CHAPTER 10

Bayle’s Skepticism Revisited

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Abstract

Current historiography tends to present the Huguenot intellectuals as a relatively isolated group within Dutch society. In this article it is argued that it is vitally important to reconnect the exiled Huguenots, intellectuals as well as entrepreneurs and craftsmen, with their Dutch environment, a society in transition, politically and economically, and far less tolerant than its reputation had made them to expect, in the decades before and after 1700. In the case of Pierre Bayle, this offers possibilities for a new approach and for a possible solution of the ‘Bayle Enigma’: how did Bayle see the relation between faith and reason? Among leading Bayle scholars only those that are themselves committed Protestants tend to claim Bayle for the fideist cause, whereas others see his work as the prequel to the dechristianised eighteenth century French Enlightenment. Here Bayle’s fideism is seriously questioned, arguing from an analysis of Bayle’s plea for toleration, as developed throughout the body of his published works. It is shown how, departing from the ineffability of religious truth and an emphasis on the subjective nature of faith, Bayle moves to a position where he categorically denies the possibility of tolerance within a confessional context, as every Christian church or sect will eventually suppress or persecute others in the cause of what they consider true religion. On the contrary, Bayle extolled the virtue of the atheist, who does not expect a reward, over the morality of any religious tradition or custom. Any attempt to cast Bayle as a pyrrhonist when it comes to religion and, more specifically, theology should be rejected: whereas the natural sciences provide useful knowledge, Bayle denies the possibility of a sound natural theology and radically separates reason and religion. In this he essentially agreed with some of his compatriots who, under persecution, adopted Spinozist positions already before 1685.

1 Between Golden Age and Dutch Enlightenment: The Dutch Refuge

As a rule, historians have tended to consider the Dutch Refuge as an essentially foreign episode in the history of the Netherlands, and it is easy to see why. The sudden growth during the 1680s of the French-speaking population—
estimates vary but at least some thirty-five thousand Protestant réfugiés were involved, largely concentrated in the provinces of Holland and Zeeland—occurred precisely between the flowering of the Golden Age of the Dutch Republic and the breakthrough of Dutch Enlightenment, which until fairly recently was situated in the second half of the eighteenth century.¹ The Dutch Refuge simply arrived too late in the Dutch Republic to have contributed to what is still regarded its finest hour. It coincided with the gradual loss of power and prestige of the Republic, following the French invasion of 1672, at a time when the rapid expansion of the Dutch economy was coming to a grinding halt.² More importantly perhaps, it just remained too French. The fact that upon arrival French Huguenots joined Walloon churches, some of which dated from the sixteenth century, was not very helpful. Their proud insistence to remain Francophone and their dogged obsession with the theological politics of their country of origin hardly contributed to the integration of the Refuge into the Dutch Republic.

The Refuge presents a special challenge to the historiography of the Dutch Enlightenment because the latter’s most authoritative accounts have turned eighteenth-century debates about the very nature of Dutch culture and politics into its crucially important issue. In both Wijnand Mijnhardt’s and Niek


van Sas’s analyses the predicament of the Dutch Republic constituted the essence of Dutch enlightened discourse—not unlike the state religion of Rome, in which the history of Rome itself was the main object of reverence.\(^3\) In view of the massive amounts of literature produced by eighteenth-century Dutchmen in particular during the latter half of the century concerning the state of their ailing nation, Mijnhardt and Van Sas are able to point to a wealth of evidence supporting their claims. On close inspection their competing views on the Dutch Enlightenment reveal more similarities than its authors perhaps would care to admit. Both accounts concentrate emphatically on the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. For obvious reasons around 1700 the Dutch Enlightenment was not yet as obsessed as it was to become with diagnosing the causes of Dutch decline, although by the early 1700s to many observers the French surely had something to do with the gradual loss of prestige the Republic was beginning to suffer. From 1672 to 1713 the Dutch Republic was almost constantly at war with Louis XIV and the finances of the States General would never recover from the strains this major military effort put on the national budget.\(^4\) In addition, during the early eighteenth century Dutch commentators increasingly came to regard ‘French morals’ a major threat to the indigenous moral fiber. Throughout the eighteenth century the solid and sociable Dutch burger would be reinvented again and again, and his moral virtues were largely defined in opposition to the ‘French’ aristocrat, whose morals were, needless to say, effeminate, arrogant, and ultimately treacherous.\(^5\)

Meanwhile, the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes came to strengthen the status of French as a vehicle of scholarly communication. A formidable array of the most prominent Dutch eighteenth-century authors, including Justus van Effen, Isaac da Pinto, Elie Luzac, Belle van Zuylen, and Frans Hemsterhuis,


reached their compatriots publishing French journals, treatises, novels, and philosophical dialogues. None of them play any part in either Mijnhardt’s or Van Sas’s accounts of the Dutch Enlightenment, with the obvious exception of the mature Van Effen, once he abandoned French in favor of the vernacular, that is. Both Mijnhardt and Van Sas insist on the importance of the late-eighteenth-century emergence of a national cultural and political arena, but their approach comes at a price, as their national perspectives exclude some of the finest minds of the age from having any relevance to the Dutch Enlightenment.

Both Mijnhardt’s van Van Sas’s analyses carry the considerable advantage that they help us to understand why the Dutch Enlightenment failed to make any impact abroad: by concentrating on the Dutch Republic itself, the Dutch Enlightenment grew increasingly inward-looking, or so it would seem, and, as a consequence, it became largely irrelevant to observers from abroad. During its Golden Age, foreign commentators such as Sir William Temple considered the Republic “the envy of some, the fear of others, and the wonder of all their neighbours.” But by the end of the century the neighboring countries had, each in their own way, made huge steps forward on the road to recovery from such major crises as the Thirty Years’ War, the Fronde, and the Civil War. By the early eighteenth century the Holy Roman Empire, France, and Great Britain were all well on their way to establishing a new and modern exertion of state power, while the Dutch Republic started to suffer from the inadequacies of its increasingly antiquated constitutional make-up.

