intellectual world a new energy of thought, and turned the pursuit of man upon scientific principle.” Perhaps Palmer referenced his own efforts when he reported that the “philosophy of the human mind is making deep researches, to develop the nature of those principles, which will afford a permanent hope to the wretched in every part of the world.” He believed these “principles of nature”—the phrase he would later use as his book’s title—allowed the “hope, that a lasting source of felicity may be established for the great family of mankind.”

Great improvements had already been made and more were on the way. “The philosophy of this age” would strip religion of its mysteries, teach pure morality instead, and “serve to ameliorate the condition of the human race.”

Within weeks of this optimistic speech, disaster struck Philadelphia in the form of yellow fever. By December some five thousand people had succumbed to the mosquito-borne virus. Among the dead was Palmer’s wife, who left behind her children and a sick husband. Palmer received medical attention from Dr. Benjamin Rush (but refused to be bled). When the illness passed, Palmer found himself in utter darkness: the fever left him permanently blind. Widowed at age twenty-nine, Palmer faced some difficult choices. What could he do as a blind man, and how could he care for his children? Plenty of his neighbors went to church with increased fervor, committed more than ever to the repentance that might lift the fever’s scourge. Palmer chose another path. He sent his children to live on his parents’ farm in Connecticut. Then he turned all his energies to promoting freethought.

As Palmer gained renown as an outspoken critic of Christianity and other revealed religions, he did not feel the need to choose between the languages of vitalism and deism. Both had their uses in his larger project of undermining “superstition,” by which he meant the belief in a judging
God and in the supernatural phenomena described in the Bible. In his “deistical lectures” to the Deistical Society of New York and the Society of Theophilanthropists in Philadelphia, Palmer’s antireligious rhetoric became as searing as Thomas Paine’s. This was no coincidence. Palmer had published an extensive defense of *The Age of Reason*, and he admired Paine as “one of the first and best of writers, and probably the most useful man that ever existed upon the face of the earth.” Emulating Paine’s straightforward style, Palmer delivered bold lectures. His talents as a speaker included “correct and elegant” diction, as the New York *Diary and Mercantile Advertiser* reported, and an elocution “clear and sonorous—the effects of which are heightened by energetic and expressive gestures.” But even Palmer’s friend John Fellows conceded that the “bold and positive manner in which he attacked popular prejudices” offended many. On Christmas Day in 1796, for example, Palmer told his audience that Christians’ “pretended Saviour is nothing more than an illegitimate Jew, and their hopes of salvation through him, rest on no better foundation than that of fornication or adultery.” Salvation was unnecessary anyway, Palmer insisted, because the doctrine of original sin is “totally impossible” as well as “immoral and unjust.” Why should everyone suffer eternal torment just because Adam ate an apple? The idea of atonement through Jesus’s suffering was no better. It presupposes a vindictive God who demands sacrifice and murder, only to condemn most people to hell anyway. No wonder Christianity fomented such “horrid wars and cruelties.” Much better to reject the toxic fabrications of the Bible altogether and look instead to the “God of Nature,” the benevolent “Creator of the universe” who was the “parent and friend of the whole human race.”

Palmer’s adversaries fought back. When he gave weekly lectures in 1798 to a group of freethinkers in upstate New York, a local newspaper went on the attack. His appearance excited “malevolent enmity,” wrote a supporter, and a “religious tornado . . . has shaken the country on account of Mr. Palmer.” A Massachusetts newspaper tried to discount him as well. “A poor, blind Mountebank, on the stage of infidelity, he acquires his daily bread by laboring ‘to crush’ that divine Savior to whose church by *solemn covenant* he belongs, and whom till lately he professed to adore.” Critics never tired of portraying Palmer as an apostate and hypocrite.


Palmer knew how to use the press himself. He advertised his lectures and book in America’s first deist newspaper, The Temple of Reason, founded in 1800 and edited by Denis Driscol, a recent Irish immigrant and former priest turned deist and political radical. The newspaper made war on the Bible, Christian doctrine, and clergy of all kinds. It reprinted excerpts from Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, comte de Volney, and Nicolas de Condorcet, and it solicited funds for a new Temple of Reason to be built in Philadelphia.24

