

29
 Bayle
Dictionnaire, “Pyrrho B”

A man is therefore happily disposed toward faith when he knows how defective reason is.
 – Bayle, *Dictionnaire, “Pyrrho”* rem.C

Pierre Bayle was the imp of 17th century philosophy. He delighted in proving that everyone else was wrong about what they thought, whatever it might be. In executing this project he wrote a massive, four-volume dictionary, devoted to cataloguing notable intellectual errors and attacking all the major philosophers and schools either at his time or before it. This work, the *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, is one of the most bizarre works of philosophy ever written. It came out just a few years after Locke’s *Essay*, and was written in the format of a standard dictionary or encyclopedia, except that most of the entries were on people — generally obscure ones. Under each person was a relatively short entry, but appended to the entry were long notes and in these notes Bayle digressed on all sorts of philosophical, scientific, religious and moral topics. In the process he also told a number of extremely lewd and obscene stories (“Quellenec,” “Mammarians,” “David”), as well as offered extended critiques of the philosophy of Descartes, Leibniz, Aristotle, Malebranche, and Spinoza, among others.

The project of attacking everyone else’s views was one that Bayle carried to such lengths that he can often be found arguing on opposite sides of an issue with equal force and conviction. This was a technique approved of by the ancient sceptics, who sought to prove that no one can really know anything for sure, and Bayle followed in their footsteps. Two of the articles in the *Dictionnaire*, in particular, were notorious for reviving and amplifying traditional sceptical arguments, the article on Zeno of Elea, in which Bayle revived Zeno’s paradoxes and applied them to show that there is something fundamentally incoherent about our notion of space (contrary to what Descartes tried to claim in *Meditations V*), and the article on Pyrrho, in which Bayle (or, more precisely, an Abbé whose views Bayle claimed to be reporting) asserted that, had Pyrrho (or Arcesilaus, one of his followers) been alive today, he would have been able to offer even more devastating sceptical arguments than he had managed to present in Hellenistic Athens — and that far from preventing him, the discoveries of the new science and the revealed truths of the Christian religion would have facilitated this project.

QUESTIONS ON THE READING

1. How does the position on ethics that Bayle attributed to Pyrrho differ from Locke’s position on ethics?
2. Why is scepticism not dangerous to science or to the state?
3. Why is it dangerous to religion?
4. Why is this danger only slight?
5. What shields us against Pyrrhonian arguments?
6. Why would Arcesilaus be more formidable today than in his own time?
7. What were the ancient sceptics right about, according to the “new philosophy?”
8. What do the new philosophers attempt to exempt extension and motion from? Why are they unable to actually do this?
9. Why do I have no good proof for the existence of bodies?



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10. Why would it prove too much to claim that God would be a deceiver for giving me ideas of extended things if there are no extended things in existence?
11. In what way is a peasant like a Cartesian?
12. What entitles us to think that the principle of the transitivity of identity (that is, that if $a=b$ and $b=c$, then $a=c$) is wrong?
13. Why should I think that even though I am here in Canada, I might also at this moment exist in Constantinople?
14. How is it that the mystery of the Eucharist invalidates all the rules of arithmetic?
15. What assures me of the fact that I existed yesterday?

NOTES ON THE READING

While Bayle agreed with the ancient sceptics that we cannot know anything for sure, he also thought that we can believe many things. In taking this position he agreed with Locke, who also held that most of our assertions are based on belief or opinion rather than knowledge. But Bayle rejected Locke's view that our beliefs and opinions ought to be based on a reasoned assessment of probabilities. Throughout his works, Bayle attacked the abilities of reason to give us any warrant for our beliefs. He held that they are instead based on one or the other of four factors:

- natural inclination
- the force of education
- ignorance
- faith

By natural inclination Bayle meant to refer to our instincts and propensities. We are naturally averse to uncertainty, and this makes us want to leap to make judgments on slight evidence and stick by those judgments in preference to resting content with a state of ignorance.

By education Bayle probably did not mean what we would associate with the word today. In Bayle's day, education had more to do with indoctrination than learning. His references to the force of education were references to people's tendency to unquestioningly accept those beliefs they have had handed down to them since childhood, and cling to those beliefs even in the face of disconfirming evidence simply because they are old and comfortable.

