

Bayle, Dr Levitin, and the Square Table

by

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I. *The Risks of Emancipation*

In what is presented as a wide-ranging and erudite fresco – in revisionist style – of early modern philosophical and theological culture¹, Dmitri Levitin offers a new interpretation of Bayle’s thought, which goes even beyond the Protestant *redécouverte* of the early 1960s. More royalist than the king, Levitin challenges the positions of Elisabeth Labrousse, who is known to be responsible for the great success of the thesis of a Protestant Bayle, averse to free-thinking. With her innate empathy as a historian, her subtlety and even self-irony, Mme Labrousse did not fail to grasp, appreciate and sometimes emphasise with intellectual honesty, the obscurity and problematic nature of Bayle’s alleged Protestant undertone. Levitin dismisses all this as a «psycho-historical approach»². For him, Bayle was neither a rebellious Protestant, nor a «libertine Calvinist» (Hubert Bost’s oxymoron), nor a heterodox thinker: he was a reformed «natural theologian»³ close to Louis Tronchin⁴, Jean Le Clerc⁵, and even Pierre Jurieu⁶ – with the latter, Bayle’s disagreement is regarded as merely political. However, Levitin’s Bayle is not «a first-rate philosopher», but only a «journalist», whose «real genius» lay not «in doing philosophy, but in thinking about philosophizing»⁷. In particular, it is firmly stated that Bayle argued for «the de-philosophisation of theology»⁸ seeking to

¹ D. Levitin, *The Kingdom of Darkness. Bayle, Newton, and the Emancipation of the European Mind from Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2022.

² Ivi, pp. 237-238.

³ Ivi, p. 301.

⁴ Ivi, pp. 352-355.

⁵ Ivi, p. 391.

⁶ Ivi, p. 366.

⁷ Ivi, pp. 233-234.

⁸ Ivi, p. 422.

«emancipate» Christianity – and especially Reformed Christianity – from any contamination with Western metaphysics.

Levitin's book is divided into two parts, both very large, one devoted to Bayle and the other to Newton. I will not go into the second part here, except tangentially, and I will refrain from discussing what is not directly linked to Bayle and his fellow fighters in his purported battle against philosophy. Pierre Gassendi is said to be a forerunner of Bayle, and an author whom Bayle made full use of (which is true)⁹; Nicolas Fréret is dubbed a follower of Bayle, with his polemic against philosophical systems (this is also true)¹⁰. But no worse examples could be chosen to demonstrate what Levitin is seeking to demonstrate. As is now clear, Gassendi and Fréret had quite other intentions than to emancipate faith from philosophy. Gassendi was a close friend of Guy Patin and Gabriel Naudé and a participant in the intellectual collaboration that led Patin to draft the *Theophrastus redivivus*, the most important atheist clandestine manuscript of the seventeenth century¹¹. For his part, Fréret was the secret author of the *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe* (c. 1720-1725), one of the most important atheist clandestine manuscripts of the eighteenth century¹². It is really paradoxical to claim that Fréret was urged by Bayle to «foster caution about philosophising about the divine»¹³. The «horrific monist pantheism»¹⁴, which for Levitin represents the dark evil of pagan thought, is, according to Fréret, the necessary outcome of all theology, including Christian theology¹⁵. And Fréret's way out, in his

⁹ Ivi, pp. 221, 248-268.

¹⁰ Ivi, pp. 850-852.

¹¹ See G. Mori, *Athéisme et dissimulation au XVIIe siècle: Guy Patin et le Theophrastus redivivus*, H. Champion, Paris 2022 (on Gassendi as a free-thinker, cf. pp. 265-267).

¹² See N. Fréret, *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*, critical edition by S. Landucci, L.S. Olschki, Firenze 1986; later in A. Mothu-G. Mori (eds.), *Philosophes sans Dieu. Textes athées clandestins du XVIIIe siècle*, H. Champion, Paris 2005, 2nd ed. 2010, pp. 51-186. Fréret's authorship has been challenged, with poor arguments and without discussing in detail Landucci's cogent demonstration, by M. Benítez, *La composition de la Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe: une conjecture raisonnable*, in C. Grell-C. Volpillac-Augier (eds.), *Nicolas Fréret, légende et vérité*, The Voltaire Foundation, Oxford 1994, pp. 177-192.

¹³ D. Levitin, *The Kingdom of Darkness*, cit., p. 850.

