

PIERRE BAYLE.

(1647-1706.)

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THE philosophy of the eighteenth century in France, taken as a whole, presents so striking a contrast with that of the seventeenth century that the passage from the one to the other would be hardly intelligible did we not meet, as early as the end of the seventeenth century, with thinkers who, though of secondary rank, were yet bold and original, and who distinctly heralded the approaching era. In the seventeenth century speculative reason, having finally freed itself from Scholasticism and the authority of the ancients, declared its absolute independence and made the freest use of it. It attempted a rational construction of the universe, by intimately uniting metaphysics and physics and endeavored to realise the ideal of an intuitive and deductive science, which should be to the totality of natural phenomena what mathematics is to numbers and figures. In religion it was independent in fact but respectful in form. With Descartes and Gassendi, it refrained from touching upon sacred subjects; with Malebranche and Leibniz it flattered itself upon having established the conformity of reason with faith. Political and social problems, at least in France, it carefully abstained from entering upon,—doubtless from caution, but also because it felt that the method was lacking to enable it to do so successfully.

The eighteenth century presents a very different aspect. It is here difficult to discover what the prevailing philosophy really is for the precise reason that philosophy is everywhere,—in tragedies, novels, history, political economy. Every one is more or less of a philosopher. Yet no one makes the least original effort to conceive reality in its unity. Metaphysical problems are neglected, or at most are dealt with separately, without a thought of their mu-

tual dependency and without any controlling idea to give to them unity and to render the results harmonious. They are no longer attractive in themselves; the interest people seemingly take in them conceals an ulterior object. At the same time, the attitude of philosophers towards religion has totally changed. The majority, instead of seeking a peaceful compromise with revealed religion, assail it openly; many of them going so far as to attack natural religion, while they nearly all proclaim morals to be independent of religious dogma. Political, social, and pedagogical problems become the chief objects of study with philosophers. As the Church had, from time immemorial, given undisputed solutions of these questions, the matter was, so to speak, a new one. People took to it eagerly. They were anxious to occupy this new and wide domain, which was but just opened, and rushed forward to take complete and immediate possession of it. At the same time the influence of the natural sciences, which were progressing more slowly but more surely, increased as new discoveries were made, and gradually prepared the way for a new form of philosophical speculation, which soon set in.

The principles of Descartes were, as we have seen, in great measure responsible for the formation of a philosophy different from his own. Descartes himself sedulously avoided the discussion of political and social questions; but that his successors should have so applied the philosophy of "clear ideas," was inevitable. In the same way, the precaution he had taken to "set apart" the truths of faith was not equivalent to a treaty of peace with theology, accepted on both sides, and definitive. It was merely a truce, destined soon to be broken. The conflict was so inevitable that, even had theologians been perfectly reconciled to Cartesianism, the strife would nevertheless have been brought on soon thereafter, by the natural development of philosophical thought alone. If Cartesianism was looked upon suspiciously by Pascal, it did not alarm his friends at Port Royal: Arnauld and Nicole in their *Logic* showed themselves staunch Cartesians. Nor did the most illustrious of the leaders of the French Roman Catholic Church, Bossuet and Fénelon, conceal their sympathy for the philosophy of Descartes, being, as it seems, more desirous of finding Cartesianism conformable to the teaching of the orthodox doctrine, than of combating it in the name of the latter. It was from the ranks of philosophers themselves that serious hostilities began. Pure Cartesians these opponents were not; but they followed, more boldly than Descartes himself, the way he had laid open; and if they dif-

ferred from him, it was chiefly in applying his method and principles at the very points where he had abstained from so doing.

On the other hand there had been running, throughout the seventeenth century, a more or less hidden, but uninterrupted, undercurrent of opposition to the spiritualistic philosophy, which was then predominant, and above all to Christian philosophy. Being Epicureans in spirit, taste, and often in morals, and unbelievers in matters of religion, the "libertines" were naturally drawn to doctrines which were in accordance with their tendencies. They welcomed the empiricism of Gassendi; they would readily have espoused materialism, had the latter openly declared itself, and the most intelligent among them were not long in guessing the advantage which the cause of unbelief would draw from the method and physics of Descartes. All this, however, was not worked out, made clear, and openly presented to the public. To find the real precursors of the philosophy of the eighteenth century, we must go to the last quarter of the seventeenth. There then appeared two minds quite different from each other in all things save in one: that they both sowed many seeds which were soon to bear fruit. These men were Bayle and Fontenelle.