Though it may seem paradoxical, ignorance can also produce belief. The ignorance in question is ignorance of the reasons for questioning a belief, or a lack of intelligence, leading people to be unable to understand the arguments for rejecting a belief. Sometimes, this sort of ignorance may leave people better off than if they were more educated. Bayle gave the examples of a Greek general who complained that it was useless to use military strategy against barbarian enemies because, knowing nothing of proper tactics, they could not be deceived by his troop movements. He also mentioned an urban philanderer who complained that the peasant women in the countryside were too ignorant to be seduced by his advances.

The final source of belief, faith, was particularly important for Bayle. He understood it to have very different roots than did Locke. For Locke, faith arises when we discover reasons to suppose that a particular report has come from God, who knows all and would not lie. But for Bayle, faith is something that can be simply given to us by God, who graciously compels those he has elected for salvation to accept the revealed truth. It might seem that in saying this Bayle was endorsing the "vision" or "immediate revelation" that Locke attacked as incoherent and unwarranted in the *Essay's* chapter on enthusiasm. But this would be wrong. When Locke attacked enthusiasm he envisioned the enthusiast appealing to vision or to immediate revelation as a justification for their



belief. But Bayle's whole point is that there is no reason, not even one's own vision or one's own inner sense of conviction. The believer does not believe because they feel convinced or seem to themselves to see the revealed truth. They rather believe because God forces them to, even in the absence of a vision or a sense of conviction.

The three other sources of belief might produce religious conviction as well. Education can develop deep-seated prejudices that no reasoning is able to overcome. Ignorance of sceptical arguments or an inability to understand them may lead people to persist in their opinions. And a natural aversion to uncertainty, especially in those cases where a great deal is at stake (such as eternal life in Heaven), can lead us to make a gamble and neglect the grounds for doubt.

Compared to these causes of religious belief, reason does not come off very well. Bayle admitted in a clarification he later wrote on the Pyrrho article that reason might be able to convince atheists that God exists. But, contrary to Locke's claim in *Essay* IV.xvi.14, Bayle asserted that a proof of the existence of God can only lead us to conclude that revelation is possible, not that God has actually revealed anything to us. Reason cannot convince us of the truth of the Christian revelation. This is because the Christian revelation does not obviously conform to reason — or at least, to such reason as we are in possession of. (We will see why this is shortly.) This means that faith in the Christian revelation can only come from some other source.

Given this state of affairs, Bayle observed that, far from relying on reason, we ought rather to employ sceptical arguments to demonstrate the insufficiency and unreliability of reason. Though religious belief only comes from a gift of God, the force of education, "ignorance," or natural inclination, if we are convinced through sceptical arguments of our own inability to obtain knowledge or justification, we might at least be induced to abandon our objections to these other causes of belief and pray to God for the gift of some further illumination.

Some caution is required if Bayle is to be correctly interpreted on this score. He acknowledged that an unrestricted scepticism, employed to cast doubt on all things, including the Christian revelation, is dangerous to religion and so is "justly condemned" in schools of theology. But he was confident that extreme scepticism could not be sustained. The force of natural inclination, education, experience, and faith would eventually overcome the anti-religious, philosophical doubts that sceptical reasoning induces and lead us to reject reasoning, which caused us to have these unsustainable doubts. So though sceptical arguments lead to unacceptable and dangerous conclusions, they are not ultimately dangerous. In the end, they can only serve the salutary purpose of inducing us to reject reasoning, which is the true enemy of Christianity (Christianity being an ultimately irrational religion). Sceptical arguments are to be endorsed for that reason and not because of the anti-religious conclusions that they more immediately entail.

The view that sceptical arguments ought to be employed as an inducement to turn to other sources of belief is called fideism. It is not an obviously inconsistent position, but many, including many of Bayle's contemporaries, were not convinced that sceptical arguments can be safely employed to attack reason without also calling revelation in to question. By insisting in the Pyrrho article that the Christian religion is too contrary to reason for its revelation ever to be justified by that means, Bayle brought scepticism and revelation so uncomfortably close together that he was accused by many of insincerity, and of being an atheist who wanted to cast doubt on the coherence and intelligibility of the central doctrines of Christianity, rather than a fideist who wanted to induce us to turn to other sources of belief.