¹⁴ Ivi, pp. 851-852.

¹⁵ See N. Fréret, *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*, in *Philosophes sans Dieu*, cit., p. 141: «In all systems, the ultimate cause to which one must return, whether it is called Fate, Necessity, Nature, Universal Cause, Supreme God, cannot be distinguished from

secret *magnum opus*, is certainly not that of a faith relieved of all metaphysical ballast, but that of a philosophy without God and without a first cause, with a radicality that only David Hume was to equal in those years.

All this is also likely to weigh heavily on our interpretation of Bayle's public texts. Was he sincere in his attempt to defend Christian culture, civilisation, and political community, or was he only defending himself, like Gassendi and Fréret, *from* Christian culture, civilisation, and political community? If, as the latest research has shown, the presence of a disguised atheist culture in seventeenth-century French-speaking culture is certain, is it really pertinent to continue to lash out – as Levitin obviously cannot avoid doing¹⁶ – at the “Straussian” readings of early modern philosophical production, in a derogatory sense, as if they were the historiographical inventions of some Don Quixotic dreamer? Bayle was accused – following the archetype of all censorship – of corrupting young people and was expelled from the *Ecole illustre* in Rotterdam. His most famous work, the *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, was sharply censored in Holland and in France by political and ecclesiastical authorities. Are we to believe that he took no countermeasures? Obviously, I agree that it is not possible to answer this question with historical certainty, but it is a historiographical mistake to neglect it, or to deny its importance, or answer it negatively without providing any serious justification other than a *petitio principii*.

2. A (Biased) History of Western Metaphysics

One question runs through Levitin's entire volume: that of the destiny of metaphysics and the deleterious effects it had on Western culture, and, above all, on Christian religion. In Hobbesian terms, this is «the Kingdom of darkness». According to Levitin, Western thought is traversed by an insane passion for monism that is supposed to bring with it absurd consequences¹⁷. Only Christianity, with its doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, provides a way out of this cul-de-sac. However, if we limit ourselves to the case-study of Bayle, the point is quite different:

particular beings».

¹⁶ D. Levitin, *The Kingdom of Darkness*, cit., p. 228.

¹⁷ Ivi, pp. 227-307.

the crisis of Western metaphysics, in Bayle's thought, occurs at two levels. On a general level, Bayle's anti-metaphysical stance derives from his epistemological prudence that leads him to question the great systems of thought, especially on ultimate questions touching the infinite or the ontological foundations of reality. On a more specific level, for Bayle, the crisis of metaphysics has been brought about by its *collusion* with Christian theology (which is the exact contrary of Levitin's «emancipation» programme). According to Bayle, an atheistic system of thought could stand without the absurdities into which theological metaphysics fall, the latter having to save not only the infinity and power of the First Cause, but also its spirituality, personality, freedom, wisdom, providence, and goodness. At one point, Levitin appropriately quotes a passage from a letter by Bayle to Jean-Baptiste «Du Bois» (i.e., more exactly, Dubos, or Du Bos) on the incompatibility between human free will and God's omnipotence:

All the best arguments that are alleged are that without [free will] man would not sin and God would be the author of evil thoughts as well as good ones. This is fine when speaking from one Christian to another, but in disputing with the impious one ends up begging the question¹⁸.

Levitin's comments on this text are unsatisfactory¹⁹: he refers the reader to other passages in his volume, where, however, there is no mention of Bayle's letter to Dubos; he then adds that these are just «rhetorical considerations» (another weapon he often uses to avoid problematic questions) and finally brings up Gassendi again. However, the point of view from which Bayle addresses the question of evil has nothing to do with pagans, with Christians, or with Gassendi. Bayle clearly understands that wielding God's responsibility for evil is of no use when discussing with philosophers who do not believe in a personal and providential God (i.e. atheists). This is clearly stated in the final passage of Bayle's letter to Dubos, which Levitin does not quote: «Spinoza admits this consequence [that God is the author of evil] and obliges you to resort to different proofs»²⁰. Bayle

¹⁸ P. Bayle to J.-B. Dubos, December 13, 1696, quoted by Levitin, *The Kingdom of Darkness*, cit., p. 318.

¹⁹ D. Levitin, *The Kingdom of Darkness*, cit., p. 318.

