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Bayle's Skepticism Revisited

Wiep van Bunge

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

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- 1 Paul Dibon, *Regards sur la Siècle d'Or* (Naples, 1990), pp. 315–41; J. A. H. Bots, G. H. M. Posthumus Meyjes, and F. Wieringa, eds., *Vlucht naar de vrijheid: De hugenoten en de Nederlanden* (Amsterdam, 1985); Christiane Berkvens-Stevelinck, 'De Hugenoten,' in: *La France aux Pays Bas*, ed. Paul Blom et al. (Vianen, 1985), pp. 13–49; J. A. H. Bots and G. H. M. Posthumus Meyjes, eds., *La Révocation de l'Édit de Nantes et les Provinces Unies, 1685* (Amsterdam, 1986); Gerald Cerny, *Theology, Politics and Letters at the Crossroads of European Civilization: Jacques Basnage and the Baylean Huguenot Refugees in the Dutch Republic* (Dordrecht, 1987); Willem Frijhoff, 'Uncertain Brotherhood: The Huguenots in the Dutch Republic,' in: *Memory and Identity: The Huguenots in France and the Atlantic Diaspora*, ed. Bertrand Van Ruymbeke and Randy J. Sparks (Columbia, S.C., 2003), pp. 128–71; John Marshall, *John Locke, Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture: Religious Intolerance and Arguments for Religious Toleration in Early Modern and 'Early Enlightenment' Europe* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 138–93; David van der Linden, *Experiencing Exile: Huguenot Refugees in the Dutch Republic, 1680–1700* (Farnham, 2015).
 - 2 Jonathan I. Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall, 1477–1806* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 998–1018; Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude, *The First Modern Economy: Success, Failure and Perseverance of the Dutch Economy, 1500–1815* (Cambridge, 1997), esp. pp. 673–681; Maarten Prak, *The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 263–73. For a classic account of the subsequent loss of prestige of the Dutch Republic after the Treaty of Utrecht, see: J. Aalbers, 'Het machtsverval van de Republiek der Verenigde Nederlanden,' in: *Machtsverval in de internationale context*, ed. J. Aalbers and A. P. van Goudoever (Groningen, 1986), pp. 7–36. For a recent collection of essays on the theme of eighteenth-century Dutch decline, see Koen Stapelbroek, ed., *Dutch Decline in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, special issue of *History of European Ideas* 36, no. 2 (2010).

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,

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- 3 N. C. F. van Sas, *De metamorfose van Nederland: Van oude orde naar moderniteit, 1750–1900* (Amsterdam, 2005); Joost Kloek and Wijnand Mijnhardt, *1800: Blauwdrukken voor een samenleving* (The Hague, 2001). See also Wijnand Mijnhardt, 'The Dutch Enlightenment: Humanism, Nationalism, and Decline,' *The Dutch Republic in the Eighteenth Century: Decline, Enlightenment, and Revolution*, ed. Margaret C. Jacob and Wijnand Mijnhardt (Ithaca, N.Y., 1992), pp. 197–223; idem, 'Dutch Culture in the Age of William and Mary: Cosmopolitan or Provincial?,' *Anglo-Dutch Perspectives on the Glorious Revolution of 1688–1689*, ed. Dale Hoak and Mordechai Feingold (Stanford, 1996), pp. 219–33.
- 4 J. A. F. de Jongste and A. J. Veenendaal Jr, eds., *Anthonie Heinsius and the Dutch Republic, 1688–1720: Politics, War, and Finance* (The Hague, 2002); Donald Haks, *Vaderland en vrede, 1672–1713: Publiciteit over de Nederlandse Republiek in oorlog* (Hilversum, 2013).
- 5 Willem Frijhoff, 'Verfransing? Franse taal en Nederlandse cultuur tot in de revolutietijd,' *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 104 (1989), 592–606; Remieg Aerts and Henk te Velde, eds., *De stijl van de burger: Over Nederlandse burgerlijke cultuur vanaf de middeleeuwen* (Kampen, 1997); Joost Kloek and Karin Tilmans, eds., *Burger: Een geschiedenis van het begrip 'burger' in de Nederlanden van de Middeleeuwen tot de 21ste eeuw* (Amsterdam, 2002).

reached their compatriots publishing French journals, treatises, novels, and philosophical dialogues.⁶ 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.⁷

Both Mijnhardt's and 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."⁸ 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.⁹ Most of the

6 Cf. J. J. V. M. de Vet, 'Francofone letteren en periodieke geschriften in de Verenigde Provinciën: Notities over de eeuw van Bayle en Hemsterhuis', *Spiegel der Letteren* 46 (2004), 289–98. See, more generally: Marc Fumaroli, *Quand l'Europe parlait français* (Paris, 2001).