If by "philosopher" we understand a man whose ideas concerning the great metaphysical problems form a definite system, Bayle must be refused that name, for he pleads the natural weakness of the human mind, and takes refuge in a modest kind of scepticism. He should rather be called a scholar, a commentator of the ancients, a historian of theological controversies, and, above all, a journalist. Nothing interests and diverts him more than the *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres*. He was born a Protestant, was converted to Roman Catholicism, but almost immediately after relapsed to Protestantism, on which account not being allowed to dwell in France, he finally fixed his residence in Rotterdam. He was not a daring man, at least in no respect did he appear so. His aspect was rather that of a person of the sixteenth century than of one of the eighteenth. He published large folios, full of learned discussions, and loved to point out and correct the mistakes of other scholars whose works nobody read. He liked not only history, but the crumbs of history, half buried in the dust of dictionaries. Such a universal and greedy curiosity cannot but seem harmless; and if peradventure a bold expression here and there causes the reader to prick up his ears, he is soon reassured. It required a keen insight to discover, amid such inexhaustible and minute erudition, constantly busied with almost forgotten things,

an engine of war destructive of nearly all that the seventeenth century held certain and sacred. Nevertheless that engine was there, or at least it came from there. And Voltaire had good reason for eulogising the immortal Bayle as "the pride of the human species."

One neither can nor ought to give a systematic account of ideas which their own author explicitly neglected to unite into a system. But Bayle's ideas, though not strictly linked together, are yet coherent. They centre about certain leading points, to which Bayle always reverts even when we least expect him to do so; and these points themselves have as a common centre—namely, the relations between revelation and reason, with all the consequences which the solution of that question involves.

Bayle boldly asserts at times that there can be no such thing as opposing reason. For there is, he declares, a distinct and vivid light which shines upon all men the moment they open the eyes of their attention: it is God Himself, the essential and substantial Truth, who then enlightens them immediately. It is in vain for one to try to deny this light. There are axioms which we cannot question, however hard we may try. We cannot believe that the whole is not greater than the part. Even though the opposite statement should be cited in Scripture a hundred times, man, such as he is, would not believe it. Therefore let nobody say that theology is a queen to which philosophy is a serving-maid merely; for the theologians themselves, by their very behavior, confess that philosophy is the queen and theology the servant. Hence the exertions and contortions which they inflict upon their minds to avoid being accused of a conflict with genuine philosophy. They would certainly not exert themselves so much if they did not tacitly admit that the authority of any dogma not confirmed, examined, and recorded in the supreme parliament of reason and natural light, is "wavering, and fragile as glass."

Had Bayle always spoken thus he would have not only pre-saged but forestalled the eighteenth century. But then he would have shocked the great majority of his contemporaries. Being condemned as irreligious and impious, he would have been far less read, and his influence would have been infinitely more restricted. He usually speaks a much more cautious language. Not only is he a believer, but he repudiates utterly the accusation of heresy. He objects to being mistaken for a Socinian, who refuses to believe in the Trinity and the Incarnation as contrary to natural light.

He even goes further. In the case of a conflict between

revelation and reason, the latter must yield. For, could reason lead us to a knowledge of truth, the token of this would be evidence. Now there are things entirely evident which a Christian rejects as false. Thus, says Bayle, you reject the axiom of identity when you accept the Trinity, the Eucharist, and Transubstantiation. Those who lived before the Gospel did not hesitate to accept as true some very evident propositions; but the mysteries of our theology have shown that these propositions, in spite of their evidence, are false. Let us profit by this lesson, and, in order not to fall into errors like those of the heathen, and thus less excusable, let us hold nothing as certainly true, save what is taught by the Church.