²⁰ P. Bayle to J.-B. Dubos, December 13, 1696, in E. Labrousse *et al.* (eds.), *Correspondance de Pierre Bayle*, The Voltaire Foundation, Oxford 1999-2017, Letter

was to reiterate the same position a few years later, in the *Réponse aux questions d'un provincial*:

Would not a Spinozist offer a system which would be neither that of the Manichaeans, nor that of any Christian sect? This is the figure under which one must represent those whom Mr Bayle supposes to be able to make difficulties against the origin and consequences of sin²¹.

It is therefore not difficult to answer Levitin's question (and section title): «Did Anyone in the Seventeenth Century Believe that Pure Reason Could Solve the Problem of Evil?»²². Spinoza did, just as Bayle's "young Stratonists" also did. It is quite surprising, therefore, to read in Levitin's book that a Stratonist could not justify the problem of evil:

The doctrinaire Epicurean or Stratonist could continue to insist on the problem of evil, but since he himself would adhere to the principles of natural law despite the moral fatalism his metaphysical doctrine should logically have led him to espouse, he was hardly in a better position than the Christian on the issue, and in a worse position on all others²³.

Apparently, Levitin believes that a moral rationalist must also be an advocate of free will, but the history of early-modern philosophy proves otherwise (Spinoza is again the most obvious example). Indeed, how could Bayle claim that Stratonian determinism and «fatalism» are incompatible with moral rationalism when he himself is both a moral rationalist *and* a determinist and openly maintains that there is no contradiction between the two as long as one remains in an atheistic context?²⁴

1194, vol. X, p. 354.

²¹ P. Bayle, *Œuvres diverses* (hereinafter OD) iii, 790.

²² D. Levitin, *The Kingdom of Darkness*, cit., p. 317.

²³ Ivi, p. 364.

²⁴ See especially OD iii, 984: «[...] in order to sin, and to do a good deed, it is sufficient for a man to act voluntarily. It is not true, therefore, that the distinction between virtue and vice is essentially destroyed if the freedom of indifference is removed. This would be true, at most, only if the freedom of human actions were defined in the sense explained by the Theologians attached to the dogmas of a National Synod [i.e. the Synod of Dordrecht, cf. OD iii, 867] which Mr. Bernard has signed. However, it is quite certain that Atheists do not deny freedom as defined by

It is always from this Spinozist (i.e. atheist) point of view that we need to analyse the history of metaphysics that Bayle traces in the *Continuation des pensées diverses sur la comète* (1704). This is a crucial moment in Bayle's intellectual biography. But Levitin follows Bayle only up to a certain point, and the conclusion of Bayle's argument is omitted from his book. Bayle does not limit himself to saying that young Stratonists «reject crude polytheism»²⁵, still less that they arrive at «scepticism»²⁶. Bayle writes that the two young Stratonists are (philosophically) «atheists» – to be more precise, «positive atheists», since they have subjected to their rational scrutiny all available systems of thought. This is quite different from «scepticism», and this is a position which Bayle considers as more or less invulnerable, relatively speaking (i.e., there are no philosophical or theological objections to Stratonism that a Stratonist philosopher could not retaliate against a Christian theologian). Levitin entirely obliterates, above all, the actual outcome of Bayle's polemic around Stratonism, which is also the conclusion of his history of Western metaphysics:

The argument from design could be deployed against the Stratonist pagan, but only if that design was assigned entirely to a transcendent deity. Any intermediate principle or immanent deity would be jumped on by the Stratonists (or atheistic Chinese) as proof that matter could be self-organising²⁷.

However, for Bayle, Christian theology falls into the same original sin as any other metaphysics founded on the notion of an «intelligent design», in which the order of Nature is created by a wise and omnipotent God. The question raised by Bayle's Stratonist (OD iii, 342-348) is very subtle, but decisive: can there be an uncreated order, or does every order presuppose an intelligent creator? The dilemma is compelling: if every order presupposes an intelligent creator, God too must have an intelligent cause that established the internal order of the divine perfections, which is absurd. We must therefore assume that an uncreated order can exist, which opens the way for thinking that a certain order can be thought as embedded from all eternity in nature, including laws that regulate the entire course of material and

these Theologians».