Palmer even bought a press of his own, an improbable step for a blind man. He received indispensable aid from his colleague, Mary Powell, a widowed freethinker herself. John Fellows described her as “a woman of good sense, and fine moral feelings,” who “possessed as strong an interest as [Palmer] in promoting the cause of truth.” Palmer composed aloud, and Powell wrote his words down. “He dictated as fast as a quick writer could copy,” Fellows observed, “and in language that required little or no alteration.” Palmer published the first edition of his book in 1801, apparently using his own press to produce it. A second edition came out in 1802. Palmer and Powell married in October 1803, and two months later they launched their weekly newspaper Prospect; or, View of the Moral World, which ran until March 1805. The paper gained subscribers in and beyond New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore who paid to read arguments debunking the Bible and all church authority. Paine, who had befriended the couple after his return to the United States, made occasional contributions to the newspaper. The Prospect also offered extracts from Palmer’s “Theological Discourse” as well as serialized reprints of skeptical works such as Rousseau’s “Profession of Faith of a Savoyard Curate” and Edward Gibbon’s “The Progress of the Christian Religion.” A decade after Palmer lost his first wife and his eyesight, he could take stock of his life with some measure of satisfaction. By promoting freethought in his lectures and publications, Palmer had successfully made himself into a conduit of ideas that had the power, he believed, to change the world (Figure I).25

24 On Denis Driscol’s radical leveling ideas, see Richard J. Twomey, Jacobins and Jeffersonians: Anglo-American Radicalism in the United States, 1790–1820 (New York, 1989), 33–34, 97–98. On Driscol’s collaboration with Palmer, ibid., 73–74; Michael Durey, Transatlantic Radicals and the Early American Republic (Lawrence, Kans., 1997), 195–97. The description of Mary Powell is from Palmer and Fellows, Posthumous Pieces, 3–4 (“good sense”), 9 (“dictated”). The Prospect; or, View of the Moral World (PVMW) appeared from Dec. 10, 1803, to Mar. 30, 1805. Subscribers in New York City; Orange and Dutchess Counties in New York, north of the city; and Philadelphia had a local contact person who collected payment for the newspaper, while subscribers in “every other part of the country” were requested to “transmit their several dues by post.” See [Elihu Palmer], PVMW, July 28, 1804, in Prospect; or, View of the Moral World, For the year 1804 (New York, 1804), 272 (quotations); Palmer, Prospect; or, View of the Moral World, For the year 1805 (New York, 1805). Manuscripts also arrived from “our literary correspondents in Philadelphia and Boston”; PVMW, Sept. 15, 1804, 328. Palmer
Figure I

Elihu Palmer enjoyed tearing down Christianity, but he also wanted to replace blind faith with something better, namely what he called “moral philosophy,” or the facts of nature as he saw them. We can best see his elaboration of these ideas and trace their provenance in his Principles of Nature. The book presents the vitalist cosmology Palmer had discussed with Isaac Ledyard a decade before, but it also shows Palmer’s engagement with other sources of vitalist ideas. Understanding these influences and discerning what Palmer adopted from them helps elucidate Palmer’s vitalist convictions. One major influence was comte de Volney, who, as a medical student in Paris, had attended the salon of the intrepid freethinker Paul-Henri Thiry, baron d’Holbach. D’Holbach envisioned an entirely mechanistic universe without any deity at all. Inspired by the salon’s irreverent conversations about religion, Volney embarked on a comparative study of the world’s religions and published the results as The Ruins; or, A Survey of the Revolutions of Empires. Volney began by discounting the very possibility of a personal revelation from God. Instead, Volney maintained that all religious ideas traced their origins back to human observation of the natural world and to a desire to understand and influence the powerful forces of nature. These reflections about nature had spun off in different directions, and Volney discussed nine “systems” of belief that developed over the course of human history, each with its own distinctive way of understanding the relationship between the natural world and divine power.26

Volney himself clearly favored the “Sixth system,” according to which the universe was made up entirely of matter in constant motion. Volney carefully parsed two strands of thought within this sixth system. One “sect” of philosophers believed the eternally moving elements of matter were mechanistically determined in their course by their inherent properties. This view represented that of d’Holbach, whose utterly atheistic

regularly advertised his own public appearances. For example, “A Political Lecture Will be delivered by the Editor of this paper, on Tuesday evening next, at 7 o’clock, at Shephard’s Long-Room, Druid’s grove Tavern, No. 11, George-street. Public Discourses Upon Moral and Philosophical Subjects, will be delivered by the Editor every Sunday evening at six o’clock, at Snow’s long room, No. 89 Broad-Way”; see PVMW, Feb. 11, 1804, 80. For the pieces Thomas Paine wrote for the Prospect, see for example Paine, “A Correspondent has favoured. . . .,” PVMW, May 26, 1804, 195–99; Paine, “Remarks on the Foregoing Sermon,” PVMW, Feb. 18, 1804, 83–85. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s work was republished in parts over many issues throughout 1804. See “Profession of faith of a Savoyard Curate, From Ro[usseau],” PVMW, May 5–Nov. 17, 1804. For Edward Gibbon, see Gibbon, “The Progress of the Christian Religion,” PVMW, Dec. 24, 1803, 22.

and deterministic materialism did not leave room for a self-activating and unpredictable life force. A second line of thought in the sixth system also focused on matter in motion but attributed it to a divine power at work. Adherents of this view claimed that “the whole universe was God” and that “God was at once effect and cause, agent and patient, moving principle and thing moved.” Volney apparently sided with the latter position, speculating about a vital force he called a “luminous fluid, principle of warmth and motion, pervading the universe.”