A Primer on Chalcedonian Theology. To understand why Bayle claimed that the Christian revelation contradicts reason, it helps to know something about orthodox Christian theology.

The first Christians were Jews. Their belief was quite simple. They supposed that a particular, historical individual, Jesus, was the Saviour who, as it had been foretold in the Jewish scriptures, would deliver them from the dominion of foreign powers.

This simple belief was not easy to defend. The historical Jesus reportedly lived and died without saving anyone. He did not, like Mohammed, die at the head of victorious armies, having conquered half the known world.

To reconcile this belief with the historical facts, the early Christians claimed that Jesus had not come to save us from the dominion of foreign powers in this world, but to preach a moral message that would deliver us from the dominion of the Devil get us saved in the next world.

In giving this answer, the early Christians moved in the direction of articulating doctrines, possibly already present in Jewish apocalyptic literature and Jesus's own preachings, of the immortality of the soul and of a final judgment where the good would be rewarded and the wicked punished.

But this did not quite get around the difficulty. If Jesus was God's messenger, sent to deliver an important message to us, why were there not some more evident marks of the fact that he had in fact been favoured by God? If God had really intended for a certain person to preach on his behalf, he would make that evident, by working miracles through that person and supporting the person's projects in other ways. But while Jesus did work some miracles, he did not end up very well. The way he died was not a sign of divine favour. Might it not have been, therefore, that such miracles as he was able to perform were actually worked on his behalf by devils, wanting to convince us of a false message, and that God ultimately revealed that he was a false prophet by making him come to a bad end?

Note that the early Christians were in no position to answer this question by pointing to the successful dispersal of the Christian message and the eventual dominion of the Christian Church in medieval Europe. None of that had happened yet. They rather claimed that Jesus's death was necessary for our salvation. They referred back to the Bible story of Adam and used it as the basis for a further doctrine, the doctrine of original sin. Adam, they claimed, had been given infinite gifts by God: eternal life and perfect happiness in the garden of Eden. In turning away from God, he had rejected these infinite gifts and thereby performed an act of infinite wickedness. This sin was so great that it had a corrupting effect on Adam's nature — it made him worse as a human being. And since, even in those days, the containment model of causality was implicitly believed, it was supposed that an imperfect and corrupt cause could not give rise to an effect more perfect than itself. All of Adam's progeny would therefore have to inherit his corruption. Thus, the original sin and the guilt of it would be passed down through the generations. A special, sacrificial act was required to atone for this sin. That is what Jesus did.

There was a problem with this defence, however. It rested on the assertion that, by getting crucified, Jesus had performed some extraordinary act, capable of atoning for all the past crimes of humanity against God. However, it was by no means unusual for people to be crucified in the Roman world. And crucifixion was not the longest or most agonizing death that countless people have experienced both before and since. Why did this particular crucifixion deserve to be considered as special?

The response to these objections was that Jesus's death was no ordinary death. All the other people who died before him deserved to die, if only because of their original sin, which merited far



worse punishment than a lingering death. Indeed, because all other human beings are the necessarily corrupt and depraved products of corrupt and depraved causes, and so deserving of infinite punishment, no other human being could have atoned for original sin merely by being crucified. But Jesus, the early Christians claimed, was the one human being who was directly conceived by God. Hence, he inherited no original sin, not even from his mother's side of the family, and so his death was not simply a just punishment but a sacrifice, made to atone for the crime.

Moreover, no other sacrifice could have served this purpose because Adam's sin was infinite. (After all, in turning against God, Adam was rejecting infinite goods.) No mere human death, being the death of a finite being, could possibly atone for an infinite crime. But Jesus was not merely human. He was also divine. As himself God, his sacrifice was an infinite sacrifice that had overflowed, as it were, and made an infinite amount of Grace available to the rest of us if only we would believe in him and accept his message.

But why would God sacrifice himself to atone for a wrong that had been done to him in the first place? If he was disposed to forgive us, why not simply forgive us and save himself the trouble of getting sacrificed? And how could God possibly sacrifice himself anyway? God cannot feel pain. Even if he came down and impersonated a human being, his "sacrifice" would be a hoax and a mere play-act of no value.