²⁵ D. Levitin, *The Kingdom of Darkness*, cit., p. 261.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ Ivi, p. 283.

spiritual events. The supposition of a transcendent God, therefore, becomes superfluous. Bayle maintains that this conclusion is valid for every metaphysical system, including the Christian one, unless one accepts Descartes' thesis of the divine creation of eternal truths (OD iii, 347-348). However, since Bayle – like Malebranche – rejects Descartes' thesis (which he considers as destructive of any certainty in science and in morals), he must himself accept the first horn of the dilemma: an order can exist in Nature (and, therefore, in matter) without an intelligent cause. Hence his final comment: «How can one overcome, after that, the obstinacy of a Stratonist?»²⁸.

This point is crucial, as well as historically relevant. In fact, it was perfectly grasped, first by Leibniz, with contempt (*Essais de Théodicée*, § 190-192), and later by Hume, with full agreement, in Part IV of the *Dialogues concerning Natural religion* – and also, to quote an author highly reputed by Levitin, by Fréret in the *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*²⁹. This is also an issue largely discussed by Bayle scholarship, but Levitin prefers to refrain from participating in the debate, indeed he does not even mention it.

3. From Moral Rationalism to the Theory of «Double Truth»

The other fundamental point of Levitin's interpretation is that Bayle is not a sceptic, nor a fideist, but a rationalist, at least in the moral sphere. Elisabeth Labrousse already argued this, as myself and Antony McKenna have also done. A rationalist in morals, Levitin's Bayle is supposed to be reluctant to apply rational criticism to Christian dogmas. According to Levitin, Bayle's position was ultimately the standard one: «there were revealed mysteries that were not accessible to reason, and natural truths that were»³⁰. Thus, the debate shifts to Levitin's second and more challenging thesis, concerning the relationship between reason and faith. Levitin argues that Bayle is not an advocate of the «theory of double truth» and attributes the opposite thesis to me:

²⁸ OD iii, 348.

²⁹ Cf. P. Bayle, *Continuation des pensées diverses*, § 114, OD iii, 348, and N. Fréret, *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*, cit., p. 143.

³⁰ D. Levitin, *The Kingdom of Darkness*, cit., p. 229.

Gianluca Mori, citing the *Dictionnaire* article ‘Luther’, has written that Bayle’s position “is actually a re-interpretation of the theory of ‘double truth’”. This is a significant misunderstanding. Bayle believed that the double-truth doctrine adopted by Luther and Hofmann was an understandable overreaction to the excesses of scholastic Aristotelianism that they encountered among other theologians. But he was unequivocal in his rejection of the doctrine itself [...]³¹.

Let us try to clarify this point. Since the Middle Ages, three possible ways of understanding the relationship between reason and faith are historically attested. For the sake of clarity, let us use anachronistic labels to define them: (1) *Rationalism*: reason demonstrates the truths of faith; (2) *Separatism*: reason and faith have different spheres, in each of which they are sovereign, but are not opposed to each other; (3) *Fideism*: reason and faith are contradictory and therefore faith opposes the conclusions of reason. The so-called «theory of double truth» obviously belongs to the family of “fideism”. However, almost no one (except perhaps Daniel Hoffmann)³² has ever asserted for its own sake (and not polemically) that there can be two contradictory truths. For a Christian theologian, there can be only one truth, the revealed truth attested by faith. Bayle’s «reinterpretation» consists precisely in arguing that, if theology and philosophy are contradictory, it must never be conceded that what is false in theology is true in philosophy. Once faith is chosen, philosophy is falsified³³. In other words, if «double truth» means saying that faith and reason are contradictory (if one is true, the other is false), then Bayle is an advocate of the «theory of double truth»; if, to be considered as an advocate of this theory, it is also required to maintain that there are two contradictory «truths», then Bayle is not an advocate of double truth. Finally, this is a purely verbal question, as is that of knowing whether to argue for a «reinterpretation of the theory of double truth» is or not to argue for the «theory of double truth».

Once the verbal question has been overcome, the substantive question remains: are faith and reason contradictory for Bayle or not?

³¹ Ivi, p. 381.

³² See D. Hoffmann, *Pro duplici veritate Lutheri Disputatio*, A. Dunkerus, Magdeburgi 1600. See also P. Bayle, *Dictionnaire, Hoffman*, rem. C (but without quoting Hoffmann’s *Disputatio*).

³³ *Dict., Luther*, rem. KK.

