

PIERRE BAYLE: RATIONALISM AND RELIGIOUS FAITH. SELF-EVIDENT TRUTHS AND PARTICULAR TRUTHS

ANTONY MCKENNA

Université Jean Monnet Saint-Etienne (Université de Lyon)
CNRS IHRIM – UMR 5317
mckenna@univ-st-etienne.fr

ABSTRACT

We examine the premises of the interpretation of Bayle as a sceptic and fideist and seek to refute some of the arguments advanced in favour of that reading. The crucial distinction between moral principles and “particular” or “speculative” truths allows us to present Bayle as a moral rationalist, who insists on the irrational nature of the Christian faith, incompatible with the self-evident principles of natural morals. Bayle’s fideistic stance – i.e. his adoption of Jurieu’s definition of faith – is presented as a “shield” against persecution. His arguments on the existence of God and on His nature are always conducted within the framework of a hypothetical concession designed to contribute to the radical refutation of rationalist theology.

KEYWORDS

Pierre Bayle, Pierre Jurieu, Rationalism, Faith, Fideism, Self-evident truths, *Commentaire Philosophique*, *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, Atheism, Common notions.

For some time now the debate on Bayle's religious and philosophical convictions has been turning in circles because, although the number of articles devoted to Bayle has increased considerably, researchers have not paid much attention to the arguments deployed and each side has remained firmly entrenched in its own interpretation. This has produced *a priori* barriers defined by the commentator's reading: an interpretation is immediately classed as for or against Bayle's sincere Christian faith and the “dialogue” comes to a halt. Those who argue in favour of a free-thinking (or unbelieving) Bayle are accused of presenting him as a surreptitious hypocrite and – scandalously – as an atheist, and the examination of the arguments for and against goes no further. Such a reaction takes little account of the conditions in

which he was writing. He was familiar with the historical case of Uriel Acosta, whom he portrays as a sincere person following his rational judgement on religious faith: Acosta went from one Church to another and his successive departures were regarded by each community as acts of treachery. Acosta was thus gradually expelled from all social life and finally committed suicide. That is the portrait Bayle offers of his life and it can be read as a nightmarish self-portrait. One might also invoke the case of another very free-thinker with whom Bayle was acquainted: Hadriaan Beverland, exiled in England because of his impious works and, despite all his efforts, unable to obtain permission to return to his homeland. Bayle also knew the unenviable fate of Adriaan Koerbagh¹, who was accused of atheism and died in prison some twenty years before Bayle's first publications. The point is worth making: a philosopher was not free to declare himself an atheist in the United Provinces at the time of Bayle's exile, between 1681 and 1706. Accused by Jurieu of impiety and atheism, Bayle was threatened with expulsion from the refugee Huguenot community and he was obviously sensitive to that threat, since he hid even from his closest friends that he was the author of the *Avis aux réfugiés*². Moreover, he suffered from the efficiency with which his main enemy – strongly supported by the refugee community – bandied his accusations, since in 1693 he lost his position at the Illustrious School of Rotterdam on judgement by the town council – even if it may be thought that his dismissal was due mainly to political motives and that the religious reasons given were simply pretexts³. I thus conclude on this point – without taking sides and without presenting arguments for one interpretation or another of Bayle's works – that if Bayle was an unbeliever or atheist, he could not profess his opinions openly and explicitly.

In any case, whether we consider him to be a believer or unbeliever, we are obliged to read his works “between the lines”: reading him in this way is not reserved for those who consider him to be a disguised atheist, since, if he was in fact a sincere believer, we have to interpret subtly the passages where he raises objections to faith, where he points out the insuperable logical difficulties implied by a given article of faith, and where he renders paradoxical the very conception of an infinitely perfect Creator. Moreover,

1 See S. Lavaert, «Entre clandestinité et sphère publique: le cas Koerbagh», *La Lettre clandestine*, 25 (2018).

2 See Pierre Bayle, *Avis aux réfugiés*, ed. G. Mori, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2007.

3 See the letter from Bayle to Michel Le Vassor, 12 July 1695 (*Correspondance*, ed. E. Labrousse et A. McKenna, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1999-2017, 15 vol., XIII, p.583-589): Bayle had apparently taken precautions to provide himself with a possible retreat to England should Jurieu make things unbearable in Rotterdam.

Bayle changes his position on the relation between reason and faith around the time of the “Glorious Revolution” (as we shall see below), so that, in order to perceive the coherence and significance of his philosophy, we must seek the reason for this change of mind. We all have to read his works between the lines: it's an obvious fact and besides it is true of all the authors we interpret, even when we choose to take at face value their most explicit declarations. To interpret a work, to penetrate a text in search of a coherent sense, is by definition to read it “between the lines”.

Since the very publication of his works, Bayle was considered to be a hypocrite, hiding his real convictions. True, in his own lifetime, readers painted the portrait of an “outright sceptic”, a disciple of Pyrrhon, but that scepticism was held to be the mask of an unbelieving rationalist who took pleasure in defining insoluble paradoxes and setting them up as so many obstacles to “true” faith. The reception of his works in the Huguenot refugee communities leaves no doubt on this point: they rejected fideism as a disastrous religious philosophy, destructive of faith and reason; their faith, they considered, was “reasonable”, justified by Locke's treatise as reformulated by the “Swiss Triumvirate”: Ostervald, Werenfels et Jean-Alphonse Turretini, and awaiting confirmation by Bénédict Pictet and Formey's articles in the *Encyclopédie* printed in Yverdon⁴. It was the triumph of “common sense”. On the other side, the reception of Bayle's works by the 18th century *philosophes* makes it obvious that they considered him to belong to their ranks: for them, his logical objections to the articles of Christian doctrine disqualified that and indeed any other religious faith. He was obviously, so it seemed to them, a rationalist philosopher who did not dare to air his views explicitly⁵.

Richard Popkin⁶ was the first to take Bayle's philosophical scepticism seriously as the foundation of a sincere faith – in the tradition of other philosophers that he regarded as “fideists”, such as Montaigne and La Mothe Le Vayer. A host of disciples have followed in his footsteps, from B. Brush to T. Lennon, J.R. Maia Neto, J.C. Laursen and, more recently, M. Hickson and K.