Whether conceived in passively mechanistic or vitalist terms, the sixth system located an animating power within matter, a notion Volney—and also Palmer—supported. The movement of matter is life. As all matter is constantly in motion, Palmer wrote, “all is alive, all is active and energetic.” Even the rays of the sun, traveling through space at the speed of light, showed motion and hence life. Palmer believed the whole universe vibrated with a vital force in every last particle of matter.

Palmer and Volney may have had the opportunity to discuss their ideas in person. Volney came to the United States in 1795, spent some time with Thomas Jefferson at Monticello, where they worked together on an English translation of The Ruins, and remained in America for three years. Palmer’s friend and bookseller, John Fellows, carried Volney’s book and may have enabled a meeting of the two freethinkers. (If so, a conversation with Volney about Jefferson might explain Palmer’s later comment to Jefferson that Principles of Nature “contains nothing new to you.”) Palmer frequently cited Volney and wrote that “of all the books that ever were published, Volney’s The Ruins is pre-eminently entitled to the appellation of Holy Writ, and ought to be appointed to be read in Churches.”

Like Volney, Palmer seriously considered but then ultimately rejected d’Holbach’s entirely mechanistic and atheistic monism, and his reasoning is revealing. Palmer cited approvingly and sometimes paraphrased closely

27 Volney, Ruins, 243 (“Sixth system”), 246–47 (“sect,” 246, “effect and cause,” 246–47), 245–46n (“luminous”). In a footnote added to the 1796 edition of The Ruins, Volney wrote: “The more I consider what the ancients understood by ether, and spirit, and what the Indians call akache, the stronger do I find the analogy between it and electrical fluid. A luminous fluid, principle of warmth and motion, pervading the universe, forming the matter of the stars, having small round particles, which insinuate themselves into bodies, and fill them by dilating itself, be their extent what it will, what can more strongly resemble electricity?” Volney clearly rejected any belief system that separated the animating power, however conceived, from “inert” matter. Ibid., 245–47n (“more I consider”), 249–54 (“inert,” 249).


the English translation of d’Holbach’s *System of Nature*. But Palmer wrote that upon much reflection he felt pressed “to the admission of an immortal principle, to the faint conception of an eternal being, whose perfections guarantee the existence and harmony of the universe.” Where d’Holbach saw in every organism an unthinking mechanism operating according to deterministic laws, Palmer saw instead a mysterious life force at work in all matter. The unseen vital power eluded accurate description. “The essence of such a being is inconceivable,” Palmer wrote. Humans can have only faint glimmerings of that which animates the universe. “At present,” Palmer maintained, “it is sufficient that we refer the universe, its laws, and order, to the divinity of thought emanating from the most perfect of all beings.” Palmer’s tentative articulation of the “immortal principle” defies easy categorization. His reference to a “perfect being” capable of “thought” suggests a distinct and sentient deity, much like something a deist might propose. Yet Palmer also insisted that nothing exists above or beyond the singular substance of the universe. Aware of the limited capacity of humans to comprehend the divine, Palmer repeatedly expressed his sense of wonder about the ineffable mystery that animates all matter.

To the inevitable charges of atheism, Palmer responded with sarcastic humor. When a reviewer of the first edition of *Principles of Nature* wrote that “Mr. Palmer is as determined an Atheist as any of them,” Palmer responded with a footnote in the second edition. For believers, he wrote, “the Christian God is like a man, perhaps like one of the New York Reviewers. Now the fair deduction from all this is, that whosoever doth not believe that God is like a New York Reviewer, is a most profane and abominable Atheist.” In Palmer’s own view, “the mighty power by which the universe is sustained” must ever elude definition, and “of the shape or form of this power, the New York Reviewers have as little idea as the author of the *Principles of Nature*.” Theism, Palmer implied, did not require that divine power appear as anything like a personal God.

While Ledyard and Volney inspired Palmer with the notion that a “living principle” infused all matter, the English eccentric and world traveler John Stewart added another distinctive element to Palmer’s thinking. Stewart introduced Palmer to the idea that sensation occurs at the level of the atoms that make up every living thing. These atoms have a memory of

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sorts for sensation, Stewart explained. As the tiniest particles go through the endless permutations that comprise the life cycles of organisms, the particles carry sensations such as pain from one living thing to the next. Individual consciousness does not survive the disintegration of one life form and its reformulation into something else, and beings have no conscious memory of a previous state. But the atoms themselves register sensation and carry it forward into their future forms. Stewart’s greatest lesson was that any pain inflicted on a living creature accrues in the substance that makes up all things. The eternal reconfiguration of particles means that each will eventually partake in the experience of all.  

