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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

**The Core Mysteries:
Pierre Bayle's Philosophical Fideism**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Philosophy

by

Kristen A. Irwin

Committee in charge:

Professor Donald Rutherford, Chair
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Professor Eric Watkins

2010

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The dissertation of Kristen A. Irwin is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2010

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is difficult to know where to begin in acknowledging the debts that one accrues over the course of a graduate career, and over the course of writing a dissertation in particular. Initial thanks must surely go to the director of this dissertation, Donald Rutherford, for his unflagging support of a project that was off the beaten path, and for his consistently challenging feedback. Any particularly intelligent or insightful moments in the dissertation are due to his suggestions and comments. Thanks also to Eric Watkins, Sam Rickless, Cynthia Truant, and Stephen Cox for believing enough in the value of Pierre Bayle to agree to sit on my dissertation committee; they made it possible for me to pursue this project.

The international community of Bayle scholars has been a source of intellectual sustenance and encouragement since I first walked into the Paris office of Hubert Bost in the fall of 2005. My deepest thanks to M. Bost for allowing me to sit in on his Bayle seminar at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes that semester; his patience with and advocacy for me has been a great source of strength, and this dissertation is the partial fruit of his investment. Other members of the Bayle community that have been important partners in philosophical discourse include Thomas Lennon, Gianni Paganini, Todd Ryan, Jean-Luc Solère, and José Maia Neto. Other Bayle scholars who, unbeknownst to them, have deeply influenced this work through their writings include Olivier Abel, Elisabeth Labrousse (*requiescat in pacem*), and Gianluca Mori. I cannot emphasize enough the importance to this dissertation of my participation in the November 2006 conference on Bayle's

Eclaircissements, sponsored by the Association Pierre Bayle; the fruits of my interchanges there are found primarily in Chapters Two and Four. The October 2008 conference on Bayle as historian and critical philosopher – sponsored by the Programa de Pós-Graduação em Filosofia da UFMG (Belo Horizonte, Brazil), the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (Paris, France), and the Università degli Studi del Piemonte Orientale “A. Avogadro” (Vercelli, Italy) – was also pivotal in the development of my thinking on Bayle; the fruits of the helpful comments from that conference are found primarily in Chapter Three.

I owe more diffuse, but no less significant, intellectual debts to those who have mentored me and to those who have walked alongside me in the scholarly life. As an undergraduate, several professors modeled the life of the mind for me in such an irresistible way that I was foolish enough to see a vocation for myself in it; thanks to James Stephens, Thomas Burke, and David Stewart for entertaining and nurturing my scholarly dreams, such as they were. In graduate school, I learned much from fellow pilgrims Ryan Hickerson, Nellie Wieland, Andrew Hamilton, Nina Brewer-Davis, James Messina, and Matthew Brown, among others. Sharon Skare and the other women of the UCSD philosophy department provided a safe community to laugh, drink, eat, and collectively process our experiences as female graduate students in philosophy; participation in this community was one of the highlights of my graduate career.

Other communities played a crucial role in sustaining the life of the spirit during the writing of this dissertation. UCSD’s Graduate Christian Fellowship was a

de facto family during the first years of my graduate career, and it continues to be my great joy to watch that community evolve as an organic expression of thinking and devout followers of Jesus. University Lutheran Church provided an authentic connection to life outside of the ivory tower, and a safe place to walk through the “dark nights of the soul”; special thanks to Rev. Dr. Brian Hooper and Paula Pegues for their wisdom, humor, and spiritual sustenance. The Veritas Fellowship of graduate students at UC Berkeley played a significant role in my social and spiritual stabilization during my time as a visiting graduate researcher there from September 2007 to March 2008.

Finally, I owe a large debt of gratitude to my colleagues at my current institution, Biola University. After several months on the job, I still wake up every morning amazed at my good fortune in working at an institution that is so fully committed to my intellectual, pedagogical, and spiritual growth. In particular, Cassandra Van Zandt (Dean of Humanities) and Gregg Ten Elshof (Department Chair, philosophy) have gone above and beyond the call of duty in their mentorship and support. Thanks are also due to my departmental colleagues David Ciochi and Tom Crisp, whose congeniality and devotion to our shared intellectual and spiritual life are an inspiration for my own research, teaching, and service.

Above all else, my ultimate appreciation and love are reserved for my husband and partner in all things, David Diepenbrock, who has altered the fabric of my life in an altogether unexpected and entirely wonderful way.

An earlier version of Chapter 3, “The Limits of Reason: Bayle’s Qualified Academic Skepticism,” has been published as “La philosophie comme méthodologie: la conception sceptico-rationaliste de la raison chez Bayle,” *Kriterion: Revista de Filosofia* (January 2010).

An earlier version of Chapter 4, “The Christian Mysteries at the Core of Bayle’s Philosophical Fideism,” has been accepted for publication as “La foi et la croyance chez Pierre Bayle,” *Doxa: Études sur les formes et la construction de la croyance* (ed. Pascale Hummel), and will appear later this year.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Core Mysteries:
Pierre Bayle's Philosophical Fideism

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy

University of California, San Diego, 2010

Professor Donald Rutherford, Chair

This dissertation develops an original interpretation of the relationship between reason and religious belief in the work of Pierre Bayle, a seventeenth-century skeptic, that I call “philosophical fideism.” The underdetermined, and often paradoxical, nature of Bayle’s writing makes interpreting him a formidable task; I therefore begin by sketching out the contemporary interpretive landscape of Bayle studies, currently deeply divided over the issue of Bayle’s conception of the reason-faith relationship.

I subsequently examine other conceptions of the reason-faith relationship among rationalists and skeptics of the seventeenth century, and argue that Bayle’s position on this issue is deeply influenced by his Cartesian inheritance. I argue that the central, but neglected, factor in understanding Bayle on the reason-faith question is the influence of seventeenth-century Calvinist rationalism, particularly that of Moïse Amyraut. I show how Amyraut’s tripartite distinction of revealed truths provides the framework for a central element of Bayle’s philosophical fideism, and argue that a small group of revealed truths that Bayle calls “the Christian mysteries” form the core

of Bayle's philosophical fideism. I attribute a conception of reason to Bayle that I call "qualified Academic skepticism," in contrast to the "supersceptical" interpretation of Richard Popkin on the one hand, and the Stratonian interpretation of Gianluca Mori on the other.

Finally, I explain the grounds of Bayle's claims about the erring conscience and the justification for religious toleration. Conscience plays a crucial role in Bayle's philosophical fideism, not only epistemologically, but also morally. The erring conscience supports the interpretation of Christian mysteries as Bayle's own religious first principles, greatly increasing the significance of Bayle's doctrine of the erring conscience. If the conscience is the source of one's core beliefs and of their moral force, then reason, though still able to examine critically the claims of conscience, would be impotent to mitigate the moral force of the duties and rights of conscience. One cannot in good conscience, therefore, be intolerant of those who articulate alternative "first principles" since their source is the individual conscience itself. This account thus establishes a ground for religious toleration that is independent of, but compatible with, religious first principles.

Introduction

The aim of my dissertation is to articulate a philosophical interpretation of the writings of Pierre Bayle, an early modern Huguenot skeptic, that provides a coherent account of his conception of the relationship between reason and religious belief. My work arises as a response to the inadequacies of the interpretations of Bayle that have been proposed in the secondary literature. Unlike recent scholars such as Gianluca Mori, who maintains that Bayle's arguments imply a philosophical atheism, I argue that Bayle's conception of the nature and function of reason is in fact consistent with the sincerity of his affirmation of revealed theology and religious belief. Since my interpretation focuses on Bayle's conception of reason and its proper function within philosophy and theology, I am concerned both with Bayle's explicit statements about the nature of reason, and with Bayle's own use of reason in philosophical and theological arguments. My thesis is motivated by the assumption that understanding these two elements of Bayle's thought is the key to developing a coherent reading of the Baylean corpus.

A Who is Bayle?