4 See A. McKenna, «Pierre Bayle et le Brandebourg», in Claire Gantet et Markus Meumann (dir.), *Transferts, circulations et réseaux savants franco-allemands au XVIII^e siècle*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2018, p.000-000.

5 P. Rétat, *Le « Dictionnaire » de Bayle et la lutte philosophique au XVIII^e siècle*, Paris (1971).

6 R. Popkin, «Pierre Bayle's Place in 17th-Century Scepticism», dans *Pierre Bayle, le philosophe de Rotterdam*, dir. P. Dibon, Amsterdam, Elsevier, Paris, Vrin, 1959, p. 1-19; *The High Road to Pyrrhonism*, dir. R. A. Watson et J. E. Force, San Diego, Austin Hill Press, 1980; *Idem, The History of Scepticism : From Savonarola to Bayle*, nlle éd., Oxford, OUP, 2003.

Irwin⁷. For all of these researchers, it is taken for granted that Bayle was a sceptic: it is now only a question of defining his scepticism as Pyrrhonian or Academic. They base their arguments essentially on the article “Zénon d'Elée”, where Bayle demonstrates that we have no clear notion of space or time, but also on the article “Pyrrhon”, remark B, in which Bayle analyses in greater depth the relation between Pyrrhonism and Christian faith. I cannot hope to deal here with all the arguments of all the commentators, so I have chosen three that seem to me to be symptomatic.

Chris Laursen concedes that the first chapters of the *Commentaire philosophique* are founded on moral rationalism, but he turns Bayle's own analyses of the decisive influence of education and custom – in the second part of the *Commentaire* – against that same rationalism. In this sense, Bayle is said to be a willy-nilly sceptic – a sceptic *malgré lui*. Further in this article, I will offer an answer to that interpretation.

Michael Hickson argues in all his articles in favour of Bayle's scepticism and sincere fideism and even comes to question whether Bayle accepts self-evidence as a criterion of truth⁸. However, the terms of the question are obviously askew: the presuppositions of the enquiry lead inevitably to a negative conclusion. Since, from 1693 onwards, Bayle elaborated a whole battery of arguments against rationalist theology (or apologetics based on rational demonstration), it is obvious at the outset that, *if and only if* he is a

7 C.B. Brush, *Montaigne and Bayle. Variations on the Theme of Skepticism*, The Hague, M. Nijhoff, 1966; J.R. Maia Neto, «O ceticismo de Bayle », in *Kriterion: revista de filosofia*, XXXV (93), 1996, p. 77-88; T. Ryan, *Pierre Bayle's Cartesian Metaphysics: Rediscovering Early Modern Philosophy*, New York, Routledge, 2009; du même, « Évolution et cohérence du fidéisme baylien: le paradoxe du “fidéisme raisonnable” », in *Les « Éclaircissements » de Pierre Bayle*, dir. H. Bost et A. McKenna Paris, H. Champion, 2010, p. 447-457; J.-L. Solère, « Bayle et les apories de la raison humaine », in *La Raison corrosive*, dir. I. Delpla et P. de Robert, Paris, H. Champion, 2003, p. 87-138; du même, « Scepticisme, métaphysique et morale: le cas Bayle », in *Les « Éclaircissements » de Pierre Bayle*, p. 499-524; J.C. Laursen, J.C. Laursen, «Skepticism against reason in Pierre Bayle's theory of toleration», in Diego E. Machuca, (dir.), *Pyrrhonism in Ancient, Modern, and Contemporary Philosophy*, Berlin, Springer, 2011, p.131-144, et «Pierre Bayle on Religious Persecution: From Emotional Rationalism to Skeptical Resignation», in J.-C. Darmon, P. Desan, and G. Paganini (dir.), *Scepticisme et pensée morale: De Michel de Montaigne à Stanley Cavell*, Paris, Hermann, 2017, p.91-109; et les articles de M. Hickson et K. Irwin in S. Charles and P. Junqueira Smith (dir.), *Academic Scepticism in the Development of Early Modern Philosophy* (Suisse, Springer, 2017).

8 M. Hickson, «« Bayle on *évidence* as a criterion of truth », *Libertinage et philosophie*, 14 (2017), p.105-125. Voir aussi son article «Disagreement and Academic Scepticism in Bayle», in S. Charles and P. Junqueira Smith (dir.), *Academic Scepticism*, op. cit., p.293-317, où il s'appuie sur l'article «Chrysippe, rem. F, pour arguer que Bayle est un sceptique académique parce qu'il expose avec intégrité l'ensemble des arguments dans un débat pour ou contre une opinion quelle qu'elle soit.

sincere Christian, then self-evidence is not a decisive and exclusive criterion of truth – since the truth of the Christian doctrine is not self-evident. I will return to this neglected condition, which is vital in order to reconstruct Bayle's argument as a whole.

Lastly, in support of his reading of Bayle as a sceptic, Frédéric Brahami explains that Bayle “defends the Cartesian principle of the creation of eternal truths” and quotes a passage from the *Continuation des pensées diverses*, §114: “God can create a square circle when he wants”⁹. But it must be underlined that this remark is an *objection* raised by “Chinese philosophers” and addressed to Christian missionaries, whose God is precisely *unable* to create a square circle. Bayle then suggests the Cartesian response, but comments ironically on such a “solution”:

Mais est-il certain ce dogme-là [la création des vérités éternelles selon Descartes], demanderez vous: je vous répondrai qu'en le connoissant si propre à prévenir les rétorsions des Stratoniciens[,] j'ai fait tout ce que j'ai pû pour le bien comprendre, et pour trouver la solution des difficultez qui l'environnent. Je vous confesse ingénument que *je n'en suis pas venu encore tout-à-fait à bout*. Cela ne me décourage point; je m'imagine comme ont fait d'autres Philosophes en semblables cas que le tems développera ce beau paradoxe. Je voudrois que le Pere Mallebranche eût pû trouver bon de le soutenir, mais il a pris d'autres mesures.

