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Mary Astell's Critique of Pierre Bayle: Atheism and Intellectual Integrity in the *Pensées* (1682)

Abstract: This paper focuses on the English philosopher Mary Astell's marginalia in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's personal copy of the 1704 edition of Pierre Bayle's *Pensées diverses sur le comète* (first published in 1682). I argue that Astell's annotations provide good reasons for thinking that Bayle is biased toward atheism in this work. Recent scholars maintain that Bayle can be interpreted as an Academic Sceptic: as someone who honestly and impartially follows a dialectical method of argument in order to obtain the goal of intellectual integrity. In her commentary, however, Astell suggests that: (i) if Bayle were honest and impartial in his inquiries, then he would not have pretended to attack popular superstition, only to undermine generally-held religious beliefs; and (ii) if Bayle valued intellectual integrity, then his argument for a society of virtuous atheists would not have relied upon a deceptive equivocation in terms. I conclude that the rediscovery of this marginalia is valuable for enhancing our appreciation of Astell as an astute reader of one of her most enigmatic contemporaries.

Keywords: Mary Astell; Pierre Bayle; atheism; intellectual integrity; Academic Scepticism.

Introduction

Among Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's personal items at Sandon Hall in Staffordshire, there is a 1704 edition of Pierre Bayle's *Pensées diverses sur le comète* [Various Thoughts on the Comet] (1682), an attack on popular superstitions of the early modern period.¹ On the opening flyleaf of the first volume, there is a short commentary in the handwriting of Montagu's friend, the English feminist and devout Anglican Mary Astell (1666–1731).² This

¹ This two-volume edition is held in Lord Harrowby's private library at Sandon Hall, Staffordshire, United Kingdom. Bayle's *Pensées* was first published anonymously in Rotterdam in March 1682 as *Lettre à M. L. A. D. C., Docteur de Sorbonne. Où il est prouvé par plusieurs raisons tirées de la Philosophie, et de la Théologie, que les Comètes ne sont point le présage d'aucun malheur*. One year later, in March 1683, Bayle published a revised and expanded second edition, *Pensées Diverses*, which is now regarded as the definitive text.

² On the reverse of the title page, there is a note in pencil by Montagu scholar Robert Halsband: 'Comments probably in hand of Mary Astell[.] RHalsband 1963.' Based on both external and internal evidence, it now seems beyond reasonable doubt that the handwriting is that of Astell. I am grateful to Lord Harrowby for granting his kind permission to refer to this marginalia from Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's personal copy of Pierre Bayle's *Pensées Diverse* (4th edn, 1704) held in the private library at Sandon Hall, Staffordshire.

commentary is a harsh critique of Bayle (1647–1706), condemning him for his ‘disingenuous’ and ‘sly insinuations’ against religion in the book. Pulling no punches, Astell accuses him of raking ‘together all the vile suggestions his great reading afforded, against Christianity’, and she criticizes him for ‘confounding w[hat] ought to be distinguish’d’, superstition and religion. His entire book is dismissed as ‘a loose, rambling, incoherent rapsody’.³ Among Astell scholars, these remarks are generally well-known. In 2005, Christine Sutherland reproduced Isobel Grundy’s transcription of Astell’s 240-word commentary in her book *The Eloquence of Mary Astell* (Appendix B, 169). Nevertheless, it is not quite so well known that Astell followed up her harsh observations in the flyleaf with hundreds of annotations in the margins of Bayle’s *Pensées*.⁴ Many of these notes continue the same theme: they remark that Bayle is a ‘trifler’, ‘a bab[b]ler indeed’, he is ‘intolerable’, ‘silly and trifling’, his words are full of ‘banter and grimace’, ‘confusion and fal[l]acy’, and ‘tattle’ (*M* §LVII, 102; §XC, 172; §LXXVIII, 140; §CXLII, 282; §CXVIII, 232; §CXIII, 223; §CXLVI, 290; §CXXV, 241). But in addition to general abuse, Astell also raises precise argumentative points, pertinent rhetorical questions, and, in one instance, a series of fallacious syllogisms,⁵ to show the error in Bayle’s reasoning. Seen in this context, Astell’s flyleaf remarks actually constitute a summative statement of the main lines of argument in her annotations: namely, that Bayle is insincere and dishonest, and that his arguments rely on equivocation. Her marginalia as a

³ These remarks all appear on the opening flyleaf. Hereafter I refer in-text to Astell’s marginalia as *M* with section numbers and page references from the 1704 edition of *Pensées* at Sandon Hall, Staffordshire. In my quotations, I have expanded contractions and abbreviations, and replaced thorns and other symbols, to make the comments accessible to the modern reader. I use square brackets to indicate where I have either completed a word myself or taken a guess at a likely missing word (some words and letters were cut off by a later binding job).

⁴ Isobel Grundy and Heather Jackson each comment only briefly on the marginalia. See Grundy, *Lady Mary*, 194–5; and Jackson, *Marginalia*, 64–5.

⁵ In section 63, Bayle implies that people’s religious beliefs are often exploited for cynical political ends. In response, Astell points out that it does not follow that all religion is a convenient political tool. She writes: ‘Some cheats have counterfeited Banknotes therefore All Banknotes are Counterfeit! Pickpockets get into Clouds, therefore All Clouds even at Court are full of Pick Pockets! Some Men are Knaves for Money; Therefore All Men are Knaves without Interest or against it!’ (*M* §LXIII, 111).

whole amounts to more than 7000 words—a substantial essay-length critique of Bayle, appearing on 160 of 312 printed pages in the volume.