Recent research has opened up a new perspective on the Dutch Enlightenment, and it now seems imperative to take the Refuge and its impact on Dutch society and Enlightenment culture into account. While the discontinuities between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries should probably not be overestimated, a major difference between the seventeenth- and the eighteenth-century Dutch Republic was constituted by rapidly changing immigration figures, as the growing self-consciousness of Dutch enlightened discourse appears to have coincided with the virtual halt of immigration.

history of the Dutch Republic, with the notable exception of the latter half of
the eighteenth century, was characterized by a constant influx of immigrants:
from the fall of Antwerp to the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, hundreds of
thousands of foreigners found their way to what Bayle dubbed “la grande arche
des fugitifs.”10 Traditionally, the Dutch Refuge has often been identified as a
particularly successful example of foreign immigration. Thorough research,
however, carried out by David van der Linden, has convincingly established
how tough life must have been in the Dutch Refuge. Making ends meet was
much more difficult than many of its more prominent members may have
wanted us to believe.11 It would seem that the traditional image of its pros-
perity needs to be scaled down considerably. To the large majority of French
Protestants, Holland turned out to be anything but a land of milk and honey.
Even in the printing industry, only a handful of Huguenot entrepreneurs man-
aged to survive. In Rotterdam between 1680 and 1715, poor relief among the
Walloons quadrupled, wrecking the finances of the Rotterdam congregation.12

The religious fervor of the Refuge also appears to have been seriously
overestimated.13 Apart from the fact that religious reasons were not the sole
factors involved in the decision of many Huguenots to move to the Republic,
living in exile turned out to present a considerable challenge to their loyalty
to the Reformed creed. On the one hand, French Reformed ministers in the
Dutch Republic, for obvious reasons, began to develop an increasingly exclu-
sivist and intolerant discourse, and it has been argued that in doing so ortho-
dox Huguenots actually continued a strong French tradition.14 On the other,
however, explaining the Revocation and its terrible consequences to its victims
turned out to be a major theological challenge. The Calvinist argument, accord-
ing to which the Revocation should be considered a providential punishment
for the sins of the Huguenots, could not be developed successfully without

10 Pierre Bayle, Dictionnaire historique et critique (Rotterdam, 1697), article ‘Keuchlin.’ I have
used the second edition (Rotterdam, 1702). On the history of the Dictionnaire historique
et critique, which was first published in 1697 in Rotterdam, see H. H. M. van Lieshout,
The Making of Pierre Bayle’s Dictionnaire historique et critique (Amsterdam, 2001). See also
https://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/content/dictionnaire-de-bayle.
11 Van der Linden, Experiencing Exile (see above, n. 1), pp. 15–78. See also Frijhoff, ‘Uncertain
Brotherhood’ (see above, n. 1).
12 Van der Linden, Experiencing Exile (see above, n. 1), pp. 73–4.
13 Van der Linden, Experiencing Exile (see above, n. 1), pp. 81–129.
14 Marshall, John Locke, Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture (see above, n. 1),
pp. 179–89.
adding the promise of imminent salvation for those concerned.15 Thus, by the early 1690s réfugié pastors such as Pierre Jurieu started promising their flocks that following the ascension of William III to the throne of England, a return to France was now at hand. As early as 1686 Jurieu had published his infamous L'Accomplissement des prophéties, revealing how the Book of Revelation presaged the imminent restoration of the Church in France.16 Jurieu’s former friend Pierre Bayle was genuinely disgusted both by Jurieu’s millenarian pretensions and by the bloodthirstiness of this Rotterdam pastor, who was relishing the prospect of the imminent military downfall of the Anti-Christ, that is Louis XIV, by a northern European Protestant coalition led by William III.17 In the wake of the Treaty of Ryswick (1697), however, on which occasion William III preferred to ignore the plight of the réfugiés in exchange for his recognition by Louis XIV as rightful King of England, the large majority of the Dutch Huguenots started to realize that Jurieu’s promises would not materialize in the foreseeable future: at least a thousand réfugiés in the Dutch Republic actually returned to France and converted to Catholicism once it became clear that William III was not about to topple the Sun King.18

The more recent views on the Refuge may also shed a new light on the philosophical stance of Pierre Bayle, the most brilliant réfugié who during the early Enlightenment found a new home in Holland, and more specifically on his alleged ‘Pyrrhonism.’ It would seem that some of the hardships suffered by Dutch Huguenots as well as a series of personal crises resulting from the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes left their mark on the increasingly despondent views articulated by ‘le philosophe de Rotterdam.’ Bayle had arrived in Rotterdam as early as 1681 to take up a position as professor at the newly established Illustrious School of the city, which he would never leave. He never learned Dutch because he never needed to: his employers as well as his friends in Holland all knew French and the French community of Rotterdam was rapidly growing. In 1687, Isaac Dumont de Bostaquet, a nobleman from Normandy, observed upon arriving in Rotterdam that “this beautiful town had become almost ‘Frenchified,’” owing to the large numbers of inhabitants from Rouen and Dieppe who were now living in Rotterdam.19 In 1708 Élie Richard from la Rochelle visited Rotterdam and estimated that its French population

15 Van der Linden, Experiencing Exile (see above, n. 1), pp. 131–59.
18 Van der Linden, Experiencing Exile (see above, n. 1), p. 132.
19 Van der Linden, Experiencing Exile (see above, n. 1), p. 28.
numbered fourteen thousand people. This was surely exaggerated, but by the late seventeenth century the Walloon community of Rotterdam must have accommodated a little under three thousand members at least. So it took Bayle little effort to remain French, living in Rotterdam for twenty-five years. But being a Frenchman living in the Dutch Refuge inevitably caused feelings of alienation and in the end, arguably, despair once the message hit home that the expectation of any imminent return to France was illusory.

