LA PENSÉE DE PIERRE BAYLE

Sébastien CHARLES, « Introduction » – Anton MATYTSIN, « The Many Lives of Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* in the Eighteenth Century » – Elena MUCENI, « Mandeville a-t-il traduit le *Dictionnaire* de Bayle ? Une hypothèse à l'épreuve » – Marie-Hélène QUÉVAL, « Bayle et Gottsched. L'édition allemande des *Pensées diverses sur la comète* » – Gianni PAGANINI, « Pierre Bayle interprète de l'hétérodoxie juive à l'aube des Lumières » – Michael HICKSON, « Bayle on *évidence* as a criterion of truth » – Kristen IRWIN, « Les implications du scepticisme modéré académique de Bayle pour la connaissance morale » – Antony MCKENNA, « Bayle et le scepticisme. Un écran de fumée » – Todd RYAN, « Pierre Bayle and the Regress Argument in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* » – Sébastien CHARLES, « Bayle au siècle des Lumières. Du pyrrhonisme radical au scepticisme mitigé » – Peter BALÁZS, « La tolérance. Conviction philosophique ou produit culturel ? »

VARIA

Anna MINERBI BELGRADO, « Les *Doutes sur le système physique des causes occasionnelles* de Fontenelle. Un texte à décrypter ? » – Sébastien DROUIN, « *L'Histoire critique de la République des Lettres* (1712-1718) et l'impossible mécénat »

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La pensée de Pierre Bayle

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BAYLE ON *ÉVIDENCE* AS A CRITERION OF TRUTH

INTRODUCTION

In the well-known dialogue of the article "Pyrrhon", remark B, of the *Dictionnaire*, Pierre Bayle imagines a skeptical (or "philosophical") abbot explaining to a naïve abbot that all efforts to defeat Pyrrhonian skeptics must fail because there is no sure criterion of truth:

> Right away the philosophical abbot declared to the other that in order to hope for some victory over a skeptic, it is necessary to prove to him before anything else that the truth is recognizable with certainty by some marks. We usually call these marks the criterion of truth [*criterium veritatis*]. You will rightly claim that *évidence* is the criterion [*caractere sûr*] of the truth; for if *évidence* is not this criterion, then nothing would be. "So be it", the skeptic will respond, "I have been waiting for you here all along; I will show you that there are things you reject as false that possess the highest degree of *évidence* [*qui sont de la dernière évidence*[1]]."

The skeptical abbot assumes the truth of core Christian doctrines like the Trinity in order to show that there are propositions that are both evident and false. For example, the proposition that any two things equal to a third are equal to each other–*i. e.* the Transitive Property of Equality (TPE)–is falsified by the Trinity, since the Father and the Son are both God, but the Father is not the Son.

Bayle's motive in this passage viz-a-viz religion has been much debated. There has been less discussion of Bayle's intentions viz-a-viz

1 Bayle, Pierre, *Dictionaire historique et critique* (*DHC*), 5th edition, Amsterdam/Leyde/La Haye/Utrecht, 1740, vol. III, "Pyrrhon", remark B, 732b. All citations of the *Dictionaire* below will follow the standard format: "*DHC*" followed by volume (I-IV), article and remark (if applicable), page number, column (a or b, if applicable). All translations in this paper are mine unless indicated otherwise.

skepticism, perhaps because those intentions seem obvious. Even those, like Richard Popkin, who find the religious motives behind this passage impossible to discern with certainty, nevertheless assert that Bayle's aim in this passage with respect to skepticism is clear. Bayle's aim is to use the skeptical abbot's arguments to undermine the dominant criterion of truth of the period, *évidence*:

> In this passage Bayle is going beyond any previous skeptic in challenging the contention that l'*évidence* is the criterion of truth, by suggesting that a proposition can have l'*évidence* and yet be known to be false. Sextus Empiricus, Gassendi, Huet, and others had not challenged the criterion per se but had questioned whether the criterion could actually be applied in given cases, and whether it was in fact a usable means of ascertaining if a proposition was true[2].

This passage advances the skeptical reading of Bayle on *évidence*. According to this reading, Bayle, like the skeptical abbot in the article "Pyrrhon", rejects *évidence* as the criterion of truth. The claim is not only that Bayle believed that we cannot reliably recognize *évidence* or apply that criterion to determine what is true and what is false in particular cases; the claim is the stronger one that, according to Bayle, *évidence* is simply not the criterion of truth because a proposition can be both evident and false.

The skeptical reading of Bayle on *évidence* is challenged, however, by works written by Bayle both before and after the *Dictionnaire*, in which he defends *évidence* as the criterion of truth. Most notably, in a number of detailed passages of his *Cours* given at Sedan and Rotterdam, Bayle explains and defends a Cartesian position according to which *évidence* (Bayle used the Latin "*evidentia*" in that work) is a necessary and sufficient criterion of truth[3]. Then after the *Dictionnaire*, in response to a variety of critics, Bayle surprisingly declared in no uncertain terms: "I acknowledge with all the Dogmatists that *évidence* is the criterion of

2 Popkin, Richard, *Pierre Bayle: Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections*, Indianapolis/Cambridge, Hackett, 1991, p. 199–200.

3 Throughout the paper I consider the criterion of truth to be an element in the justification of a belief which contributes to our certainty that the belief is true. By calling X a "necessary criterion of truth" I mean that the possession of X is necessary in order to be certain that the belief is true. By calling X a "sufficient criterion of truth" I mean that the possession of X is sufficient in order to be certain that the belief is true.

truth[4]." This last passage, penned by the hand of Bayle, can be called the dogmatic reading of Bayle on *évidence*.