Malebranche did indeed choose another path... and Bayle follows him on this point: he declares explicitly that Descartes' “sentiment” on the divine creation of eternal truths “may be of some use in certain circumstances, but it goes against so many good reasons and brings with it such uncomfortable consequences that there is hardly any extreme position which is not preferable to that one” (*Réponses aux questions d'un Provincial*, II, chap. 89).

Let us return first to the *Commentaire philosophique*: can Bayle's argument be turned back against his own rationalism? Is he a willy-nilly sceptic? I won't dwell on the moral rationalism of the first chapters: everyone is agreed (including Richard Popkin *in conversation*) that Bayle founds his conception of natural morality on self-evident principles of which one cannot be unaware unless it be by negligence or malice¹⁰. The question of the contradiction raised by Chris Laursen can be resolved, it seems to me, by the distinction Bayle makes between self-evident moral principles and “speculative truths”, in other words between the “common notions” of ethics and the “particular truths” –

⁹ F. Brahami, *Le Travail du scepticisme: Montaigne, Bayle, Hume*, Paris, PUF, 2001, p.110.

¹⁰ See A. McKenna, «Bayle et le hareng rouge» and «Pierre Bayle: liberté de conscience et liberté de penser», in the work *Etudes sur Pierre Bayle*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2015.

the mysteries – of Christian doctrine. It is a crucial distinction in the *Commentaire philosophique*. In the field of “common notions” self-evidence imposes itself upon all people's minds, and moral principles are thus assimilated to logical and mathematical axioms. This may not be as naïve as it may first appear. I understand this position as follows. Moral principles have the status of “nominal definitions”: just as, once the unit has been defined, $1 + 1 = 2$, $2 + 2 = 4$, etc., so, in the field of morals, killing a person is a crime, violence is in itself criminal, generosity triggers thankfulness, etc. And just as the application of mathematical principles to the physical world requires interpretation, so the application of moral principles to people's physical acts requires knowledge of circumstances, motives and intentions¹¹. But there can be no doubt as to the truth of moral principles in themselves: they derive directly from natural morality, that is the “general charity we owe to all men by the indispensable duties of humanity”, which defines our natural conception of “equity”; this general rule of ethics is a “rational” and “natural” principle: it founds the “rules of civility and social life”¹². Ignorance of such notions derives necessarily, *by definition*, from negligence or malice: there can be no excuse for it¹³. Our moral duty is to apply the nominal principles as best we can to practical life. Furthermore, it is *because* – it is *only because* – the New Testament conforms to our common notions in the field of ethics – i.e. to our natural and rational moral principles – that we can regard it as “divine”.

In the domain of the “particular truths” of Christian doctrine, on the other hand, each person must follow his own convictions and we can err in good faith and in all innocence: in other words, they are *adiaphora*. Bayle thus emphasises the necessary agreement between reason and faith on the ethical plane. The other doctrinal articles (such as Christ's divine nature, redemption,

11 See Bayle's commentary on the case of Amphitryon and Alcmena, in his *Nouvelles lettres de l'auteur de la « Critique générale de l'« Histoire du calvinisme de Mr Maimbourg » »* (Villefranche, 1685, 12^e), Letter IX, §xiii : *Réflexion sur la fable d'Amphytrion*: « si une femme trompée par la ressemblance qui seroit entre son véritable mari, et un autre homme, accordait à cet autre homme tous les privilèges du mariage, elle ne donneroit aucune atteinte à sa chasteté ». Thus, he seeks to demonstrate that « les droits de la vérité dépendent de la condition, pourvû qu'elle soit connue » et donc « que la fausseté se puisse rendre maîtresse de tous les droits de la vérité »: « il n'y a que l'opinion qui fasse toute l'essence et tout le fondement des droits de la vérité ». The moral truth of a situation depends on the circumstances and what people know or think they know of those circumstances.

12 Bayle, *Ce que c'est que la France toute catholique sous Louis le Grand*, éd. E. Labrousse, Paris, Vrin, 1973: « cette charité générale que nous devons à tous les hommes, par les devoirs indispensables de l'humanité » (p.72); he evokes here our natural conception of « équité » (p.77), and this first moral principle, both “rational” and “natural”, founds the « règles de la civilité et de l'honnêteté » (p.83).

13 *Commentaire philosophique*, éd. J.-M. Gros, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2006, p.296-297.

salvation, grace, Trinity, Transsubstantiation, etc.) are relegated, so to speak, to the field of education, habit, “taste” and “zeal”: there is no *reason* to interpret them rather in one way than another. Naturally, Bayle insists on the decisive role of education and habit in the formation of our convictions in the field of “particular truths”: since these convictions are not based on rational arguments, their hidden source must be sought in our passions, in self-interest, in habit and education – in a word, in our “temperament”. But this decisive influence as far as the *adiaphora* are concerned does not affect the certainty of moral principles: the latter are self-evident and absolutely certain *by definition* according to Bayle – despite the difficulties to which they may give rise.

To illustrate his moral rationalism, one needs only to recall that he assimilates moral principles to logical axioms and imagines a fable in which children are raised to believe that “the whole is not bigger than its part” (*Commentaire philosophique*, II, 10): out of lazy-mindedness, the children fail to question the false lesson inherited from their parents. Bayle regards that laziness as culpable. The translation of this “case” of negligence regarding the first principles of logic emphasises the irrationality which has its source in that lazy-mindedness. That irrationality is obvious in the example of a logical principle; the error of Saint Augustine in his interpretation of Christ's parable of the wedding banquet (Mat. 22, 1-14) as being favourable to religious persecution is deemed no less obvious. What strikes us as obvious in the field of logic should make us more sensitive to the importance of the error in the field of morals. These principles – logical axioms and moral principles – are self-evident and certain by definition. In the *Commentaire philosophique* Bayle does not therefore contradict himself: the analysis of the influence of education and habit cannot be turned back on the certainty of logical axioms and rational moral principles. Bayle is not a willy-nilly sceptic.