2 The Bayle Enigma

Bayle’s philosophical stance, meanwhile, continues to baffle commentators. Indeed, few early modern philosophers have inspired such widely divergent interpretations as Pierre Bayle has. Although modern Bayle scholarship only started during the 1960s following the publication of Élisabeth Labrousse’s two major volumes on the philosophe de Rotterdam, by the late 1990s Thomas Lennon was fully entitled to conclude that the confusion surrounding Bayle’s work had become tantalizing:

To take just the twentieth-century literature, the suggestions are that Bayle was fundamentally a positivist, an atheist, a deist, a sceptic, a fideist, a Socinian, a liberal Calvinist, a conservative Calvinist, a libertine, Judaizing Christian, or even a secret Jew, a Manichean, an existentialist ... [I]t is tempting to conclude that these commentators cannot have been talking about the same author, or at least that they have not used the same texts.


23 Thomas M. Lennon, Reading Bayle (Toronto, 1999), p. 15.
Over the past decade or so, the situation has only deteriorated further as the experts have continued to put forward interpretations of Bayle’s thought that are fundamentally at odds with one another.

The reasons for these divergences are obvious, or so it would seem, for to begin with Bayle was a highly prolific author who published more than nine thousand double-column pages in folio; the *Dictionnaire historique et critique* alone, first published in 1697, counts some six million words, covering many hundreds of names but also sixty-one cities, twenty religious sects, eight islands, six peoples, six rivers, five provinces, three monasteries, two feasts, and one horse. Second, Bayle was not a systematic philosopher, that is to say he never sought to create a philosophical system—in the way Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz had tried to do. Instead, he preferred to comment on topical issues, which it could be argued attests to the modernity of his approach, which is further complicated by the way his thought clearly matured. Bayle did not shy away from thinking twice. Third, especially in the *Dictionnaire*, Bayle’s style has also caused confusion, as his immense erudition allowed him to create entries largely made up of quotations, comments, and further clarifications that more often than not makes it difficult to identify Bayle’s personal stance. Finally, the skeptical fideism attributed to Bayle by Labrousse (and soon after by the indomitable Richard Popkin) is itself inherently ambiguous, for a skeptical fideist doubts until he or she believes—and anyone wondering whether and why the fideist’s skepticism does not affect the contents of his or her alleged faith is simply expected to assume so. In short, fideism tends to turn the epistemological issue of the objects of doubt into the moral and psychological issue of the believer’s sincerity. Traditionally, doubts about man’s cognitive access to the world he inhabits was welcomed by theologians arguing for the necessity of faith. But skepticism comes in varying degrees, and in some cases it was just very hard to decide when exactly skeptics stopped questioning the veracity of our insights. Arguably the best known example of this complication is supplied in the final pages of Hume’s *Dialogues on Natural Religion*, in which Philo, having destroyed the arguments for the existence of God, suddenly declares that a “person seasoned with a just sense of the imperfections of natural reason, will fly to revealed truth with the greatest avidity,” and that “[t]o be a

philosophical sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian.”25

Currently, two main lines of approach have come to dominate Bayle scholarship, for while Hubert Bost, José Maia Neto, and Michael Hickson are continuing and further developing the Labrousse-Popkin interpretation according to which Bayle was indeed a Pyrrhonist and a fideist, Antony McKenna and Jonathan Israel have embraced Gianluca Mori’s attempts to demonstrate that Bayle, although he was a skeptic of sorts, did not endorse Pyrrhonism, and was no fideist, but rather a rationalist, fiercely critical of revealed religion.26 When Élizabeth Labrousse first launched her fideist reading of Bayle, she did so in order to reclaim Bayle for the history of French Protestantism. According to Labrousse, Bayle never left the church he grew up in, and she has argued eloquently that turning Bayle into a precursor of the French Enlightenment runs the risk of conflating the cultural context of the Huguenot refugees, desperately trying to come to terms with their predicament in the Netherlands of the 1680s and ‘90s, with the intellectual climate ruling Paris from the 1720s onwards.27 At the time, the impact of her work was huge, as is evident for instance from the way it was incorporated into Quentin Skinner’s celebrated paper ‘Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas.’ Labrousse’s efforts have remained extremely influential: although Hubert Bost feels the term fideism does not suit Bayle’s final outlook on the relation between faith and reason, he also insists on characterizing the philosophe de Rotterdam as “un protestant compliqué.”28

The scholar who did more than anyone to establish the image of Bayle as a ‘superskeptic’ was of course Richard Popkin, a close personal friend of Labrousse. To Popkin, Bayle was such a crucial figure in his History of Skepticism, as he was the last major representative of the seventeenth-century ‘crise pyrrhonienne’ as well as the most important single influence on David Hume, arguably the greatest skeptical philosopher ever. But unlike Hume, Popkin’s Bayle remained a fideist, whose faith “was built on the ruins of reason.” Just read, Popkin argued, the entry on Pyrrho in the Dictionnaire, and in particular the accompanying remarks B and C; consider the Third Éclaircissement to the Dictionnaire, and the further clarifications concerning the articles on the Manicheans and on Atheism: following Pyrrho, Bayle emphasized the impotence of reason, which is nowhere more apparent than in our inability to account for the reality of evil in a world created by an omnipotent and benevolent deity.

3 Bayle on Toleration

Bayle’s justly famous plea in favor of toleration, entitled Commentaire philosophique sur ces paroles de Jésus-Christ Contrain-les-d’Entrer, has often been portrayed as his first essentially skeptical book. It was published in 1686, eleven years before the Dictionnaire and only several months after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. Bayle had just been informed that his beloved brother Jacob, a minister, had died in a French prison. According to Chris Laursen, the Commentaire promotes ‘Pyrrhonist’ or ‘Academic’ skepticism, and one of the reasons for this is that its famous doctrine of the erring conscience undermines


30 Popkin, The History of Scepticism (see above, n. 26), p. 292.

31 Pierre Bayle, Commentaire philosophique, ed. Jean-Michel Gros (Paris, 2006). The title page of the first edition said it was published in Canterbury and translated from an English text, composed by one “sieur Jean Fox de Bruggs.” In reality the Rotterdam libraire Reinier Leers was its publisher, and Bayle’s authorship would not remain a secret for long.
its own rationalist tendencies. Thus, a direct line can be drawn between the Commentaire and the article on Pyrrho, which Laursen uses conversely to elucidate the Commentaire. As Laursen readily admits, this line of reasoning requires the caveats that should come with interpreting an earlier text based on a later one, but according to him it provides the only way to render the Commentaire coherent.