In this paper I will try to answer the following question: was Bayle a skeptic or a dogmatist about *évidence*? Or must we respond that he was both–or that he was neither–in which case we have yet another instance of the "Bayle enigma[5]"? This paper will proceed by presenting Bayle's evolving accounts of *évidence* in his three most important discussions of that criterion: in his first philosophical work, the *Cours*; in his article "Pyrrhon" of the *Dictionnaire*; and in his last philosophical work, the *Entretiens de Maxime et de Thémiste*. The paper begins with some historical background to the concept of *évidence* that will demonstrate that Bayle's final position on *évidence* is both rooted in the tradition of that concept, but also importantly different from it. Bayle's final position on *évidence* is very complex and amounts to a form of skepticism, but it is not the skepticism of the abbot in "Pyrrhon".

THE ORIGINS OF ÉVIDENCE AS AN EARLY MODERN CRITERION OF TRUTH

The French noun "*evidence*" and its cognates are translations of the Latin "*evidentia*" and its cognates[6]. Cicero writes as if he coined the term "*evidentia*" to serve as a Latin equivalent of the Greek "*enargeia*[7]*", which is consequently the term with which to begin this very potted background. An excellent recent overview of enargeia* in Greek philosophy by Katerina Ierodiakonou establishes that the concept was first used in a technical way by Epicurus to refer to a criterion of truth, although the term "*enargeia*" was used in ordinary Greek language much earlier to refer to something's being

4 Bayle, Pierre, *Œuvres diverses* (*OD*), La Haye, 1727–1731, t. III, p. 1070.

5 See Lennon, Thomas M., *Reading Bayle*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1999, p. 14–20.

6 Nicot, Jean, *Thresor de la langue francoyse tant ancienne que moderne*, Paris, 1606, p. 268.

7 "In their view, there was no need to define knowledge, *i. e.* the "apprehension" (or, to translate literally, the "grasp") they call *katalepsis*, and it was unscientific to try to persuade anyone that some things are apprehensible, because nothing is clearer than *enargeia*, as the Greeks put it. (I'll call this "perspicuity" or "plain evidence" [*evidentiam*], if that's all right.)." Cicero, *On Academic Scepticism*, translated with Introduction and Notes by Charles Brittain, Indianapolis/Cambridge, Hackett, 2006, p. 11 (*Academica*, II.6).

obvious, though not necessarily true[8]. "[*E*]*nargeia* is not, on Epicurus' view, a matter of subjective feeling or conviction; it rather describes a feature of an impression, or generally of our criteria of truth, relative to the objects to be known. According to Epicurus, the fact that the criteria of truth are evident means: (i) that what they are indicative of does not stand in need of proof or further scrutiny, because impressions by themselves, for instance, given their relation to the external object, are guaranteed to faithfully represent the things of which they are impressions; and (ii) that they constitute our basis for judging the truth or falsehood of all beliefs[9]." The Stoics followed the Epicureans in adopting *enargeia* as a criterion of truth, claiming that all cognitive impressions have this character[10]. However, the Epicureans' largely externalist conception of *enargeia* was developed by the Stoics and came to include an important internalist component: "the Stoics not only stress that the cognitive impression is a faithful representation of the external object, but also specify, as a further requirement for its being a reliably faithful representation, that it reveals the external object in a clear and distinct way[11]." As we will see, Bayle, following the Cartesians, will adopt a Stoic-inspired view of the criterion as clear-and-distinct perception.

Turning now to Latin Medieval philosophy, *evidentia* was connected to issues surrounding the certainty of knowledge since at least the time of Thomas Aquinas, who appealed to *evidentia* both in order to explicate the concept of certainty, and also to distinguish natural knowledge from knowledge by faith:

> Certitude can mean two things. The first is firmness of adherence, and with reference to this, faith is more certain than any understanding [of principles] and scientific knowledge. For the first truth, which causes the assent of faith, is a more powerful cause than the light of reason, which causes the assent of understanding or scientific knowledge. The second is the evidence [*evidentia*] of that to which assent is given. Here, faith does not have certainty, but scientific knowledge and understanding do[12].

8 Ierodiakonou, Katerina, "The notion of enargeia in hellenistic philosophy", in *Episteme, etc.: essays in honour of Jonathan Barnes*, ed. Ben Morison and Katerina Ierodiakonou, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 61.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 68–69.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

12 Aquinas, Thomas, *The disputed questions on truth*, translated from the definitive Leonine text by James V. McGlynn, SJ, Chicago, Henry Regnery Company, 1953, p. 212 (14.1ad.7).

In this passage *evidentia* is a quality of the object of assent when that assent is an instance of scientific knowledge or understanding. Aquinas further explicates that quality of that object: "Evidence [*Evidentia*] is said to be that which convinces the mind to assent to something. But the mind is convinced to give assent to things because they become apparent to it[13]." *Evidentia* is a persuasive quality of objects of assent which derives from the fact that the object is apparent or manifest or clear to the mind. Objects of faith lack the clarity that is the mark of objects of the understanding. In his *Cours*, Bayle will closely follow Aquinas in distinguishing faith and reason partly by means of *évidence*. However, Bayle will later cause faith and reason to collide and threaten to undermine each other by allowing *évidence* to wander outside of the realm of philosophy into that of theology.

Subsequent Medieval philosophers developed Aquinas' account of *evidentia* in response to skeptical objections to both our sense knowledge and knowledge of the necessary truths of mathematics and metaphysics. In what follows I rely on the excellent recent work of Henrik Lagerlund and Elizabeth Karger on the philosophers John Buridan and Albert of Saxony, who offered responses to the following skeptical argument: "It appears to you beyond doubt that the warmth you feel is produced by the heat of the fire. The appearances would, however, be exactly the same if God were miraculously producing this warmth while preventing the fire from having its normal effect. You cannot, then, rely on perceptual appearances alone to claim that you know that the warmth you feel is produced by the heat of the fire[14]." The argument will remind readers of Descartes' omnipotent deceiving God objection, but it can be found already in the writings of William of Ockham and Robert Holcot[15]. The argument obviously challenges the possibility of certain sense knowledge, and if one accepts the Aristotelian dictum that "nothing is in the intellect which was not first in the senses", then the argument is also a broader attack on certainty.