But let us notice the very special motives which Bayle gives for this attitude, apparently so submissive. Let us hear him speak to philosophers and theologians by turns. "Do not try to understand mysteries," he says to the former; "if you could understand them they would be mysteries no longer. Do not even try to lessen their apparent absurdity. Your reason here is utterly powerless; and who knows but that absurdity may be an essential ingredient of mystery? Believe, as Christians; but as philosophers, abstain." And, turning to theologians: "You are quite right in demanding that we should believe; but make this demand in the name of authority only, and do not be so imprudent as to try to justify your belief in the eyes of reason. God has willed it so, God has done so: therefore it is good and true, wisely done, and wisely permitted. Do not venture any further. If you enter into detailed reasons for all this you will never come to an end, and, after a thousand disputes, you will be compelled to fall back upon your original reason of authority. In this matter, the best use to make of reason is not to reason. Moreover, if you condescend to discuss the point, you will be beaten. You wish that truth, that is, revelation, should always have the best reasons on its side. You wish this to be so, and you imagine it to be so. What a gross mistake! How could a theologian's answers regarding mysteries, which are beyond the reach of reason, be as clear as a philosopher's objections? From the very fact of a dogma being mysterious and utterly incomprehensible to weak human understanding, it naturally follows that our reason will combat it with very strong arguments, and can find no other satisfactory solution than the authority of God.

"This is precisely what theologians do not often admit. Because I think the reasons they give in favor of the dogma are weak, they conclude that I do not believe in the dogma. I should

not indeed believe if God had not bidden me to do so; but He commands and I submit. But He does not bid me hold demonstrations as sound when they are not. Theologians must choose: either they must affirm their dogmas in the name of a supernatural light, without discussion; or, if they discuss them, they must not assume that they alone have the privilege of possessing truth. But they nearly always adopt a third method: they choose to discuss, and pretend to be right beforehand. If any one candidly and undisguisedly points out the strength of the contrary opinion, he makes himself odious and suspicious. Indeed, even theologians themselves scruple to state the strongest arguments urged against them, lest these should produce too forcible an impression upon the reader. These arguments they conceal, out of charity and zeal for truth. Was not Cardinal Bellarmin reproached for his candid statement of the reasons alleged by heretics, on the ground that it was prejudicial?"

If therefore a theologian desires to act prudently, while remaining sincere, he must abstain from entering upon a discussion in which he is sure not to prevail. He must present mysteries as they are, that is, as incomprehensible and absurd. The Christian will nevertheless believe in them, since they were revealed by God Himself. It is his sole reason for believing in them: but fortunately this reason is indisputable. One does not raise objections against God.

Yet Bayle did raise objections; and the strictures which he preferred against Providence elicited, as everybody knows, the *Théodicée* of Leibniz. According to Bayle, if we look upon things in a human way, i. e., from the point of view of mere reason, the partisans of Providence find it difficult to prove that everything in the universe is the work of Providence, and equally difficult to defend themselves against the Manicheans, who maintain that a principle of good and a principle of evil are continually at strife in the universe, and that neither is able to triumph over the other. No doubt, as God is all-powerful and all-bounteous, his work cannot but be the best possible, and we thence naturally infer the existence of Providence. But does experience confirm this reasoning? It does not: we see that man is wicked and miserable. Was the Creator unable or unwilling to make him otherwise? In both cases it is very difficult to defend Providence. Were there nowadays, says Bayle, Marcionites as skilled in disputation as are either the Jesuits or the Jansenists, they would not have advanced three syllogisms ere they had compelled their adversaries to confess that

they did not understand their own assertions, and that we come here to the verge of the unfathomable abyss of the sovereignty of the Creator, in which our reason is lost, there remaining nothing but faith to uphold as. A pagan philosopher would here have an advantage over the Christian.

It is evident that evil should be prevented, if possible. Now God does not prevent all the disorders in the world, and yet it was most easy for Him to do so. It is also evident that a non-existent creature cannot be an accomplice to an evil deed, and it ought not in justice to be punished later on therefor. And yet, does not God allow all men to suffer the consequences of the original sin? Can this sin justify all the sufferings in the world? The conclusion is: Believe in Revelation. "Revelation is the only store-house from which arguments can be produced against such people; by it alone can we refute the so-called eternity of the evil principle."

Leibniz had much ado to refute Bayle's objections. He shows indeed that the hypothesis of the Manicheans is shallow and that nothing is easier and more insignificant than to suppose a special principle in order to explain facts which puzzle us. But this Bayle is perfectly willing to grant him. Does Leibniz in his turn succeed in proving man's liberty and vindicating Providence? Hardly. The liberty which Leibniz recognises in man is a form of determinism merely; and his proposed explanation of the existence of evil in the universe, perhaps the least unsatisfactory that could be given, has but one fault; but the fault is a serious one. It forces its readers into pessimism. If this world be indeed the best of all possible worlds, *Candide* is not wrong in thinking it bad. We must therefore agree with Bayle that Revelation is our only resource here, and that reason, pure and simple, does not bear out the same conclusion.