Let’s first take a closer look at the Commentaire’s rationalism or ‘dogmatism,’ as Laursen prefers to call it. As will be only too familiar, Bayle’s plea for toleration consists of two parts, and centers on the famous passage in Luke 14,23, according to which Christ would have advised his followers not to be lenient toward unbelievers: “compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.” The first part of the Commentaire is a sustained attack on the literal interpretation of Luke, and is based on a maxim first put forward by Augustine, according to which no literal interpretation of Scripture implying the necessity to commit a crime can be true. For God has provided us with reason and as a consequence we are obliged to make use of this gift:

Sans exception il faut soumettre toutes les lois morales à cette idée naturelle d’équité, qui aussi bien que la lumière métaphysique, illumine tout homme venant au monde. (emphasis in original)

The Bible is such a difficult book, Bayle continues, that without the use of our rational abilities we would be unable to understand what God is trying to tell us, and as a consequence we would be condemned to the wretched state of Pyrrhonism.

In short: it is reason which tells us what can be admitted as a truly biblical message and what not. It was, to be sure, Élisabeth Labrousse herself who first pointed to Bayle’s moral rationalism, which appears to rest on a particular
variety of Cartesianism—a Cartesianism that is without the voluntarist theory of the “création des vérités éternelles.” Subsequently, Antony McKenna emphasized the extent to which these rationalist hermeneutics had already been prepared in a short pamphlet Bayle had published just before he wrote the Commentaire. In 1685 Bayle had issued a first commentary on the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, entitled *Ce que c’est que la France toute catholique*, in which he had underlined the existence of “cette charité générale que nous devons à tous les hommes, par les devoirs indispensables de l’humanité.”

According to Bayle, this universal charity can be rationally deduced from the natural law obvious to all rational human beings. According to the Commentaire, our natural abilities must be respected as they are God’s gift to man and this is why the use of violence in matters of religion is always prohibited, for religion is defined by Bayle as “une certaine persuasion de l’âme par rapport à Dieu.” This persuasion is a strictly personal, subjective matter, and no kind of external force or violence can and should ever interfere with it: “La contrainte est incapable d’inspirer la religion.” Forced conversions will only result in hypocrisy, that is in false, merely external acts that are unrelated to the inner convictions of the believer. Laursen feels Bayle’s account of toleration rests on a contentious definition of religion since it overestimates the powers of reason and because Bayle is not entitled to claim as he does that God hates insincerity. But Bayle’s position in the Commentaire appears to leave little room for doubt. It is both morally wrong and opposed to the light of reason to use violence in the conversion of others:

C’est donc une chose manifestement opposée au bon sens at à la lumière naturelle, aux principes généraux de la raison, en un mot à la règle

36 Labrousse, *Bayle* (see above, n. 22), 2: 257–89.
39 “Un esprit attentif et philosophe conçoit clairement que la lumière vive et distincte, qui nous accompagne en tous lieux et en tous temps, et qui nous montre que le tout est plus grand que sa partie, qu’il est honnête d’avoir de la gratitude pour ses bienfaiteurs, de ne point faire à autrui ce que nous ne voudrions pas qui nous fût fait, de tenir sa parole, et d’agir selon sa conscience; il conçoit, dis-je, clairement que cette lumière vient de Dieu, et que c’est une révélation naturelle: comment donc s’imaginera-t-il que Dieu vienne après cela se contredire, et souffler le chaud et le froid, en parlant lui-même à nous extérieurement, ou en nous envoyant d’autres hommes, pour nous apprendre tout le contraire des notions communes de la raison?” Bayle, *Commentaire philosophique* (see above, n. 31), p. 93.
40 Bayle, *Commentaire philosophique* (see above, n. 31), p. 99.
41 Bayle, *Commentaire philosophique* (see above, n. 31), p. 100.
42 Laursen, ‘Skepticism against Reason’ (see above, n. 32), p. 133.
Laursen feels that the arguments Bayle put forward in the first part of the Commentaire are not very impressive, and Bayle, or so Laursen implies, was perfectly aware of their inadequacy: he destroyed them himself in chapters VIII–X of the second part of the Commentaire.44 For the decisive argument developed in these chapters concerns the rights of the erring conscience, which in Laursen’s view explode the rationalist foundations for toleration as they had been developed in the first part of the Commentaire. For Bayle is unable to meet the objection that full toleration results in the recognition that if your conscience tells you to persecute a particular sect, you should be allowed to do so.45 While it is true that Bayle wrestles with this objection, he does provide two replies: first, that it is perfectly possible to commit a crime following your conscience, and second, that believers holding on to “false maxims” present a challenge to those of us who hold true maxims.46 However, in view of Bayle’s own admission that our choice to belong to any particular “sect” is largely the result of the customs and habits which we just happen to have internalized as well as the specific education we have been subjected to,47 clearly we are left with the question of what to make of the powers of our God-given ‘natural light’ in matters of religion. According to Laursen:

The upshot is that a book which starts out taking for granted universal truths and conscientious morals ends up arguing that one reason we cannot be meant to persecute the people who are wrong is the good Pyrrhonian reason that we can rarely tell for sure who is right and who is wrong. Good Pyrrhonian reasons justify this conclusion: reason is weak and works itself into paradoxes, and we are products of our education.48

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43 Bayle, Commentaire philosophique (see above, n. 31), p. 100.
44 Laursen, ‘Skepticism against Reason’ (see above, n. 32), p. 136.
45 “Qu’il s’ensuit de ma doctrine le renversement de ce que je veux établir; je veux montrer que la persécution est une chose abominable, et cependant tout homme qui se croira obligé en conscience de persécuter, sera obligé, selon moi, de persécuter, et ferait mal de ne persécuter pas.” Bayle, Commentaire philosophique (see above, n. 31), p. 298.
46 Bayle, Commentaire philosophique (see above, n. 31), p. 299.
47 Bayle, Commentaire philosophique (see above, n. 31), pp. 169–73.
48 Laursen, ‘Skepticism against Reason’ (see above, n. 32), p. 140.
Bayle's Skepticism