This distinction between moral principles and “particular” or “speculative” truths weighs heavily on the definition of the rights of an erring conscience. In the field of *adiaphora*, uncertainty reigns: reason does not allow us to determine one “orthodox” interpretation in preference to another. People develop their beliefs by education and habit; they reinforce their convictions by taste and by zeal, with all the force of passion and self-interest. It is this potentially conflictual uncertainty which creates the demand for tolerance and for a doctrine of tolerance that has a rational foundation. The rights of the erring conscience do not therefore stretch to the misconception of rational moral principles; they concern only the irrational beliefs inculcated in us by education and habit. In some places, even today, that is already a very wide field of application...

We must therefore now turn to the question of the status of the articles of Christian doctrine. I will not insist on the change in Bayle's position between the *Commentaire philosophique* (1686) and the *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1696-1697, 1702) – which I have highlighted elsewhere¹⁴. Suffice it to say that, in 1686, as we have seen, “natural” and “rational” ethics are the basis on which we approve the moral lesson of the New Testament: it is *because* – and *only because* – the New Testament conforms to our common notions in the field of ethics – i.e. to our “natural” and “rational” moral principles – that we can regard it as “divine”. In this perspective, natural reason *authorises* the Evangelical precept “And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise”¹⁵. But, in the *Dictionnaire* (1696-1697, 1702), there is no question of a harmonious agreement between faith and reason: on the contrary, the article “Pyrrhon”, remark B, is a powerful attack against rationalist theology. Bayle demonstrates that Christian doctrine is incompatible with our fundamental notions in the field of ontology – no problem here, since we know that our conceptions of space and time are uncertain – but also in the field of logic (the laws of non-contradiction and excluded middle) and above all in the field of justice and ethics: the very nature of faith – the “folly” of the cross (1 Cor. I, 18) – is opposed to our rational conception of moral principles. In Bayle's article, an abbot designated as a “good philosopher” explains that the Christian mysteries of the Trinity, Incarnation and Transsubstantiation go against our elementary notions of unity, identity, person and substance. Up to that point, no serious problem, since Bayle had always maintained that our belief in “speculative truths” is founded on education and habit, taste and zeal. But now, in the crucial field of ethics, he argues that the existence of Evil, the mystery of Original Sin and the salvation of the chosen few contradict our elementary notions of justice, goodness and honesty – and thus render incomprehensible the notion of an infinitely perfect Being, since the infinite attributes of that Being (majesty, omnipotence, wisdom, justice, goodness) are incompatible with each other. Christian doctrine thus reduces us to Pyrrhonism and Pyrrhonism reduces us not only to doubt the existence of bodies and minds, but also to admit that we do not have a firm notion of what is just and honest. He thus reveals the contradiction between “natural” or “rational” ethics and the Christian

14 See *supra*, n.10.

15 “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7,12); “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luc 6,31).

doctrine, and that implies an internal contradiction within Christian doctrine since, by calling into question our fundamental ethical notions, these mysteries contradict our reading of the ethics of the New Testament. To sum up: Pyrrhonism reduces us to nonsense: no rational discourse is possible – and that is the sense in which, Bayle claims, it prepares us for faith:

C'est un grand pas vers la Religion Chrétienne que nous attendions de Dieu la connoissance de ce que nous devons croire, & de ce que nous devons faire: elle veut que nous captivions notre entendement à l'obéissance de la Foi. (« Pyrrhon », rem. C)

In other words, *one would have to be a Pyrrhonian* in order to believe in Christian doctrine. The nature of the dialogue in Bayle's article belies the critical approach which questions the status of self-evidence in Bayle's philosophy, since he bases his argument on a *dato non concessio* – on the *provisional* admittance of a premiss which is taken as a starting-point in order to better penetrate his opponent's logic. Thus, in general, he delegates his discourse and constructs his arguments on his opponent's premisses. In the article “Pyrrhon”, he attributes the dialogue to two abbots (i.e. two Christians), of whom one is a “good [Cartesian] philosopher” and the other knows only his Scholastic “routine”: the debate is thus conducted *as if* the truth of Christian doctrine were certain and the presentation of the “advantages” for faith of the “new [Cartesian] philosophy” of hyperbolic doubt is founded on a provisional hypothesis or *dato non concessio*: *if and only if* one is Christian believer, then one must reject our conception of logic, unity, identity, person and substance, as well as our natural and rational conception of justice. *If and only if* one is a Christian, one must reject self-evidence as a criterion of truth, since no single article of Christian faith is compatible with right reason¹⁶.

However, faith is thus reduced by the Pyrrhonian believer to a number of incomprehensible formulæ that we can repeat but to which we can attach no precise idea of person or substance. In other words, our Cartesian abbot who is a “good philosopher” has demonstrated to his Aristotelean colleague that his faith is an empty shell of words in which he can claim to believe but which he

16 «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 l'évidence et l'incompréhensibilité, c'est ce qui ne se peut [...] Il faut opter nécessairement...» (*Éclaircissement sur les pyrrhoniens, Dictionnaire* (1702), éd. 1740, p.644). The same logical framework – the *dato non concessio* – is given to his last unfinished work, the *Entretiens de Maxime et de Thémiste*, Rotterdam, 1707, since it is his last battle against the rationalist theology of Isaac Jaquelot and Jean Le Clerc.

is incapable of explaining and even of understanding. Pyrrhonism has served to reveal the true nature of faith – not only as far as the mysteries are concerned but also on the moral plane : it is perfectly irrational¹⁷.