The significance of the seventeenth-century question of the relationship of reason and faith in Bayle's work is reflected in the significance of both reason and faith in the life of Bayle himself. Bayle was raised in a devoutly French Calvinist

environment, from his birth in 1647 in the small hamlet of Le Carla, until he left for the Jesuit college in Toulouse. His father, a Huguenot pastor, and his family were horrified by his 1669 conversion to Catholicism, presumably as a result of his philosophical studies under the Jesuits at Toulouse. Eighteen months later, however, Bayle reconverted to Calvinism, officially becoming a *rélaps*, the most persecuted religious classification under the Catholic French monarchy. Bayle then fled France, and studied for two years at a Calvinist seminary in Geneva under Louis Tronchin. Finding himself drawn more to philosophy than to the pastoral vocation, he transferred to the University of Geneva to study Cartesian philosophy. After completing his studies there and returning to France in disguise in 1674, Bayle spent a year as a private tutor in Rouen and Paris before winning a prestigious position at the Protestant Academy of Sedan in 1675.¹

It was at Sedan that Bayle first came into contact with Pierre Jurieu, a Calvinist theologian who became Bayle's mentor, and eventually his most bitter enemy. Initially, Bayle and Jurieu had such a warm relationship that when the French government closed the Sedan academy in 1681, Bayle followed Jurieu to the Ecole Illustre, a Protestant academy in Rotterdam where they both joined the faculty. The souring of their relationship likely began when Bayle refused an arranged marriage with a young woman whose hand had been offered by the Jurieu family. He cited his desire to focus exclusively on his life as a scholar as the reason for his refusal, but it soon became clear that there were also intellectual reasons for the cooling of Bayle

¹ My account here is drawn primarily from the excellent biographies of Bayle by Elisabeth Labrousse (*Pierre Bayle : du pays de Foix à la cité d'Erasmus*, Nijhoff 1963) and Hubert Bost (*Pierre Bayle*, Fayard 2006).

and Jurieu's relationship. Jurieu was already unhappy with Bayle after the publication of Bayle's *Commentaire philosophique* (1687), which advocated religious toleration, and the animosity increased markedly in 1690, when Jurieu vociferously attacked Bayle's anonymously-published *Avis important aux réfugiés sur leur prochain retour en France*, which Jurieu saw as profoundly anti-Protestant.²

During his first several years in Rotterdam, almost all of Bayle's writings, such as his *Critique générale* (1682), *Pensées diverses* (1683), and *Ce que c'est que la France toute catholique* (1686), had been focused on attacking Catholic theology and practice. Indeed, the death of Bayle's father and brothers in 1684 and 1685, and the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, provided compelling reasons for Bayle to engage in anti-Catholic polemic.³ Jurieu saw the *Avis important aux réfugiés*, however, as confirming evidence of an anti-Protestant turn in Bayle's thought, and began to denounce Bayle publicly as a heretic. Jurieu's public proclamations against Bayle, however, were belied by Bayle's devotion to the Reformed community in Rotterdam, and all the biographical evidence seems to support the fact that he faithfully adhered to the Calvinist religion— at least, in practice — for the rest of his life.

Despite his apparently devout life, the text that solidified Bayle's reputation as a grave danger to religious belief was his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697), the reference work of encyclopedic scope that Bayle considered to be his *magnum opus*. The *Dictionnaire* contains many articles that engage in implicit criticism of

² Bayle's authorship of the *Avis* has recently been definitively established by Mori in his updated edition of the *Avis* (Champion, 2007).

³ The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes (also known as the Edict of Fontainebleau) in 1685 was a withdrawing of the civil rights and religious freedoms that had been granted to Huguenots under the Edict of Nantes in 1598.

several of his Protestant contemporaries, including Jurieu, as well as other articles that seem to undermine the rational legitimacy of religious belief as a whole. Bayle attempted to clarify his criticisms in the second edition of the *Dictionnaire* in 1702, which included *Eclaircissements*, or Clarifications, on several of the most controversial articles. These addenda did little to deflect criticism, however, and Bayle provided even more ammunition for his critics with the publication of his *Réponse aux questions d'un provincial* (1704) and *Continuation des Pensées diverses écrites à un Docteur de Sorbonne* (1705), which contained reconstructions of coherent atheist positions, and argued that atheists could be morally upright. Bayle continued to write replies to both his Catholic and Protestant critics until the day of his death on December 28, 1706, the same day he wrote in a letter to a friend, “I am dying as a Christian philosopher, convinced of and pierced by the bounties and mercy of God.”⁴

Despite this final profession of faith by Bayle, many Enlightenment *philosophes* in the generations following Bayle saw him as their intellectual predecessor, and claimed him as one of their own. Voltaire is perhaps Bayle’s most famous admirer, and is probably most responsible for Bayle’s reputation as the “arsenal of the Enlightenment,” a reference to the many arguments that the *philosophes* lifted from Bayle. The *philosophes* adapted Bayle’s arguments to attack “irrational” philosophers and theologians, using the arguments to show the absurdity of any religious belief whatsoever. It is this picture of Bayle that has defined his place in intellectual history, until the more recent interpretations of the twentieth century.

⁴ Labrousse, *Pierre Bayle: du pays de Foix à la cité d'Erasmus*, I:269.

B Interpreting Bayle: The proto-Enlightenment, fideist, and rationalist readings

Since the Enlightenment, relatively few scholars have taken on the task of interpreting Bayle, and of those scholars, there have been almost as many different interpretations of Bayle's philosophical thought as there have been interpreters. At the risk of oversimplification, the interpretations can be situated along a spectrum. At one extreme, the complexity and seeming ambiguity of Bayle's arguments, as well as his criticisms of rational theology, have been cited as evidence by proponents of a primarily ironic and critical interpretation of Bayle as a subversive atheist. This interpretation was first popularized by the Enlightenment *philosophes*. At the other end of the spectrum is a family of interpretations that considers Bayle's skepticism about the ability of reason to establish certainty as evidence of an affirmation of fideism, and of Huguenot Calvinist fideism in particular.⁵ In this section, I will explain in more detail the interpretive problems associated with Bayle, trace the development of the major positions along the spectrum, examine representative examples of each kind of interpretation, and show that a viable fideist interpretation can be developed that responds to inadequacies in the powerful recent interpretation of Gianluca Mori.

The interpretive problems associated with Bayle's writings are perhaps most obvious in his *Dictionnaire*, one of the most challenging texts of the early modern period. The majority of its pages are devoted not to the scholarly articles themselves,

⁵ I go on to discuss the term "fideism" and my own usage of it, later in this section.

but to remarks and footnotes that showcase Bayle's own thoughts on the topics of the articles. Further, many statements in the *Dictionnaire* appear to contradict each other, even within the same entry (e.g., Art. "Pyrrho," Rems. C & D). It is not just the underdetermined, and quite often paradoxical, nature of the *Dictionnaire* that poses an interpretive problem for would-be scholars of Bayle, however; when one examines Bayle's corpus in more depth, the difficulty is magnified. Elisabeth Labrousse notes that "Bayle speaks, in turn, the language of a Calvinist theologian, a Huguenot pamphleteer, a disciple of Malebranche, or a spiritual son of Erasmus, Montaigne, and Naudé."⁶ Bayle's scholarship on all of these topics and in all of these genres was exhaustingly thorough. His arguments not only cite the relevant historical sources, but also engage all of his relevant contemporaries, a testament to his lifelong obsession with the intellectual trends of his day. Bayle's arguments are so multifaceted and complex that it is often unclear exactly what theses the arguments are supposed to be defending. As Jean Delvolvé aptly notes,

The very originality of Bayle's ideas – their lack of systematic construction, their diffusion in the mass of an excessively prolix work, their intentionally obscure exposition, hidden (since one must discover them through a thousand reluctances and among the illusion of contrary affirmations) – all of these reasons have hindered the comprehension of Bayle by his contemporaries, and Bayle taking his rightful place in the history of human thought.⁷

⁶ "[T]our à tour, Bayle parle le langage d'un théologien calviniste, d'un pamphlétaire Huguenot, d'un disciple de Malebranche ou d'un fils spirituel d'Erasmus, de Montaigne, et de Naudé" (*Hétérodoxie et rigorisme* xvi).

⁷ "L'originalité même des idées de Bayle, leur défaut de construction systématique, leur diffusion dans la masse d'une œuvre prolix à l'excès, leur exposition volontairement obscure, enveloppée – car il faut les découvrir à travers mille réticences et parmi les trompe-l'œil des affirmations contraires – toutes ces raisons ont empêché que Bayle fût compris de ses contemporains et prît dans l'histoire de la pensée humaine le rang qui devait être le sien" (*Religion, critique et philosophie positive chez Pierre Bayle* 426).

Like Delvolvé, Thomas Lennon's *Reading Bayle* (1999) recognizes the multiple ambiguities and difficulties inherent in any attempt to provide a systematic interpretation of Bayle. In contrast to the many interpreters who attempt to position Bayle on the fideist-atheist spectrum, Lennon argues that the nature of Bayle's texts prohibits fixing any sort of univocal interpretation to his thought. Instead, Lennon argues that what is most distinctive about Bayle's thought is its dialogic character and polyphonic thinking (Lennon 29). According to Lennon, polyphonic thinking is characterized by a certain independence of voice, a consciousness of the personal, and openness to resumption and revision (31; 35; 37). Polyphonic texts "exhibit this characteristic of allowing others to speak autonomously, rather than as vehicles for the views of the author" (29); it would be a mistake, in that case, to impose an artificial systematization on a text to create a single voice or interpretation. If Lennon is correct, then the typical temptation to force internal consistency onto Bayle's texts would not just be a hermeneutic mistake; it would be a philosophical one, for it would entail the pursuit of consistency between arguments defending opposing positions. Lennon thus recommends that Bayle be read as an essentially polyphonic philosopher.