In this paper, I argue that Astell’s extensive critique provides us with good reasons for thinking that Bayle endorses atheism in this work. Recent scholars have been divided about how best to interpret the writings of Bayle, a French Protestant who spent most of his adult life in exile in Holland. On the one hand, there are those who think that Bayle is a disguised atheist, someone whose reasoning irresistibly leads to atheist conclusions, despite his outward professions of faith. Chief among these scholars, Gianluca Mori declares that if we read between the lines, all ‘the paths of Bayle’s philosophical reflection lead to atheism’ (Mori, *Bayle*, 189; Lennon, ‘What Kind of a Sceptic’, 270). On the other hand, there are those, such as Élisabeth Labrousse, who construe Bayle as a sincere fideist, someone who embraces religious beliefs on the basis of faith alone rather than reason. Labrousse grounds her interpretation on a historical-contextualist reading, emphasizing that Bayle was a committed Calvinist all his life. ‘He may not have been a fervent one,’ Labrousse says, ‘but he was a convinced and practising one, and he continued to practise his religion until the day he died’ (*Bayle*, 32). More recently, there have been those who maintain that Bayle is best understood in terms of his commitment to Academic Scepticism. José R. Maia Neto was the first to put forward this view,⁶ and his reading has since been endorsed by Thomas M. Lennon, Michael W. Hickson, and Kristen Irwin, albeit with qualifications.⁷ Lennon points out that if Bayle were an Academic Sceptic, he would never have said so, due to his reluctance to uphold positive doctrines. Instead, ‘he would have sought to give instances of intellectual honesty, practice it himself and, presumably, promulgate it, and not just say what it is’ (‘What Kind of a Sceptic’, 277). Lennon does not pretend to solve the puzzle of Bayle’s intentions—only to

⁶ Maia Neto, ‘Academic Skepticism’ and ‘Bayle’s Academic Scepticism’.

⁷ Hickson, ‘Disagreement’; Irwin, ‘Bayle’s Qualified Academic Scepticism’; Lennon and Hickson, ‘Pierre Bayle’; Lennon, *Reading Bayle*; and Lennon, ‘What Kind of a Sceptic’.

explain why there is a puzzle. In his view, Bayle's Academic Scepticism is compatible with him putting forward a number of different and competing viewpoints, without taking a stance. And so, even today, some scholars continue to regard Bayle as an 'enigma'.⁸ His precise philosophical commitments remain a riddle, a cryptic puzzle, to be deciphered and decoded.

In my analysis of her marginalia, I show that Astell offers another potential solution to the Bayle enigma. Her comments provide plausible reasons for thinking that while Bayle might have been committed to Academic Scepticism by the time of his final work, the *Continuation des pensées diverses sur la comète* [Continuation of Various Thoughts on the Comet] (1705), he was more biased toward atheism in the first major publication of his career, the *Pensées*.

To support this claim, in the first part of this paper, I outline the principles that Bayle would have to be committed to, to be a proponent of Academic Scepticism in the *Pensées*: specifically, honesty and impartiality in his method of philosophizing, and intellectual integrity as a prime goal. I then demonstrate that Astell values the same philosophical principles in her own work—but that her commitment to honesty, impartiality, and integrity actually forms the basis of her critique of Bayle. In the second part, I examine Bayle's arguments against superstition in the *Pensées*, and then I outline Astell's reasons for thinking he is being dishonest and biased against religion. In the third and final part, I explain why Astell thinks Bayle cannot be committed to the goal of intellectual integrity, that is, to forming judgments free from prejudice. I conclude that Astell is justified in claiming that Bayle's 'Whole Book seems designed as a Plea for Atheism' (*M* §CXIII, 223), and I propose that the rediscovery of this marginalia is valuable for enhancing our appreciation of Astell as an astute philosophical reader of one of her most enigmatic contemporaries.

⁸ The phrase 'the Bayle enigma' originates with Heyd, 'Disguised Atheist'.

i. Shared values: honesty, impartiality, and integrity

In early eighteenth-century England, Bayle was a divisive and controversial figure.⁹ It is likely that Astell was familiar with his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* [Historical and Critical Dictionary] (first published in 1697), a vast encyclopaedia of historical people and places. In her marginalia, she frequently disparages the pretensions of his ‘Voluminous Writings’, his ‘labour performance in so many Tomes’, and ‘so many tedious volumes full of repetition and idle bable’ (*M* §II, 2; §XLIX, 87; §XC, 172). Since the fourth edition of *Pensées* was published in two volumes alone, these comments appear to refer to the *Dictionnaire*, published in four folio volumes amounting to more than eight million words (many of them in Bayle’s ‘Remarks’). It seems that Astell wrote her commentary at the height of the *Dictionnaire*’s popularity—and notoriety—in England, probably sometime between 1715 and 1722.¹⁰ When the *Dictionnaire* was first published, Bayle’s faithful reporting on the obscene and irreligious ideas of others attracted considerable criticism. One of the main concerns was that several articles—namely those on the Manicheans, Marcionites, and Paulicians—promulgated the arguments of Pyrrhonian sceptics and atheists. In response to Pierre Jurieu’s charge of Pyrrhonism, Bayle admitted that he regarded all ‘disputes to be nothing more than intellectual games in which it is indifferent to me whether one proves the pro or the con’. Of his opponents, he said: ‘I do not find it deplorable in the least that they disagree with me; and as soon as a greater probability presents itself to me, I line myself up with it painlessly and shamelessly’. He then added: ‘That has always been the

⁹ For details, see Courtines, *Bayle’s Relations*; Champion, ‘Bayle in the English’; and Champion, ‘Reading Bayle’.