Buridan laid the foundations of a response to this skeptical objection by distinguishing degrees of *evidentia*. Maximal, or strict, *evidentia* is

13 *Ibid.*, p. 215 (14.2obj.14).

14 See Karger, Elizabeth, "A buridanian response to a fourteenth century skeptical argument and its rebuttal by a new argument in the early sixteenth century", in Lagerlund, Henrik (ed.), *Rethinking the history of skepticism: the missing medieval background*, Leiden, Brill, 2010, p. 215–232 (217).

15 *Ibid.*, p. 217.

a characteristic of a mental proposition present in the intellect only if that proposition is impossible to doubt and therefore compels assent. Analytic propositions and propositions derived from the principle of non-contradiction all possess maximal *evidentia*[16]. This is therefore the degree of *evidentia* enjoyed by logical and possibly mathematical truths. However, there is a lesser degree of *evidentia* which corresponds to those propositions that cannot be doubted when one restricts one's attention to the natural course of events, but which can be doubted when one entertains hyperbolic doubts based on miraculous divine interference with nature. These "naturally evident" propositions are those which belong to what we today called "the natural sciences". So strictly, or maximally, evident knowledge is infallible knowledge of the truths of logic and mathematics, while naturally evident knowledge is fallible knowledge of the truths of the natural sciences.

Buridan's student, Albert of Saxony, used these distinctions to respond to the skeptical argument outlined above. Albert first makes a concession: it is true that the certainty of the natural sciences is weakened by hyperbolic skeptical doubts. But the conclusion to draw from this is not that we cannot know anything about nature, but only that we cannot know anything about nature with the highest degree of certainty, which is provided only when that knowledge is maximally evident. Knowledge of nature enjoys the certainty provided by natural *evidentia*, which is sufficient for the natural sciences. Albert answers skepticism about the natural sciences by lowering the standard of certainty required for such knowledge. As we will see, the hyperbolic doubt of the skeptical abbot in "Pyrrhon" is similar to the skepticism confronted by Buridan and Albert. Moreover, Bayle will adopt the Buridanian strategy of distinguishing degrees of *évidence* in order to answer that skepticism.

Turning finally to the early modern period, the occurrences of the terms "*evidentia*", "*évidence*", and their cognates in Descartes' writings are relatively infrequent, but crucial, including this one in the first rule of the second *Discourse*: "never to accept anything as true if I did not have evident knowledge of its truth [*ne recevoir jamais aucune chose pour vraie, que je ne la connusse évidemment être telle*[17]]…" This moral-intellectual rule for the direction of the mind is repeated later in

16 *Ibid.*, p. 221–222.
17 Descartes, *Discourse on method*, part two (CSM, I, p. 120 ; AT, VI, p. 18).

the *Discourse*: "whether we are awake or asleep, we ought never to let ourselves be convinced except by the evidence [*l'évidence*] of our reason[18]." From these passages it is clear that Descartes took *évidence* to be a necessary criterion of truth: unless we possess *évidence* we cannot be sure that we possess the truth. While Descartes uses "*evidentia*" or its cognates in the *Meditations*[19], he emphasizes instead the criterion of clarity-and-distinctness, which is, by all appearances, equivalent to *evidentia* in Descartes' writings. This criterion is not only considered a necessary mark of the truth, but also a sufficient criterion of truth: "I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true[20]." Bayle will follow Descartes throughout his career in equating *évidence* with clarity-and-distinctness, and in considering it a necessary criterion of truth; however, he will abandon Descartes' view of *évidence* as a sufficient criterion of truth around the time of the *Dictionnaire*.

By the time Bayle wrote the *Dictionnaire*, *évidence* was *the* principal criterion of truth, *the* key epistemological concept in the Republic of Letters. While Descartes undoubtedly had something to do with this, his writings are not sufficient to explain the attention that French philosophers paid to this concept in the last decades of the seventeenth century. Descartes used many concepts to describe the criterion of truth in his writings: indubitability, clarity and distinctness, the natural light of reason, good sense, perspicuity[21]. His writings therefore do not explain why French philosophy became especially focused on *évidence*. To understand this focus, we must turn to the last author in this brief overview, Nicolas Malebranche.

Évidence plays a more prominent role in the philosophy of Malebranche than it did in Descartes' philosophy. In only the second chapter of the *Recherche* Malebranche writes: "truth is almost never found except with evidence, and evidence consists only in the clear and distinct perception of all the constituents and relations of the

18 *Ibid.*, part four (CSM, I, p. 131 ; AT, VI, p. 39).

19 See, for example, AT, VII, p. 29, 51, 59, 69, 70.

20 Descartes, *Meditations*, III (CSM, II, p. 24 ; AT, VII, p. 35).

21 This is a criticism that the skeptic, Pierre-Daniel Huet, lodged against Descartes in his 1689/94 *Censura philosophiae cartesianae*. See Huet, Pierre-Daniel, *Against cartesian philosophy*, edited, translated, annotated, and introduced by Thomas M. Lennon, Amherst NY, Humanity Books, 2003, p. 120–121.

object necessary to support a well-found judgment[22]." This passage indicates that Malebranche took *évidence* to be a necessary criterion of truth. Just a few lines further down, Malebranche emphasizes the necessity of *évidence* for the assent to truth in his first general rule for avoiding error: "We should never give complete consent except to propositions which seem so evidently true that we cannot refuse it of them without feeling an inward pain and the secret reproaches of reason[23]…" If we restrict our attention to the highest degree of *évidence*, then Malebranche claims that the perception of *évidence* is also a sufficient criterion of truth and compels the will to assent: "the reason why the will always assents to the representations of things that are completely evident is, as we have already said, that there is in these things no further relation to be considered that the understanding has not already perceived. Consequently, it is necessary, as it were, for the will to cease its agitation and useless self-exhaustion, and for it to assent with full assurance that, since there is nothing further toward which it can direct its understanding, it is not mistaken[24]."