B.1 The proto-Enlightenment reading and the fideist response

Historically, the most influential interpretation of Bayle is the interpretation of the *philosophes* mentioned at the beginning of this section. According to this account, all of Bayle's arguments that ostensibly defend a position consistent with theism, in fact serve as a vehicle for his heterodox rationalist critiques of religion. The completeness of Bayle's arguments, and his dedication to charitable reconstruction of

his opponents' arguments, is not evidence of Bayle's responsible scholarship, but is rather a chance for him to advance his own subversive views, and to demonstrate definitively the irrationality of religious faith. That these views are in fact his own is, according to this interpretation, supported by the paradoxical replies and weak counterarguments that Bayle provides to answer the charges of his "opponents." According to these scholars, Bayle's apparent acceptance of what seem to be obviously anti-intellectual paradoxes and "Christian mysteries" (such as the doctrine of the Trinity) by an otherwise philosophically sophisticated mind supports an interpretation of Bayle as a surreptitious atheist, or at least a philosopher whose arguments implicitly commit him to a rationalist-inspired atheism.

This interpretation of Bayle stood relatively unchallenged until Elisabeth Labrousse's landmark two-volume work, *Pierre Bayle* (1964). While the first volume is primarily a detailed biography, the second volume is a thematic study of Bayle's philosophy of history, philosophical ideas, theology, and practical morality. Labrousse's interpretation challenged the proto-Enlightenment reading of Bayle as inconsistent with the biographical details of Bayle's life, and her study of Bayle's ideas revealed a thinker whose views were considerably more complex than the straightforwardly rationalist atheism that the *philosophes* had attributed to him. She has been called "la première bayliste de sa génération," and her work inspired others to pursue an interpretation of Bayle that was both more consistent with the

biographical details of his life, and more accurate in its portrayal of the complexity of Bayle's thought.⁸

Labrousse offers what might be called a "fideist" reading of Bayle, and the interpretation of Bayle's thought that I will propose falls into this "fideist" camp. In general, a fideist interpretation of Bayle is one that reads him as a faithful Calvinist, and takes his affirmations of faith to be legitimate rather than ironic. Admittedly, using this term to describe any thinker before the nineteenth century is, strictly speaking, anachronistic, since the term does not actually appear as a description of philosophical or theological positions until 1789.⁹ Its meaning is further obscured by the fact that Catholics and Protestants have traditionally used the term to describe different classes of thinkers. The Roman Catholic Church's official condemnation of fideism as a heresy implies that anyone classified as a fideist is a heretic;¹⁰ the Catholic use of the term to describe canonical Christian figures, then, is narrower than the Protestant use. On this restricted Catholic definition of fideism, only thinkers who "deny reason any role or function in the search for truth, both before and after the acceptance of faith" would count as fideists (Popkin xxii). Thomas Aquinas, for example, would not count as a fideist for Catholics, though almost all Protestant

⁸ See the introduction to Richard Popkin's *Historical & Critical Dictionary: Selections from the work of Pierre Bayle* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1965).

⁹ Its first well-known appearance is in Eugène Ménégoz, *Réflexions sur l'évangile du salut* (1789); see Thomas Carroll's "The traditions of fideism" (*Religious Studies* 44 (2008): 1–22) for a more complete treatment.

¹⁰ The Church condemned doctrines resembling those of later fideists as early as 1348 (Nicolas d'Autrecourt), and in 1840, forced the French theologian Louis Bautain to affirm explicitly anti-fideist propositions, such as "Human reason is able to prove with certitude the existence of God; faith, a heavenly gift, is posterior to revelation, and therefore cannot be properly used against the atheist to prove the existence of God" and "The use of reason precedes faith and, with the help of revelation and grace, leads to it" (New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia, "Fideism").

thinkers, including Calvin, would. The Protestant use of the term, by contrast, captures not only classic Protestant thinkers such as Luther, Calvin, and Kierkegaard, but also Catholic thinkers such as Pascal and Huet, extending even to such esteemed philosophers as Descartes and Kant (Popkin xxii).

With this great divergence in the usage of the term, perhaps the definition most useful for the present purposes is the one that Richard Popkin provides in his *History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (2003):

Those whom I classify as fideists are persons who are sceptics with regard to the possibility of our attaining knowledge by rational means, without our possessing some basic truths known by faith (i.e., truths based on no rational evidence whatsoever)... Fideism covers a group of possible views, extending from (1) that of blind faith, which denies to reason any capacity whatsoever to reach the truth, or to make it plausible, and which bases all certitude on a complete and unquestioning adherence to some revealed or accepted truths, to (2) that of making faith prior to reason. The latter view denies to reason any complete and absolute certitude of that truth prior to the acceptance of some proposition or propositions by faith (i.e., admitting that *all* rational propositions are to some degree doubtful prior to accepting something on faith), even though reason may play some relative or probable role in the search for, or explanation of, the truth (xxi, xxii).

On Popkin's account, there is a range of possible fideist positions based on the scope of the epistemic authority that is allotted to faith. At one extreme is the radical view that all claims of faith have absolute epistemic authority over the claims of reason in every domain which contains claims of revealed religion. On this view, reason is completely devoid of any epistemic authority in any domain containing claims of revelation. At the other extreme is a view that is characterized by the claim that the acceptance of some proposition or propositions by faith is necessary for certainty. Compared to other forms of fideism, this view assigns a much more limited role to

faith; while faith still is necessary in order to gain complete certainty, reason nevertheless plays an essential role in the investigation and explanation of the truth. Popkin calls this latter kind of fideism “weak” fideism, and the former kind “strong” fideism.

A further distinction can be made among fideist views between those that allow reason some role in securing certainty, and those that assert that faith is the only possible guarantor of certainty. It is the latter conception of fideism that typically uses some version of skepticism – often Pyrrhonian skepticism – as a propaedeutic for faith; Huet is perhaps the best example of this version of fideism. The former conception of fideism, however, is perhaps best exemplified by someone like Pascal, who argues in his *Pensées* that one must avoid these “two extremes: to exclude reason, to admit reason only” (P214; Levi 62).

While any position that makes faith prior (in some sense) to reason is a fideist position, the two elements that determine the relative “strength” or “weakness” of a position’s fideism are the scope of reason’s epistemic authority, on the one hand, and reason’s role in securing certain knowledge, on the other. For example, the assertion that reason itself is incapable of adjudicating between two *prima facie* rational claims seems to lead to a straightforwardly “strong” fideist position. Since any fideist position already admits that faith is in some sense prior to reason, faith is the only authority capable of filling the vacuum left by reason. One example of a claim characteristic of a “weak” fideist position is that reason, while not an absolute guarantor of certainty, can nevertheless be trusted to yield reliable conclusions in the

domains of philosophy, mathematics, scientific inquiry, and even rational theology. The conclusions that reason yields are reliable, according to this “weak” position, because God, in his providence, has created human reason in the image of his own – a claim which itself must be accepted on faith. So while this latter position is still minimally a fideist position insofar as it is based on faith in God’s providence, it is clear that the epistemic authority of reason is much stronger, and its scope much larger, than in a “stronger” fideist position that denies reason any epistemic authority.

The understanding of “fideism” that I shall use conforms more closely to the Protestant usage of the term, though I shall not consider classic rationalist philosophers such as Descartes and Leibniz to be fideists. The basis for denying that these philosophers are fideists is their confidence in reason’s ability to function in nearly every domain of knowledge. Christian rationalists such as Descartes rely on the truths known by the “natural light of reason” to serve as the first principles in their philosophical systems. This is not true of philosophers such as Pascal who, although they allow reason a role in the investigation of philosophical and scientific claims, deny that reason can provide independent insight into the revealed claims of Christianity, which must be accepted on faith. Descartes and Leibniz, by contrast, make claims about the nature of God and his relationship to the world that are, first and foremost, a product of rational investigation; that they are consistent with the claims of revelation is a happy (if theologically necessary) byproduct. It is for this reason that I shall not classify them as fideists.

For fideist commentators inspired by Labrousse, including Karl Sandberg and Hubert Bost, reading Bayle as a proto-Enlightenment thinker ignores the philosophical context of the seventeenth century. The central preoccupations of Bayle's thought were not the same as those of the *philosophes*, but were rather determined in large part by the context of Cartesianism and Protestant theology. According to the fideist interpretation defended by these commentators, the complex structure of Bayle's arguments reflects not a subversive atheism, but rather his desire to demonstrate for his opponents the paradoxes of reason with respect to metaphysics, and with respect to the metaphysical claims of religion in particular. This demonstration of the paradoxes of reason provides a basis both for Bayle's affirmation of Calvinist theology, and for his use of rigorous philosophical argumentation. The fideist interpretation of Bayle as a Calvinist philosopher who uses reason to disarm reason in the face of inexplicable faith, then, is consistent not only with his commitment to responsible argument, but also with his lifelong adherence to the Calvinist faith.