To measure the distance between Bayle's moral rationalism in the *Commentaire philosophique* and his fideism in the *Dictionnaire*, we need only to quote a passage published in 1686:

Je sais bien qu'il y a des axiomes contre lesquels les paroles les plus expresses et les plus évidentes de l'Écriture ne gagneraient rien, comme *que le tout est plus grand que sa partie; que si de deux choses égales on ôte choses égales, les résidus en seront égaux; qu'il est impossible que deux contradictoires soient véritables, ou que l'essence d'un sujet subsiste réellement après la destruction du sujet.* Quand on montrerait cent fois dans l'Écriture le contraire de ces propositions; quand on ferait mille et mille miracles, plus que Moïse et les apôtres, pour établir la doctrine opposée à ces maximes universelles du sens commun, l'homme fait comme il est n'en croirait rien; et il se persuaderait plutôt, ou que l'Écriture ne parlerait que par métaphores ou par contre-vérités, ou que ces miracles viendraient du démon, que de croire que la lumière naturelle fût fautive dans ces maximes. (*Commentaire philosophique*, éd. J.-M. Gros, p.86-87)

In the 1686 *Commentaire*, Bayle emphasised the importance of this principle:

il importe que la lumière naturelle ne trouve rien d'absurde dans ce qu'on lui propose comme révélé; car ce qui pourrait paraître d'ailleurs comme très certainement révélé, ne le paraîtra plus dès qu'il se trouvera contraire à la règle matrice, primitive et universelle de juger et de discerner le vrai et le faux, le bon et le mauvais. (*ibid.*, p.93)

It is thus clear that, after his dismissal from the Illustrious School in 1693, Bayle revised his position on the relation between reason and faith. In 1702, he observes that Catholics and Protestants are agreed in declaring that religious mysteries are “above reason” and not “contrary to reason” and he analyses this notion:

17 See also the *Dictionnaire*, art. «Socin», rem. H: «Quelques autres personnes d'étude, qui les examinent [les mystères de la doctrine chrétienne] avec une grande curiosité, peuvent aussi être fatigués de la résistance de leur raison ; mais tout le reste des hommes sont là-dessus dans une parfaite tranquillité : *ils croient, ou ils croient croire*, tout ce qu'on en dit, et ils se reposent doucement dans cette persuasion. [...] Ils s'accommodent beaucoup mieux d'une doctrine mystérieuse, incompréhensible, élevée au dessus de la raison : on admire beaucoup plus ce que l'on ne comprend point ; on s'en fait une idée plus sublime, et même plus consolante. Toutes les fins de la religion se trouvent mieux dans les objets qu'on ne comprend point : ils inspirent plus d'admiration, plus de respect, plus de crainte, plus de confiance. [...] En un mot, il faut convenir que dans certaines matières l'incompréhensibilité est un agrément.»

Si quelques doctrines sont au-dessus de la raison, elles sont au-delà de sa portée. Si elles sont au-delà de sa portée, elle n'y sauroit atteindre. Si elle n'y peut atteindre, elle ne peut pas les comprendre. Si elle ne peut pas les comprendre, elle n'y sauroit trouver aucune idée, aucun principe, qui soit une source de solution; et par conséquent les objections qu'elle aura faites demeureront sans réponse, ou, ce qui est la même chose, on n'y répondra que par quelque distinction aussi obscure que la thèse même qui aura été attaquée. (*Éclaircissement sur les manichéens* [*Dictionnaire*, éd. 1740], IV, p.630)

Bayle thus rejects the famous Pascalian distinction. Faith is incompatible with reason. And this position is in perfect harmony with his anti-Malebranchist definition of the “Christian philosopher”:

Les *Philosophes Chrétiens* qui parlent sincèrement disent tout net qu'ils sont Chrétiens, ou par la force de l'éducation, ou par la grâce de la foi que Dieu leur a donnée, mais que la suite des raisonnements philosophiques et démonstratifs ne serait capable que de les rendre sceptiques à cet égard toute leur vie. (Bayle to Jean Bruguère de Naudis, 8 September 1698, ed. E. Labrousse and A. McKenna [Oxford 1999-2017], Letter 1378).

Faith is indeed, according to his analysis, an effect of education and habit, and we are incapable of distinguishing the effects of grace and habit. Faith is irrational; reason leads to atheism.

Now we must ask: can this irrational, blind, zealous faith – identical to that preached by Jurieu¹⁸ – bring us salvation? Bayle takes care to quote the opinion of a Pyrrhonian specialist on this question: La Mothe Le Vayer, who, it is true, regards Pyrrhonism as innocent:

Ce n'est donc pas sans sujet que nous croyons le Systeme Sceptique, fondé sur une naïve reconnoissance de l'ignorance humaine, le moins contraire de tous à nostre creance, et le plus approprié à recevoir les lumieres surnaturelles de la Foi. («Pyrrhon», rem. C)

18 Pierre Jurieu, *Le Vray Système de l'Église et la véritable analyse de la foi*, Dordrecht, 1686, chap. 21: “La certitude de la foi ne dépend pas de l'évidence des motifs”. See also *idem*, *Traité de la nature et de la grâce*, Utrecht, 1687, p. 225: “Je crois les mystères de l'Évangile, non par conviction, mais parce que je les veux croire, et je les veux croire parce que je crois que cela est de la dernière importance pour la gloire de Dieu et pour mon salut. Un mondain veut croire que le plaisir charnel est un vrai bien; ce n'est pas qu'il ait aucune raison de le croire, mais il croit parce qu'il le veut, et il le veut parce que les passions le veulent et entraînent sa volonté. Ainsi il est certain que la volonté détermine l'entendement beaucoup plus souvent que l'entendement ne détermine la volonté. Dans toutes les choses qui sont évidentes, c'est l'entendement qui détermine la volonté; mais dans les choses de foi, qui sont obscures, ou dans les choses fausses, c'est la volonté qui détermine l'entendement.”