Over the first few centuries of the Christian church, a sophisticated Christology was developed in answer to these objections. Whether this Christology was a new development, that went beyond the original teachings of the Church, or merely a more explicit articulation of what had been implicitly, though confusedly believed all along continues to be a matter of debate. According to this Christology, the Christ was said to be somehow distinct from God, even though he was God. As a distinct, pre-existent being, he had interceded with God on behalf of humanity, much as one parent might intercede with the other on behalf of one of the children. Then, he had come down to earth and had become a human being, Jesus, in whom both divine and human natures were supposed to be mingled in a single person, so that this single person could genuinely suffer through the human nature while still performing an infinite sacrifice through the divine nature. Moreover, by making the sacrifice in the human nature, Christ was showing God, on behalf of humanity, that the human nature deserved to be redeemed.

This seems tantamount to ditheism — to denying the oneness of God and elevating Christ to the status of a second deity. Monotheism was one aspect of its Jewish heritage that the Christian Church could not bring itself to renounce. The Church instead declared that it accepted the oneness of God, but held that the one God, though one in substance, contains different persons. Christ is somehow personally, though not substantially, distinct from the father.

These doctrines were all slowly worked out over the first three centuries of the Christian church, and there was a good deal of divisiveness, internal struggle and schism along the way. No one could really understand what it meant to say that there are two, divine and human natures in one person in Christ-Jesus or that there are three persons in one substance in God, and those who tried to explain these doctrines coherently and intelligibly were invariably declared to hold heretical views. But by the time of the great early church councils at Nicea and Chalcedon, at least an orthodox wording was developed, though it was declared to be a "mystery" what the wording actually meant. The agreed-upon wording, codified in the Athanasian and Nicene creeds, was considered to be itself a part of revelation, along with the scriptures, as the Holy Spirit (the third person of the Trinity) was supposed to have been immediately present among the consular officials



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and to have illuminated them with this revealed truth. In outline, those Christians who today still recite the Athanasian or Nicene creeds are declaring their faith in following doctrines, however mysterious they may be:

- the existence of an afterlife
- a final judgment where souls will be sent to heaven or hell depending, crucially, on whether they have accepted Christianity
- the doctrine of original sin
- the doctrine of the Atonement
- the doctrine of the Incarnation (i.e., of the dual divine and human natures of the person of Christ)
- the doctrine of the Trinity (i.e., of the unity of three distinct persons in the one substance of God)

The Eucharist and the Protestant Reformation. In the 17th century belief in these Chalcedonian doctrines was taken to be essential to Christianity by both Catholics and Protestants alike, and they are still the official doctrines of the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox and more fundamentalist Protestant congregations today (though priests, ministers, and theologians have increasingly abandoned them in this century). The only exceptions in Bayle's day were certain heretical movements: the Unitarians (who denied the Trinity), the Socinians (who revived the old, Arian heresy and denied the Incarnation), and the Deists who denied all the mysterious aspects of Christianity but for the doctrines of the afterlife and the final judgment. It was charged, with some justice, that these heretics were no longer recognizably Christian, at least if one takes some sort of belief in Christ/Jesus as Saviour to be essential to Christianity.

Beneath this broad agreement on Chalcedonian orthodoxy, there was a great deal that separated the Church of Rome from the Reformed Churches. Among these things was the doctrine of the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist. This was a further Christian mystery that was invented during the middle ages and was taken to be an essential part of Catholic belief.

Christians had always re-enacted the last supper that Jesus is reported to have had with his disciples as a commemorative ceremony. The Roman Church had elevated this ceremony to the status of a sacrament, and declared that during it the ceremonial bread and wine were converted into the actual body and blood of Christ. Moreover, it was held that each particle of the bread and wine is itself completely and entirely the whole of the body and blood of Christ (so that, when the bread is broken and the wine passed around among the celebrants, each would get all of Christ into themselves, and not just a part).