This much seems certain: in the *Commentaire* Bayle's use of the term 'conscience' reveals a definite ambiguity. On the one hand, it refers to infallible reason, on the other to a subjective conviction.\(^{49}\) It remains to be seen, meanwhile, whether the *Commentaire* is indeed at heart a Pyrrhonian exercise, casting doubt on our every attempt to reach any kind of certainty, for as both Gianluca Mori and Antony McKenna have argued, Bayle would not at all gradually abandon his moral rationalism. Instead, he would come to doubt the usefulness of unconditional religious toleration. As early as his *Ce que c'est que la France toute catholique* he had expressed clear reservations concerning the toleration of French Catholic fanaticism. \(^{50}\) What is more, by the time he was composing the *Dictionnaire*, Bayle repeatedly expressed his disillusionment: in articles such as 'Abdas,' 'Braun,' 'Geldenhauer,' 'Ferrier,' and 'Socin,' he now complained that the only reason small sects seek to be tolerated is that they wish to grow into large sects, able to suppress the smaller ones. \(^{51}\) In the *Réponse aux questions d'un provincial*, written during the early 1700s, he repeated this suggestion:

> Or il est sûr que la doctrine de la tolérance ne produit rien; si quelque secte en fait profession, c'est parce qu'elle en a besoin; et il y a tout lieu de croire que si elle devenoit dominante, elle l'abandonneroit tout aussitôt.\(^{52}\)

It would seem, then, that near the end of his life he came to consider toleration as a strictly political necessity, as the only possible answer of the State to the essentially violent nature of the Church, that is, the Christian Church. In the final pages of the *Réponse* he infamously wondered whether France would not be better off with “un roy Spinoziste,” a Spinozist King surrounded by


\(^{51}\) Mori, *Bayle philosophe* (see above, n. 26), p. 314.

peace-loving Spinozists as his subjects. (It should be added that this political motive was already apparent in the *Commentaire.*)

This should not lead to a denial of Bayle's skepticism. He was highly skeptical about all sorts of cognitive and moral claims, especially those made in the name of religion. In fact, from the early 1680s onwards his critique of Christianity became so devastating that both Labrousse's and Popkin's characterization of Bayle as a skeptical fideist fails to convince. For public use, the fideist stance served an obvious purpose: Bayle was definitively fired from the Illustrious School of Rotterdam in 1693, and he was fully aware of the risks of being portrayed as an atheist, but it would seem his critics had every reason to be suspicious, for by the end of his life his attitude toward revealed religion raised very serious questions indeed. Bayle's critique of Christianity basically involves two related issues: first, his continuing and increasingly devastating commentary on the actual history of Christianity, and second, of course, his insistence on the possibility of virtuous atheism. The latter in particular makes it difficult to characterize Bayle as a Pyrrhonist.

As early as the *Pensées diverses*, Bayle had formulated a devastating critique of the 'authority of tradition,' which effectively silenced the *argumentum e consensu gentium*, as it was plain to see that his comments on the prejudices relating to comets held true for all appeals to tradition: the fact that many people hold onto a notion for a long time does not in any way enhance its probability. In a remarkably straightforward passage concluding the preface to the *Commentaire philosophique* Bayle claimed he was not at all surprised by the rise of unbelief. Instead, he was amazed that there weren't more “esprits forts” and “déistes,” owing to the disasters wrought by religion. The *Dictionnaire historique et critique* also testifies eloquently to Bayle's growing revulsion over the moral and political effects of this particular revealed religion. Apart from the scathing articles on such religious fanatics as Schwenckfeld and

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53 Bayle, *Oeuvres diverses* (see above, n. 52), 3: 954–5.
54 “Il est évident que jamais les hommes ont formé des sociétés et qui ont consenti à déposer leur liberté entre les mains d’un souverain, n’ont prétendu lui donner droit sur leur conscience.” Bayle, *Commentaire philosophique* (see above, n. 31), p. 145.
56 “Notre siècle, et je crois que tous les précédents ne lui en doivent guère, est plein d’esprits forts, et de déistes. On s’en étonne; mais pour moi je m’étonne qu’il n’y a en ait pas davantage, vu les ravages que la religion produit dans le monde, et l’extinction qu’elle amène par des conséquences presque inévitables de toute vertu, en autorisant pour sa prosperité temporelle tous les crimes imaginables, l’homicide, le brigandage, l’exil, le rapt, etc., qui produisent une infinité d’autres abominations, etc.” Bayle, *Commentaire philosophique* (see above, n. 31), p. 81.
Savonarola, Bayle was especially disgusted by the Crusades and remarkably mild in his assessment of Islam and the religion of the Chinese. By the end of his life, he dryly observed that

(d)epuis le IVe siècle jusqu’au nôtre, les conspirations, les séditations, les guerres civiles, les révolutions, les détrônements, ont été des choses aussi fréquentes, et peut-être même plus fréquentes parmi les chrétiens que parmi les infidèles. Si certains pays y ont été moins sujets, ce n’est pas la foi chrétienne qui en a été la cause; il faut attribuer la différence aux divers génies des peuples, et à la diverse constitution des gouvernemens.

In several respects, pace Labrousse, Bayle's moral outlook resembled the cosmopolitan attitude of the Parisian libertinage much more than the Reformed prudishness which appears to have dominated the Dutch Refuge. As David Wootton has demonstrated, Bayle's Calvinist detractors had every reason to be appalled by his treatment of, for instance, King David and the subjects of prostitution and abortion.

As far as Bayle's comments regarding the possibility of virtuous atheism are concerned, Gianluca Mori has brilliantly analyzed how Bayle's careful introduction of the possibility of virtuous atheism in the Pensées diverses actually goes to show that the virtue of atheists is superior to that of the believer, since only the atheist is virtuous for the sake of virtue itself, instead of out of hope of reward. Bayle first launched this provocative notion in the Pensées diverses,


58 See for instance the articles ‘Japon,’ remark E, where Bayle notes that Christianity turned into a violent sect from about the year 1000, and ‘Grégoire VII’. See also Bayle, Pensées diverses (see above, n. 55), pp. 299–300; Rolando Minuti, Orientalismo e idee di tolleranza nella cultura Francese del primo ’700 (Florence, 2006).