7 See also Wiep van Bunge, 'Introduction,' in: *The Early Enlightenment in the Dutch Republic, 1650–1750*, ed. Wiep van Bunge (Leiden, 2003) and idem, 'The Presence of Bayle in the Dutch Republic,' in: *Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), Le philosophe de Rotterdam: Philosophy, Religion and Reception*, ed. Wiep van Bunge and Hans Bots (Leiden, 2008), pp. 197–216.

8 Sir William Temple, *Observations upon the United Provinces of the Netherlands*, introd. G. N. Clark (Cambridge, 1932), p. xi.

9 Jan Lucassen, *Migrant Labour in Europe, 1600–1900: The Drift to the North Sea* (London, 1987), pp. 133–205; Jan Lucassen and Rinus Penninx, *Newcomers: Immigrants and their*

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 prosperity 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 managed 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 exclusivist and intolerant discourse, and it has been argued that in doing so orthodox 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, according to which the Revocation should be considered a providential punishment for the sins of the Huguenots, could not be developed successfully without

Descendants in the Netherlands, 1550–1995 (Amsterdam, 1997); Leo Lucassen and Jan Lucassen, *Winnaars en verliezers: Een nuchtere balans van vijfhonderd jaar migratie* (Amsterdam, 2012), pp. 189–221.

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.

16 Pierre Jurieu, *L'Accomplissement des prophéties, ou la délivrance prochaine de l'Église*, 2 vols. (Rotterdam, 1686).

17 Hubert Bost, ed., *L'Affaire Bayle' : La bataille entre Pierre Bayle et Pierre Jurieu devant la consistoire de l'Église wallonne de Rotterdam* (Saint-Étienne, 2006). See also note 57.

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.²⁰ 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.²¹

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*,²² 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

20 Élie Richard, *Door ballingen onthaald: Verslag van reizen in Frankrijk, Vlaanderen, Nederland en Duitsland, 1708*, trans. Robert den Does, ed. Kees Meerhof (Hilversum, 2012), p. 9. See, however, R. N. L. Mirandolle and L. Bresson, *Rotterdam in den loop der eeuwen* 2.6 (Rotterdam, 1907), pp. 18–19.

21 For a recent biography, see Hubert Bost, *Pierre Bayle* (Paris, 2006). See also Hans Bots, *De Fransman Pierre Bayle en Nederland: Over een problematische verhouding en de betekenis van Bayles denken toen en nu* (Nijmegen, 2005); Antony McKenna, 'Yearning for the Homeland. Pierre Bayle and the Huguenot Refugees,' *Australian Journal of French Studies* 44 (2007), 213–26.

22 Élisabeth Labrousse, *Pierre Bayle*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1963–1964). The first part delivers a biography: *Du Pays de Foix à la Cité d'Érasme*, the second part, re-issued in 1996, offers an interpretation of Bayle's thought: *Hétérodoxie et rigorisme*.

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.²⁴ 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

24 Mara van der Lugt, *Bayle, Jurieu, and the Dictionnaire historique et critique* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 1–14; Antony McKenna, 'Pierre Bayle in the Twentieth Century,' in: *Pierre Bayle*, ed. Van Bunge and Bots, pp. 253–76, there 253.

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 Élisabeth 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

25 David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Henry D. Aiken (New York, 1948), p. 94.

26 Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle*, rev. and exp. ed. (Oxford, 2003); Hubert Bost, *Pierre Bayle, historien, critique et moraliste* (Turnhout, 2006); Gianluca Mori, *Bayle philosophe* (Paris, 1999); Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 331–341; idem, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670–1752* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 63–93, 135–163 and 663–696; McKenna, ‘Pierre Bayle in the Twentieth Century’ (see above, n. 24); idem, ‘Pierre Bayle: Free Thought and Freedom of Conscience,’ *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 14 (2012), 85–100; José R. Maia Neto, ‘Bayle’s Academic Skepticism,’ in: *Everything Connects: In Conference with Richard H. Popkin*, ed. James E. Force and David S. Katz (Leiden, 1999), pp. 263–79; Michael W. Hickson, ‘Disagreement and Academic Skepticism in Bayle,’ in: *Academic Skepticism in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Sébastien Charles and Plinio Junquerio Smith (Cham, 2017), pp. 293–317.