¹⁰ These speculative dates span from the year in which Astell first met Montagu (1715), to the year in which Astell repeats verbatim her marginal comments about atheists and blank paper in the advertisement to her *Enquiry After Wit* (1722), a likely reference to Bayle. On Astell’s friendship with Montagu, see Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*.

spirit of the Academic philosophers.’¹¹ In remark G of the article on Chrysippus in his *Dictionnaire*, Bayle makes similar comments. He observes that in the Hellenistic period, philosophers could be classified as either ‘lawyers’ or ‘reporters’. The lawyers were dogmatists whose only concern was to win their case, even if it meant misrepresenting the views of others. The reporters were those who honestly and impartially represented the strengths and weaknesses of all parties in a dispute. Among the latter, Bayle approvingly lists the Academic Sceptics (cf. Maia Neto, ‘Bayle’s Academic Scepticism’, 271–2).

Scholars emphasize that Bayle’s Academic Scepticism is evinced not only by such explicit remarks about method, but also by his commitment to their goal of intellectual integrity.¹² The Academic Sceptics belonged to a school of thought in ancient Greece, headed by Arcesilaus and his successors Carneades, Clitomachus, and Philo of Larissa. Their scepticism was characterized by a dialectical method whereby they investigated arguments both for and against any given position. They stood in principled opposition to the doctrinaire or dogmatic philosophy of their peers, the Stoics and Pyrrhonians. They advocated open-mindedness and disinterestedness, and disavowed holding steadfast to any one positive doctrine. In the Academics’ view, the wise man is someone who does not positively affirm anything as true or false. In response, the Stoics pointed out that if the sceptic never assents to any belief, then it is impossible for the sceptic to act. The Academics rejected this view, however. They argued that even though the wise man does not positively affirm anything as true, he is capable of acting on impressions that are probable (meaning, in this context, convincing or persuasive). Their crucial point, however, was that when the wise man acts, he does so with *integrity*—he does so, that is, following a complete investigation pro and contra what is most probable.

¹¹ Pierre Bayle, *La cabale chimerique*, chapter XI, in Pierre Bayle, *Oeuvre diverses* (La Haye, 1737), tome II, 656a; quoted in Hickson, ‘Disagreement’, 295–6.

¹² See Hickson, ‘Disagreement’, 293–317; Lennon and Hickson, ‘Pierre Bayle’; Lennon, *Reading Bayle*, 12–41; Lennon, ‘What Kind of a Sceptic?’, 274–9; and Maia Neto, ‘Bayle’s Academic Scepticism’, 263–76.

Hickson argues that Bayle can be regarded as an Academic Sceptic because he follows their *method* of philosophizing in order to achieve the same *goal* ('Disagreement', 299). Hickson bases his case on a close examination of Bayle's later follow-up to the *Pensées*, the *Continuation des pensées diverses*, a work that contains pertinent references to Cicero's *Academica*. In the *Continuation*, Hickson says, Bayle emulates the Academic Sceptics' method by consistently engaging in an 'extensive and rigorous presentation of both sides of a disagreement' (299). Bayle does so in order to combat customary prejudices, but also in order 'to render the reader's judgment suitable for forming probable opinions about disputes *with integrity*' (299; Hickson's italics). In light of this approach, Bayle's dialectical method need not be regarded as purely negative, but rather as a positive tool to enable him and others freely to determine what is most probable. In Hickson's view, for Bayle the goal of dialectical method is to attain both freedom *from* prejudice and the freedom *to* judge any given evidence by the light of one's own reason. This two-fold freedom of judgment constitutes intellectual integrity. The wise man will thoroughly consider both sides of a disagreement, because only then will he be in a position to make a probable judgment with integrity. Commenting on Bayle's *Continuation*, Hickson says that:

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. (316)

For this reason, Bayle cannot be regarded as a Pyrrhonic sceptic: his philosophical goal is not to suspend judgment in order to obtain tranquillity of mind (*ataraxia*), but rather to form any probable judgments that he does form with wholeness of judgment, the Academics' goal.

Although Astell is no sceptic, she too is strongly committed to the ideal of intellectual integrity as independence of judgment and freedom from prejudice.¹³ This is no surprise given that Astell was steeped in the writings of Descartes, Nicolas Malebranche, and Blaise Pascal, three early moderns who actively engaged with Academic Scepticism. In the second part of her feminist treatise, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1697), she proposes a method of judgment based on rules originally drawn from Descartes' *Discourse on the Method* (1637) and *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (composed in 1628). In her *Proposal*, she makes a distinction between the ways of philosophizing of the fool and the wise man (*SPL* 128). In her view, the fool is rash, hasty, and precipitate in his judgments. His will is a 'headstrong and Rebellious Subject [who] rushes on precipitately', drawing the wrong conclusions from a fleeting examination of premises (*SPL* 130, 163). By contrast, the wise man follows those habits of mind that 'prevent Rashness and Precipitation in our Judgment, which is occasioned by [Volatileness] ... together with an over-weaning opinion of our Selves' (*SPL* 162). To form such habits of mind and 'honestly to search after Truth' (*SPL* 136), Astell suggests that we must follow a rigorous method of thinking: we must attain a distinct notion of our subject, and reason only about clear ideas; we must proceed gradually, from the most simple objects to the more complex; we must be thorough and exhaustive in our inquiries, viewing our subject matter from all sides; and we must remain precisely focused on the subject every step of the way (*SPL* 176–8). Above all, we must '*judge no further than we Perceive, and not ... take any thing for Truth, which we do not evidently Know to be so*' (*SPL* 178). If we cannot decide one way or another, then we must suspend our judgment. She says:

¹³ On Astell's commitment to freedom of mind more generally, see Springborg, *Mary Astell*, 5, 99, 217; Broad, *Philosophy of Mary Astell*, 170–6.

Reason wills that we shou'd think again, and not form our Conclusions or fix our foot till we can honestly say, that we have without Prejudice or Prepossession view'd the matter in Debate on all sides, seen it in every light, have no bias to encline us either way, but are only determined by Truth it self, shining brightly in our eyes, and not permitting us to resist the force and Evidence it carries. (*SPL* 135)

Astell holds firm to the view that a subject should be viewed 'on all sides', that we must take care to examine any theoretical stance in its entirety. For if we do not, 'if we view but half of it,' she says, 'we may be much mistaken, as if we extended our sight beyond it' (*SPL* 177).

Astell thus evinces a commitment to integrity in the Academic sense of the word. We need to view all sides of a debate, she suggests, for the sake of forming judgments with freedom from prejudice *and* the freedom to judge for ourselves, by the light of our own reason.

I will now show that the bulk of Astell's commentary on Bayle's *Pensées* plausibly suggests that Bayle does not dispute with either honesty or impartiality, toward the goal of integrity, but rather leans positively toward the atheist's side.

ii. Misrepresentations: Bayle's lack of honesty and impartiality

In her commentary, Astell does not pretend to speculate about Bayle's personal intentions in writing the *Pensées*, so much as reveal the intentions expressed in his text.¹⁴ In section 88, Bayle writes that:

¹⁴ In the following analysis, I likewise interpret Astell as commenting on a lack of honesty and impartiality *in the text*, rather than in Bayle himself. As Hickson notes, it is necessary to translate the authorial virtues of honesty, impartiality, and integrity into discernible features of texts, to avoid the trap of 'judging *an author's* intentions and character, neither of which is obviously revealed by the author's writings' ('Disagreement', 298; my italics).

you know well what is said in philosophy against those who do not have an intention to get drunk. They are told that if they do not have this intention *formally*, they have it at least *interpretively*, that is, that they have an intention that can reasonably be interpreted as one to get drunk. (*VT* §88, 110)

In response to this remark, Astell writes in the margin that ‘this reason holds as to this writers attempt against Christianity’ (*M* §LXXXVIII, 164). In his work, Bayle’s formal intention is to argue against the superstitious belief that comets are either the causes or the signs of impending evils—such as great wars, intolerable droughts, plague and pestilence, dangerous miscarriages, sterility in women, and so on—supposedly sent by God to punish human wickedness. At the start of the *Pensées*, Bayle says that he wrote the work because a friend (a fictional ‘Doctor of the Sorbonne’) had requested his thoughts about a comet that blazed across the skies of Europe in the winter of 1680–81. On Astell’s reading, Bayle’s interpretive intentions indicate that his work was never about superstitious belief in comets. Her remarks highlight why his arguments might be interpreted as targeting Christianity and religion instead.

To understand her criticisms, let us begin with a *précis* of Bayle’s arguments. In bare outline, he claims that comets are neither the causes nor the signs of impending doom and disaster, because: first, the causal theory is unsupported by science and reason (an argument from natural philosophy) and, second, if comets were miraculous signs, then this would impugn God’s wisdom and holiness (an argument from theology). In the first case, Bayle points out that natural philosophers maintain that comets inhabit an atmosphere that is potentially several million leagues above the earth. But if this is so, then it is absurd to think that celestial bodies at such a distance could have any discernible influence on the terrestrial sphere, let alone bring about tremendously catastrophic events (*VT* §9). Furthermore, he says,

even if the appearance of comets is often followed by earthly misfortune, we have no grounds to assert that any of those misfortunes were *caused* by comets. In such cases, neither reason nor observation reveals any necessary causal link. The most our observations can discover is a constant conjunction of two occurrences: the appearance of a comet and the subsequent occurrence of a terrible calamity. But there is every reason to think that terrible calamities will occur regardless, with or without comets (*VT* §23).

Second, Bayle argues that because comets confuse and deceive some human beings, and inspire others to engage in idolatry, they cannot be intended as signs from an infinitely wise and holy God. If God had intended comets to be miraculous presages, then in his infinite wisdom he would have bestowed upon them a clear and unequivocal meaning. But instead, the meaning of these presages remains open to a vast number of interpretations. Since all men alike are not visited by misfortune (in fact, one man's misfortune might be another's fortune), it is also a necessary consequence that some men are deceived by these so-called bad omens. Furthermore, historical evidence shows that the appearance of comets in pagan times simply inspired men to commit acts of idolatry with a heightened zeal—to immolate human and animal victims, to consult with demons, and to pray to false deities—in order to expiate past sins. It follows that if comets were intended to be miraculous signs of God's displeasure, they did nothing to bring the pagans to worship the one true God. On the contrary, the appearance of comets actually led them to redouble their acts of idolatry. Again, Bayle emphasizes, this result is incompatible with God's wisdom and holiness.