59 Bayle, Oeuvres diverses (see above, n. 52), 3: 957.


61 Gianluca Mori, ‘L”athée spéculatif” selon Bayle; permanence et développements d’une idée,’ in: De l’Humanisme aux Lumières, Bayle et le protestantisme, ed. Michelle Magdelaine et al. (Paris, 1996), pp. 595–605; idem, Bayle philosophe (see above, n. 26),
famously arguing “que l’athéisme ne conduit pas nécessairement à la corruption des mœurs.”62 Why? Because man does not act according to his general principles, but is motivated first and foremost by his particular temperament, his ‘taste’, and the habits he has grown accustomed to.63 Next, the *Dictionnaire* presented an opportunity to paint a picture of the moral character of Spinoza, the most dangerous “athée de système” the world had ever seen, but whose moral excellence was beyond dispute.64 Near the end of his life, Bayle was prepared to go even further, as is evident from the *Continuation des Pensées diverses* (1705): don’t forget to *read* Spinoza’s *Ethics*, and please read as well, Bayle now wrote, my article on Epicurus, and please consider the excellent moral precepts taught by Chinese philosophers; in darkest Africa even the “kaffers” show evident signs of natural equity.65

5 Bayle’s “Pyrrhonism”

The ease with which Popkin refers to the Pyrrhonist consequences apparent from the *Dictionnaire* article on Pyrrho is hardly self-evident, to say the least. According to Popkin, remark B of the article leads to

an attack on the entire rational world and raises the horrendous possibility, which no previous sceptic had entertained, that a proposition could be self-evident and yet demonstrably false—that there might be no criterion of truth whatsoever.66

But is this really what Bayle is saying? Remarks B and C actually claim that there is only one science that should be fearful of Pyrrhonism, namely theology. Consider the opening lines of B:

C’est par rapport à cette divine Science que le Pyrrhonisme est dangereux; car on ne voit pas qu’il le soit guere ni par rapport à la physique, ni par rapport à l’Etat. Il importe peu qu’on dise que l’esprit de l’homme est trop borné, pour rien découvrir dans les veritez naturelles, dans les causes qui produisent la chaleur, le froid, le flux de la mer, etc. Il nous
doit suffire qu’on s’exerce à chercher des Hypotheses probables, et à re-
cueillir des Expériences; et je suis fort assuré qu’il y a très-peu de bons
Physiciens dans notre Siécle, qui ne se soient convaincus que la Nature
est un abîme impenetrable, et que ses ressorts ne sont connus qu’à celui
qui les a faits, et qui les dirige. Ainsi tous ces Philosophes sont à cet égard
Académiciens et Pyrrhoniens. La vie civile n’a rien à craindre de cet es-
prit-là; car les Sceptiques ne nioient pas qu’il ne se falût conformer aux
coutumes de son païs, et pratiquer les devoirs de la Morale, et prendre
parti en ces choses-là sur des probabilitez, sans attendre la certitude. Ils
pouvoient suspendre leur jugement sur la question, si un tel devoir est
naturellement et absolument légitime; mais ils ne le suspendoient pas
sur la question, s’il le faloit pratiquer en telles et telles rencontres. Il n’y
a donc que la Religion qui ait à craindre le Pyrrhonisme: elle doit être
appuiée sur la certitude; son but, ses effets, ses usages, tombent dès que
la ferme persuasion de ses vérités est effacée de l’ame.67

Clearly the “Pyrrhonism” Bayle attributes to physicists is of a completely differ-
ent nature from the Pyrrhonism threatening theology: Bayle’s skepticism only
turns into genuine Pyrrhonism where he discusses the possibility of formul-
ating a rational theology. His entire discussion of evidence in remark C on
‘Pyrrho’ exclusively concerns the theological concepts of the trinity and tran-
substantiation.68 And the problem of evil, famously addressed in the article on
the Manicheans, presents such a problem because theologians keep telling us
that God is good, and that as a consequence evil shouldn’t be there.69

What is more, Popkin’s reference to the “suggestion” that a proposition could
be self-evidently true and demonstrably false at the same time only comes up
in an imaginary discussion staged by Bayle between two French “abbés”—and
if only in view of his extremely critical assessment of the entire Catholic tra-
dition, it seems prima facie odd to expect him to have chosen two Catholic
theologians to express his own views. And the argument implied by Popkin
seems itself incoherent, for it boils down to the conclusion that it is rational
not to be rational in matters of faith. Rather, or so it would seem, Bayle was out
to chastise the theological ambition to achieve ‘mathematical’ certainty when

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67 Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (see above, n. 10), article ‘Pyrrhon’, remark B.
68 See Todd Ryan, *Pierre Bayle’s Cartesian Metaphysics: Rediscovering Early Modern
Philosophy* (New York, 2009), pp. 21–6 and in particular Gianluca Mori, ‘Pierre Bayle
on Scepticism and “Common Notions”’ in: *The Return of Scepticism: From Hobbes and
69 See for the entire debate see Steven Nadler, *The Best of All Possible Worlds: A Story of
Philosophers, God and Evil in the Age of Reason* (Princeton, 2010).
it came to defining the essence of God and his Son.70 Natural theologians, or so Bayle must have felt, just aim too high. Indeed, the critical outlook Bayle fostered throughout his life makes little sense from a Pyrrhonist perspective, according to which man is essentially unable to distinguish between truth and falsity, right and wrong. Let’s not forget what the Dictionnaire was all about: it was first conceived as an attempt to correct and set the record straight on the countless errors Bayle had encountered in previous dictionaries, most notably Louis Moreri’s Grand dictionnaire historique of 1674.71 For instance in the entry on Grotius, remark H, Bayle claims that historical research, being what it is, occasionally has to rely on eyewitness testimony, which of course does not result in mathematical certainty, but which has to be taken seriously, otherwise “on ouvre la porte au Pyrrhonisme.”72 Antony Grafton has crowned Bayle not only as the inventor of the modern footnote but as the “founder of historical learning” as we still know it today.73