But Bayle pursues his enquiry: “Note that La Mothe Le Vayer excludes Pyrrhonians from the grace he grants to several other ancient philosophers”, and he quotes him again:

Je tiens pour desespéré le salut de Pyrrhon, et de tous ses disciples qui ont eu les mesmes sentimens que luy touchant la Divinité. Ce n'est pas qu'ils fissent profession d'Athéisme, comme quelques-uns ont cru. On peut voir dans Sextus Empiricus qu'ils admettoient l'existence des Dieux comme les autres Philosophes, qu'ils leur rendoient le culte ordinaire, et qu'ils ne nioient pas leur Providence. Mais outre qu'ils ne se sont jamais determinez à reconnoître une cause premiere, qui leur fist mepriser l'Idolatrie de leur tems, il est certain qu'*ils n'ont rien cru de la Nature Divine qu'avec suspension d'esprit, ni rien confessé de tout ce que nous venons de dire qu'en doutant, et pour s'accommoder seulement aux loix et aux coutumes de leur siecle, et du país où ils vivoient.* Par consequent, puis qu'ils n'ont pas eu le moindre lumiere de cette foi implicite, sur laquelle nous avons fondé l'esperance du salut de quelques Payens, qui l'ont possedée conjointement avec une grace extraordinaire du Ciel, je ne voi nulle apparence de croire qu'aucun Sceptique ou Pyrrhonien de cette trempe ait pu éviter le chemin de l'Enfer (*ibid.*: my italics)

One would have to be Pyrrhonian in order to believe Christian doctrine, but a faith founded in such a philosophy is based only on doubt and social conformism: it is not meritorious and cannot lead to salvation. One cannot help wondering what use it may serve.

But Bayle declares imperturbably in the *Eclaircissements* (1702) that Christian faith requires submission of reason to divine authority. One would therefore expect him to abandon his declaration of the primordial status of natural law and rational ethics – since they are in contradiction with Christian faith («Pyrrhon», rem. B). But on the contrary, once he has found shelter from Jurieu's attacks in his own adoption of the latter's conception of blind faith, Bayle returns in his last works to moral rationalism:

Qu'on fasse abstraction de ce dogme-là [de l'existence de Dieu], qu'on le nie même, on ne laissera pas de juger que le cercle n'est point un triangle, qu'un sophisme est un mauvais raisonnement, que la conclusion d'un bon syllogisme est vraie si les deux prémisses sont vraies, qu'il est digne de l'homme de se conformer à la raison, etc. [...] que la trahison d'un ami est une mauvaise qualité morale et que la fidélité pour son ami est une bonne qualité morale. (*RQP*, III, §29)

Bayle insists on this rational definition of moral obligation:

S'il y a des règles certaines et immuables pour les opérations de l'entendement, il y en a aussi pour les actes de la volonté. Les règles de ces actes-là ne sont pas toutes arbitraires: il y en qui émanent de la nécessité de la Nature et qui

imposent une obligation indispensable; et comme c'est un défaut de raisonner d'une manière opposée aux règles du syllogisme, c'est aussi un défaut de vouloir une chose sans se conformer aux règles des actes de la volonté. (*CPD*, §151)

And he gives a general rule governing the exercise of conscience:

La plus générale de ces règles-ci est qu'il faut que l'homme veuille ce qui est conforme à la droite raison, et que toutes les fois qu'il veut ce qui n'y est pas conforme, il s'écarte de son devoir. Il n'y a point de vérité plus évidente que de dire qu'il est digne de la Créature raisonnable de se conformer à la raison, et qu'il est indigne de la Créature raisonnable de ne se pas conformer à la raison. (*ibid.*)

Conscience is again identified with reason:

[la conscience est] un jugement de l'esprit qui nous excite à faire certaines choses parce qu'elles sont conformes à la raison, et qui nous détourne de quelques autres choses, parce qu'elles sont contraires à la raison (*RQP*, III, §xxix)

And religious zeal reassumes its real name: blind folly, enthusiasm, fanaticism, revealing itself to be a powerful source of obscurantism and persecution:

Ce que le christianisme a commis de violences, soit pour extirper l'idolâtrie païenne, soit pour étouff[er] les hérésies, soit pour maintenir les sectes qui se séparoient du gros de l'arbre, ne sauroit être exprimé. L'histoire en inspire de l'horreur: on en frémit pour peu qu'on soit débonnaire: une bonne ame ne peut lire innocemment cette sorte de relations; elle ne sauroit s'empêcher de maudire la mémoire de ceux qui ont été cause de ces incendies. (*RQP*, III.21)

[...] il est sûr que tel homme qui n'aurait été que médiocrement vindicatif s'il n'eût point eu de religion, devient un tigre lorsqu'un faux zèle s'empare de sa conscience. (*RQP*, III.29)

Une conscience de cette nature n'est-elle pas plus redoutable que l'irréligion à ceux qui ont à traiter avec de pareilles gens? Quel fond peut-on faire sur des personnes qui se croient dispensé[s] de leurs serments et des lois de l'équité par rapport aux hérétiques, ou toutes les fois qu'il s'agit des intérêts de la vérité céleste? (*RQP*, III.29)

This new turning-about of his position in his last works strongly suggests that the fideism of the *Dictionnaire* was simply a shield which protected him from censorship and worse. He gives new and forceful expression to moral rationalism in his last works.

Let us now return to the period of the *Dictionnaire*. We have seen that none of the main articles of Christian faith – Original Sin, Incarnation, Redemption, Trinity, Transsubstantiation, salvation of the chosen few, condemnation of the others to eternal punishment in hell – is compatible with reason. This analysis is diversified in the philosophical articles of the *Dictionnaire*, where Bayle constantly poses the analytical problem of the relation between premisses and consequences in a domain where what is at stake is the contradiction between reason and faith. These articles constitute a systematic attack on rationalist theology¹⁹.

Faith requires submission of reason. This implies that we must establish exactly, by examination of Scripture, the doctrine to which reason must submit. However, as Maria-Cristina Pitassi has demonstrated, Bayle considers such an examination to be impossible: he offers a general deconstruction of the crucial Protestant notion of “examination” by pinpointing its “insurmountable difficulties”²⁰. Faith is reduced to a personal “sentiment” without rational foundation; religious zeal prevents us from analysing such questions without prejudice; the difficulties inherent in historical scholarship (philological analysis of sources; identification of social, philosophical and religious context; history of the transmission and reception of the Scriptural text, etc.) render it impossible to be certain of the authenticity of the Bible, since they demand endless research and an erudition which opens the door to any number of different interpretations; finally, refuge can be found only in an authoritative decision, but that authority itself requires authentication and yet more erudition stretching beyond our means : examination is thus impossible.