This is, to say the least, not immediately apparent to the senses. To explain why the bread was really flesh even though it still looked like bread and the wine really blood even though it still tasted like wine, the medieval Christians developed the doctrine of transubstantiation. According to this doctrine, the substantial form of the sacrament is converted from that of bread and wine to that of flesh and blood, though the accidents remain the same.

When the Protestant Reformation began, the doctrine of transubstantiation was among those that were called into question. Many of the reformers viewed it as a ridiculous superstition. At best it was unnecessary for any belief in Jesus as Saviour (unlike the earlier doctrines which, as noted above, were in a sense forced on the early Christian apologists in the process of articulating and defending their beliefs). At worst, it was a form of idolatry, which substituted the worship of a



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piece of food or the gross, physical act of eating and digesting that food for a true, spiritual communion with God.

One reason why Descartes and other modern philosophers got into trouble in Catholic countries was that, by denying substantial forms and qualities really existing outside of our senses and in things, they were seen to be questioning the doctrine of the Eucharist and so advocating Protestantism.

Bayle and Christianity. One of Bayle's points in the Pyrrho article was that, had Pyrrho been alive in 17th century Europe, he would have had an even easier job of arguing for scepticism. One of the things that would have made it easier for him, Bayle claimed, was Christian doctrine. For, when one surveys doctrines such as those of the Eucharist, the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Atonement, and original sin, they appear to show us that we cannot trust our powers of reason.

Bayle proceeded to give a number of examples. Just a few of them are discussed here.

Reason tells us that two things that are identical to a third thing are identical to one another. But revelation, through the doctrine of the Trinity, teaches us that this is false. The Father is identical to the one, true God. Christ is identical to the one, true God. But Christ is not identical to the Father. So the law of the transitivity of identity is false, and all the reasoning that is built on that law, including all mathematical truths, is accordingly open to doubt.

Reason, or at least a uniform experience, tell us that one and the same body cannot be in two different places at the same time — or, that if it is, it is only because it is so big that one part of it extends over the one place while another reaches out to the other. It is certainly not possible for two distinct parts of an extended body, such as the head and the foot of a person, to be in the same point at the same time. But the doctrine of the Eucharist teaches us that this is false and that one and the same body can be completely and entirely in many different places at the same time, since the body and blood of Christ can be completely and entirely in different hosts at the same time, and each and every part of the body and blood of Christ is completely and present in every part of the host. This revealed fact in turn undermines all our ascriptions of identity and individuation at a time. I may, for all I know, exist in many different places at once, just as the host can, so that someone now existing in Turkey may have as much a claim to be me as I, who now exist in Canada, think that I do. Moreover, if all the parts of an extended body may coexist at a point, it follows that if bodies are in fact extended, this is only by accident and not because it is essential to them to be so. But this overthrows the distinction between matter and spirit.

Reason tells us that we cannot doubt our own existence. But the doctrine of the Trinity teaches us that the person of Christ existed for thousands of years prior to the creation of the human body and the human soul of Jesus. This person is supposed to have been identical to the person of Jesus, for according to the doctrine of the Incarnation, Jesus had two distinct natures, divine and human, but was only one person. But that means that the union of the human body and the human soul of Jesus did not produce a person, since the person existed prior to and independently of that union. Consequently, persons must be distinct from bodies and souls. Consequently, I cannot know that I exist. My senses only tell me that I have a body, and reflection only tells me that I think and so must have a soul. But just because a body and a soul are united in me, that does not mean that I am a person. I may be a zombie.

Reason also tells us that it is unjust that the innocent be held responsible for the crimes of the guilty, or punished for those crimes. But the doctrines of original sin and the Atonement teach us that God, who is supremely just, considers all subsequent generations to be responsible for Adam's



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sin, and that he accepted the sacrifice of the one human being who was perfectly innocent of that sin as atoning for the crime of the guilty party who first performed it. Thus, all of rational justice is called into question.

These are extraordinary arguments. As Bayle presented them, they all explicitly have the form,

Reason leads us to hold doctrines that revelation shows us are false.
Therefore, reason is not to be trusted.

But it seemed to many that Bayle was really leading his readers up to the point where they would draw a rather different conclusion:

Revelation leads us to hold doctrines that reason shows us are false.
Therefore, revelation must be false.