Stewart’s monist cosmology of sensate matter came to him as he journeyed throughout India in the 1760s and 1770s, adapting elements of Hinduism as they suited him. He continued his travels on foot through Africa, Europe, and central Asia, acquiring the nickname “Walking” Stewart along with a reputation for lengthy philosophical speeches. After the unnerving experience of witnessing street violence in revolutionary France, Stewart set his sights on the United States as a forum for his ideas. He arrived in New York in 1795 and soon published his conception of the universe in a thirty-five-page poem, *The Revelation of Nature*. Palmer and Stewart may have met in New York; they both knew Fellows, who carried the poem in his store. For the next four years, Stewart traveled around the United States and lectured on the idea that atoms in the monist universe register and retain a memory of sensations.  

Palmer found Stewart’s notion of sensate matter persuasive. He frequently paraphrased Stewart’s ideas, usually without attribution and always as a statement of fact. Palmer wrote repeatedly about “the immortality of sensation in the aggregate mass of sensitive and intelligent life.” He explained that “our sentiments are, at this moment, suffering under the cruel lash of ancient institutions,” suggesting that violence inflicted long ago caused pain that continued to be felt in the present. Indeed, the “whole

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33 [John Stewart], *The Revelation of Nature, with the Prophecy of Reason. . . .* (New York, [1796?]). The precise publication date is hard to determine because Stewart began a new calendar, giving the date on the title page as “the fifth year of intellectual existence, or the publication of the apocalypse of nature, 3000 years from the Grecian olympiads, and 4800 from recorded knowledge in the Chinese tables of eclipses, beyond which chronology is lost in fable.” For Stewart’s peripatetic lifestyle, see Claeys, *Journal of British Studies* 53: 636–59; Fischer, *Common-Place* 15.
animal world are reciprocating with each other a system of extensive and perpetual wretchedness.” Palmer was convinced by Stewart’s claim that pain accumulated in the material universe and grew with every act of violence, large or small.34

The concept of singular, sensate matter was unusual enough in 1790s New York, but to this Stewart added an even more eccentric idea. His monism gained a vitalist dimension through his conception of the instantaneous and unpredictable exchange of particles. Atoms jump invisibly and continuously from one being to the next, he believed, so that some of one’s own atoms experience whatever treatment one metes out. The atoms that make up the rider wielding the whip join, in a flash, the atoms that comprise the flagellated horse, with the effect that the rider unwittingly beats part of himself. The miserable atoms of the slaughtered pig become part of the dinner guest eating roast pork. Doing unto others is exactly the same thing as doing unto oneself. The recognition that pain redounds upon the perpetrator naturally leads the self-interested individual to universal kindness. The lesson is clear. Whoever wishes to avoid the experience of whip or slaughterhouse will forgo such acts of brutality and avoid increasing the suffering of sensate matter.35

Stewart’s presumption of an ongoing exchange of sensate particles had moral implications that were both straightforward and thoroughly radical. As Stewart explained, “what tenderness, what benevolence” must the man who understands the atom-swapping process feel for all fellow creatures: “he would lift the worm from the path, lest some heedless fool might crush it, and save the drowning fly from his tea cup; he never could be the tyrant of his species, or a torpid link upon the chain of being.” Even a leaf of lettuce merits careful consideration. Take, for example, a gout-ridden man who unwittingly transfers his pain to the food he swallows. Although eating is necessary to survival, of course, every extra mouthful “is gratuitous anguish, transferred to brute matter, his fellow being.” The enlightened man is aware of the transfer of sensation and “fears to communicate pain to the crust he eats.” He will even end his own life rather than convey chronic pain to the organisms around him. Stewart’s move toward a post-humanist reevaluation of all living beings as equally (if not equal) stakeholders in a monist universe led him to moral guidelines that were simple and few: think, freely share your thoughts, and do no harm to sensate beings. This meant the vigilant effort to avoid all unnecessary acts of violence, whether purposeful or careless, in the course of everyday life.36

35 For more on Stewart’s idea of jumping atoms, see Fischer, Common-Place 15.
36 Stewart, Revelation of Nature, preface, esp. xiv (“tenderness,” “fears”), xiii–xiv (“gratuitous”). For more on Stewart’s post-humanism, see Fischer, Common-Place 15.
Palmer, by contrast, did not promote an egalitarian concern for all organisms—instead, he celebrated that human reason and moral sense had lifted “intelligent man” above “all other inferior animals.” But Palmer did accept Stewart’s lessons regarding the endless and even immediate exchange of sensate particles. “The constant interchange of matter with matter,” Palmer wrote, “should teach man . . . that the pain which he inflicts upon sensitive existence, will return upon himself with interest, and will pave the way for eternizing a system of misery fatal to the sensations of the whole animal world.” What caused the suffering of man was “the law of sensation, by which his life was every moment modified.” Like Stewart, Palmer conceived of a “vast assemblage of living creatures, whose relations are reciprocal and reciprocated under a thousand different forms, and supported by a thousand different ligaments of an imperceptible nature.” Palmer enjoyed the sense of connection on a cosmic scale. “Nothing is foreign or irrelative in the vast fabric to which we belong. Union is most intimate.” This perception gave Palmer feelings of all-inclusive solidarity, along with a joyous calm. “Man’s highest happiness,” Palmer promised, lay in “discovering his true connection with nature, and the eternal duration of this connection.”