Malebranche, like Aquinas, carefully restricts *évidence* to the domain of philosophy, and excludes it from theology. However, Malebranche goes further than in Aquinas in separating philosophy and theology when he writes that "[w]e must be equally submissive to faith and evidence; but in matters of faith, evidence must not be sought before belief, just as in matters of nature, one must not stop at faith, that is, at the authority of philosophers. In a word, to be among the Faithful, it is necessary to believe blindly; but to be a philosopher, it is necessary to see with evidence[25]…" Malebranche scolds the Socinians in the third book of the *Recherche*, and offers advice to those who wish to oppose their tendency to allow *évidence* to serve as the rule of the faith. One should not try to give evident responses to objections against the Trinity, since "the objections raised against the main articles of our faith, especially against the mystery of the Trinity, are so strong that they cannot be given solutions that are

22 Malebranche, Nicolas, *The search after truth*, edited and translated by Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp, Cambridge/New York, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 10 (Malebranche, Nicolas, *Œuvres complètes* (*OC*), edited by Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, Paris, J. Vrin, 1962, t. I, p. 54–55).

23 Malebranche, *The search after truth*, p. 10 (*OC*, I, p. 55).

24 *Ibid.*, p. 9 (*OC*, I, p. 53).

25 *Ibid.*, p. 14 (*OC*, I, p. 62).

clear and [*evident*[26]]…" Moreover, even if there are evident responses to objections to theological doctrines, one should not use them, "for fear that their [the heretic's] mind, having once tasted the evidence of arguments in these questions, would be unwilling to submit to those that can be proved only from tradition[27]". The message is clear: the criterion of *évidence* should not be appealed to in matters of theology, even when it is possible to make use of it. *Évidence* is the basis of philosophy; faith and tradition are the bases of theology. Bayle's final position on *évidence*, especially as it relates to the distinction between philosophy and theology, will share much in common with Malebranche's view.

THE CARTESIAN ACCOUNT OF *ÉVIDENCE* IN THE *COURS*

The first work in which Bayle discusses *evidentia* / *évidence* at length is his *Cours*, which he taught at Sedan and Rotterdam in the 1670's and 80's[28]. The position on *evidentia* in that work is straightforwardly Cartesian. In his "Logic", Bayle offers several methodological precepts that are obviously inspired by Descartes, the first one of which declares both the necessity and sufficiency of clear-and-distinct perception as a criterion of truth: "The first precept is based on this axiom, *everything that is clearly and distinctly conceived is true*, from which it is easy to conclude that we can never be sure of having found the truth unless we have a clear and distinct idea of things[29]." However, Bayle is aware that people can be mistaken in claiming that they perceive an idea clearly and distinctly, so the mere belief that one perceives an idea clearly and distinctly, or the mere appearance of clarity and distinctness, is not sufficient for certainty

26 *Ibid.*, p. 206 (*OC*, I, p. 395). I have replaced Olscamp and Lennon's "convincing" with "evident" because Malebranche's term here is "*évidentes*".

27 *Ibid.*, p. 206 (*OC*, I, p. 396).

28 Bayle, Pierre, *Systema totius philosophiae* (*Cours*), in *OD*, IV, p. 199–520. It is now standard in the literature to refer to the work as the *Cours*, but it is important to recall that Bayle wrote the work in Latin, and that the French translation that runs parallel in the *OD* was not from Bayle's hand. Therefore, I will refer to *evidentia* when discussing this work, though it is clear from Bayle's later writings that he took "*evidentia*" and "*évidence*" to mean the same thing.

29 *Cours*, "Logic" (*OD*, IV, p. 256).

that one possesses a true idea. The appearance of clarity and distinctness must be joined together with the "rejection of prejudices, preconceived opinions, all reverence for antiquity and the ambition for novelty, and other enemies of right reason[30]". Bayle summarizes his view of the marks of truth writing that "*evidentia* and freedom from prejudice are the criteria of truth[31]…" Bayle's use of "*evidentia*" in this summary indicates that, like Descartes, he takes *evidentia* to be synonymous with clarity-and-distinctness, a position that he will maintain throughout his career.

Bayle discusses two ways in which *evidentia* is produced in the mind. The first way is through the perception of first principles, which are all not only evident (clear and distinct), but also *self*-evident. Bayle argues that just as light is sufficient by itself to manifest itself, so too the truth of first principles is sufficient to make itself clear and distinct to the mind[32]. The clarity of first principles is in turn the source of the clarity of evident propositions that are not self-evident: "By means of these [first principles] we seek out other principles that are less clear[33]." The method of arguing from self-evident first principles to less clear principles, and of imparting *evidentia* to those less clear principles, is called "reasoning evidently" (*discurrere evidenter*) by Bayle, and constitutes the very definition of philosophy[34]. To reason evidently toward a conclusion requires two things: that the premises of the argument necessarily entail the conclusion, and that the premises succeed in rendering the conclusion evident. To philosophize, therefore, is to extend the *evidentia* of the first principles of metaphysics and morality to all the true implications of these first principles. Bayle writes in the "Ethics" of the *Cours* that human depravity has rendered the first principles of morality less evident than those of metaphysics, but he insists nonetheless that there are evidently true axioms of morality that serve as the basis of all moral reasoning[35].