Perhaps the clearest example of this genre of interpretation is Karl Sandberg's *At the Crossroads of Faith and Reason* (1966). Sandberg's position in this work is that the traditional proto-Enlightenment reading of Bayle as a *philosophe avant la lettre* is not only inconsistent with his life – as he says Labrousse's *Bayle: Du pays de Foix à la cité d'Erasme* shows – but also fails to appreciate sufficiently the influence of his religious background and his interactions with his contemporaries on his philosophical thought. Among the pieces of evidence that Sandberg cites is Bayle's furious reply to the Jesuit Father Maimbourg's *Histoire du Calvinisme* (1682). Bayle

wrote his reply – *Critique générale de l’Histoire du Calvinisme* – in two weeks, and Sandberg argues that it manifests a “noticeable... strength of Protestant conviction and commitment” (49). In this work, Sandberg writes, Bayle “attached considerable importance to the idea that since the workings of Providence were infinite, they could not, by definition, be understood by finite reason” (53). However, Sandberg also acknowledges “a strong element of rationalism in French Calvinism” (57), and cites Bayle’s assertion in *Pensées diverses* that his views were not far from those of Malebranche.

Ultimately, though, Sandberg argues that Bayle’s pessimistic assessment of reason is what characterizes the bulk of his work, and cites the Calvinist doctrine of the corruption of the Fall as one of the factors influencing this assessment. Throughout Bayle’s journal *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres*, he makes critical remarks about the arguments of secular rationalists, and Sandberg’s view is that Bayle’s remarks here indicate that “all rational investigation of theological or philosophical questions eventually yields, not clarity and evidence, but rather antinomies which render reason powerless either to affirm or deny” (59). Finally, Sandberg cites Bayle’s remark in the *Dictionnaire* that “there is no contradiction between these two things: (1) the light of reason teaches me that that is false; (2) Moreover, I believe it because I am persuaded that this light is not infallible and because I prefer to defer to the proofs of sentiment and to the impressions of conscience, in a word, to the word of God, than to defer to a metaphysical

demonstration” (“Spinoza,” Rem. M).¹¹ For Sandberg, this is evidence not only of Bayle’s sincerity in his faith, but also of his confidence in the coherence of his religious and philosophical views.

B.2 The subversive atheist reading *redux*

The fideist interpretation of Bayle has recently been challenged by the careful studies of Antony McKenna (1990) and Gianluca Mori, among others. Mori’s *Bayle philosophe* (1999) is perhaps the best example of this kind of interpretation, which represents a more historically responsible version of the interpretation advocated by the *philosophes*, in response to the charges of anachronism leveled by proponents of a fideist interpretation. Mori agrees with their assessment of anachronism, and on this basis he rejects the proto-Enlightenment reading as inaccurate. He goes to great lengths to situate Bayle in this seventeenth-century context, and highlights the respects in which Bayle borrows from his contemporaries, particularly Malebranche (Mori 8).

Mori is equally dismissive of the fideist interpretation of Bayle, though his reasons are less explicit (14). While he praises the “Protestant” interpretation of Elisabeth Labrousse for its criticisms of the proto-Enlightenment reading, he points to the many equivocations in her own reading, which he admits is more complex than most fideist readings of Bayle (258). Mori’s proposed interpretation of Bayle is that of a “Stratonian,” a position that Bayle outlines in the *Continuation des Pensées*

¹¹ « [I]l n’y a point de contradiction entre ces deux choses: 1, la lumière de la Raison m’apprend que cela est faux; 2, je le croi pourtant, parce que je suis persuadé que cette Lumière n’est pas infaillible, & parce que j’aime mieux déférer aux preuves de sentiment, & aux impressions de la conscience, en un mot à la Parole de Dieu, qu’à une Démonstration Métaphysique » (« Spinoza » Rem. M; *DHC* 259).

Diverses (1705). Strato, the position's namesake, was the third leader of the ancient Lyceum, after Aristotle and Theophrastus. Strato is distinct from other ancient philosophers in his uncompromising atheism. Bayle himself is interested less in the position advocated by Strato himself than in a modern adaptation of Stratonianism. Strato represents for Bayle the position of seventeenth-century *libertins*: the denial of a providential God, and the affirmation of the eternity and infinity of the universe.

Mori's case that Stratonianism, in fact, represents Bayle's own philosophical position rests on a methodological feature of the structure of Bayle's arguments. Bayle typically structures his arguments not to support directly the position he actually holds; rather, he constructs the best possible argument for the strongest opposing position, only to defeat it later. This eventual defeat makes evident the superiority of the position Bayle actually holds. Bayle explicitly develops the position of the Stratonian atheist over the course of several sections of *CPD*, and, according to Mori, this position is never actually refuted by Bayle. Thus, the strongest opposing position to rational Christian philosophy is left standing as a menace to theist philosophers. The presupposition of Mori's argument is that if Bayle's position were not that of the Stratonian atheist, then he would have provided more decisive objections to the position; in the absence of those objections, the implication is that a rational person – and presumably, therefore, Bayle – is forced to accept Stratonianism as the only philosophically defensible position. Mori is careful never to claim explicitly that Bayle was in fact an atheist, but his interpretation leaves no doubt as to the

implications of Bayle's failure to provide a convincing reply to the Stratonian atheist position.

B.3 Problems with Mori's reading, and a return to fideism

Although Mori's interpretation succeeds in situating Bayle's arguments within their proper seventeenth-century context, he often seems to overlook the most obvious context of the arguments themselves: Bayle's own works. The form that Bayle gives to his arguments, and the audience to whom he addresses them, are essential elements that must be considered in any historically responsible interpretation of his thought. Only after considering Bayle's arguments in the context of each individual text, and then proposing an interpretation of those arguments based in the particularities of that text, can one attempt to reconstruct an interpretation of Bayle's thought as a whole. Constructing a charitable and historically responsible interpretation of Bayle requires going beyond the *Dictionnaire* to engage less familiar, but equally important, works of Bayle that speak to this theme. These other works may provide the necessary evidence to make the interpretive debate tractable once again. Mori has appealed to some of Bayle's arguments in these less familiar works, but engaging these arguments at a deeper level requires a more thorough examination of both the texts, and the contexts, in which the arguments occur.

The inadequacies in Mori's account warrant a reexamination of a fideist interpretation of Bayle.¹² While Thomas Lennon has expressed some resistance to Mori's arguments against the possibility of reading Bayle as a fideist, and is one of the few scholars who have hinted at a possible fideist response to Mori's account, no such fideist interpretation has yet been proposed.¹³ In Chapter Four, I will sketch such an interpretation.

C The Question of Skepticism

Thus far, I have made no mention of Bayle's widespread reputation as a skeptic, and to some extent, the question of Bayle's skepticism is orthogonal to the more controversial question of Bayle's underlying philosophical or theological beliefs. There is no question, however, that the type of skepticism that one attributes to Bayle affects the philosophical and theological positions that one ascribes to him more generally. I shall address this question at length in Chapter Three, but treat it briefly here, since Bayle's skepticism is unquestionably the intellectual trait for which he is best known.

Richard Popkin's reading of Bayle's skepticism has been quite influential; he considers Bayle to be a Pyrrhonian "supersceptic," the culmination of a long tradition of early modern Pyrrhonism.¹⁴ According to Popkin, Bayle's conception of reason is self-devouring; it ceaselessly raises objections to every argument, until no argument

¹² I have shown some of the specific shortcomings of Mori's interpretation in my unpublished paper, "Bayle seulement *philosophe*? Challenging Gianluca Mori's Reading of Bayle" (2005), and will address them in Chapter Three.

¹³ See Lennon's rejoinder to Mori's article "Bayle, Saint-Evremond, and Fideism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* April 2004.

¹⁴ *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford, 2003).

remains unscathed. This represents a line of interpretation that Thomas Lennon calls “Humean Pyrrhonism.”¹⁵ Humean Pyrrhonism is, for Lennon, “the apparently paradoxical view that, sometimes at least, it is reasonable to renounce reason in favor of some other, contrary means of belief formation, if not access to truth” (258). Lennon notes two other varieties of skepticism that have often been attributed to Bayle: religious skepticism and Academic skepticism. Religious skepticism is, for Lennon, the denial of the validity of access to truth by means of religious or supernatural instinct (258). Academic skepticism is, for Lennon, the “methodological prescription that we act in our knowledge claims only with Ciceronian integrity” (259), and it is this version of skepticism that Lennon ultimately attributes to Bayle. The skepticism that I attribute to Bayle in Chapter Three is also of the Academic variety, but unlike Lennon, I argue that Bayle’s Academic skepticism is limited by “right reason” and by faith and conscience. Bayle’s appeal to “right reason” and to the “common notions” of the maxims of morality point away from Humean Pyrrhonism to a kind of rationalism with respect to moral knowledge, and his certainty about the “Christian mysteries” point away from religious skepticism towards a kind of fideism with respect to core religious truths.