This insight alone was enough to fundamentally alter human behavior, Palmer thought. “If man had a comprehensive view of the successive changes of his existence, and a correct idea of the nature of sensation continually resulting from the renovation of organic forms, sympathy or universal benevolence, would become irresistibly impressive upon his moral powers, and form the basis of his subsequent conduct.” Universal benevolence would end slavery, for example, because “the immoral opinion, that the whites have a right to enslave the blacks, is a complete abandonment of the principle of reciprocal justice, and a violation of the fundamental laws of Nature.” Regarding the discriminatory treatment of women, Palmer echoed Condorcet in calling for the “total annihilation of the prejudices which have established between the sexes an inequality of rights.” As with individuals, so too are nations of people only superficially different. Palmer denounced nationalism as a “narrow prejudice” that is “disgraceful” and “subversive of the best interests of human society.” Corrupt governments stoke nationalist prejudices to wage self-serving wars, but when citizens see through the propaganda they will refuse to kill one another. Education about sensate matter naturally produces “universal benevolence,” which will, in turn, accomplish a thoroughgoing and entirely peaceful revolution in social relations.

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In an age of revolutionary rhetoric, Palmer’s advocacy of universal human equality and his denunciation of belligerent nationalism put him in good company.  Even so, the logic of vitalism led him to carry these ideas further and to include in his concern more living creatures than did most political theorists or religious thinkers of his day. The presence of a life force within every living organism, and the fact that each one registers sensation in its constitutive atoms, makes it worthy of respect and care. The vitalist universe therefore required, in Palmer’s words, “the expansion of mind” needed to “extend the circle of man’s moral affections and duties.” Universal benevolence “should also be extended to the whole animal world, so as to exclude acts of cruelty, and annihilate every species of injustice. The child that is permitted in early life to run a pin through a fly, is already half prepared to run a dagger through the heart of his fellow creature!” Concern with only the human species was selfish and misguided, Palmer thought. Humans must come to respect all living beings.

Palmer’s project was education for the sake of intellectual liberation, not political reform. Of course he deplored the “system of plunder and
robbery, which makes nine-tenths of the human race absolute slaves to support the other tenth in indolence, extravagance, pride, and luxury.” He knew that, over time, “our political institutions must be changed, and placed upon the broad basis of universal liberty and universal justice.” But Palmer remained vague about what this political reform entailed, leaving it to Paine and others to devise plans for the redistribution of wealth, the education of all children, the end of slavery and discrimination, and the spread of political enfranchisement. His chosen role was to explain the vitalist makeup of the universe. Like Stewart (averse to revolutionary violence since his days in Paris), Palmer imagined a vitalist-inspired benevolence spreading across the globe with a logic of its own, radically transforming human societies without shedding a drop of blood.41

Palmer’s strong endorsement of a vitalist cosmology of sensate matter did not diminish his appreciation for deism, and he felt no need to choose one at the expense of the other. Principles of Nature contains decidedly vitalist language (notably in chapters 15, 17, 20, 24, and 26) but also a passage in chapter 17 that describes a deistic “God of nature, the intelligent organizer of the universe; possessed of all possible perfection and excellence, and directing the vast concerns of nature with the greatest harmony, and the most divine benevolence.” This “divine Creator of the universe” is sentient and transcendent, complete with a capital “G” and masculine pronoun.42 The book’s penultimate chapter also champions deism. This “pure and holy religion” appears here as the most recent step in the intellectual liberation of humankind. Deism is the religion that “at the present period of the world” frightens believers and “threatens to shake to the centre the chief corner stone on which the Church is built.” To the clergy’s depictions of deism as “an immoral monster . . . producing universal disorder,” Palmer responded by describing the deist assumption of “one perfect God, Creator and Preserver of the Universe,” whose immutable laws allow no “miraculous interference in the movements of nature.” Deism optimistically affirms that “the powers of man are competent to all the great purposes of