This is the crucial point on which the whole of the present debate depends. Levitin, of course, argues that, in mainstream Protestant theology and also for Bayle (despite the fact that he does not accept the opposition against/above reason)³⁴, reason and faith are not contradictory³⁵ and that one is compatible with the other as long as each of them remains in its own field:

Nobody in the seventeenth century thought that the statement “The revealed dictates of God cannot be in conflict with the moral dictates of natural law as inscribed on the conscience” was epistemologically equivalent to the claim that “The theological mysteries revealed by God have to be deducible by reason.” Of course, more or less everyone agreed that those mysteries did not contradict reason: to disagree would be to commit oneself to the doctrine of double truth³⁶

But this is not the case, if one takes a look at Bayle’s texts.

The first text in which the contradiction between faith and reason, and in particular moral reason, emerges clearly is the article «Pyrrhon» in the *Dictionnaire*, with the famous tirades of the *abbé pyrrhonien*, one of which points to the inescapable opposition between self-evident moral laws and God’s conduct in human history:

It is obvious that a creature who does not exist cannot be an accomplice to an evil action, [...] and that it is unjust to punish him as an accomplice to this action. Nevertheless, our doctrine of original sin *shows us the falsity of these self-evident notions*³⁷.

Levitin is aware of this passage, but does not deal with it except in passing, and paraphrases it in this way: «Did [Bayle] not say in Remark B of the article “Pyrrhon” that the evidence of moral evil implied serious questions about God’s goodness?»³⁸.

It does not seem to me that Levitin’s paraphrase captures the sense of the text. The meaning, however, is clear: moral laws that appear self-evident to reason are to be regarded as «false», writes Bayle, insofar as they are opposed to Christian revelation. What more

³⁴ D. Levitin, *The Kingdom of Darkness*, cit., pp. 404-420.

³⁵ Ivi, pp. 394-396.

³⁶ Ivi, p. 240.

³⁷ P. Bayle, *Dictionnaire, Pyrrhon*, rem. B – our italics.

³⁸ D. Levitin, *The Kingdom of Darkness*, cit., p. 316.

could he have said in order to designate the contradiction between faith and reason? Admittedly, the *abbé pyrrhonien* is a fictional character, and he is also a Catholic³⁹. However, while this may have some value with respect to the question of transubstantiation, it has none with respect to the question of evil, which touches alike everyone, Catholics, Protestants and Christian heretics of all confessions. In later works, Bayle repeats dozens of times the assertion of the article «Pyrrhon». In the second part of the *Réponse aux questions d'un provincial* (1705) and in the *Entretiens de Maxime et de Thémiste* – Bayle's last, puzzling work (1707) – this position is ubiquitous, and the link with the article «Pyrrhon» is explicitly mentioned («[the *abbé pyrrhonien*] infers that evidence is not a certain characteristic of the truth, since *there are various evident propositions that are false*, assuming we admit the truth of these mysteries»⁴⁰). In the *Réponse* and in the *Entretiens*, Bayle continually repeats that, if one accepts faith, one must reject – that is, hold as «false» – the «common notions» of morals (our italics):

Common notions must be rejected with regard to the Mysteries⁴¹.

Mr. Bayle has repeated so often that *one must reject common notions and ideal goodness* when it comes to judging whether the objections of the Manichaeans are sound or not⁴².

Our common notions of goodness and holiness [...] cannot be true insofar as they are put to use against this absolutely certain axiom, “that everything God does is done well”⁴³.

One must abandon [a common] notion as false when it is opposed by Scripture⁴⁴.

[Bayle] was right to uphold that *we ought to reject the common notions of goodness and the love of virtue* when we judge divine providence with respect to evil⁴⁵.

I rejected the evidence of the common notions of goodness, etc., in order to join myself to the evidence of the facts contained in Scripture [...]⁴⁶.

Thus, in Bayle's «reinterpretation» of the theory of double truth

³⁹ Ivi, p. 405.

⁴⁰ OD iv, 101; Hickson ed., p. 393, our italics.

⁴¹ OD iii, 861.

⁴² OD iii, 866.

⁴³ OD iv, 21; Hickson ed., p. 175.

⁴⁴ OD iv, 23; Hickson ed., p. 179.

⁴⁵ OD iv, 51; Hickson ed., p. 257.

⁴⁶ OD iv, 54; Hickson ed., p. 265.

– possibly for the first time in the history of Christian thought – revealed faith is deemed contradictory not only with human empirical knowledge but with the most important axioms of morals (and also of Logic, concerning the doctrine of the Trinity).