D Conclusion

With this background in hand, we are now in a position to elaborate a new picture of Bayle’s philosophical thought. It certainly involves elements of previous

¹⁵ This typology is taken from Lennon’s “What Kind of a Skeptic Was Bayle?” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XXVI (2002), 258-279.

readings – Cartesianism, Huguenot Calvinism, Academic skepticism, and fideism – but draws them together in an original way. First, I examine the depth and extent of Bayle’s Cartesian inheritance on the relationship of reason and faith, and argue that Bayle’s inheritance from Cartesianism is more substantive than that of a typical skeptical fideist. Next, I introduce Calvinist rationalism as a crucial element in Bayle’s theological formation. I argue that Bayle’s conception of faith is informed primarily by this tradition, and plays a defining role in his conception of the relationship of reason and faith. I then examine Bayle’s conception of reason, and argue that it is primarily that of an Academic skeptic, though with an important exception for moral truths. The privileged place that Bayle accords to the Christian mysteries in the relationship of reason and faith is the next subject of investigation, and I argue that a proper understanding of their epistemic status is the key to making sense of Bayle’s claims about the relationship of reason and faith more generally. Finally, I draw out the consequences of this reading of Bayle for his positions on the doctrine of the erring conscience and his defense of religious toleration, and I argue that this reading of Bayle offers stronger support for these positions than any other interpretation currently on offer.

Chapter 1 Bayle's Cartesian Inheritance: Reason and Faith among Seventeenth-Century Cartesians

1.1 Reason and Faith: The Structure of the Question in the Seventeenth Century

A truism that nevertheless bears repeating is that Bayle's engagement with the problem of reason and faith was profoundly influenced by his contemporaries. The specifics of his position will be addressed in detail in later chapters, but it is clear that early modern Cartesians and skeptics, in particular, played an important role in shaping his account.¹⁶ It is thus essential to investigate these contemporary accounts of reason and faith in order to begin to make sense of Bayle's own account. I propose that in spite of significant philosophical disagreements, early modern Cartesian views on the relationship of reason and faith are more similar than they might initially appear, and that Cartesian thought on the reason-faith question is what forms the primary backdrop of Bayle's own position. The main alternative to the Cartesian account, however, is a skeptical one: the fideism of Pierre-Daniel Huet. Huet's skeptical fideism is the closest to Bayle's of all of Bayle's contemporaries, and while

¹⁶ While Bayle was almost certainly influenced by non-Cartesians as well – e.g., Locke's position on religious toleration – it is less clear that non-Cartesian epistemology or metaphysics played a significant role in his thought. (This is, of course, controversial; see, e.g., Ch. 1 *et passim* of Todd Ryan's *Pierre Bayle's Cartesian Metaphysics* (Routledge 2009).)

Bayle retains some Cartesian commitments in his account of reason and faith – as Chapter 3 will make clear – I will argue in Chapter 4 that at the most basic level, his position is a philosophically sophisticated kind of fideism.¹⁷

The philosophical and theological disagreements of Descartes, Arnauld, and Malebranche are by now well-known. From philosophical disagreements about the nature of efficient causation, to theological wrangling over the doctrine of grace, the intellectual debates among these thinkers have received significant recent attention.¹⁸ On the basis of these disagreements, and the personal antipathy between Malebranche and Arnauld in particular, one might be forgiven for assuming that their positions on the relationship of reason and faith would be similarly divergent. In fact, however, their positions are not so different from each other, particularly when compared to some of the alternatives on offer during the early modern period from thinkers such as Huet. What fundamentally unites the Cartesians, and sets them apart from Huet, are the claims that reason has its own independent epistemic authority, and that reason has the ability to properly judge its own proper scope. Huet questions both of these claims, and his position will provide a helpful foil to the Cartesians when we investigate Bayle's position on reason and faith, which bears the marks both of Cartesianism, and of Huet's deep distrust of reason.

¹⁷ The proximity of Bayle's position to Huet's has not escaped notice in the literature on skepticism. Richard Popkin notes that Huet and Bayle actually met in Paris when Huet was a co-tutor of the Dauphin with Bossuet, and argues that Huet was taken seriously by Bayle, despite Huet's opinion of Bayle's scholarship as "superficial" since much of it was conducted without reading knowledge of original languages. (See *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*, OUP 2003; 278, 281.)

¹⁸ See, among others, Denis Moreau's *Deux Cartésiens* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1999).

This chapter, then, will first examine Cartesian positions on the relationship of reason and faith, by way of articulating five distinctive theses. These theses will serve as touchstones for determining which elements of the Cartesian reason-faith framework Bayle inherits, and which elements of this framework he rejects. The chapter will then examine the nature of Huet's conception of the reason-faith relationship, and the elements of it that Bayle adopts. The survey of Bayle's intellectual inheritance on the reason-faith question will then be in place, setting the stage for a detailed examination of his conception of faith in the second chapter, and an examination of his conception of reason in the subsequent chapter.

1.2 The Two Magisteria, via Philosophy: Descartes on Reason and Faith

1.2.1 The Revelation Thesis (RT) and the Epistemic Privilege (EP) Theses

Any investigation of early modern conceptions of reason and faith must begin with Descartes. As Thomas Lennon aptly observes, “[p]hilosophy in the latter half of the seventeenth century was dominated by mixed reactions to Descartes” (*ACP* 9; Preface).¹⁹ The scope of Descartes' work is broad, but his position on the relationship of reason and faith is somewhat ambiguous. While Descartes styles his philosophical program as a radical reversal of Scholasticism, he claims that it is not a danger to theological orthodoxy, and in fact seems to go to great pains to appease theologians,

¹⁹ *ACP* = *Against Cartesian Philosophy* (Huet; trans. Lennon); *CSM(K)* = Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch (& Kenny) (standard English version of Descartes' corpus); *OA* = *Oeuvres de Messire Antoine Arnauld* (standard edition of Arnauld's corpus).

asserting that philosophy and theology should largely be kept separate.²⁰ At the end of the first part of his *Principles*, Descartes writes,

76. Divine authority must be put before our own perception; but, that aside, the philosopher should give his assent only to what he has perceived. But above all else we must impress on our memory the overriding rule that whatever God has revealed to us must be accepted as more certain than anything else. And although the light of reason may, with the utmost clarity and evidence, appear to suggest something different, we must still put our entire faith in divine authority rather than in our own judgment. But on matters where we are not instructed by divine faith, it is quite unworthy of a philosopher to accept anything as true if he has never established its truth by thorough scrutiny; and he should never rely on the senses... in preference to his mature powers of reason (CSM I:76).

Two theses can be drawn from this text that will be our starting point for characterizing the Cartesian position on reason and faith; I call them the “orthodoxy” theses because their affirmation represents the standard, relatively uncontroversial, theological position of early modern Christian philosophers. The first thesis I will call the Revelation Thesis, or (RT):

(RT): There exists a set of religious beliefs affirmed on the basis of revealed Scripture alone.

The extent to which reason can be used to support beliefs of revelation varies widely among early modern figures, but all orthodox Christian thinkers – both Catholic and Protestant – hold that some core set of the beliefs of Christianity can only be affirmed on the basis of revelation. Socinians would deny (RT), since they hold that every

²⁰ See, e.g., his Dedicatory Letter of the *Meditations*.

Christian doctrine can be fully understood by reason; it is instructive, then, that both early modern Catholics and Protestants considered the Socinians to be heretics.²¹

A second thesis that can be drawn from this passage has to do with the epistemic authority of revealed religious beliefs as against beliefs based on reason. I will call this the Epistemic Privilege Thesis, or (EP):

(EP): (RT) beliefs have privileged epistemic authority.

(EP) is a condition for orthodoxy because the epistemic authority of revealed religious beliefs comes from their source: faith, or divine authority. To claim that beliefs based on faith have no more authority than beliefs based on reason would be to subsume the authority of God to the authority of a created thing, namely, human reason. Though this issue is not widely addressed by early modern theologians, it seems clear that subsuming divine authority to human authority would be considered heterodox at the very least, and at worst, heretical. So while there is a diversity of positions on the epistemic authority of reason among early modern Christian philosophers, the epistemic privilege of revealed religious beliefs remains unquestioned.