Though Bayle denied that this was his purpose, his fellows in the (Calvinist) Walloon Church of Amsterdam took it to be intended. Why else, they observed, would Bayle have included the obviously (to them) false and absurd mystery of the Eucharist along with the fundamental Christian doctrines of the Trinity, Incarnation, Atonement, and Original Sin? By including the false mystery in with the true ones Bayle seemed to be telling those Protestants who had rejected the miracle of the Eucharist on the grounds of its absurdity that they ought, by that same argument to reject all the other mysteries of Christianity as well. Or, alternatively, he seemed to be suggesting that if they were willing to accept the Protestant mysteries even though they contradict reason, then they ought not to hesitate to accept the Catholic one as well. Either way, the Protestants were being accused of inconsistency, and confronted with a (for them) untenable choice between Deism and Catholicism.

Bayle's reply to this objection was that since he had used the literary device of an imagined discussion between two French Abbés to deliver his arguments, he was obliged by that choice to include Catholic mysteries as well as Protestant ones. But this was a hollow excuse and Bayle was forced to defend his position more fully in a "Clarification" appended to later editions of the *Dictionnaire*.

Bayle's motives. Was Bayle trying to tacitly call Christianity into doubt? Note that Bayle went to some pains to distance his own authorial voice from the conclusions of Note B to the Pyrrho argument. He claimed he was merely relating a report told to him by someone who was present to witness a dialogue between two Abbés. Thus, the actual content of note B is just a report of a report of the claims of a degenerate French Papist, not Bayle's own voice — or so he would have had his readers suppose.

Be this as it may, two considerations tell against the view that Bayle was himself trying to advance the cause of Deism or Atheism by reporting the Abbé's views. The first is biographical. Bayle had been born a Protestant, then converted to Catholicism, then reconverted to Protestantism. The second conversion was illegal in his native France, and as a result he was forced into exile in Holland and subjected to serious danger of apprehension and repatriation. One wonders why, if the man was not sincerely religious, he would have done such a thing.

Attention should also be paid to the Church Bayle finally chose to join: the Walloon Church of Amsterdam. This was a Calvinist Church, and the Calvinists accepted the doctrines of predestination and salvation only of those elected to receive God's Grace. These doctrines were in



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part a reaction to abuses of the medieval Roman Church, which had told people that they could buy a place in Heaven through the good work of giving money to the Church. However, the doctrine also had theological roots.

The Christian scriptures had declared that God wills that all be saved. This was, after all, supposed to be the point of the sacrifice on the cross. But this claim is paradoxical. If God now wills that all be saved, as a consequence of the sacrifice on the cross, how is it that some are not saved? Some people obviously live totally wicked lives and it is not possible to imagine that they will be saved. But God is omnipotent. Whatever he wills is executed. How, therefore, could any wicked person successfully thwart the omnipotent will of God? In wrestling with this problem, Augustine, from whom Calvin drew great inspiration, had declared that all that the scripture meant is that God wills that all kinds of people be saved — barbers as well as carpenters, paupers as well as princes — not that each and every individual would be saved. God does *not* will that each individual be saved. He only wills the salvation of the just.

But now the doctrine of original sin intervened to pose a further problem. If we are all born corrupt, how can we possibly become just and deserve salvation? Not through simply deciding to perform good acts, Augustine and Calvin declared, because we are too corrupt to be able to make such a decision. If, in our state of corruption, we ever do manage to do good, it is only unintentional or because we are simply trying to buy a salvation we do not deserve through an empty show of goodness when in fact we are totally wicked at heart and only vainly trying to pretend to be otherwise by tricking God into thinking we are good — a trick that will not succeed. The only way, Augustine and Calvin declared, that people in our original state of corruption could possibly be elevated to do a good deed out of true goodness of heart is if God were to first graciously give them the strength to be able to do so.

But how could anyone possibly deserve such Grace? Not through performing good works and trying to be a good person, because that would only really become possible *after* the Grace had first been given.

The conclusion that Augustine and Calvin drew is that God's Grace is given for free.

But since God does not will that each and every individual be saved, this Grace is not freely given to all. It is only given to some, the elect.