4. *The Square Table*

Let us draw a conclusion from all this, passing over many other topics where Levitin's analysis, despite his undisputed erudition and argumentative skill, proves to be misleading and based on a partial and potentially mystifying view. For instance, in his analysis of Bayle's position concerning the debate between Catholics and Protestants on the «principle of faith», Levitin⁴⁷ duly analyses the articles «Beaulieu» and «Nihusius» of the *Dictionnaire*, but he merely mentions⁴⁸ the article «Nicole», in which Bayle argues that Catholics and Protestants destroy each other and adds (rem. C) that «the author of the Commentary on *contrain-les d'entrer*» (i.e., Bayle himself) has shown «the inescapable difficulties of the way of examination». Instead of taking this passage into account, Levitin simply declares that «he is not convinced» by Cristina Pitassi's conclusion (hardly debatable, in my opinion) that Bayle's comments on the question signal the defeat of the classic Protestant argument of «examination»⁴⁹.

The most important fallacy in Levitin's interpretation lies in his failure to understand the incompatibility between Bayle's moral rationalism and his conclusions on the relationship between reason and faith. This occurs because Levitin tries to bring Bayle back to the fold of Protestant orthodoxy, whereas Bayle's position is much more radical: if faith really wants to emancipate itself from philosophy, it must also renounce the axioms of morality. The reason for this is absolutely clear. As Bayle argues in the *Entretiens de Maxime et de Thémiste*, if one upholds the absolute validity of «common notions», one arrives directly at atheism («if the conduct of the God of the Christians is not conformable to these notions, then there is no God»⁵⁰).

In other words, Levitin's insistence on Bayle's «moral rationalism»,

⁴⁷ D. Levitin, *The Kingdom of Darkness*, cit., pp. 407-411.

⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 407, n. 137.

⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 408, n. 139.

⁵⁰ OD iv, 24; Hickson ed., p. 185.

far from giving him a good foundation for bringing Bayle back into the Protestant fold, should lead him straight to the conclusion that Bayle is an atheist. The only hope, and the only way out, for those who claim that Bayle is a faithful believer in the Reformed religion (or any other religion), would be to assert that Bayle is not a moral rationalist, but a follower of Jurieu's theory of faith as a blind instinct devoid of any rational support. Moral rationalism, for Bayle, implies atheism because it follows from the objections of Stratonists and Epicureans based on the presence of evil in the world that an infinitely perfect being does not exist; faith, as we have seen abundantly, implies the «rejection» of the «common notions» of justice, goodness and virtue. Thus, as Bayle had argued since the *Eclaircissement sur les pyrrhoniens*, a dilemma opens up for every believer (and every philosopher):

You must choose between Philosophy and the Gospel: if you want to believe nothing but what is self-evident and in accordance with common notions, take Philosophy and leave Christianity; if you want to believe the incomprehensible Mysteries of Religion, take Christianity and leave Philosophy; for to possess the self-evident and the incomprehensible together is what cannot be done, to combine these two things is hardly more impossible than combining the properties of the square with those of the circle. You must necessarily choose: if the properties of a round table do not satisfy you, have a square one made, and do not claim that the same table provides you with the conveniences of a round table and those of a square one⁵¹.

Levitin comments this passage as follows:

However, once this uncompromising rhetoric is reduced to its conceptual fundamentals – the claim that philosophy *qua* pure reason could not fully explain Christian mysteries – one is left with a proposition that every single Christian theologian, of any methodological bent or confessional allegiance, would have agreed with⁵².

Once again, despite Levitin's attempt to reduce Bayle's most powerful arguments to bare rhetoric, no Christian orthodox theologian has ever said that faith and reason are contradictory just as a table can-

⁵¹ P. Bayle, *Eclaircissement sur les Pyrrhoniens*, in *Dictionnaire*, iv, p. 634.

⁵² D. Levitin, *The Kingdom of Darkness*, cit., p. 376.

not be both round and square at the same time. And the real issue, for Bayle, is not that philosophy is «incapable» of «fully explaining» the mysteries – as in Levitin’s euphemism or understatement – but, again, that Christian faith implies the destruction of the «common notions» of morals, as all the passages from the *Entretiens de Maxime et de Thémiste* quoted above abundantly demonstrate.