For a large part of the *Pensées*, Bayle then defends this position against the potential objection that God uses comets not to excite idolatry but *to prevent atheism*, an end that is entirely compatible with his wisdom and holiness. After all, it might be argued, it is far better for men to fall into idolatry than atheism, because atheism causes the ruin of human societies. Atheists (that is, those who recognize no divinity) are undeterred by fear of divine anger, and

so they abandon themselves to their vicious inclinations, and engage in all manner of socially destructive activities. In response, Bayle argues that atheism is not a greater evil than idolatry. In pagan times, he points out, belief in the existence of gods did not prevent men from committing terrible crimes. But unlike atheists, these pagans performed their wicked actions in full knowledge of the will of their gods and with extreme contempt for them. This makes them *worse* than atheists, he says, since atheists do not perform their crimes in contempt of God (*VT* §§118, 132).

More controversially, Bayle argues that atheism need not herald the complete destruction of civil society—a society of virtuous atheists is entirely possible. This is because even in Christian societies the virtue of citizens is largely due to the effectiveness of civil laws, not the efficacy of religious belief. After all, he observes, Christians know that they are expected to renounce their vices, suppress their lusts, and follow right reason, in order to attain everlasting happiness and avoid eternal misery—revelation tells them so. Yet the majority of Christians do not take these measures. Instead they slavishly follow their dominant passions, the inclinations of their temperaments, the force of their habits, and the tastes and sensitivities of their upbringings (*VT* §135). According to Bayle, this is because the bodily passions, inclinations, habits, and tastes—and not the principles of reason—are the true motivators of human actions (*VT* §§136, 143). People will follow their passions regardless of their religious principles; the only effectual constraint on their actions is their fear of temporal punishment, their hope of praise, and their desire to please others. It follows from this, he says, that a society of virtuous atheists could conceivably flourish.¹⁵

¹⁵ Bayle also allows that atheists might form basic moral beliefs—about helping the poor, opposing injustice, being loyal to friends, not harming others, and so on—with the assistance of ‘the lights of reason’ (*VT* §172) or *la droite raison*. But because Astell attacks only Bayle’s negative argument, that religious beliefs do not determine moral conduct, rather than his positive argument concerning moral belief formation in atheists, I have not expanded on this topic here. For further details, see Irwin, ‘Bayle’s Qualified Academic Scepticism’.

Today, these arguments have established the *Pensées*' credentials as an important step along the road to modern secularism. Lennon and Hickson observe that 'Whatever his intentions, this impulse toward modern atheism was Bayle's greatest single influence' ('Pierre Bayle'). For Astell, it was also his greatest danger. To disarm his arguments, she repeatedly points to a lack of honesty and impartiality in Bayle's method of philosophizing.

In the opening paragraph, in response to Bayle's claim that he wrote about comets at a friend's request (*VT* §1), Astell notes that here 'He sets up a Jack Straw that he may throw stone[s] at him' (*MI*, 1). In Astell's lifetime, 'Jack Straw' was an iconic figure in English folklore, one of the rebel leaders who fought alongside Wat Tyler during the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. According to legend, this revolt ended when Tyler was stabbed to death by the Lord Mayor of London, William Walworth. For many years to come, the defeat was a staple feature of triumphal pageant processions at the annual Lord Mayor's Show of London. In 1700, while Astell was living in Chelsea, the city once again celebrated Walworth's vanquishing of Tyler, sometimes referred to as 'Jack Straw' (by then, a generic name for a rebel leader). On this occasion, a personification of Walworth was preceded by 'the Head of *Wat Tyler* on a Bloody Spear' (Settle, *The Triumphs of London*, 5). When Astell accuses Bayle of setting up a Jack Straw, then, she likely means he sets up a head on a pike; that is, he sets up an effigy of a reviled figure at which pageant spectators might throw stones. Her implication is that Bayle argues against a fake opponent, somebody already universally despised, and someone who might be easily knocked down. This is not too far from today's philosophical sense of 'a straw man'. If philosophers commit the straw man fallacy, they misrepresent their adversary's position or they present a weakened version of their argument so that it might be easily refuted. When Astell accuses Bayle of fighting 'with a Jack Straw of his own making' (*M* §CIV, 211), she accuses him of both fighting against a fabricated

enemy—popular superstition—and committing the informal fallacy, by misrepresenting the Christian religion as a species of superstition.

A number of Astell's marginal comments highlight these points. In her view, no 'reasonable Person' or 'nobody of consideration' in her time actually subscribes to the superstitious beliefs that Bayle attacks (*M* §CIV, 210; §XLIX, 87). To support this claim, she poses numerous rhetorical questions in the margins. When Bayle argues against the view that comets are miraculous presages, Astell asks: 'Who says they are?' (*M* §III, 3). When he contends that astrology is 'the most ridiculous thing in the world', she says: 'Who doubts it?' (*M* §XVII, 24). When he claims that there is no supernatural power in names, she replies: 'Who of common sense [t]hinks there [i]s?' (*M* §XXX, 50). And in response to Bayle's assertion that comets are unnecessary to prevent atheism, she asks: 'Who ever pretended that they were?' (*M* §CIV, 211). The cumulative effect of all these questions is to cast doubt on Bayle's honesty and sincerity, and to suggest that he does not examine his subject with impartiality. At one point, she asks:

What wou'd he infer from this pompous [appearance?] of Argument &c? That Comets are not Miraculous, nor Presages? What reasonable Person contends that they are? Here is then a deal ado about nothing. But his business is to Obscure Truth, to confound Ideas, and from some faint resemblances and false suppositions, to draw what Inferences he pleases. (*M* §CIII, 210)

In Astell's opinion, the true target of Bayle's critique is Christianity and religious belief more generally.