1.2.2 The Overlapping Scope Thesis (OS)

Descartes makes several explicit statements about the relationship of philosophy and theology that seem to imply that he sees no overlap between them. One of his best-known statements on the relationship of philosophy and theology is from his 27 May 1630 letter to Mersenne:

²¹ The Socinians were a group of antitrinitarian Protestants of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who used reason as the sole criterion for the acceptability of religious doctrines. Their rejection of the Trinity and of the divinity of Christ places them squarely outside of Christian orthodoxy.

As for the question whether ‘it is in accord with the goodness of God to damn men for eternity,’ that is a theological question: so if you please you will allow me to say nothing about it. It is not that the arguments of free thinkers on this topic have any force, indeed they seem frivolous and ridiculous to me; but I think that when truths depend on faith and cannot be proved by natural argument, it degrades them if one tries to support them by human reasoning and mere probabilities (CSMK 26).

In addition to reaffirming Descartes’ commitment to (RT), this passage says that: philosophers’ (“free thinkers”) arguments are “frivolous and ridiculous” in matters of theology, and truths of faith are “degraded” if reason is used to support them. The implication is that reason should remain silent on theological questions, even if it may, in fact, have something to say (though Descartes does not countenance that possibility here). Indeed, Descartes seems to identify truths of faith as the sort of truths that cannot be proved by “natural” – that is, rational – argument. This would seem to preclude the possibility that truths of faith could ever be upheld by reasoned argument, and thus implies a separation between the truths of reason and the truths of faith.

In the Dedicatory Letter to the Sorbonne at the beginning of the *Meditations*, however, Descartes writes,

...For us who are believers, it is enough to accept on faith that the human soul does not die with the body, and that God exists; but in the case of unbelievers, it seems that there is no religion, and practically no moral virtue, that they can be persuaded to adopt until these two truths are proved to them by natural reason...

...It is of course quite true that we must believe in the existence of God because it is a doctrine of Holy Scripture, and conversely, that we must believe Holy Scripture because it comes from God; for since faith is the gift of God, he who gives us grace to believe other things can also give us the grace to believe that he exists. But this argument cannot be put to unbelievers because they would judge it to be circular (CSM II:3).

This passage seems to cement Descartes' affirmation of a classically orthodox position on reason and faith: faith is epistemically sufficient for belief, but reason can provide a warrant for belief that is accessible to those who already believe, as well as to those who do not.

In this same passage, Descartes provides further evidence of his willingness to use reason to buttress and support the truths of faith:

I have always thought that two topics – namely God and the soul – are prime examples of subjects where demonstrative proofs ought to be given with the aid of philosophy rather than theology.... Moreover, I have noticed both that you and all other theologians assert that the existence of God is capable of proof by natural reason... (CSM II:3)

From this passage, it seems clear that at least two topics of theology – God and the soul – are open to philosophical investigation and argument. In particular, philosophy can serve theology by providing rational justifications for revealed beliefs whose truth is already known on the basis of faith. This leads us to a third thesis that can be used to characterize the Cartesian position on reason and faith; call it the Overlapping Scope Thesis, or (OS):

(OS): There exists a set of religious beliefs that is within the scope of both reason and faith.

Notice what is *not* included in this thesis, however: that this overlap is completely unproblematic. The Cartesian position simply *assumes* that it is, without much investigation, and we shall see in our study of Huet and Bayle that this assumption does not go unchallenged. For the Cartesians, however, the important upshot of this thesis is that rational, or natural, theology is a viable area of inquiry; there are, in fact, many religious beliefs that are supported not only on the basis of faith, but also by

natural reason, and this overlapping scope is a happy convergence, since reason and faith will, for the Cartesians, yield the same conclusions about revealed truths.²²

So exactly what sort of knowledge of God could be given by reason? To put it simply, the knowledge of rational – or, as it is sometimes called, natural – theology. This kind of knowledge is within reason’s scope, but even Descartes admits that this type of knowledge is not sufficient for salvation. Writing again to Mersenne, he says:

...it is possible to know by natural reason that God exists, but I do not say that this natural knowledge by itself, without grace, merits the supernatural glory which we hope for in heaven. On the contrary, it is evident that since this glory is supernatural, more than natural powers are needed to merit it. I have said nothing about the knowledge of God except what all the theologians say, too. One should note that what is known by natural reason – that he is all good, all powerful, all truthful, etc. – may serve to prepare infidels to receive that Faith, but cannot suffice to enable them to reach heaven (CSMK 211; Letter to Mersenne, March 1642).

For Descartes, then, knowledge from rational theology concerns basic divine attributes: God’s existence, omnibenevolence, omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, immutability, and eternity. But what is known by natural reason is merely a propaedeutic for something further; a supernatural grace must be added to this natural knowledge in order for it to be soteriologically efficacious. There is a separation between rational theology and “supernatural glory” that “natural powers” cannot bridge.

What is it, then, that “suffice[s] to enable [people] to reach heaven” according to Descartes? It is the “supernatural illumination” of faith. In a 1641 letter to

²² Notice, though, that beliefs based on rational theology are not necessarily coextensive with beliefs that are soteriologically efficacious; reason is not, therefore, a sufficient substitute for faith with respect to salvation for Descartes.

Hyperaspistes, he clarifies one of his replies to the second set of objections to his *Meditations*:

In the reply to the Second Objections I said ‘when we are supernaturally illumined by God, we are confident that what is put forward for us to believe has been revealed by God himself’; but there I was speaking not of human knowledge, but of faith (CSMK 191).

This passage provides us with the tools for an instructive parallel between the “natural light” of reason, and the “supernatural light” of God. Whereas for Descartes, the natural light of reason provides evidence that grounds a particular kind of certainty, the supernatural light – presumably that of grace, which leads to faith – provides certainty that God is the source of what has been supernaturally illumined. Faith, then, plays the same epistemic role as the clear and distinct perception that reason provides, and the supernatural light of grace plays the same epistemic role as the natural light of reason.

Since these two kinds of light have the same ultimate source, as long as the natural light of reason is properly attended to, there will be no conflict between the truths that it illuminates, and the truths illuminated by the supernatural light. As Descartes writes to Jacques Dinet,

It would be impious to fear that any truths discovered in philosophy could be in conflict with the truths of faith. Indeed, I insist that there is nothing relating to religion which cannot be equally well or even better explained by means of my principles than can be done by means of those which are commonly accepted (Letter to Jacques Dinet, 581; 2nd ed. of *Meditations*, 1642) (CSM II:392).

This is not to say that the two kinds of light always illuminate the same truths, though there is overlap in the case of rational theology. But it does imply that Descartes can

explain any apparent contradiction or conflict between the truths given by reason and the truths revealed by faith by appealing to the misuse or misapplication of reason.²³

1.2.3 The Independent Epistemic Authority Thesis (IA)

The three theses articulated so far to characterize the Cartesian position on reason and faith – (RT), (EP), and (OS) – do not substantially distinguish the position from its Thomist predecessor; after all, Aquinas also affirmed the truth of the Christian mysteries, the epistemic priority of revelation, and the legitimacy of rational theology. Descartes’ radical addition to the classic Thomist position, however, concerns his conception of the epistemic authority of reason. Descartes attributes some sort of self-standing epistemic authority to reason. At the beginning of the first part of his *Discourse on Method*, Descartes assumes that the ubiquity of reason – and in particular, the proper application of reason – gives it plausible epistemic authority:

Good sense is the best distributed thing in the world.... [T]he power of judging well and of distinguishing the true from the false – which is what we properly call ‘good sense’ or ‘reason’ – is naturally equal in all men, and consequently that the diversity of our opinions does not arise because some of us are more reasonable than others but solely because we direct our thoughts along different paths and do not attend to the same things. For it is not enough to have a good mind; the main thing is to apply it well (CSM I:111).

According to this passage, every person has the capacity for rational judgments, and the capacity to distinguish truth from falsity. The implication is that so long as this capacity is applied properly, reason can be trusted to deliver truth.

²³ Of course, early modern Catholics might also argue that the misuse or misinterpretation of the “supernatural light of faith” by Protestants could also lead to apparent contradictions or conflicts between truths of reason and truths of faith. Among those who share a common theological orientation, however, appealing to the misuse or misinterpretation of supernatural light is not an explanatory option.

This might seem to be a rather weak ground for the independent epistemic authority of reason; however, Descartes thinks that reason's primary ground for independent epistemic authority is not merely proper application, but also the clear and distinct perception that accompanies the "natural light" of reason when it is properly attended to. Clear and distinct perception is central to the Cartesian account of the reliability of reason, and Descartes establishes the independent epistemic authority of reason in the Third Meditation:

...I am certain that I am a thinking thing. Do I not therefore also know what is required for my being certain about anything? In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting; this would not be enough to make me certain of the truth of the matter if it could ever turn out that something which I perceived with such clarity and distinctness was false. So I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that what I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true (CSM II: 24).