We must now seek to define the limits of the field of “particular truths” and to pose this question in terms relevant to the analysis of Bayle's position, we must define what he means by the existence of God. In his last works, he offers a sharp analysis:

Il n'y a rien de plus facile que de connoître qu'il y a un Dieu, si vous n'entendez par ce mot qu'une cause premiere et universelle. Le plus grossier et le plus stupide païsan est convaincu que tout effet a une cause, et qu'un très-grand effet suppose une cause dont la vertu est très-grande. [...] Les Athées, sans en excepter

19 See A. McKenna, «Pierre Bayle, historien de la philosophie: un sondage», *Bulletin de l'Institut d'Histoire de la Réformation* (Genève), 2016, p.57-89, and (in slightly modified form) *Lexicon Philosophicum*, 2017: <http://lexicon.cnr.it/index.php/LP/article/view/511>.

20 M.-C. Pitassi, «Fondements de la croyance et statut de l'Écriture: Bayle et la question de l'examen», in H. Bost et A. McKenna (dir.), *Les «Éclaircissements» de Pierre Bayle*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2010, p. 143-160; we quote here the terms of her analysis.

un seul, signeront sincèrement avec tous les Orthodoxes cette these-ci: *Il y a une cause premiere, universelle, éternelle, qui existe nécessairement, et qui doit être apellée Dieu.* Tout est de plein pied jusques-là, personne ne fera un incident sur les mots: et il n'y a point de philosophes qui fassent entrer plus souvent le nom de Dieu dans leurs systèmes, que les Spinozistes. Mais de là vous devez conclure, que ce n'est point dans cette these si évidente que consiste le vrai état de la question. (*CPD*, ch. 20)

Indeed,

Il ne suffit point de connaître qu'il y a un Dieu; il faut de plus déterminer le sens de ce mot, et y attacher une idée : il faut, dis-je, rechercher quelle est la nature de Dieu, et c'est là où commence la difficulté. C'est un sujet que les plus grands philosophes ont trouvé obscur, et sur lequel ils ont été partagés en plusieurs sortes de sentiments contraires. (*ibid.*)

And he refers those difficulties to one fundamental cause:

Il ne peut point être facile à l'homme de connaître clairement ce qui convient, ou ne convient pas à une nature infinie. (*ibid.*)

Thus, provided one is content with a general statement, *God exists*, everyone can agree, whether they believe in a First Principle of Being or in a divine Father Christmas; but as soon as it is stated more specifically that *God created the world*, certain philosophers will abandon common opinion; if it is added that *God governs the world and determines events*, other philosophical sects will be formed

Abrégeons, et contentons-nous de dire qu'à mesure que vous allongerez votre formulaire, vous verrez multiplier les opinions, et sortir du centre de l'unité un plus grand nombre de gens, les uns d'un côté, les autres d'un autre. (*ibid.*, ch. 21)

And we have no hope that an impartial person will examine these different conceptions of God and pronounce definitive judgement :

Peu de gens sont en état de faire de bonnes discussions; car ou ils n'ont pas assez de lumieres, ou ils ont trop d'attachement à leurs préjugés. Or de vouloir que des personnes zélées pour la religion examinent meurement, équitablement, exactement le parti contraire, c'est prétendre que l'on peut être bon juge entre deux femmes de l'une desquelles l'on est amoureux, pendant que l'on n'a pour l'autre que de l'aversion. (*ibid.*, ch. 20)

A fine expression of the power of passion... Bayle thus leads us to conclude that we are incapable of expressing faith in terms which do not raise new questions and new doubts, new definitions and new frontiers, new precisions and new heresies. And these questions are both unavoidable and insoluble. Revealed discourse, just like human discourse, creates uncertainty. There is no

self-evidence to rely on: in the infinite nuances of their diverging professions of faith, beliefs are determined by education, habit, passions and self-interest...

The Christian God is an infinitely perfect Creator. Bayle demonstrates that, because of the very perfection of his nature, the infinitely perfect Being can do nothing, cannot create anything, since creation would imply the imperfection of the “previous” state of being: creation would thus go against His own perfection, which would be a contradiction in terms (« Epicure », rem. S)²¹. Similarly, we cannot reconcile the existence of evil in the world as we know it with the creative act of an omnipotent God who is infinitely wise, infinitely good and infinitely just (« Manichéens », « Pauliciens »)²², nor reconcile the doctrine of divine election with our conception of infinite justice. To take up this last point: since, according to the doctrine of Saint Augustine, divine grace does not infringe on human liberty but delivers human nature from the burden of sin, it follows that God could have – and should have, as it were, in consonance with his infinite goodness and justice – created men perfect and happy since he could do so without depriving them of their “liberty”²³.

Moreover, as Martine Pécharman explains²⁴, in his last works Bayle broaches in radical terms the metaphysical question of the relative status of essence and existence, including that of the essence and existence of God the Creator:

C'est une chose certaine que l'existence de Dieu n'est pas un effet de sa volonté. Il n'existe point parce qu'il veut exister, mais par la nécessité de sa nature infinie. Sa puissance et sa science existent par la même nécessité. Il n'est pas tout puissant, il ne connoît pas toutes choses parce qu'il le veut ainsi, mais parce que ce sont des attributs nécessairement *identifiez* avec lui-même. L'empire de sa volonté ne regarde que l'exercice de sa puissance, il ne produit hors de lui actuellement que ce qu'il veut, et il laisse tout le reste dans la pure possibilité. De là vient que cet empire ne s'étend que sur l'existence des Créatures, il ne s'étend point aussi sur leurs essences. Dieu a pû créer la matiere, un homme, un cercle, ou les laisser dans le néant, mais il n'a pû les produire sans leur donner leurs

21 See A. McKenna and A. Mothu, « D'Épicure à Jamet en passant par Bayle : *La Lettre métaphysique sur la création* », in *Der Garten und die Moderne. Epikureische Moral und Politik vom Humanismus bis zur Aufklärung*, dir. Edoardo Tortarolo et Gianni Paganini, Bad Canstatt, Frommann-Holzboog, 2004, p.247-275.