Certainty without *evidentia* is possible only in theology, never in philosophy, where we can never be certain of having found the truth unless we have a clear and distinct idea of that truth[36]. Echoing a long

30 *Ibid.* (*OD*, IV, p. 256).
31 *Ibid.* (*OD*, IV, p. 256).
32 *Ibid.* (*OD*, IV, p. 257).
33 *Ibid.* (*OD*, IV, p. 257).
34 *Cours*, "Proemium" (*OD*, IV, p. 202).
35 *Cours*, "Ethics" (*OD.* IV, p. 259).
36 *Cours*, "Logic" (*OD*, IV, p. 256).

tradition, Bayle claims that philosophical knowledge (*scientia*) and faith do not differ with respect to the degree of certainty of their doctrines, but they do differ with respect to the source of that certainty. In philosophy, certainty is built upon *evidentia*, while in theology certainty is based in faith, which Bayle defines as belief in the testimony of another. Philosophy can attain indubitable truths by the method of evident reasoning from first principles; theology–at least that part of theology which rests on divine faith, or the witness of God himself rather than the witness of another human–enjoys indubitability because of the veracity of God, "who, we know, can neither deceive nor be deceived[37]". When God reveals something, we can be certain that it is true.

Bayle says very little in the *Cours* about the relationship between reason and faith, but he does acknowledge that theologians must employ argumentation and reasoning. The theological use of reason shares something in common with philosophical reasoning, but also differs from philosophical reasoning in an important respect. Both philosophical and theological reasoning prove their doctrines with necessity. Both forms of reasoning therefore produce certainty and arrive at truths. However, while theological reasoning proves with necessity, it does not produce clarity and distinctness in the mind that perceives the conclusion of the argument (presumably because the argument, being based on principles known by faith, does not begin with clarity and distinctness[38]).

PYRRHONISM ABOUT *ÉVIDENCE* IN THE *DICTIONNAIRE*

The clean separation of reason and faith in Bayle's *Cours* is famously ruined in the *Dictionnaire*. Most of the literature on faith and reason in the *Dictionnaire* focuses on the nature or sincerity of Bayle's fideism[39],

37 *Ibid.* (*OD*, IV, p. 249).

38 *Ibid.* (*OD*, IV, p. 203).

39 The classic treatment is Labrousse, Elisabeth, *Pierre Bayle, tome II : hétérodoxie et rigorisme*, La Haye, Martinus Nijhoff, 1964, p. 293–316. But also see the following excellent recent discussion: Ryan, Todd, "Évolution et cohérence du fidéisme baylien : le paradoxe du 'fidéisme raisonnable'", in *Les « Éclaircissements » de Pierre Bayle*, 447–458, ed. Hubert

but in what follows I want to focus instead exclusively on what happens to Bayle's doctrine of *évidence*.

The skeptical abbot in "Pyrrhon", remark B, of the *Dictionnaire* offers the following argument to prove that some evident propositions are false: "It is evident that things that are not different from a third are not different from each other: this is the basis of all of our reasoning, and it is upon that foundation that we rest all our syllogisms. Nevertheless, the revelation of the mystery of the Trinity assures us that this axiom is false. Invent all the distinctions you please, you will never show that this maxim is not contradicted by this great mystery[40]." According to Popkin's skeptical reading, the goal of the passage is to show that a logical first principle that is commonly considered evident is in fact false. Therefore, some evident propositions are false, and therefore *évidence* is not the criterion of truth.

Popkin's skeptical reading is, of course, correct if we assume that Bayle shares the view of the skeptical abbot, because Bayle himself says that the skeptical abbot's goal in that passage is precisely what Popkin says it is: "I am astonished that such a perceptive mind did not see that it is in no way a question here of explicating the difficulties of our mysteries; for the mysteries were assumed to be true in the course of the objection, and they had to be taken as true, since on that basis it was concluded that *évidence* is not a certain criterion of truth[41]." In Bayle's mind, the skeptical abbot has launched a direct attack on *évidence* as the criterion of truth. There are consequently two questions to address: what precisely is the skeptical abbot's argument against *évidence*?; and did Bayle himself espouse that argument?

The skeptical abbot's argument against *évidence* is clear enough in general. It has the form of an *ad hominem* argument against the naive abbot who, it is assumed, believes both in the Christian mystery of the Trinity (presumably on the basis of faith), and in TPE. The skeptical abbot argues that these two beliefs are inconsistent since any interpretation of the Trinity entails the negation of TPE. The skeptical abbot

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Bost and Antony McKenna, Paris, Honoré champion, 2010, which touches on several of the same themes to be discussed below, but from the point of view of Bayle on faith, rather than Bayle on *évidence*.

40 *DHC*, III, "Pyrrhon", rem. B, p. 732b.

41 *Réponse aux questions d'un provincial* (*RQP*) II, clx (*OD*, III, p. 835b).

concludes that the naive abbot should believe that TPE is false, since the naive abbot will obviously insist that the mystery of the Trinity is true. Since the naive abbot believes that TPE is evident, then he must acknowledge that some evident propositions are false, and therefore conclude that *évidence* is not the criterion of truth. The logic of this argument on the surface is uncontroversial.

However, there is a hidden assumption in the argument, namely that one can know with certainty that the Trinity contradicts TPE. The skeptical abbot nowhere makes this claim, but his argument requires it. If the abbot wishes to conclude that the truth of the Trinity certainly entails the falsity of TPE, then the abbot must assume that we have certain knowledge of the inconsistency of the Trinity and TPE; otherwise, the abbot has no business concluding that *évidence* is not the criterion of truth, but is in a position at best to conclude only that *évidence may not be* the criterion of truth, which is a far weaker claim than what he sets out to prove.