It probably goes too far to attribute to Bayle a genuine philosophy of science, but as we have just seen in his comments on Physics, he was fully conscious of the crucial differences between the natural sciences and theology. In addition, he held firm views on the epistemological status of History and Philology, that is to say the humanities, as is evident for instance from the prefaces he wrote for the Nouvelles de la République des Lettres, the journal he published from 1684 to 1687, and the first announcement of his Dictionnaire, entitled Projet et fragmens d'un Dictionnaire critique (1692). In the Preface to the Projet Bayle writes:

Je soutiens que les veritez historiques peuvent être poussées à une degré de certitude plus indubitable, que ne l'est le degré de certitude à quoy l'on fait parvenir les veritez Geometriques; bien entendu que l'on considerera ces deux sortes de veritez selon le genre de certitude qui leur est propre.74

71 Labrousse, Bayle (see above, n. 22), 2: 3–68. See also Van Lieshout, The Making of Pierre Bayle’s Dictionnaire (see above, n. 10).
72 Thomas M. Lennon, ‘What Kind of a Skeptic was Bayle?’, Midwest Studies in Philosophy 26 (2002), 259–79, there 278. References to ‘Pyrrhonism’ in the Dictionnaire total 78: http://artflsrv02.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/showrest_?conc.61.128090.0.77.bayle.
74 Pierre Bayle, Projet et Fragmens d'un Dictionnaire critique (Rotterdam, 1692), preface.
In the Preface to the first issue of the *Nouvelles* the way he distinguishes between theology and science, interpreted in a broad sense, acquires a decidedly polemical edge:

Il ne s’agit point ici de Religion; il s’agit de Science: on doit donc mettre bas tous les termes qui divisent les hommes en différentes factions, et considérer seulement le point dans lequel ils se réunissent ...

For all intents and purposes, Bayle invokes a *moral* difference between religion and science: religion *divides* whereas science *unites*. By the same token, the dozens of scientific studies discussed in the *Nouvelles* testify to his genuine fascination with the natural sciences and with natural history in particular. Let’s not forget either that his *Pensées diverses* from 1682 on the occasion of Halley’s Comet reveals a pretty astute awareness of astronomy, and that many entries in the *Dictionnaire* are concerned with distinguishing real science from pseudoscience. Again, from a Pyrrhonist perspective, Bayle’s attempts at demarcation make little sense.

Philosophers tend to associate the emergence of the concept of probability with the rise of empiricism. But the medieval concept of ‘moral certainty’ played a crucial part both in Descartes and in Spinoza, and surely the aim of Bayle’s *Dictionnaire* in particular was not to arrive at the conclusion that we know nothing—on the contrary, he carefully sought to examine what we *probably* know, from ‘Aaron’ to ‘Zeuchlin.’ John Kilcullen feels that as a consequence Bayle was not even a skeptic, as “fallibilism is not scepticism.” Nor does it seem warranted to attribute to Bayle a fideist solution to the “ruins of

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reason,” as he seems mainly intent on separating reason from faith. Admittedly, in remark H of his article on Spinoza in the Dictionnaire, Bayle seems to provide himself with the opportunity of a fideist “escape”:

\[(i)\text{il n'y a point de contradiction entre ces deux choses: 1. la lumière de la Raison m'apprend que cela est faux; 2. je le crois pourtant, parce que je suis persuadé que cette Lumière n'est pas infaillible, et parce que j'aime mieux déférer aux preuves de sentiment, et aux impressions de la conscience, en un mot à la Parole de Dieu, qu'à une Démonstration Métaphysique.}\]

Several other passages have been identified in which Bayle presents “blind faith” as a solution to the antinomies resulting from a philosophical analysis of religion.\(^{79}\) Even Labrousse, however, admitted that the abruptness with which Bayle interjected such phrases render them pretty artificial.\(^{80}\) Popkin also noticed that these passages “suggest an absence of a crucial religious element.”\(^{81}\) According to McKenna, on the other hand, Bayle used the fideist stance as a “last line of defense” for the simple reason that around 1700 it was simply impossible to admit a real loss of faith.\(^{82}\) Jonathan Israel regards Bayle’s fideism as a “smokescreen … which, indeed, serves no real function in Bayle’s philosophy other than categorically to separate philosophy from theology and deflect criticism by concealing the true implications of his stance.”\(^{83}\)

At this stage it should be added, though, that this remains a highly controversial conclusion. Recent atheist readings of Bayle are still being questioned, for instance, by José Maia Neto and Michael Hickson, who have tried to improve the Popkinite interpretation of Bayle as a Christian Pyrrhonist by turning him into an Academic Skeptic.\(^{84}\) According to Hickson:

While the Pyrrhonians presented and created disagreements in order to induce suspension of belief, the Academics presented disagreements in order (1) to combat prejudices, (2) to reveal the strengths and weakness of competing arguments and beliefs, and ultimately (3) to render the

\(^{79}\) For a collection, see Mori, Bayle philosophe (see above, n. 26), pp. 236–7.

\(^{80}\) Labrousse, Bayle (see above, n. 22), 2: 237.

\(^{81}\) Popkin, The History of Scepticism (see above, n. 26), p. 290.

\(^{82}\) McKenna, ‘Pierre Bayle in the Twentieth Century’ (see above, n. 24), pp. 266–7.

\(^{83}\) Israel, Enlightenment Contested (see above, n. 26), p. 82.

\(^{84}\) Maia Neto, ‘Bayle’s Academic Skepticism’ (see above, n. 26); Hickson, ‘Disagreement and Academic Skepticism in Bayle’ (see above, n. 26).
reader’s judgment suitable for forming probable opinions about disputes with integrity.85

Bayle himself makes no distinction between Pyrrhonist and Academic skepticism, but according to Hickson it was not Sextus Empiricus but Cicero who had inspired Bayle. As a consequence, Bayle’s aim was not to achieve a state of Pyrrhonian ataraxia, in which judgment is suspended indefinitely. His aim, Hickson argues, was simply presenting the best, that is the most convincing, argument. But Hickson’s reconstruction leaves the question unanswered as to which untouched arguments can be considered superior.86 And again: around 1700 it was simply impossible to argue with integrity that atheism was intellectually and morally superior to Christianity.