41 Walters, Elihu Palmer’s “Principles of Nature,” 180 (“plunder”), 226 (“political institutions”). In his oration on July 4, 1800, Palmer complained that “avarice, and commercial speculation” had produced “political lethargy.” The solution was first and foremost a mental one: “the activity of the mind, and the progress of science are the sources to which benevolence will resort, and on which it must ultimately rest its hopes, for the cure of such direful calamities.” Elihu Palmer, The Political Happiness of Nations: An Oration . . . ([New York, 1800]), 20. Palmer was not unusual in his assumption that universal benevolence would spread and naturally bring about radical social change, even without the aid of legal, economic, or political reforms. See Evan Radcliffe, “Revolutionary Writing, Moral Philosophy, and Universal Benevolence in the Eighteenth Century,” Journal of the History of Ideas 54, no. 2 (April 1993): 221–40; Riskin, Science in the Age of Sensibility; Sarah Knott, Sensibility and the American Revolution (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2009); Cotlar, Tom Paine’s America, 35, 70.

human existence” and that “science, virtue, and happiness, are the great objects” of human endeavor. Because deism is “built upon a substantial foundation,” Palmer wrote, it “will triumphantly diffuse happiness among the nations of the earth, for ages after Christian superstition and fanaticism have ceased to spread desolation and carnage through the fair creation of God.”

Nowhere did Palmer explain why he endorsed in his writings and lectures both a deist Creator-God and a Stewartian vitalism of sensate matter. We can only speculate. Certainly Palmer viewed deism as a welcome improvement on any revealed religion. It was a crucial step in human enlightenment, along the lines of Condorcet’s stadial history of human development. (Palmer felt Condorcet was among those “justly entitled to the universal gratitude and applause of the human race.”) Perhaps Palmer thought the recognition of a vital power within shared, sensate matter would follow as the final phase of human insight. Or maybe, following the lead of his mentor, Isaac Ledyard, Palmer preferred a position of intellectual modesty, a willingness to leave indeterminate that which was beyond the compass of the human mind. In the face of an infinite power, Palmer did not try to parse the question of transcendance or immanence. Deists and vitalists might variously imagine God as ontologically distinct from creation, or not, or as sentient like a person, or not. More important for Palmer was that both dispensed with revelation, miracles, and supernatural mystery of any kind and both promised relief from religious superstition and fear.

Even if Palmer’s conceptual tent of freethought was capacious enough for him to remain agnostic—or inconsistent—on the question of the vitalist immanence or the deist transcendance of the divine, his book’s vitalist assertions far outnumber the deist formulations. Furthermore, Palmer readily praised Stewart as the greatest philosopher—ever—of the material world: Stewart’s “enquiries into the nature of the human mind, the qualities of the material world, and the connection subsisting between the parts and the whole, have never been equalled by any individual, either in ancient or in modern times.” The final chapter of Palmer’s book begins with an excerpt from Alexander Pope’s Essay on Man (the epigraph for this article as well) and reasserts two foundational truths. The first is that of immortal matter in endless motion, bound by “eternal laws to pass through the routine of its successive modes of existence.” The second is “the immortality of sensation in the aggregate mass of sensitive and intelligent life.” Palmer concluded that

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43 Ibid., 257–62 (quotations, 261).
44 Walters, Elihu Palmer’s “Principles of Nature,” 179 (quotation). Michael P. Levine writes that pantheists could hold views of divine immanence and transcendance at the same time, as long as the deity was not thought to be a personal one. Levine, Pantheism: A Non-Theistic Concept of Deity (London, 1994), 95, 115–16, 147. For more on Palmer’s critique of fearmongering clergy, see Fischer, Revue Française d’Études Américaines, no. 125, 13–26.
humans, too, are “destined to pass through an infinite diversity of predicaments, partaking at all times of the immortality of sensation in successive forms of animal existence.” Deism might be perfectly acceptable, even admirable, as a replacement for revealed religion. But more exciting for Palmer was the concept of the universe as a singular entity with a shared sensibility.45

**Principles of Nature** soon found an audience. Thomas Paine wrote to commend Elihu Palmer for “the excellent work you have published. I see you have thought deeply on the subject, and expressed your thoughts in a strong and clear style.” Others hated the book’s overt enmity to Christianity and branded Palmer a dangerous infidel, with the result that Palmer and his ideas received more attention than the book might have garnered on its own. Alarmed critics believed the book’s heretical author was part of a larger attack on the democratic republic. John Wood, a political writer, published a pamphlet in 1802 on the allegedly secret “Society of the Columbian Illuminati.” This was Wood’s name for the Deistical Society of New York, a group “composed of the scattered dregs of those Jacobin Infidels,” of which Palmer was president. Playing on fears of an imported conspiracy to undermine the new republic, Wood depicted “President Palmer” as “the Weishaupt of the order,” a reference to the German founder of a banned Order of the Illuminati in Bavaria. **Principles of Nature** was the “text book” for all the members, who were inducted into the “whimsical jacobinism of Paine, and the wild philosophy of his disciple blind Palmer.” The members supposedly met according to “grades,” much like Freemasons, and were bound “to renounce all form of worship whatever.” The New York Illuminati planned to fill “all the public offices in the United States . . . with deists,” and Wood was at pains to expose its representatives, especially DeWitt Clinton, who has been “displacing christians, to make room for deists” in government. Already one state legislator was “an avowed supporter and hearer of the President Palmer.”46