The skeptical abbot's argument therefore has a flaw, possibly even an inconsistency of its own. Presumably the skeptical abbot grants that the mystery of the Trinity is not itself evident, but is taken on the basis of faith. We are sure that he grants that TPE is evident, since he must assume this in order to attack *évidence*. But on what basis does the skeptical abbot rest his certainty of the inconsistency between the Trinity and the logical axiom? He never says, beyond claiming that we will "never show that this maxim is not contradicted by this great mystery". The skeptical abbot must assume, therefore, that never-being-able-to-show not-X is a certain mark of the truth of X. But then how skeptical is the skeptical abbot? Is he merely attacking one criterion of truth–*évidence*–in favour of another–*never-being-able-to-show not-X*? This is not likely, since it was agreed earlier in the remark that if anything is the criterion of truth it is *évidence*.

The weakness just outlined is likely what Bayle has in mind when, in remark C of "Pyrrhon", he writes that the skeptical position "contradicts itself, for if skepticism is solid, then it would prove that it is certain that we must doubt. Therefore, there would be some certainty, and we would consequently possess a sure criterion of truth. Now that would ruin the system. However, do not fear that things will come to this; the reasons for doubting are themselves doubtful, and we must therefore

doubt whether we should doubt[42]." In this passage Bayle distances himself from the skeptical abbot, whose argument he considers self-refuting because it requires rational certainty in order to undermine the basis of all rational certainty. However, Bayle still endorses a kind of doubt that questions *évidence* as the criterion of truth. The skeptical abbot provides an argument that *évidence* is certainly not the criterion of truth; Bayle seems to opt for the position that *évidence* may not be the criterion of truth.

However, another reading of "Pyrrhon" is that Bayle is not endorsing skepticism about *évidence*, but rather following Malebranche in starkly demarcating the limits of *évidence* in matters of faith. Recall Malebranche's claims quoted above to the effect that faith must be blind and that it is even dangerous to offer *évidence* in support of the faith. Bayle's notorious passage in the *Éclaircissement* devoted to "Pyrrhon" echoes Malebranche: "It is necessary to choose between philosophy and the Gospel: if you want to believe nothing but what is evident and in conformity with common notions, then take philosophy and leave Christianity; if you want to believe the incomprehensible mysteries of religion, then take Christianity and leave philosophy[43]…" The intended lesson of "Pyrrhon" may not be a novel and radical skepticism about *évidence* as Popkin suggests, but merely a rehearsal of a theme by Malebranche.

There are two initial reasons, therefore, to distance Bayle from his skeptical abbot, both of which call into question Popkin's skeptical reading of Bayle on *évidence*: the first is that Bayle rightly finds the skeptical abbot's position self-refuting and therefore accepted only a mitigated version of it at most; and the second is that Bayle might have used the skeptical abbot merely to remind a new generation of Socinian suspects (Jean Le Clerc, Isaac Jaquelot, Jacques Bernard) about the need to keep *évidence* out of theology.

42 *DHC*, III, "Pyrrhon", rem. C, p. 733b.
43 *DHC*, IV, "Éclaircissement sur les pyrrhoniens", p. 644.

BAYLE'S MITIGATED SKEPTICISM ABOUT *ÉVIDENCE* IN HIS LAST WORKS

Bayle's *Dictionnaire* invited such passionate responses from critics largely on account of his claim in "Pyrrhon", but also in "Manichéens" and "Pauliciens", that there are evident philosophical propositions opposed to core doctrines of the faith. The Rationalist theologians Le Clerc, Jaquelot, and Bernard forced Bayle to explain how this opposition did not entail either the most extreme skepticism based on the rejection of *évidence*, or the rejection of the Christian faith based on upholding the veracity of *évidence*. I have dealt elsewhere with the way in which Bayle upheld the Christian faith despite acknowledging the presence of evident objections to it[44]. Here I will focus on the converse question: how could Bayle maintain *évidence* as the criterion of truth despite rejecting the force of evident objections to the faith? The key texts are Bayle's last works, the posthumous fourth part of the *Réponse aux questions d'un provincial* (*RQP*) and the *Entretiens de Maxime et de Thémiste* (*EMT*), which are Bayle's final words on *évidence*, as well as his fullest treatments of that topic since the early *Cours*. These works are undoubtedly skeptical in some sense of the term. However, in what follows I will argue that these works also bear an important resemblance to the doctrine and intent of the anti-skeptical arguments of Buridan and Albert of Saxony outlined above.

Recall the skeptical argument that Buridan and Albert opposed: since God is omnipotent, He can produce all the same sensory appearances in us even if external sense objects do not exist. Therefore, all alleged sensory knowledge is doubtful because we cannot say with certainty whether that knowledge corresponds to the reality that we think it does. Notice that the structure of this skeptical argument is similar to the structure of the skeptical abbot's argument in "Pyrrhon": on the basis of a theological doctrine, an attack is made against the *évidence* of some purported philosophical truth. In the *RQP* Bayle makes it clear in response to his opponent Bernard that he does not wish to endorse the

44 Hickson, Michael W., "Belief and invincible objections: bayle, le clerc, leibniz", in *Leibniz et Bayle: confrontation et dialogue*, 69–86, ed. Christian Leduc, Paul Rateau, and Jean-Luc Solère, Studia Leibnitiana Sonderheft 43, Franz Steiner Verlag, 2015.

skeptical abbot's conclusion that we must reject *évidence* as the criterion of truth, but instead he would like to adopt a Buridanian response to this skepticism: "*évidence* appears to me to be the criterion of truth, but not all evident propositions seem equally evident to me[45]". Bayle's solution to the skeptical abbot's problem will, like Buridan's anti-skeptical strategy, grant that the skeptical objection calls the certainty of some philosophical principles into doubt; but the solution will preserve *évidence* as a criterion of truth by borrowing the Buridanian insight that there are degrees of *évidence*. The details of this intricate strategy are laid out in Bayle's *Entretiens*.