27 Élisabeth Labrousse, ‘Reading Pierre Bayle in Paris,’ in: *Anticipations of the Enlightenment in England, France and Germany*, ed. Alan Charles Kors (Philadelphia, 1987), pp. 7–16.

28 Quentin Skinner, ‘Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,’ *History and Theory* 8 (1969), 3–53, there 33; Hubert Bost, ‘Pierre Bayle, un “protestant compliqué,”’ in: *Pierre Bayle*, ed. Van Bunge and Bots, pp. 83–101.

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.²⁹ But unlike Hume, Popkin's Bayle remained a fideist, whose faith "was built on the ruins of reason."³⁰ 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.³¹ 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

29 See also many of the articles collected in Richard H. Popkin, *The High Road to Pyrrhonism*, ed. Richard A. Watson and James E. Force (1980; repr. Indianapolis, 1993), and more recently also Gianni Paganini, 'Hume, Bayle et les *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*,' in: *Pierre Bayle dans la République des Lettres: Philosophie, religion, critique*, ed. Antony McKenna and Gianni Paganini (Paris, 2004), pp. 527–67; idem, 'Theism, Atheism, and Scepticism: Bayle's Background to Hume's *Dialogues*,' in: *Gestalten des Deismus in Europa*, ed. Winfried Schröder (Wiesbaden, 2013), pp. 203–43; idem, 'Hume and Bayle on Localization and Perception: A New Source for Hume's *Treatise* 1.4.5,' in: *Scepticism in the Eighteenth Century: Enlightenment, Lumières, Aufklärung*, ed. S. Charles and P. J. Smith (Dordrecht, 2013), pp. 109–24.

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.³² 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*.³³ 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*.³⁴ (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.³⁵

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

32 John Christian Laursen, 'Skepticism against Reason in Pierre Bayle's Theory of Toleration,' in: *Pyrrhonism in Ancient, Modern, and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. Diego E. Machuca (Berlin, 2011), pp. 131–44.

33 Bayle, *Commentaire philosophique* (see above, n. 31), p. 85.

34 Bayle, *Commentaire philosophique* (see above, n. 31), p. 89.

35 "Si nous n'avons pas une lumière naturelle qui soit une règle sûre et infaillible, et par laquelle il faille juger absolument de tout ce qui vient en question, sans en excepter même la question, *si une telle ou une telle chose est contenue dans l'Écriture*, nous n'aurions pas lieu de douter de la majeure de cet argument, et par conséquent de la conclusion? Comme donc ce serait le plus épouvantable chaos, et le pyrrhonisme le plus exécrationnel qui se puisse imaginer, il faut nécessairement en venir là, *que toute dogme particulier, soit qu'on l'avance comme contenu dans l'Écriture, soit qu'on le propose autrement, est faux, lorsqu'il est réfuté par les notions claires et distinctes de la lumière naturelle, principalement à l'égard de la morale*." Bayle, *Commentaire philosophique* (see above, n. 31), p. 95.

variety of Cartesianism—a Cartesianism that is without the voluntarist theory of the “création des vérités éternelles.”³⁶ 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*.³⁷ 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.”³⁸ According to Bayle, this universal charity can be rationally deduced from the natural law obvious to all rational human beings.³⁹

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.”⁴⁰ 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.*”⁴¹ 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.⁴² 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.

37 McKenna, ‘Pierre Bayle: Free Thought and Freedom of Conscience’ (see above, n. 26), p. 86.

38 Pierre Bayle, *Ce que c'est que la France toute catholique sous le règne de Louis le Grand*, ed. Élisabeth Labrousse (Paris, 1973), p. 72.

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.

primitive et originale du discernement du vrai et du faux, du bon et du mauvais, que d'employer la violence à inspirer une religion à ceux qui ne la professent pas.⁴³

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

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.

4 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

49 McKenna, 'Pierre Bayle: Free Thought and Freedom of Conscience' (see above, n. 26), p. 90.

50 McKenna, 'Pierre Bayle: Free Thought and Freedom of Conscience' (see above, n. 26), pp. 96–8. Walter Rex was one of the first experts to question Bayle's commitment to toleration. See Walter Rex, *Pierre Bayle and Religious Controversy* (The Hague, 1965), pp. 181–5.