Newspapers in New York, Baltimore, and Philadelphia ran Wood’s pamphlet in serial form, with favorable introductions. “Almost every day brings fresh proofs of the existence of a Deistical Society in New-York,” warned the New-York Gazette. “What may we not fear from an infidel club, over which Palmer presides?” The answer was “irreligion and civil confusion.” And did this “infidel gang” have a replacement in mind for Vice President Aaron Burr? Perhaps even “the renowned Elihu Palmer himself, the President and Apostle of their society?” Meanwhile, the paper promised to reprint extracts of Palmer’s book “so the horrid tendency of the work may be more generally known.” In Virginia, the Alexandria Advertiser followed suit, printing a series of excerpts from Principles of Nature in four editions of the paper. The excerpts appeared with a warning: “The extract [sic] are not made, and cannot be read by any christian, without horror.” Palmer was a danger, and his clerical past made his apostasy worse. “It aggravates [sic] the feelings to know that Mr. Palmer ’was once a public speaker in the cause of Christianity [a minister].” This blasphemer “is the man who is chosen at the head of a deistical and political club, who have been unwearied in their attempts to destroy the Christian religion and all wholesome government.”

In December 1802, at a “respectable meeting” of booksellers in Philadelphia, the men raised their glasses and wished “remorse and repentance to the man whose press or bookstore is like Pandora’s box, fraught with destruction to the morals of society.” Which writings caused moral decay? Paine’s Age of Reason, of course, “an open, blasphemous attack on the Christian Religion,” and “Principles of Nature, by Elihu Palmer, an Atheist, a work so very bad that no printer has ventured to put his name to it.” This was followed by the Temple of Reason, “an avowedly Deistical newspaper.”

Palmer’s infamy continued to grow. In 1803 an open letter in the Alexandria Advertiser asked a rhetorical question: is it not “notorious . . . that places have been assigned in our large cities, for Elihu Palmer and... ("Weishaupt"), 32 ("text book"), 36 ("whimsical"), 29 ("grades"), 37 ("renounce"), 44 ("public offices"), 45 ("displacing"). See also Eric R. Schlereth’s discussion of Wood’s pamphlet in Schlereth, Age of Infidels, 130–35.


others, to preach publicly against Christianity?” 50 Meanwhile, the Albany Centinel published a request for more information on Palmer. “His labours at Philadelphia, at New-York, at Newburgh, state of New-York—his book entitled ‘Principles of nature’ and the ‘Political work’ which he has promised; his intimacy with the Denniston and some of the Clinton family are pretty well known; but his earlier history, and his gradual progress to democracy and infidelity are still in considerable obscurity.” 51 Without much to go on, the newspaper offered satirical biographies of “great political writers,” including Palmer. In his “celebrated work” Principles of Nature, Palmer was “evidently assisted by Paine, yet he outstripped his master and gave a system of atheism.” 52

Critics might not have a word for Palmer’s cosmology, but they knew it differed from the deism of Paine. “For gross blasphemy and infidelity,” the Centinel proclaimed, Palmer’s work “far surpassed Tom Paine’s Age of Reason, and all other deistical and atheistical works that ever preceded it.” 53 The Reverend Robert Cooper, a Presbyterian minister in Pennsylvania, warned in 1804 against all atheists and especially the “high Priest Elihu Palmer.” Palmer was in company with the “infamous contemptible outcast, Paine” and the “more dangerous productions of [William] Godwin,” as well as Anacharsis Cloots and Thomas Jefferson. 54 Occasional jabs at Palmer continued to appear in newspapers, and in February 1806, the Balance in Hudson, New York, asked: “Where is Elihu Palmer now? Has he lately been confirming any of his disciples at Newburgh?” 55

In fact, he was planning a speaking engagement in Philadelphia, where, in March, he took to his bed with pleurisy, a severe inflammation of the lungs. After only a few days of illness, he died at the age of forty-two. Having lived with such passion, he was suddenly gone, leaving his wife, Mary, “greatly distressed and perplexed” after the loss of “My dearest My best of husbands.” But Palmer and his work were not soon forgotten. Obituaries throughout New England and in New York and Pennsylvania described the “well known lecturer” on morals and politics who made an impact in and beyond New York City. It would have cheered him to learn he was included in a bibliography of infidel writers, compiled in 1812 by a Presbyterian in Kentucky, who listed Palmer along with Voltaire,