But, one might object, the origin of evil, the cause of sin, and the relation of God to the world, are purely speculative questions, raised only by metaphysicians; and if reason finds it no easy thing to agree with Revelation on these points, it has quite as much difficulty in agreeing with itself when thrown on its own resources. Human reason, says Bayle, is a principle of destruction and not of edification; it is fitted only for raising doubts, and for evasions. "It therefore matters little if it runs counter to Revelation on problems which are beyond its reach. At least we clearly see that the two agree on questions connected with practical life, that faith engenders virtue, and that religion sanctions the supreme rule of conduct. Here no difficulties or objections appear.

True, says Bayle, but on one condition: religion must teach nothing contrary to morals. No doubt it is unlikely to do so; yet sometimes it does. Indeed have we not heard Fathers of the Church declaring, and contemporary priests repeating after them, that compulsion should be used to bring refractory people to the orthodox faith? Hence sprang the persecutions against heretics, the dragonades; hence the Protestants were hunted, pillaged, imprisoned, sent to the galleys, their children kidnapped, and their clergymen hanged; hence all the other methods of violent conversion set in motion when the Edict of Nantes was revoked. Now, not only are these proceedings absurd and even prejudicial to their own end; not only are these persecutions cruel and abominable, but the maxim that justifies them is based on a wrong principle. God cannot have said "*Compelle intrare.*" Just as there is no right against right, there is no Revelation against Revelation. Now, in moral matters, the first revelation is that of the conscience, "the true light which lighteth every man which cometh into the world."

Bayle is here decidedly more affirmative than usual, and the cause is evidently the indignation he feels at beholding the persecutions. "If anybody presumes to assert that God has revealed to us a moral maxim in direct opposition to the first principles of all morals, we must deny the assertion, and maintain that such a person is misinterpreting the text, and that one ought rather to reject the testimony of one's criticism and grammar than that of one's reason. God cannot contradict himself. If the Scripture does not agree with our conscience, it is because we misunderstand the Scripture. And whatever contests may arise, conscience must always have the last word. For instance, it tells us that sincere ignorance is guiltless, and that a man cannot be responsible for a fault which he commits, without knowing that he commits it. We cannot therefore believe that a heretic or even an infidel, if he is sincere, can be punished by God for anything but for evil deeds which he may have done while knowing them to be evil. As for the deeds he may have done with a secure conscience—I mean a conscience which he has not himself maliciously blinded—I cannot be persuaded that they are crimes.

Likewise, the stories in the Bible are not always edifying. If they shock my conscience, shall I abstain from condemning them? Because David, for instance, partook of God's inspiration, shall I not look upon him as a murderer, an ungrateful man, an adulterer? If the Scripture, in relating a deed, blames or praises it, nobody is

allowed to appeal from its judgment; we must all make our praise and blame conform to the pattern of the Scripture. But if the Holy Ghost has not qualified it we must not hesitate to censure what we think is a crime. There is no medium course: either such actions are worthless, or they are not wrong. Of these alternatives, our conscience can accept only the first.

Further, viewing the question more generally, religious faith does not seem to have any influence whatever upon men's manners. We have only to look about us. If we examine the morals of Christians, their lewd deeds, their scandals, their craftiness, and all that they do in order to procure money, or to obtain offices, or to supplant competitors, we shall find that they could hardly be more licentious, even if they did not believe in immortality. We shall find that, as a rule, they abstain only from such deeds as would expose them to infamy, or to the gallows, two checks which might restrain the corruption of a godless man as easily as it does theirs. A great many rogues and scoundrels believe in the immortality of the soul, whereas many godly and righteous men do not. Soldiers may be irreproachable in their faith, and indulge in all sorts of excesses. This is also seen in some women. There is nothing inexplicable about it. It is not the general opinions of the mind which determine our actions: it is the present passions of the heart; and, as the English psychologists of the nineteenth century very rightly say, "*cognition does not produce action.*" Thus (always excepting those who are led by God's spirit), the faith a man has in a religion is no guarantee for his conduct. On the contrary, it is often quite apt to rouse in his soul anger against those who think differently, fear, and a kind of zeal for devotional practice, in the hope that outward actions, and a public confession of the true faith, will screen his disorderly life and gain pardon for it some day.