However, Bayle does not limit himself to (publicly) praising this irrational faith built «on the ruins of reason»; he is also very punctilious in pointing out the result of such an irrational belief. It is perhaps worth recalling that in the *Pensées diverses sur la comète* (1682, 1683), Bayle’s first voluntarily published (anonymous) work, he demonstrates that a belief (astrology) that contradicts the common notions of reason is a ridiculous superstition. In the same work, he also shows a clearly anti-fideistic attitude, maintaining that «any miracle which is manifestly contrary to the idea we have of the virtues of God, is false» without it being necessary to have regard «to unknown rights which God may have», for, if such «rights» existed, «we should be reduced to the strangest Pyrrhonism»⁵³. In the *Commentaire philosophique* (1686), Bayle argues that fideism – or the Paulinian motto that «we must captivate our understanding to the obedience of faith» – entails Pyrrhonism in Logic (*if* we believe in the dogma of Trinity), in Theology (since faith in anybody or anything is impossible «without a reasoning which concludes that the one in whom we believe neither deceives nor is deceived»⁵⁴), and above all in Morals: the only way to avoid «the most execrable Pyrrhonism that can be imagined» is to posit that «every particular dogma, whether it is put forward as contained in Scripture, or proposed otherwise, is false, when refuted by the clear and distinct notions of natural light, chiefly with regard to Morality»⁵⁵.

It goes without saying that Levitin denies any shift in Bayle’s thought from the *Pensées diverses* and the *Commentaire* to the later works. According to him, «there is a frequent tendency to claim that Bayle moved from the “rationalism” of the *Commentaire philosophique* to the “fideism” or “scepticism” of the *Dictionnaire*, and, in some quarters, to claim that this shift betrays his theological insincerity.

⁵³ OD iii, 138.

⁵⁴ OD ii, 370.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

Nothing could be further from the truth»⁵⁶ (he tacitly targets Antony McKenna's «Pierre Bayle and the Red Herring», which is the best account of Bayle's rhetorical and philosophical strategy on this point)⁵⁷. However, I would like to ask Levitin how can a philosopher state, without contradiction, first, that to reject the «common notions» of morals would be the «ruin» of our faith (P. Bayle, OD ii, 370), and, later, that our faith orders us to reject the «common notions» of morals (OD iii, 1075; iv, 50-51)? And how can a philosopher maintain, first, that «common notions» are situated in God's essence (OD ii, 368), and later that at least some of them must be qualified as «false» (OD iv, 23, *et passim*)?

It follows that readers and critics of Bayle's works must also «necessarily choose»: between the Bayle/Erasmus of the *Commentaire philosophique*, intimately convinced of the minimum values of humanity, confident in the strength of rational reasoning at least on basic questions related to the common notions of morality and logic, critical of all sectarian violence and inquisition, and the Bayle/Jurieu of the later works against Le Clerc and Jaquelot, an irrationalist who, in the name of faith, denies the truth of the most important moral axioms. The two Bayles cannot fit together consistently: it would be another table supposedly round *and* square at the same time. If Levitin opts for the «square table», and believes that Bayle is a Reformed believer, he must – legitimately – choose the Bayle/Jurieu (as indeed he seems to do), but then he must also forgo the «conveniences of the round table» and thus deny that Bayle is a moral rationalist, going against dozens of passages from the Sedan *Cours* onwards, and reducing the *Commentaire philosophique* to a momentary slip of reason, or, at most, an intermediate stage in Bayle's thought. The only other possibility left to remove the contradiction between the Bayle of the *Commentaire philosophique*, who condemns “fideism”, and the Bayle of the *Entretiens de Maxime et de Thémiste*, who exalts it as the last resource of every believer, is to consider Bayle's “fideism” as a self-defensive screen. In this perspective, Bayle devoted his last forces, as a writer and philosopher, to demonstrating – as the result of a gigantic *reductio ad absurdum* of Christian theology – that the «common

⁵⁶ D. Levitin, *The Kingdom of Darkness*, cit., pp. 240-241.

⁵⁷ In Winfried Schröder (ed.), *Reading Between the Lines – Leo Strauss and the History of Early Modern Philosophy*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2015, pp. 193-220. For a French version, see A. McKenna, *Etudes sur Pierre Bayle*, H. Champion, Paris 2015, pp. 179-204.

notions» of reason – i.e. the ideal heritage of Western philosophical culture – converge towards an atheological conception of the world, and, at the same time, that denying them is the antechamber to the «worst Pyrrhonism imaginable», which in turn would open the way to a repressive and violent political culture, no longer bound by any bonds of humanity and solidarity.

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