Bayle's illustrates in the *Entretiens* several examples of conflicts between reason and faith like the ones raised by the skeptical abbot, and how these can be resolved in an individual mind without abandoning *évidence* as a criterion of truth. The following is such an example:

> Reason teaches me that God is a supremely perfect nature, and that everything done by such a nature is done well. Nothing could be more evident than that axiom. The same reason teaches me that a good and holy Being, insofar as He can help it, does not permit what He loves to fall into misery and vice. I then consult Revelation, and there I find that God permitted Adam and Eve, whom He loved and whom He provided with many good things, to lose their innocence, and thereby to expose their entire posterity to innumerable evils and to a horrifying moral corruption. Therefore I reject the second principle above that reason, or the natural light, had taught me, and I reject it as deceptive and false because it contradicts a truth of fact; and I affirm in virtue of the first axiom above, and also in virtue of the testimony of Scripture, that God is good and holy[46].

The first thing to note in this description of this faith-reason conflict is that it is more properly described as a reason-reason conflict. Revelation is treated as a "fact", but one that can be interpreted on the basis of opposing rational maxims, each of which is evident. The "fact" is that God permitted Adam and Eve, whom he created and loved, to lose their innocence and subsequently to suffer. On the one hand, reason teaches us that God is supremely perfect and can do nothing morally wrong; on the other hand, reason also teaches us that permitting evil that one can prevent is morally wrong. Given the fact of Revelation, it

45 *RQP*, IV, xxv (*OD*, III, p. 1074a).
46 *EMT*, I, vii (*OD*, IV, p. 20b).

follows that if we accept the first evident maxim, then we must reject the second evident maxim as false, and vice versa. The interpretation of Revelation therefore causes *évidence* to be opposed to *évidence*. Oppositions between faith and reason therefore amount to oppositions between evident rational maxims which compete to serve as the key to decipher the facts of Scripture[47].

The resolution of such oppositions becomes simple once we view *évidence*, as Bayle now does, as a mental "weight" enjoyed by some of our ideas. The weights of *évidence* of ideas often differ in magnitude, and when ideas conflict, they and their corresponding *évidences* are placed in the balance of the mind, which resolves the conflict in a quasi-mechanical way: other things being equal, the "heavier", more evident idea retains our belief, while the "lighter", less evident idea is rejected as false[48]. In the example quoted above, the maxim that God is perfectly good and can do no wrong is described by Bayle as a supremely evident maxim, and it therefore outweighs the moral maxim that evil ought always to be prevented. This leads us to view Scripture as a mystery, since we cannot comprehend how it coheres with a very basic, though not supremely evident, moral maxim.

Besides the emphasis on degrees of *évidence*, the most significant development in Bayle's thinking about *évidence* in his last works is that while he still insists that it is a criterion of truth, he clearly no longer thinks that *évidence* is, even under the best epistemic conditions, a *sufficient* criterion of truth. In the *EMT* Bayle presents a number of philosophical disputes, such as the debate over the nature of the continuum, as intractable precisely because each party in the dispute believes his position is the most evident. A line is either infinitely divisible, or composed of mathematical points, or composed of atoms: there are philosophers who uphold each of these options on the basis of their *évidence*, yet the positions are inconsistent. It follows that *évidence* is not a sufficient criterion of truth for any of these disputing philosophers[49].

47 Bayle uses the metaphor of decryption to discuss the interpretation of Scripture in *DHC*, IV, "Synergistes", remark C.

48 *EMT*, I, v (*OD*, IV, p. 16b). The disclaimer, "other things being equal", is important, since prejudices and other motives can add to or detract from the weight of an idea. However, there is nothing new about this; Bayle insists in his *Cours* that *évidence* is a reliable guide to the truth of a belief only when other motives to belief are removed.

49 See *EMT*, I, i (*OD*, IV, p. 4b).

Bayle is forced to deny both the sufficiency of *évidence* as a criterion of truth, as well as the tendency of *évidence* to compel assent (both of which are Cartesian-Malebranchian doctrines), in response to his most formidable critic, Le Clerc, who argued that Bayle's position on conflicts of faith and reason entails that core doctrines of the faith must be rejected, because it is impossible to deny the truth of evident philosophical propositions of the sort that Bayle and the skeptical abbot oppose to these doctrines. Bayle cites numerous examples of epistemically impeccable philosophers who were forced to reject as false various evident propositions that contradicted their views[50]. Gassendi, for example, rejected the evident propositions (1) that what touches something, and what does not touch that same thing, are two really distinct beings; and (2) in a round atom placed on a surface, there is something that touches the surface and something that does not touch that surface. Gassendi's belief in round, simple atoms was contradicted by these evident propositions, so he rejected those propositions as false, since to him the core doctrines of his atomism seemed even more evident.

Bayle emphasizes that Gassendi and others who had rejected evident propositions nevertheless acknowledged the *évidence* of the propositions they rejected, from which Bayle concludes that *évidence* was for these thinkers neither a sufficient criterion of truth nor an invincible motive to belief. Nevertheless, Bayle continues to write as if *évidence* was for these thinkers, and for him, a necessary criterion of truth. In each of the examples of conflicts of evident maxims, Bayle treats *évidence* as if it were rightly taken by the disputing philosophers to be best basis available upon which to assert that one possesses the truth. Without *évidence*, one cannot enter the philosophical arena. But perceiving an idea with *évidence*, even a high degree of it, in no way indicates one's chances of victory in that arena.

50 *EMT*, I, v (*OD*, IV, p. 15b).