51 Mori, *Bayle philosophe* (see above, n. 26), p. 314.

52 Pierre Bayle, *Oeuvres diverses*, ed. Pierre Des Maizeaux, 4 vols. (The Hague, 1727–31), 3: 1011. I don't think that the discussion of this quote in Michael W. Hickson and Thomas M. Lennon, 'The Real Significance of Bayle's Authorship of the *Avis*,' *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 17 (2009), 191–205, there 198–9, touches my argument.

peace-loving Spinozists as his subjects.⁵³ (It should be added that this political motive was already apparent in the *Commentaire*.)⁵⁴

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.⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶ 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

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.

55 Pierre Bayle, *Pensées diverses sur la comète*, ed. Joyce Bost and Hubert Bost (Paris, 2007), pp. 72–3.

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 prospérité 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,⁵⁷ Bayle was especially disgusted by the Crusades and remarkably mild in his assessment of Islam and the religion of the Chinese.⁵⁸ By the end of his life, he dryly observed that

(d)epuis le iv^e siècle jusqu'au nôtre, les conspirations, les séditions, 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.⁵⁹

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.⁶⁰

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.⁶¹ Bayle first launched this provocative notion in the *Pensées diverses*,

57 Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (see above, n. 10), articles 'Alix,' 'Braunbom,' 'Comenius,' and 'Kotterus'; see John Christian Laursen, 'Bayle's Anti-Millenarianism: The Dangers of Those Who Claim to Know the Future,' *Millenarianism and Messianism in Early Modern European Culture*, ed. John Christian Laursen and Richard H. Popkin (Dordrecht, 2001), pp. 95–106; Hubert Bost, 'Les faux prophètes dans le *Dictionnaire* de Pierre Bayle: fanatiques ou imposteurs?' in: *Critique, savoir et érudition à la veille des Lumières. Le Dictionnaire historique et critique de Pierre Bayle (1647–1706)*, ed. Hans Bots (Amsterdam-Maarssen, 1998), pp. 235–49. See also F. R. J. Knetsch, *Bayle's oordeel over Comenius* (Groningen, 1970).

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.

60 David Wootton, 'Bayle Libertine?' in: *Studies in Seventeenth-Century European Philosophy*, ed. M. A. Stewart (Oxford, 1997), pp. 197–226. See also Lorenzo Bianchi, 'Pierre Bayle et le libertinage érudit,' *Critique, savoir et érudition*, ed. Bots, pp. 251–67.

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

pp. 200–5. See more in general Michael Czelinski-Uesbeck, *Der tugendhafte Atheist: Studien zur Vorgeschichte der Spinoza-Renaissance in Deutschland* (Würzburg, 2007).

62 Bayle, *Pensées diverses* (see above, n. 55), p. 288.

63 Bayle, *Pensées diverses* (see above, n. 55), p. 291.

64 Wiep van Bunge, ‘Spinoza’s Life: 1677–1802,’ *Journal of the History of Ideas* 78 (2017), 211–31.

65 Bayle, *Oeuvres diverses* (see above, n. 52), 3: 395–8.

66 Popkin, *The History of Scepticism* (see above, n. 26), p. 289.

doit suffire qu'on s'exerce à chercher des Hypotheses probables, et à recueillir des Expériences; et je suis fort assuré qu'il y a très-peu de bons Physiciens dans notre Siècle, 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 esprit-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 probabilités, 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 appuyée sur la certitude; son but, ses effets, ses usages, tombent dès que la ferme persuasion de ses véritez est effacée de l'ame.⁶⁷

Clearly the "Pyrrhonism" Bayle attributes to physicists is of a completely different nature from the Pyrrhonism threatening theology: Bayle's skepticism only turns into genuine Pyrrhonism where he discusses the possibility of formulating a rational theology. His entire discussion of evidence in remark C on 'Pyrrho' exclusively concerns the theological concepts of the trinity and transubstantiation.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 tradition, 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

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 Descartes to Bayle*, ed. Gianni Paganini (Dordrecht, 2003), pp. 393–414.