22 See the network of articles devoted to the problem of evil: M. van der Lugt, *Bayle, Jurieu and the* Dictionnaire historique et critique, Oxford, OUP, 2016.

23 *Entretiens de Maxime et de Thémiste*, IIe partie, chap. IV: «Troisième faute de Mr Jaquelot: il soutient que Mr Bayle ôte à l'homme toute sorte de liberté», et chap. XV: «Examen de la réponse de Mr Jaquelot à la question, pourquoi Dieu a permis le péché».

24 M. Pécharman, «Bayle et le droit naturel moderne», in X. Daverat et A. McKenna (dir.), *Pierre Bayle et le politique*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2014. I resume and abbreviate drastically her excellent analysis.

propriétéz essentielles. Il a falu nécessairement qu'il fit l'homme un animal raisonnable, et qu'il donnât à un cercle la figure ronde, puis que selon ses idées éternelles et indépendantes des décrets libres de sa volonté, l'essence de l'homme consistoit dans les attributs d'animal et de raisonnable, et que l'essence du cercle consistoit dans une circonférence également éloignée du centre quant à toutes ses parties. Voilà ce qui a fait avouër aux Philosophes Chretiens que les essences des choses sont éternelles, et qu'il y a des propositions d'une éternelle vérité, et par conséquent que les essences des choses, et la vérité des premiers principes sont immuables. Cela ne se doit pas seulement entendre des premiers principes théorétiques, mais aussi des premiers principes pratiques, et de toutes les propositions qui contiennent la véritable définition des Créatures. Ces essences, ces vérités émanent de la même nécessité de la nature que la science de Dieu: comme donc c'est par la nature des choses que Dieu existe, qu'il est tout-puissant, et qu'il connoît tout en perfection, c'est aussi par la nature des choses que la matiere, que le triangle, que l'homme, que certaines actions de l'homme, etc. ont tels et tels attributs essentiellement. (*CPD*, §152)

Here again, he conducts his argument as if the existence of an infinitely perfect Creator were beyond doubt and deduces a first certain consequence: the infinitely perfect Being does not exist because He chooses to exist but by the necessity of His own infinite nature. The relation between God's essence and existence is a necessary one; God's essence is the necessary reason for his existence: infinite being exists necessarily. The same necessity determines the divine attributes of omnipotence and omniscience, which do not depend for their existence on God's good will but are necessarily identified with Himself. In the relation between God's essence or attributes and His existence, there is no room for an act of will: the relation is totally determined by necessity: the existence of God is not an effect of his will. Thus God has no choice in the determination of His own nature. And the same necessity extends to the essence of creatures. It is true that nothing of which God is capable can exist without His approbation: divine will makes a choice between the infinite possibilities known only to Him. But the essences of the things God decides to create is independent of that decision: the essences of created things are what they are in God's mind, and not because they are determined by God's will. When God decides to create something, He cannot decide to create it other than it is in His own infinite understanding. Thus, God could have decided not to create man or a circle, but once he decided to create a man or a circle, he could not create them without their “essential properties”, i.e. he had to create them according to His eternal ideas and could not exercise freedom of will as to those properties. By declaring that God is not exempt from *the necessity which governs what exists according to the nature of things*, Bayle declares symmetrically that the essence and existence of moral actions are

themselves not exempt from that necessity, and thus all essences are governed by the same law of necessity, which is the necessity of *truths*.

S'il y a des propositions d'une éternelle vérité qui sont telles de leur nature , et non point par l'institution de Dieu, si elles ne sont point véritables par un décret libre de sa volonté, mais si au contraire il les a connues nécessairement véritables, parce que telle était leur nature, voilà une espèce de *fatum* auquel il est assujetti, voilà une nécessité naturelle absolument insurmontable. (*CPD*, §114)

Vous devinez sans doute quelles sont les conclusions que je me propose. Je veux conclure que par la doctrine que Mr. Turretin et une infinité d'autres Docteurs, les uns Catholiques, et les autres Protestans ont adoptée, et que l'on apuie sur de très-fortes raisons, il faut convenir que les Athées peuvent être persuadez qu'il y a dans la vertu une beauté, une honnêteté *intrinsèque* et naturelle, et dans le vice une difformité, et une deshonnêteté pareillement *intrinsèque* et naturelle. Les Docteurs dont je parle, demeurent d'accord que ces attributs conviennent respectivement à la vertu et au vice par la nature même des choses et avant aucune dispensation de la Providence, ou aucun décret divin. (*CPD*, §152)

Bayle thus rejects the Cartesian doctrine of the creation of eternal truths: just as God was not free to create matter, man, or a circle without giving them their essential properties, so He could not “give man a moral law directly opposed to the Ten Commandments” (*CPD*, §152). God cannot therefore go against our ideas of His justice and goodness, and these notions constitute legitimate criteria by which we may judge His nature and actions. The existence of an infinitely perfect Being has thus become, according to Bayle's argument, a useless hypothesis: He is trapped in his own impotence, being condemned, by the perfection of His own nature, to allow the world to function according to the laws of physics. If one conceives “Nature” to be the productive cause of the existence of things, then that productive cause can be identified with God or, just as legitimately, with a principle “without liberty and without intelligence”, be it chance or non-teleological necessity (“the consequence of natural laws without direction”): “it all boils down to the same thing” (*CPD*, §152).

The conclusion follows unavoidably: the existence of the Christian God not being self-evident, it is necessarily one of the “particular” or “speculative” truths in which men believe according to their education and custom, by passion and by self-interest, in a word out of “zeal”. Naturally, according Bayle's doctrine of tolerance of “particular truths”, belief and unbelief in God should be tolerated within civil society; besides, such belief (or unbelief) has no

influence on moral behaviour. Lastly, the existence of a providential, infinitely perfect divine Creator implies in itself a number of contradictions: when Bayle admits His existence within the framework of a philosophical argument, that premiss is admitted only as a *dato non concessio*, a provisional hypothetical concession which allows him to demonstrate its absurdity.