What is remarkable about this account of clear and distinct perception is its generalizability as a criterion of truth. From the single case of reason's clear and distinct perception of the existence of the self as a thinking thing, Descartes infers that reason has the authority to claim as true anything that is "very clearly and distinctly [perceived]." This grants reason independent epistemic authority with respect to *anything* that is clearly and distinctly perceived, and Descartes puts no exception or limitation on this authority. Later in the same meditation, he insists upon the immunity to doubt of that which is perceived clearly and distinctly:

...Whatever is revealed to me by the natural light... cannot in any way be open to doubt. This is because there cannot be another faculty both as trustworthy as the natural light and also as capable of showing me that such things are not true (CSM II:27).

For Descartes, the immediacy of the truth of what is revealed by the “natural light” of reason precludes any doubt; reason’s trustworthiness is beyond question, and there is no mention of faith necessary to bolster reason’s epistemic credentials.²⁴

Based on these passages, then, a fourth thesis may be articulated as a characterization of the Cartesian position on reason and faith: the Independent Epistemic Authority Thesis, or (IA):

(IA): There exists a set of rational beliefs affirmed on the basis of the independent self-verifying epistemic authority of *évidence*, or the clear and distinct perception of the intellect.

This captures the crucial element of Descartes’ conception of reason: its epistemic authority comes not from the content of what is being clearly and distinctly perceived, but rather that it simply *is* being clearly and distinctly perceived, and *évidence* is the epistemological warrant that comes with clear and distinct perception. There is no justification within the content of the perception that can be appealed to as a ground of its epistemic authority; rather, the immediacy of the perception’s clarity and distinctness is self-verifying. As we will see in the next section, the lack of qualification of reason’s independent and self-justifying epistemic authority is problematic when reason “clearly and distinctly perceives” truths that are contrary to

²⁴ I am here taking on the reading of Descartes’ conception of “the natural light” articulated by Samuel Rickless in his article “The Cartesian Fallacy Fallacy,” *NOÛS* 39:2 (2005), 309-336. According to Rickless, “[t]he natural light, for Descartes, is no more and no less than the faculty of the pure understanding, and to know something by the natural light is just to perceive it clearly and distinctly by means of the pure understanding.”

the Christian mysteries, but Descartes does not address this issue directly in establishing reason's authority.²⁵

1.2.4 The Self-Defining Scope Thesis (SD)

As the previous subsection makes clear, Descartes' conception of the independent epistemic authority of reason does not directly countenance the possibility of a conflict between the *évidence* of the truths of reason, and the epistemic privilege of the truths of faith. His position, however, does have the resources for dealing with such a conflict. Just as *évidence* provides the grounds for the epistemic authority of the truths of reason, so too does clear and distinct perception define the proper scope of reason. That which is clearly and distinctly perceived is within the scope of reason; that which is not – including the mysteries of faith – is unintelligible to reason, and thus reason should not draw conclusions about it.

This conception of the proper boundaries and use of reason is consistent with this passage from the second part of Descartes' *Discourse on Method*:

...[W]hat pleased me most about this method was that by following it I was sure in every case to use my reason, if not perfectly, at least as well as was in my power. Moreover, as I practiced the method I felt my mind gradually become accustomed to conceiving its objects more clearly and distinctly... (CSM I:121)

By articulating a method for the proper use of reason, Descartes here implies that reason sets its own boundaries by its functioning appropriately. The practice of the

²⁵ One might raise some version of the Cartesian Circle here; after all, if the circularity charge is correct, the only guarantor of the reliability of our faculty of clear and distinct perception is the fact that God exists and is not a deceiver. Since the literature on this issue is vast, I will not attempt to settle it here; see Alan Gewirtz's classic article "The Cartesian Circle" (*Philosophical Review* 50:4, July 1941, 368-395) as a beginning. Rickless (2005), however, provides a plausible resolution of the circle.

proper method yields a “more reasonable” mind, that is, a mind that perceives its objects more and more clearly and distinctly.

The preceding observations may be summed up in a fifth thesis that can be used to characterize the Cartesian position on reason and faith; call it the Self-Defining Scope Thesis (SD):

(SD): Reason can – and does – set and respect the proper boundaries of its own functioning such that (RT) beliefs are unaffected.

Why would reason draw the proper boundaries of its functioning at RT beliefs? Recall that RT beliefs were stipulated as beliefs based on revelation alone; reason is not even a possible ground of such beliefs. If reason’s own epistemic authority is derived from its ability to perceive clearly and distinctly, then its authority is eroded as soon as it begins to operate on that which it does not perceive clearly and distinctly. If the only possible ground of RT beliefs is revelation, then reason can at best comprehend the bare content of these beliefs; it cannot interrogate the grounds of these beliefs because they are *ex hypothesi* unintelligible to reason. Reason’s boundaries are set, then, by the intelligibility of clarity and distinctness.

1.3 The Two Magisteria, via Theology: Arnauld on Reason and Faith

Taken together, the five theses articulated in the previous section – (RT), (EP), (OS), (IA), and (SD) – represent the classic Cartesian account of reason and faith. Foremost among subsequent Cartesians in adopting Descartes’ position on reason and faith was Arnauld. While Arnauld considered himself to be more of a theologian than

a philosopher, and thus approached the relationship of philosophy and theology with very different intellectual concerns than Descartes, he nevertheless defended and expanded the Cartesian position that philosophy and theology should be kept separate.

Antoine Arnauld (1612-1694) was a theologian of Port-Royal, the stronghold of seventeenth-century Jansenism. Much has been written about the relationship between Jansenism and Cartesianism,²⁶ but independently of the particulars of that debate, it seems clear that Arnauld is the most consistent Port-Royal defender of Descartes. As a theologian, Arnauld defended Descartes because he was convinced that Descartes' philosophy was theologically illuminating.²⁷ Despite being famous as the author of several of the most devastating objections to Descartes' *Meditations*, Arnauld implicitly affirms Descartes' acceptance of (OS), and clarifies the difference between philosophical and theological concerns in his objections:

Although philosophy can claim this entire work [Descartes' *Meditations*] as its own, nevertheless, because the author has respectfully and willingly submitted himself to the tribunal of the theologians, I shall here act in two capacities: I will first put forward what it seems to me could be objected to by philosophers regarding the important questions of the nature of our mind and of God; and then I shall set forth what could be offensive to theologians in the entire work (*Objections contre M. Descartes* in OA 38:8-9; AT 7:197; CSM 2:138).

Even as a theologian, Arnauld engages in philosophical discussions; however, he does so only to answer the objections of philosophers, in order to gain an audience for his

²⁶ See, e.g., see Tad Schmaltz's "What has Cartesianism to do with Jansenism?" in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60:1 (1999), 37-56.

²⁷ "The rule of the Port-Royalists was to take an interest in philosophy only to the extent that it has implications for theology" (Ndiaye 64; in *Interpreting Arnauld*, ed. Kremer; Toronto 1996); and "If [Arnauld] has devoted so much time to philosophy, and in particular to Cartesian philosophy...it is because he is persuaded that philosophy is useful to religion. What he always liked in Descartes was his submission to the church and his constant care not to meddle in theology, that is, in the theology that arises from Revelation. Because he recognized his incompetence in the area of theology, Descartes was assured of an ally of great authority in Antoine Arnauld" (*ibid* 74).

own theological concerns. In fact, in his *Examen de...Traité de l'essence du corps* (1680), Arnauld says of his participation in philosophical debate,

[F]aith, far from engaging me in these philosophical discussions, compels me to avoid them as dangerous temptations, and, moreover, is satisfied if I simply believe without philosophizing, by submitting myself entirely to everything that God asks me to believe (OA 38:123-4).

As one might expect, although Arnauld follows Descartes in addressing the two spheres of philosophy and theology separately, he only grudgingly enters into philosophical discussions, calling them “dangerous temptations,” and recommending the simplicity of submission to faith. In light of his “[entire] submission” to revealed beliefs, his acceptance of the “orthodoxy” theses (RT) and (EP) is thus firmly established, and the fact that Arnauld even enters into these debates in the first place means that he implicitly accepts (OS) as well.

What grounds Arnauld’s claim that in matters of religious belief, one should simply submit one’s reason to the authority of faith? Arnauld takes his position to be essentially that of Augustine:

[T]hese beautiful words of St. Augustine... [define] the true boundaries between the human sciences of natural things, and the divine knowledge of the mysteries of the faith: ‘What we know, we owe to reason; what we believe, to authority.’ That is to say, that in matters of science, it is reason that must persuade us; but in matters of belief, we should submit ourselves to authority. We see therefore that St. Augustine opposes reason to authority as two different principles of two sorts of knowledge; one of science and the other of faith, or divine and human (*Examen*; OA 38:94).