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 sôtiens 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

70 Harry Bracken even felt 'Pyrrho' was an *attack* on Christian Pyrrhonism: Harry Bracken, 'Bayle's Attack on Natural Theology: The Case of Christian Pyrrhonism,' in: *Scepticism and Irreligion in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Richard H. Popkin and Arjo Vanderjagt (Leiden, 1993), pp. 254–66.

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.6.1.28090.0.77.bayle.

73 Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (London, 1997), pp. 190–222.

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 considerer seulement le point dans lequel ils se réunissent ...⁷⁵

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.⁷⁶ 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.⁷⁷ 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."⁷⁸ Nor does it seem warranted to attribute to Bayle a fideist solution to the "ruins of

75 Cited from Ruth Whelan, *The Anatomy of Superstition: A Study of the Historical Theory and Practice of Pierre Bayle* (Oxford, 1989), p. 87.

76 Bost, *Pierre Bayle, historien* (see above, n. 26), pp. 9–16; Wiep van Bunge, 'Pierre Bayle on the History of Science: What Counts and What Does Not' (forthcoming). For an especially fascinating case study, see Koen Vermeir, 'The Dustbin of the Republic of Letters: Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire* as an Encyclopedic Palimpsest of Errors,' *Journal of Early Modern Studies* 1 (2012), 109–49.

77 Henry G. van Leeuwen, *The Problem of Certainty in English Thought, 1630–1690* (The Hague, 1970); Barbara J. Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England: A Study of the Relationship between Natural Science, Religion, History, Law, and Literature* (Princeton, 1983). See, however, also Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability, Induction, and Statistical Inference* (Cambridge, 2006).

78 John Kilcullen, *Sincerity and Truth: Essays on Arnauld, Bayle and Toleration* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 54–105, 101. See also, much earlier: E. D. James, 'Scepticism and Fideism in Bayle's *Dictionnaire*,' *French Studies* 16 (1962), 307–22; idem, 'Pierre Bayle on Belief and *évidence*,' *French Studies* 27 (1973), 395–404.

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) l’y a point de contradiction entre ces deux choses: 1. la lumiere de la Raison m’apprend que cela est faux; 2. je le croi pourtant, parce que je suis persuadé que cette Lumiere 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, *Piere 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.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 *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.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 *Dictionnaire* Bayle demonstrated a keen awareness of Dutch intolerance towards Mennonites, Arminians, and Socinians alike throughout the seventeenth century.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:

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.⁹¹

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

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

(Paris, 2006). See, however, Hickson and Lennon, 'The Real Significance' (see above, n. 52), pp. 195–201.

88 Wiep van Bunge, 'The Politics of Appropriation. Erasmus and Bayle,' *Erasmus of Rotterdam Society Yearbook* 33 (2013), 3–21.

89 Marshall, *John Locke, Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture* (see above, n. 1), pp. 138–93, 418–39. See also Benjamin Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), pp. 333–58.

90 Marshall, *John Locke, Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture* (see above, n. 1), pp. 166–175. See Bayle, *Dictionnaire*, articles 'Anabaptistes,' remark D; 'Episcopus,' 'Socin,' remark L. See also Dibon, *Regards sur la Hollande* (see above, n. 1), pp. 431–55.

91 Bayle, *Oeuvres diverses* (see above, n. 52), 3: 237.

l'évidence et l'incompréhensibilité, c'est ce qui ne se peut ... Il faut opter nécessairement ...⁹²

This is hardly an isolated comment, as it catches the drift of his critique of both Aristotelian and Socinian attempts to formulate philosophical theologies.⁹³ 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."⁹⁴ 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-Glain, 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.⁹⁵ 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.⁹⁶

92 Quoted from Antony McKenna, 'L'Éclaircissement sur les pyrrhoniens, 1702,' in: *Critique, savoir et érudition*, ed. Bots, pp. 297–320, there 310.

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.

96 Paul Vernière, *Spinoza et la pensée française avant la Révolution* (Paris, 1954), pp. 333–446; Madeleine Francès, 'Un gazetier français en Hollande: Gabriel de Saint Glen: Traducteur de Spinoza,' *La Revue des Sciences Humaines* 79 (1955), 407–20; Paul-Laurent Assoun, 'Spinoza, les libertins français et la politique (1665–1725),' *Cahiers Spinoza* 3 (1979–80), 171–207; Israel, *Radical Enlightenment* (see above, n. 26), pp. 295–327 and 575–90.