Note that these people who get the Grace do not get it because they deserve it. Since we are all born corrupt, none of us can do anything to deserve Grace. God, through his own inscrutable and perhaps arbitrary will, simply decides to give Grace to some and not to others, like a rich person walking down the street and giving a dollar to one beggar, and nothing to another who is equally deserving (or equally undeserving).

Since it is only through getting the gift that we are justified, i.e., become just and so deserving of a place in Heaven, this means that God is in effect the one determining who will be saved and who will be damned, by giving or withholding Grace from them. Those who get the Grace will be saved out of his infinite bounty; those who do not will be justly damned for their wickedness, and the whole arrangement will have been predestined by God, who from the beginning of time already knew what people would be born and what people he would choose to save through Grace or damn through withholding Grace.

As objectionable as these doctrines may seem, they are well grounded in Christian theology. Were it possible for people to earn salvation just through doing good works, it would be possible for those who had never heard of Christ to be saved, and this would mean that Christ's great sacrifice on the cross would have been a frivolous and useless extravagance, since there are other



ways to be saved than through the Grace released by that sacrifice. This is why the doctrine that salvation can be earned by doing good works, was condemned as heretical by the early Christian church. (It was called the Pelagian heresy.) The reformers charged that the medieval Roman church had forgotten this important point of theology and had in fact become Pelagian, by teaching that one could buy one's way into Heaven with penances, sacrifices, and good works.

In light of these Calvinist doctrines, Bayle's position can hardly be viewed as unorthodox. It is simply the epistemological counterpart to Calvin's views on predestination. Besides giving the Grace to do truly good works to some and not to others, God gives the Grace to believe apparently irrational doctrines about the person of Christ and the atonement to some and not to others. Those capable of believing these absurdities will be saved and the rest will be damned.

Let us return from this digression to consider the second reason why Bayle might be considered to have been sincere in his claim that it is revelation that falsifies reason rather than the other way around. Had Bayle really been out to attack revelation, rather than reason, then he would not have mounted yet other arguments against reason. He would, like Locke and the Deists, have wanted reason to be as certain as possible so it could tip the scale against revelation. But this is not what he did. Though the sceptical Abbé claims not to need to consult the doctrines of the modern philosophers to make his case for Pyrrhonism, he goes ahead and does so anyway before launching into his appeal to revelation. Modern science and philosophy, the Abbé claims, have effectively undermined reason's claims to be able to give us any significant knowledge.

It may well be therefore, that Bayle was sincere in his fideist project. Though he recognized that sceptical arguments are dangerous to theism, he did not think that opposing reason to revelation as he had done would have any bad effect. Those to whom God had given the Grace to believe would still believe, and would merely draw the conclusion that since reason is so fallible a source of knowledge they need all the more to trust to their faith. Those, on the other hand, who have no faith would need to learn to distrust reason from other arguments. No true Christian, however, could be a rationalist about the bases for their religion, as Descartes and the Deists had tried to be.

Scepticism and Modern Philosophy. As noted above, Bayle did not confine his attack on reason to arguments drawn from Christian revelation. He also claimed that the new philosophy supports sceptical conclusions. The core sceptical thesis, Bayle observed, had always been that we only know appearances and not things as they are in themselves, and this is just what the new philosophy of nature, initiated by Newton, had finally come to realize. Newton had rejected all attempts to understand the underlying reality that makes the world as it is and had declared that the proper method in the sciences is simply to formulate laws describing regularities in our observations. In conformity with this method, he had not attempted to explain what makes bodies gravitate towards one another, but only to formulate a law describing how they are observed to move under the influence of their gravitation. In doing this he was acting in conformity with the fundamental sceptical teaching that we can only know how things appear to us and not what they are in themselves.

But it was not just Newtonian natural philosophers who were all sceptics, Bayle claimed. Philosophers such as Galileo and Descartes and Malebranche had helped advance sceptical conclusions as well, even though they didn't realize it. Though they had not said that we can only know appearances and not things in themselves, they had said that the qualities of bodies that we are aware of through our senses are only ideas in us and not real qualities existing in those bodies.