50 “Extract from Mr. Wm. Baker’s letter . . . . ,” Alexandria Advertiser, Sept. 5, 1803, [3].
54 Robert Cooper, Signs of the Times . . . . (Carlisle, Pa., 1804), 3.
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, David Hume, William Godwin, Erasmus Darwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, comte de Volney, and Paine. At least ten editions of *Principles of Nature* appeared over the next thirty-five years. Two London publishers produced editions of the book in 1819, for which one of them was convicted of blasphemy and seditious libel. In the United States, British immigrant and radical reformer George Henry Evans published reprints of *Principles of Nature* in 1830 and 1840. Another London edition appeared in 1841. Palmer was included in a compendium of radical thinkers published in Albany in 1842. As late as 1844, the *Berkshire County Whig* remembered Palmer, whose Fourth of July oration from 1788 was still for sale in local bookstores. For decades after his death, Palmer's writings provoked reactions both enthusiastic about and hostile to the idea of a life force within matter.56

**Identifying the vitalism in writings by Elihu Palmer** (and Isaac Ledyard, comte de Volney, and John Stewart) expands our sense of the range of ideas available to people in the early Republic. To the scholarly discussion that currently places adherents of Christianity and deism in tension with one another, vying for different visions of the new nation's future, we can add a thoroughly heretical one-substance universe of vibrant, sensitive matter. How a greater awareness of this cosmology might shape our perception of the religious landscape of the early Republic is not yet clear. We might see that deists often had more in common with Christian theists than we—or they—thought. Thomas Jefferson’s deism,

for example, left intact a hierarchy of human beings within divine creation, along with the slavery and gender inequality justified by supposedly inherent differences. And plenty of American deists agreed with Thomas Paine that divine Providence must have sided with them during a war that created a specially blessed nation. In short, some American deists might look more staid—more invested in the status quo, more hierarchical, more nationalist—when we make room for the vitalist notion of a mysterious life force infusing the smallest particles of matter.

Moreover, Palmer’s vitalism certainly shows the transatlantic movement of some of the most radical ideas of the age. In this context, Palmer emerges as part of a much longer and fundamentally international story of radical freethought. He never left the United States, but he was inspired by travelers such as Volney, who participated in the salon of baron d’Holbach in Paris, and Stewart, who had traveled the world and spent time in William Godwin’s circle in London. Palmer made it his work to serve as an intellectual switchboard of sorts, determined to share with American audiences the ideas he found so transformative. His effort formed part of the longer story of vitalist monism that, with its specific manifestations in different times and places, runs at least from Benedict de Spinoza’s *Ethics* to the modern-day deep ecology movement.57

Later in the nineteenth century, supporters continued to make the case for vibrant matter in both religious and scientific terms, just as Palmer had, although these became increasingly separate conversations. Transcendentalists, and also other proponents of a “religion of nature,” saw a life force animating the natural world. So too did some evolutionary scientists who—following the French biologist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck—retained the idea that the smallest parts of matter possess a self-activating and self-organizing power. By the twentieth century, the idea of vitalist materialism had, at least among scientists, lost out to the conception of matter as passive and reacting only to outside stimuli rather than initiating movement and growth. Later still, when some twenty-first-century epigeneticists considered once more the “inherent plasticity” and primitive “responsiveness” of even simple organic forms, the ideas seemed radical all over again. Palmer would have understood; plenty of his own

peers considered his ideas of active, sensate matter absurd and downright dangerous.\textsuperscript{58}

Yet it is quite possible that in his own day Palmer did not think of himself as radical at all—only as modern. Vitalism aligned a conception of a divine force immanent in matter with the empirical pursuits of natural philosophy, creating a cosmology that, Palmer believed, would someday prevail as both scientific fact and religious truth. Palmer did his part to advance the new common sense of vitalism, one that saw life in every sensate particle and that viewed every living thing as kin. He was right to admit that his ideas were “nothing new,” as he wrote in his letter to Jefferson. But Palmer was no less excited about them for all that. He viewed sensate matter in eternal motion not merely as a mechanical fact but as a cause for wonder, gratitude, and even joy. Humans would eventually understand the vitalist cosmos and accept the shared experience of all living things, Palmer believed. When that happened, he was sure, humanity would change its ways and transform the world.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{58} For the long and varied history of nature religion, see Albanese, \textit{Nature Religion in America}, 12 (“religion of nature”); for the ongoing (but marginalized) scientific engagement with vitalist materialism into the twenty-first century, see Riskin, \textit{Restless Clock}, chap. 10, esp. 365 (“inherent”). For a philosophical exploration of the idea that even inorganic matter has “vibrant materiality” and an inquiry into what politics might result from conceiving nonhuman things as “quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own,” see Jane Bennett, \textit{Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things} (Durham, N.C., 2010), viii. For an account of the most recent findings of epigeneticists, see Siddhartha Mukherjee, “Same But Different: How Epigenetics Can Blur the Line between Nature and Nurture,” \textit{New Yorker}, May 2, 2016, 24–30.

\textsuperscript{59} Palmer to Jefferson, Sept. 1, 1802, TJP, [1] (quotation).