There are good reasons to think Bayle makes 'a deal ado about nothing' with respect to comets, as Astell suggests. Prior to the renaissance, comets were regarded as ill omens

throughout early modern Europe; but by the end of the seventeenth century, they were typically regarded as wholly natural occurrences (cf. Jorink, ‘Comets in Context’). Other superstitions of the time, such as those concerning astrology, solar and lunar eclipses, and the power of dates and names, had likewise ceased to be widespread. In addition, present-day scholars tend to agree that Bayle’s true intention was not to attack superstition as such, but rather the beliefs and practices of the Roman Catholic Church in early modern France.¹⁶ In crucial passages, Bayle slyly suggests that some present-day Christians are open to the same criticism as the pagan idolators. He implies that Catholic ‘superstitions’—such as belief in the real presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist, as well as the worship of the Virgin Mary, the saints, and the relics—are worse than atheism, since these too are performed with malice and scorn toward the one true God. Labrousse asserts that ‘there is little doubt that his biting attack on superstition is aimed at the Church of Rome’ (*Bayle*, 28).

Nevertheless, I think Astell is also justified in accusing Bayle of extending his critique beyond Catholicism to Christianity and religion in general. At one point, Bayle contends that although there is (supposedly) unanimous consent about the supernatural significance of comets, this consent does not make it true that comets presage misfortune (*VT* §45). He then launches into an attack on the notion that unanimous, generally-established opinions must be true. Pointing to several counterexamples, he argues that a ‘thousand blunders’ clearly demonstrate that popular opinions can be false (*VT* §§45–6). Here Bayle might be interpreted as targeting generally-held *religious* beliefs that people embrace without rational scrutiny. Certainly, Astell interprets him this way. When Bayle rejects the claim that ‘generally established opinions are true’, she challenges him by pointing out that ‘sometimes the[y] are, and sometim[es] they are not’ (*VT* §XLV, 81). In one passage, Bayle singles out astrology as

¹⁶ For further details on Bayle’s arguments against Catholicism in the *Pensées*, see Rex, *Essays on Pierre Bayle*, 30–74.

a counterexample to the generalization that unanimous consent is a mark of truth. He notes that ‘in the matter of presages, either of comets *or of anything else whatever*, the universal opinion of peoples should be counted as nothing’ (*VT* §32; my italics). In response, Astell points out that just ‘Because so[me] Vulgar opinions are false it does not follow that the common sense and reason of Mankind is so’ (*M* §XXXII, 55). In other comments, she emphasizes that common sense and reason support the truths of the Christian religion; ‘the Truths of Religion which he underhand attacks, have bin prov’d again and again against all Cavillers’ (*M* §XCI, 174). If Bayle thinks that religion is inconsistent with sense and reason, then he should just say so. ‘To what purpose is all this Jargon [i.e., nonsense, gibberish]?’ she asks, ‘What connexion between the Prophecy recorded in Scripture, and our Authors ridiculous presages? If he wou’d put them on a foot let him speak out, and *prove* (not insinuate falsely) that the one is of no more Authority than the other’ (*M* §CI, 201). In sum, Astell accuses Bayle of falsely insinuating that his arguments against generally-held beliefs apply to all religion, when this is not the case at all.

Astell’s critique highlights Bayle’s interpretive (unstated) intentions in the *Pensées*. If Bayle were an Academic Sceptic in this work, she suggests, he would have been concerned to faithfully report the views both pro and contra his given topic. He would have adopted the stance of a ‘reporter’ not a ‘lawyer’, one of those doctrinaire thinkers who deploys trickery to hide the strengths of an opponent’s argument, and argues against a weakened version of the argument instead—as he does here. Rather, Bayle hides his attack on Catholicism behind a critique of superstition, and then proceeds to weaken all religion through specious arguments against generally-held beliefs. Astell notes that ‘Such a writer is not honest’ (§CXXXV, 265), he is ‘disingenuous’ or insincere (*M* first flyleaf; §LX, 105; §CXL, 276–7).

iii. Equivocations: Bayle’s lack of integrity

Throughout her marginalia in the *Pensées*, Astell also targets Bayle's repeated 'play upon words', and his 'pun[n]ing' and 'quibbling' on the meaning of words (*M* §CXL, 276–7; §CXXXVII, 269; §CL, 300–1). In her summative statement on the first flyleaf, she writes:

The *Equivoque* is the grand figu[re] that adorns the whole work; the forc[e] of his Arguments lies in confounding w[hat] ought to be distinguish'd. Thus he every where confounds the *Nomina[l]* with the *Real* Christian ...¹⁷

In Astell's view, the word 'Christian' can mean either *real* Christian, as in someone who is fully and sincerely persuaded of the truths of the Christian religion, or it can mean *nominal* Christian, someone who is a Christian in name only, someone who knows 'little but the name and some outward observances' of Christianity (*M* §CXLIII, 284–5). Bayle maintains that the Christian religion and religious principles more generally have no power to make people virtuous—they cannot motivate people to behave well (*VT* §143). In response, Astell aims to show that once we properly distinguish between 'real Christian' and 'nominal Christian', we can reject the claim that real Christians are not motivated to act on their principles. According to Astell, it is only nominal Christians who fail to live up to their convictions. To say that a real Christian's beliefs are incapable of making him virtuous, as Bayle does, is like saying that 'a man in health cannot walk a Mile, because a sick man cannot' (*M* §CXLV, 287–8); the inference is unjustified.