6 Conclusion

Nobody knows what Bayle believed by the end of his life, and it remains to be seen to what extent his writings allow us to reconstruct his intellectual and religious Werdegang, if only because of their volume. Over the past few decades, a stunning diversity of competing interpretations has been built on Bayle’s vast literary output, and the Bayle Enigma continues to haunt us. Situating Bayle in the context of the Dutch Refuge will not allow us to break free of this deadlock, but it appears to confirm that Bayle’s faith had been tested to the limit, first by his expulsion from his native country, next by the gradual realization that a return to France was never going to happen, and subsequently by the violent quarrels within the Refuge, ultimately leading to his own dismissal as professor. What kind of God could possibly have wanted this to happen?

That Bayle was deeply shocked when, by the end of 1685, news reached him about the death in prison of his brother Jacob is beyond dispute—he had already lost both his father and another brother this same year.87 What is

85 Hickson, ‘Disagreement and Academic Skepticism in Bayle’ (see above, n. 26), p. 299.
86 Thus, commenting on the issue of atheism in the Commentaire philosophique, Hickson concludes: “the balance of the dispute is not intended to suspend judgment, but to force the reader to avoid hasty conclusions and to consider the arguments, weigh them carefully, and only then render judgment—a judgment that the reader can claim to have made with the freedom constitutive of Academic integrity.”
87 Labrousse, Pierre Bayle (see above, n. 22), 1: 196–200; Bost, Pierre Bayle (see above, n. 21), pp. 225–7. The answer to the question when Bayle abandoned Christianity, if indeed he did, is far from clear, although clearly the latter half of the 1680s was a particularly challenging period for Bayle. According to Mori the Avis aux réfugiés (1690) served as a watershed: Pierre Bayle, Avis aux réfugiés, Réponse d’un nouveau converti, ed. Gianluca Mori
more, it seems Bayle's anger over the way he was robbed of his position at the Illustrious School has been consistently underestimated.\textsuperscript{88} All the major crises in Bayle's life, including his flight from France, the death of his brother, and his dismissal had been religiously inspired. Bayle's initial relief to have escaped the barbarity of French religious persecution, evident from the \textit{Commentaire philosophique}, must have soured considerably when he arrived in a country celebrated for its tolerant history at a moment when it was actually curbing its tolerant politics.\textsuperscript{89} To make matters worse, his nemesis Pierre Jurieu soon became the most powerful spokesman of the Dutch Refuge, violently arguing against tolerationism. In his \textit{Dictionnaire} Bayle demonstrated a keen awareness of Dutch intolerance towards Mennonites, Arminians, and Socinians alike throughout the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{90}

There is a sense in which Bayle no longer seemed to care much about what his many critics made of his views. Paraphrasing Paul's letter to the Hebrews (10,38), he commented:

\begin{quotation}
Si le Juste vit de sa foi, un philosophe doit aussi vivre de la sienne; c'est-à-dire qu'il ne doit point faire dépendre de ce que penseront les autres hommes ce qu'il doit des choses.\textsuperscript{91}
\end{quotation}

There is, perhaps, one crucial passage in \textit{L'Éclaircissement sur les pyrrhoniens} from 1702 which seems to illustrate how Bayle really felt:

\begin{quotation}
Il faut nécessairement opter entre la Philosophie et l'Évangile; si vous ne voulez rien croire que ce qui est évident et conforme aux notions communes, prenez la Philosophie et quittez le Christianisme: si vous voulez croire les Mystères incompréhensibles de la Religion, prenez le Christianisme, et quittez la Philosophie; car de posséder ensemble
\end{quotation}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{91} Bayle, \textit{Oeuvres diverses} (see above, n. 52), 3: 237.
\end{thebibliography}
l’évidence et l’incompréhensibilité, c’est ce qui ne se peut ... Il faut opter nécessairement ...

This is hardly an isolated comment, as it catches the drift of his critique of both Aristotelian and Socinian attempts to formulate philosophical theologies. Bayle's final words appear to confirm suspicions that by the end of his life he had opted for philosophy, as he was reported to have commented that Christianity was at best "probablement probable." In one of his last letters he claimed "je meurs en philosophe chrétien, persuadé et pénétré des bontés et de la miséricorde de Dieu." Anyone only slightly familiar with Bayle's permanent obsession with the reality of evil will simply have to recognize the cynicism revealed here. A similar sentiment recurs in his observation that throughout his life he had remained a true Protestant: "car au fonds de mon âme, je proteste contre tout ce qui se dit et tout ce qui se fait."

Some Dutch Huguenots, including such 'Spinozists' as Jean-Maximilien Lucas and the Chevalier de Saint-Clain, had started radicalizing even before 1685—and it seems that Bayle should be counted among them. The all-too-familiar examples of Simon Tyssot de Patot, Professor at the Illustrious School of Zutphen, but also of Bernard Picart and Jean Frédéric Bernard, illustrate how the Dutch Refuge would continue to produce radicals well into the eighteenth century. In particular after the Treaty of Ryswick, when many réfugiés actually preferred to return to France even if this implied abandoning the Reformed creed altogether, 'la grande arche des fugitifs' occasionally appears to have served not only as a safe haven for orthodox Protestants but also as a cradle of disenchantment with Christianity as such, if not downright religious indifference.

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93 See for instance Bayle, Dictionnaire historique et critique, articles 'Alting'; 'Aristote', esp. remark M,k; 'Socin.'
94 See Bost, Pierre Bayle (see above, n. 21), pp. 499–519, explicitly based on Labrousse, Pierre Bayle (see above, n. 22), 1: 255–7.
95 Aubrey Rosenberg, Simon Tyssot de Patot (1655–1738) and His Work (The Hague, 1972); Israel, Radical Enlightenment (see above, n. 26), pp. 593–8; Lynn Hunt et al., The Book that Changed Europe: Picart and Bernard's Religious Ceremonies of the World (Cambridge, Mass., 2010); Israel, Enlightenment Contested (see above, n. 26), pp. 377–80.