CONCLUSION

Bayle continued to insist to the end of his life that *évidence* was the criterion of truth, even aligning himself with the "dogmatists" in this regard. Popkin was mistaken in one of his earliest and most influential articles on Bayle to suggest that Bayle had abandoned *évidence* by the end of his career[51]. Bayle greatly weakened *évidence* by clearly implying that it was not a sufficient mark of the truth. However, he attempted to revise his account of *évidence* to preserve its usefulness in philosophy, borrowing in particular Buridan's notion of degrees of *évidence*. But in that same article just cited, Popkin was right to demand what Bayle's revisions actually accomplished: if the presence of *évidence* does not guarantee that one has the truth, then "why should one be particularly impressed with the fact that certain axioms are *très-évident* or even the most evident that we are aware of[52]?" Bayle tried to distance himself from the skeptical abbot by insisting that *évidence* is the criterion of truth–but was he at all successful, or did he end up a Pyrrhonian *malgré lui*? A further similarity between Bayle and Buridan will show how Bayle ultimately distinguished himself from the skeptical abbot.

Just as Buridan had lowered the degree of certainty required for the purposes of natural science, so too Bayle lowered the degree of certainty required to accomplish the purposes of philosophy. Bayle will end up far more skeptical than Buridan, but the strategy employed by the two philosophers remains roughly the same. To appreciate this requires noticing that Bayle reconceptualized the purpose of theoretical philosophy around the time of the *Dictionnaire*. Recall Bayle's conception of philosophy outlined in his *Cours*. We begin with the self-evident truths of first principles, then, by reasoning evidently, we proceed from these clearest of truths to less obvious truths, all the while increasing the *évidence* of each new truth we grasp. Truth in the *Cours* is conceived

51 Popkin, Richard H., "Pierre Bayle's place in 17th century scepticism", in *Pierre Bayle : le philosophe de Rotterdam*, ed. Paul Dibon, Paris, Vrin, 1959, p. 10. Popkin cites *EMT*, I, vi (*OD*, IV, p. 17a) in support of this claim. But in the passage he quotes, Bayle was explaining the skeptical abbot's position, not his own.

52 Popkin, "Pierre Bayle's place in 17th century scepticism", *op. cit.*, p. 11.

of as a correspondence between our ideas and external objects[53]. So as we reason evidently, we gain certain knowledge of the nature of the objective, mind-independent world.

By the end of his career, Bayle had reconceived the purpose of theoretical philosophy. Instead of viewing it as the gradual ascent up a single ladder of truths toward complete knowledge, Bayle saw philosophy as including two distinct acts: system building and disputation. In remark D of the article "Manichéens" of the *Dictionnaire*, Bayle writes that "every system, in order to be good, requires these two things: first, that its ideas be distinct, second that it explain the phenomena[54]". Earlier in that remark, Bayle refers to the ideas of a good system as "the surest and clearest". The *a priori* element of any good system, therefore, is that its ideas have the characteristics of *évidence*. This is confirmed in Bayle's conception of philosophical disputes:

> Every philosophical dispute presupposes that the contesting parties have agreed to certain definitions and that they admit the rules of syllogisms and the marks by which we recognize bad reasoning… The goal of this kind of dispute is to clear away obscurities and to arrive at *évidence*; from which it follows that in the course of the trial we declare victory to one party or to other on the basis of whose propositions possess the greatest clarity[55]…

In these passages, Bayle nowhere claims, as he once did, that good philosophizing should begin and end with truths; he claims now only that good philosophizing should begin and end with the greatest possible *évidence*. We have already seen that Bayle, in his late works, does not promise that disputants will begin or end by espousing the same most-evident principles. So there can be many good, though opposing, philosophical systems at the outset and at the conclusion of a debate.

Just as in Bayle's earlier moral works absolute truth gave way to the subjective truth of conscience, so too in Bayle's late works the absolute truth gives way in importance to the appearance of truth–*évidence*. *Évidence* therefore becomes Bayle's "metaphysical conscience" in his late writings. The God of Bayle's moral writings does not reprimand those who miss the truth, assuming their seach has been sincere. So too, in

53 *Cours*, "Metaphysics", (*OD*, IV, p. 484).
54 *DHC* III, "Manichéens", rem. D, p. 305.
55 *DHC* IV, "Éclaircissement sur les manichéens", p. 630.

the late metaphysical writings, God has the grace and magnanimity to say to opposing philosophers: "One of you has ascribed to me ideas that I in fact had; the other has ascribed to me ideas that I might have had with equal glory[56]." Bayle wonders later in this passage whether there is any value whatsoever to the possession of truth, justifying his ambivalence by the example of rival astronomical theories that all explain the phenomena equally well, but which all also succumb to devastating objections. These passage echo in the metaphysical context the crux of Bayle's moral philosophy in the *Commentaire philosophique*: "the only law that God in his infinite wisdom could have imposed on man with respect to the truth, is to love every object that appears true to him, after having employed all his lights in the discernment of that truth[57]."

So in the end, how does Bayle differ from the skeptical abbot of "Pyrrhon"? The skeptical abbot aims to destroy dogmatic *évidence* and a naively optimistic view of philosophy along with it. Bayle, on the other hand, aims to reconceive *évidence*, preserve it as a criterion of truth, and render it necessary and sufficient for the certainty required by a philosophy that has for its goal not the absolute and indubitable truth, but the development of systems of thought that are clear, capable of explaining natural phenomena, and that manifest the wisdom of God to humans. Bayle differs from the skeptical abbot in that he tries to create something, rather than merely destroy what exists. The product of Bayle's new conception of philosophy guided by *évidence* rather than truth is an endless proliferation of rival philosophical theories; the flourishing of diverse moral and political systems across the globe; a multitude of scientific hypotheses perpetually competing to predict natural phenomena with greater accuracy than all the others. The result is, in other words, roughly the academic world we inhabit today.

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56 *DHC* IV, "Synergistes", rem. C, p. 218.
57 *Commentaire philosophique* II, x (*OD*, II, p. 437a).