Astell thus takes every opportunity to highlight Bayle's equivocation in terms. She observes that 'The poor man seems to have made a collection of all the follies that ever were in the world and to charge upon Christians in general the absurdity off [*sic*] a few nominal

¹⁷ Astell also accuses Bayle of failing to distinguish between 'the *Practical* Atheist', someone who believes in God but behaves in practice as though God does not exist, and 'the *Speculative* atheist', someone who has no knowledge of the existence of God. For the sake of brevity, in this paper I focus solely on Astell's claim that Bayle equivocates in his use of the word 'Christian'.

Christians' (*M* §C, 200–1). When Bayle insinuates that Christians are as inclined as pagans to embrace superstitious practices, she responds: 'not Christians who understand and practise their Religion' (*M* §XCII, 175). When Bayle says that many Christians are obsessed with presages, Astell remarks: 'he shou'd say a few ignorant or vitious Nominal Christians' (*M* §XCIII, 176). And when Bayle notes that those who blame society's disorders on the decline of religion play 'with the ambiguity of words', she retorts that: 'He all along plays on the ambiguity of words supposing him a Christian who is so only in name' (*M* §CL, 301).

To summarize, here is Bayle's argument in simplified form (as Astell interprets it):

- P1. If religious convictions determined moral conduct, then all Christians would behave virtuously.
- P2. But some Christians do not behave virtuously (they are wicked and debauched).
- C. Religious convictions do not determine moral conduct.

Once the fallacy of equivocation is removed, as Astell suggests, the argument can be reformulated thus:

- P1. If religious convictions determined moral conduct, then all *real Christians* would behave virtuously.
- P2. But some *nominal Christians* do not behave virtuously (they are wicked and debauched).
- C. Religious convictions do not determine moral conduct.

In this revised form, the conclusion no longer follows from the premises; Bayle's argument collapses.

At this point, however, we might pause to consider two objections that suggest Astell herself uses fallacious reasoning in her arguments against Bayle: namely, the ‘No True Scotsman’ fallacy and the fallacy of begging the question (a circularity in reasoning).

The ‘No True Scotsman’ fallacy is an ad hoc rescue technique for generalizations that are susceptible to counterexamples. In this case, we might think that Astell upholds the generalization that all Christians (‘all Scotsmen’, in the original fallacy) are compelled to act on their religious convictions, to follow the path of virtue. In his *Pensées*, Bayle points to the fact that many Christians do not act on their religious convictions and do not follow the path of virtue. To escape his implications, Astell then narrowly defines the conditions for being a *real* Christian. She responds that Bayle’s so-called Christians cannot be ‘healthy’ or real Christians (‘no true Scotsmen’), they must be ‘sick’ or nominal ones instead: they cannot be fully persuaded of the truths of the Christian religion, since they do not follow the path to virtue. She ends up making the conditions for ‘real Christianity’ so restrictive that there could not possibly be any real Christians in human society.

It’s not clear, however, that Astell falls prey to the No True Scotsman fallacy. Her argument as a whole does not rely on an ad hoc definition of ‘real Christians’, but rather on introspective observations about the motivating power of convictions. Against Bayle, Astell says that if a rational man is fully convinced of religious truths, then he will behave appropriately. ‘He who really believes there is a Treasure in the Field,’ she says, ‘does not hesitate about the Purchase. And he who has *faith enough to believe the Truths of the Gospel*, acts like a Fool, or a Madman if he does not live accordingly’ (*M* §CL, 300–1). Likewise, she says: ‘[D]id they believe the Christian Doctrines, as firmly as a Merchant believes he may get an Estate in India, they wou’d live like Christians’ (*M* §CXXXVIII, 272). Against Bayle, she notes that ‘whoever is heartily persuaded of the truth of Christianity, will Practise it’ and ‘no man can be said to be truly persuaded of it who does not regulate his life according to the

persuasion' (*M* §CXLIII, 284–5; § CLIV, 311). It follows therefore that real Christians do make faith the rule of their conduct, because this is what true persuasion demands. Against Bayle, Astell concludes that

all he would insinuate in prejudice of true Religion, is only puning [*sic*] on the word, and confounding the form and pretence of Religion with the Real sense of it. For this always influences the Heart and regulates the Actions in the main For Perfection is not found in a Mortal state. (*M* §CXXXVII, 269)