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In a way this was even more than Pyrrho would have wanted. Whereas the ancient sceptics had claimed simply not to know whether things as they are in themselves resemble their appearances, the new philosophers had absolutely denied that the sensible qualities exist outside of us, in things. That is why, Bayle concluded, Pyrrho would have had an easier time of it in early modern Europe. The philosophers were all already on his side.

Bayle was of course aware that Galileo and Descartes and Malebranche had claimed that things have certain primary and real properties. To this extent they were not sceptical. But, Bayle observed, they had not been able to offer any good reason for giving this different status to the primary qualities. The only way that we come to know of the “primary and real” qualities is through our senses. But those same senses inform us of the existence of sensible qualities such as colour, smell, and heat and cold. If we do not trust our senses when they present these sensible qualities as existing in bodies, then we should be given some special reason why we should trust them when they tell us that bodies have the purportedly primary qualities. But, Bayle claimed, no such reason can be given. The case of dreams shows that it is possible for us to have experience of bodies independently of being affected by bodies, and that means that it is possible to have experience of the primary qualities independently of there being anything that possesses those qualities.

Descartes had attempted to evade this objection by claiming that God would be a deceiver were he to have given us a strong natural inclination to believe that there are extended bodies outside of us when there are not in fact any. But external objects are not coloured, according to the new philosophy, yet no one thinks of calling God a deceiver for having allowed all of humanity except for a handful of recent natural philosophers, to believe that they really are not coloured. If God is not a deceiver in the latter case, then by parity of argument he should be accused of deception if he permits us to have ideas of extension that do not resemble anything that actually exists.

Solipsism of the present moment. Bayle saved an especially devastating argument for the close of the note. It appeals to a specific doctrine of the “new philosophy,” the Cartesian doctrine of constant creation, to establish scepticism about our identity over time. If God needs to recreate the world from one moment to the next, Bayle asked, how can we be sure that we had a past existence? Perhaps, just this moment, God created our souls, which never existed before, and infused into them the same set of memories they would have had in them had they been in existence, perceiving, and accumulating memories for years.

Descartes’s dreaming argument, which asked how we could tell if we are dreaming or not, opened the possibility that all our ideas might originate inside of ourselves rather than come from external objects. It called the existence of an external world into doubt and left us having to wonder whether we and our ideas might not be the only things in existence. The version of scepticism that calls the existence of an external world into question and affirms that all we can know for sure is our own existence is called solipsism.

Bayle’s appeal to constant creation is far more radical than Descartes’s dreaming argument and establishes a far more radical solipsism: a solipsism of the present moment. It charges that my entire past existence could be a dream or an illusion. Not only may there not be an external world, there may not even be a self continuing in existence from one moment to the next. The self may be no more than a temporary and fleeting, indeed, an instantaneous moment of consciousness, with no past and no future. If that is the case, anything that we think we know on the basis of memory or



past experience could turn out to be false. Thus, solipsism of the present moment establishes a total scepticism that spills over from doubt about the past existence of my self into doubt about all general rules and all induction from past experience.

It is a triumph, indeed, for the champions of revealed religion if we should end up having to accept even our own persistence through time on faith.

ESSAY QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH PROJECTS

1. Was Bayle right that no good argument can be found for treating the primary qualities differently from the sensible qualities?
2. Might Locke's account of personal identity be used to offer a reply to Bayle's argument for scepticism regarding my own past existence?
3. To what extent, if any, might Locke's account of personal identity be used to offer a reply to Bayle's attack on the rationality of the Christian mysteries?
4. Only three of Bayle's five appeals to metaphysical Christian mysteries (the first, third, and fourth) were discussed in the notes. Give an account of his point in the remaining ones, informed by a study of 17th century views on the nature of the Trinity and Transsubstantiation.
5. One of the most notorious responses to the view that the Christian mysteries are irrational was offered by a group of English thinkers collectively referred to as the Deists. Notable figures in this group include Herbert of Cherbury, John Toland, Anthony Collins, Matthew Tindal, and Lord Bolingbroke. The Deists claimed that if the mysteries were irrational then they should be rejected and they strived to formulate and justify a religion stripped of all mysterious elements. Do a study of the principal Deist tracts and determine to what extent Locke might be considered to be a member of their group.



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