Thence arise consequences which we can hardly deny Bayle, and which are momentous ones. If believing in certain dogmas has no necessary influence on the conduct of man, we may truly say that morals are independent of belief. If Christians who are "irreproachable as regards faith" lead an evil life, we must needs infer that rightful conduct is not inseparable from orthodoxy. We may therefore imagine a state composed of men believing neither in the existence of God nor in an after-life. Were they, however, zealous in preserving the public good, in checking malefactors, in preventing quarrels, in upholding the rights of widows and orphans, in encouraging fairness in business, who can doubt but such

a state would be a highly civilised one? Throughout the eighteenth century this hypothesis of a "society of atheists" proposed by Bayle, is discussed, and though some, as Voltaire, for instance, may have been made uneasy by it, it still remains, for many others, a sort of ideal.

Recapitulating Bayle's views of the mysteries of religion and of belief in the supernatural, it appears that from the point of view of knowledge, such mysteries are offensive to reason and seem absurd; in a moral point of view, they do not make man any better, and are, to say the least, useless. What is to be inferred from this? That we may dispense with the belief in the supernatural and with mysteries; that we must seek what is good and true by human reason alone? Far from it. Bayle's conclusion is in direct opposition to this. Behold, he says in substance, the weakness and helplessness of human reason! If God did not teach us the truth, would our reason bring us to it? Reason is very far from it, and is ignorant of the ways that lead to it. Therefore, how much gratitude do we owe to Divine Kindness, that has especially revealed to us through the Scripture what we should never have discovered by ourselves and what would even seem to us absurd and unacceptable, were it not corroborated in this way.

One cannot carry submission farther. How can a man be suspected of impiety who does not hesitate a moment to silence reason when Revelation speaks? Still we may question whether this submission is without reserve, if this respectfulness comes from the heart or only from the lips. If he is sincere why does not Bayle, after the example of Malebranche, seek to make the inward revelation, which is our reason and conscience, agree with the outward revelation, which is the Scripture? Why does he purposely insist on the impossibility of making acceptable to reason what religion commands us to believe? And if insincere, his language becomes a dreadful irony. Then Bayle's defence of religion looks like an organised attack upon it: when he speaks of the "weakness and helplessness of reason," he really means the incomprehensibility and absurdity of revelation. In a word, with a show of deep respect, he patiently destroys one after another, all motives for believing in Christian dogmas. When he has finished, revealed religion can no longer hold its own; it is on the verge of ruin.

Therefore the works of Bayle, particularly his *Dictionary*, were an inexhaustible store for the unbelievers of the eighteenth century. To take but one instance among a thousand, this is how he foreshadows those who are to take advantage of the defects in

the sacred texts. "Were such an account to be found in Thucydides or Livy, all critics would unanimously conclude that the copyists had transposed the pages, forgotten something in one place, repeated something in another, or inserted spurious passages amidst the work of the author. But we must beware of such suspicions when the Bible is in question. Nevertheless, there have been persons bold enough to maintain that all the chapters or verses in the First Book of Samuel do not occupy the place they originally had." Suffer this cautious remark to pass and all of modern Biblical exegesis follows.

It accordingly matters little that Bayle is incapable of systematic thought; that he appears now as a Cartesian, and now as a Pyrrhonian, that at one time evidence dispels his doubt, and that again his doubt overcomes all evidence; and that he actually seems to take pleasure in these contradictions. The eddies do not prevent us from clearly perceiving the direction of the stream. Bayle is bent on nothing less than breaking up the system of belief and principles commonly accepted by his predecessors and contemporaries. This system was one of "Christian-rationalism." Bayle shows that a choice is imperative: either one must be a rationalist and cease to be a Christian; or be a Christian, and forego reason altogether. Scriptural texts had been relied on: Bayle gives us to understand that these texts are not proof against criticism. Religion had been looked upon as the basis of morals: Bayle proves that morals depend solely upon the conscience, and that religion, even the true religion, has no influence whatever upon men's conduct. It was thought—at least in France—that royalty was of divine right; but, says Bayle, "if we do not more often see kings dethroned, it is because the nations have not been worked upon by clever enough intrigues." We might make the enumeration longer: for the "prejudices" were not few that Bayle attacked. No one, indeed, was to go further than this precursor of the Enlightenment. And even in our days his conception of morals as independent of religion and metaphysics seems to many people dangerously bold.