Astell suggests that human beings are always capable of using their freedom of will to overcome external influences on their moral judgments, even if they sometimes (perhaps often) fall short of moral perfection. In this respect, her commentary continues a familiar theme from her earlier feminist works, the *Proposal to the Ladies*, her *Reflections upon Marriage* (1700), and *The Christian Religion* (1705). In these publications, she encourages her female readers to attain virtue and happiness through the proper exercise of their wills in accordance with their understandings. She advises them to avoid hasty and precipitous judgments, and to be guided by reason rather than prejudice, passion, and sensation. Her arguments are premised on the very idea that reason and rational conviction can motivate human beings to become good and virtuous. In her marginalia, she likewise declares 'that the grace of GOD has enabled multitudes of Men and Women to conquer their appetites and passions, and wou'd enable us if we wou'd but use it, and were not wanting to ourselves' (*M* §XCII, 175). Echoing her published texts, she suggests that we should not 'run on blindly with the Herd' and 'take it [religion] as we find it where we happen to be born' (*M* §CXXVII, 246–7), but rather exert ourselves, and subject our beliefs to the light of reason. She observes that men like Bayle expect women to 'take up their Religion upon trust, and because it is the

custom of the Country' (*M* §CXLII, 280). But 'did Women spend as much time and thought upon Religion, as they do upon trifling amusements,' she says, 'they wou'd find it their Wisdom and happiness to be real Christians' (*M* §CXLII, 280). Contrary to what Bayle suggests, Astell thinks it *is* possible for all human beings—both men and women—to regulate their passions and change their conduct in light of their reasoning.

According to Astell, then, Bayle fails to engage in a thorough and rigorous examination of alternatives when it comes to explaining why it is that human beings commit sin. An alternative explanation might be that the bodily appetites incline human beings toward sensual pleasures, but that they are nevertheless capable of exercising their liberty, and making a right use of their understandings, to resist those inclinations. The fact that they don't should not be imputed to some irresistible compulsion or essential feature of their nature; rather it should be blamed on *an abuse of free will*. In her view, the fact 'that Men do not act according to their Principles is an unanswerable argument that they are Free' (*M* §CXXXVI, 266). And in what does this freedom consist? In her *Christian Religion*, Astell asserts that human freedom does not consist simply in a mere power to do as we will; rather, it consists in 'making a right use of our reason, in preserving our judgments free and our integrity unspotted' (*Christian Religion*, §249). In our moral deliberations, 'preserving our judgments free' consists in holding the balance even, 'by reducing ourselves to an indifferency to either side of the question, so that we are no longer solicitous whether *this* or *that* be true or good, but only that we may find what is so' (§249). In short, though Astell never explicitly says so, this is the very *freedom of judgment* that Bayle himself endorses in his *Continuation* (cf. Hickson, 'Disagreement', 302, 308).

Finally, let's examine whether or not Astell commits a circularity in her critique of Bayle. Her main contention, as we have seen, is that Bayle is biased toward atheism in the *Pensées*. Her grounds for this view are that Bayle shows a lack of impartiality, honesty, and

integrity in his arguments concerning religious beliefs. Yet, to point out this partiality, dishonesty, and lack of integrity in his arguments, it seems that Astell must already *presuppose* that Bayle is biased toward atheism. If he were not so biased, then we could not construe his tactics as ‘tricks’ or ‘deceptions’: they would simply be unintentional mistakes or weaknesses in argument. That he intended to be misleading or sophistical in some way requires us already to believe the conclusion of Astell’s argument: that Bayle is biased toward atheism.

To avoid this circularity, I think that Astell need only begin by *suspecting* Bayle of a certain inclination toward the atheist’s side. She might then suppose, for the sake of charity, that Bayle were impartial and non-dogmatic in his approach to the subject matter of the *Pensées*. If he were truly impartial and non-dogmatic, then we would not expect to see him seriously misrepresent religious beliefs as analogous to superstitious beliefs; and we would not expect his arguments to rely on dubious equivocations in terms. But the fact that his arguments *do*, Astell might say, provides us with compelling evidence that he is not truly impartial in his inquiries.

On the whole, then, we might conclude that Astell has good reasons for suggesting that Bayle’s ‘Whole Book seems designed as a Plea for Atheism’ (§CXIII, 223). In the *Pensées*, Bayle suggests that some Christians are worse than atheists, and that a society of virtuous atheists is entirely conceivable because religious convictions do not motivate people to become virtuous anyway. Astell’s commentary reveals that Bayle does not adopt these positive theses with integrity, because he fails to affirm them in the context of an honest and unbiased examination of alternatives. If he were sincere and impartial in his inquiries, she suggests, he would not have fought against a ‘Jack Straw’; he would not have pretended to attack popular superstition, only to then misrepresent all generally-held beliefs, including religious ones, as species of superstition. In addition, if he had judged with integrity, he

would not have presented an argument that relied on a deceptive equivocation in terms between ‘real Christians’ on the one hand and ‘nominal Christians’ on the other. For Astell, Bayle is ‘evident proof that Atheists have the strongest prejudices, and are not blank paper as he wou’d suppose them’ (*M* §CXX, 234). She makes a similar point about the prejudices of atheists in the advertisement to her 1722 edition of *Bart’lemy Fair*:

‘Tis foolish or knavish to consider the Mind of an Atheist ... as a blank Paper, in which there is nothing to be obliterated; far from this, it is smear’d and blotted with Vice, and over ting’d with Diabolical Malice against GOD Himself. Of which there is but too flagrant, and sad Proof, in the many Impious Books that are publish’d with Impunity ... (sig. [A3^v]).

For Astell, the *Pensées* was a prime example of one of those ‘Impious books’ that revealed ‘the Mind of an Atheist’. In her opinion, at least, Bayle was no enigma—he was an advocate for atheism.

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