Here Arnauld draws a distinction between the “human sciences of natural things,” and the “divine knowledge of the mysteries of the faith.” There are several different claims embedded in this distinction. The first is that human *scientia* is in fact the

scientia of “natural things” (a category that Arnauld leaves unspecified); this implies that the knowledge of “natural things” is within the scope of human reason. The second claim is that knowledge of the “mysteries of the faith” exists; it is simply of a divine character, and presumably inaccessible to reason. Thus when Augustine says that “what we know, we owe to reason,” for Arnauld this is not inconsistent either with the claim that knowledge of the mysteries of the faith belongs to God, or with the claim that we can only believe the mysteries, not know them. The basis of our natural knowledge is reason; the basis of our supernatural belief is authority. So on one side of the distinction is scientific, natural, human knowledge based on reason; on the other is mysterious faith based on divine authority.

Arnauld gives a very practical example of how and why this distinction should be adhered to; in the philosophical debate on the mind-body problem, he writes,

[N]othing would be more unreasonable than to hold that philosophers, who have the right to follow the light of reason in the human sciences, are required to take what is incomprehensible in the mystery of the Incarnation as a rule for their opinion when they attempt to explain the natural union of the soul with the body, as if the soul could do with regard to the body what the eternal Word could do with regard to the humanity he took on, even though the power, as well as the wisdom, of the eternal Word is infinite, while the power of the soul over the body to which it is joined is very limited (*Examen de... Traité de l'essence du corps*, OA 38:175).

The Incarnation is one of the paradigmatic “divine mysteries” of orthodox theology, and if the hard-and-fast distinction between theology and philosophy were not maintained with respect to the mysteries in general, and the Incarnation in particular, this would cause theological confusion for anyone who attempted to model the soul’s relation to the body on the dual nature of Christ. Arnauld’s point is that the

incomprehensibility of the divine in human form makes it a poor model for philosophers to follow when constructing theories about the soul-body union. What is notable in this passage is that, despite Arnauld's predilection for theology, he acknowledges – albeit in passing – that philosophers do indeed have “the right to follow the light of reason in the human sciences.” This seems to imply that, despite Arnauld's theological preoccupations, he also accepts (IA), insofar as he accepts reason's self-justifying light as a guide in the “human sciences.”

So what is Arnauld's ultimate position on the scope and epistemic authority of reason and faith? Roughly, reason's scope is the “human sciences of natural things,” while faith's scope is the “divine knowledge of the mysteries”; everything that is “natural” is within the scope of reason, while everything that is supernatural is within the scope of faith. This does not preclude, however, the possibility that there are certain elements of the natural world that are objects of revealed beliefs, preserving (OS). While Arnauld does not seem to address directly the source of the epistemic authority of reason, it is presumably a Cartesian account that relies on the criteria of *évidence*, clarity and distinctness, entailing an acceptance of both (IA) and (SD). His emphasis on the “tribunal of theologians” indicates that the source of faith's epistemic authority is in fact the established religious authority of the church itself. While one might ask further questions about the ground of religious authority, Arnauld simply posits it as the source of faith's epistemic authority.

1.4 The Consequences of Cartesianism: Malebranche on Reason and Faith

In general, Descartes and Arnauld agree that the scope of reason is limited to philosophical issues and natural theology, and that matters of supernatural theology fall within the scope of faith. Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715) follows them in affirming the independent epistemic authority of reason. He strengthens the Cartesian position on reason and faith by explicitly arguing that the source of faith's epistemic authority is church tradition. So while it may be the case that certain theological beliefs fall within both the scope of reason and the scope of faith, the epistemic authority of faith trumps that of reason, and so is the preferred ground for religious belief.

A somewhat different picture of Malebranche's position on reason and faith emerges, however, if we begin not with Malebranche's theology, but with his philosophical rationalism. Malebranche saw his occasionalism, for example, as the logical conclusion of Descartes' basic philosophical principles, and saw himself as correcting Descartes' errors – in essence, making Descartes a more consistent rationalist. His account of the passions, however, makes his acceptance of (IA) somewhat suspect, since the passions compromise the clear and distinct perception that grounds reason's epistemic authority; reason cannot necessarily be trusted to regulate them, and the passions will in fact lead us to misjudge the reliability of our reason. This tension is implicit in Descartes, but Malebranche makes it explicit, even though he never explicitly rejects reason's independent epistemic authority.

Malebranche also allows that there are specific subjects that are explicitly not under the jurisdiction of reason; the scope of reason is limited to the human mind's vision in God, and this implies that there are elements of religious belief that outstrip human comprehension – those elements of God's mind that are inaccessible to our “vision in God.”²⁸ For Malebranche, it is not only dangerous for heretics to attempt to “understand what belongs to the infinite” themselves, but dangerous even for orthodox theologians to do so, since it would provide ammunition for heretics to ridicule the incomprehensible:

...[S]ome [theologians] so often employ human arguments to prove or explain mysteries beyond reason... that they often give occasion to these same heretics to cling obstinately to their errors while treating the mysteries of the faith as human opinions.

...[W]e see all the time that [heretics] take the weakness of the arguments of some Scholastics as an occasion to ridicule the most sacred mysteries of our religion, which in fact are established not on these human arguments and explanations but solely on the authority of the word of God, written or unwritten... (*Search after Truth* 205-6; Book 3, Part 1, Chapter 2, Section 2).

Malebranche here argues that including the mysteries of faith within the scope of reason (“human arguments”) is a misunderstanding of the epistemic authority of the mysteries: the authority is from “the word of God.” This could mean either “written,” presumably the Christian Scriptures, or “unwritten,” presumably church tradition. The crucial point is that the epistemic authority of the “word of God” has nothing to do with reason; in fact, Malebranche claims the authority of the word of God as the *sole*

²⁸ “The most dangerous result of ignorance, or rather of inadvertence to the weakness and limitation of the human mind, and consequently to its inability to understand what belongs to the infinite, is heresy...[T]here are many people who create their own theology, based on nothing but their own mind and the natural weakness of reason, because even in subjects not under the jurisdiction of reason, they wish to believe only what they can understand” (*Search after Truth* 205-6; Book 3, Part 1, Chapter 2, Section 2).

ground of the Christian mysteries. This insistence on (RT) and (EP) assures his theological orthodoxy, despite his explicit affirmation of the independent epistemic authority of reason.

Malebranche invokes the epistemic authority of church tradition and Scripture because, as he later makes clear, there are certain mysteries of faith that do not stand up under rational scrutiny:

Indeed, human reason does not inform us that there are three persons in one God, that the body of Jesus Christ is really in the Eucharist, or how it is that man may be free but God knows from all eternity what he will do. The reasons adduced to prove or explain these things ordinarily do so only for those willing to admit them without examination, but often seem foolish to those who are willing to resist them and who are not in fundamental agreement with those mysteries. It might be said, rather, that 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 clear and convincing and that do not in any way shock our feeble reason, for these mysteries are indeed incomprehensible (*Search after Truth* 205-6; Book 3, Part 1, Chapter 2, Section 2).

Malebranche admits that were the “main articles of faith” included within the scope of reason, there would be no “clear or convincing” defense of them. Importantly, though, this does not rule out the possibility that there are certain truths that fall within the scope of both reason and faith, even if they are not the “main articles”:

...[T]he truths in which we wish to instruct [heretics] are not under the jurisdiction of reason. It is not even always proper to use these arguments with truths that can be proved by both reason and tradition (such as the immortality of the soul, original sin, the necessity of grace, the corruption of nature, and several others) for fear that their mind [i.e., that of the heretics], having once tasted the evidence of arguments in these questions, would be unwilling to submit to those that can be proved only from tradition. Rather, they should be made to distrust their own mind by having its weakness, limitation, and disproportion with our mysteries made plain to them.... (*Search after Truth* 205-6; Book 3, Part 1, Chapter 2, Section 2).

Although Malebranche does not recommend proving religious beliefs with reason for pedagogical reasons, he nevertheless admits that there are religious beliefs that can be proved by both reason and tradition – the immortality of the soul, original sin, the necessity of grace, and the corruption of nature, among others.²⁹ This implies that, according to Malebranche, these religious beliefs would fall within the scope of rational, or “natural,” theology, and would have the benefit of reason’s epistemic authority – the self-evidence of clear and distinct perception. Malebranche holds that despite the asymmetry of epistemic authority, the scopes of reason and faith overlap with respect to religious belief, and this obviously entails his acceptance of (OS).

While Malebranche steadfastly asserts the epistemic authority of faith, and advocates submission to the Church on matters of religious belief, he nevertheless argues that in “natural questions,” one should submit the teachings of human authority to reason and to the criterion of evidence:

It is obvious that... persons who want no evidence in natural questions are reprehensible, just as are those who demand evidence in the mysteries of the faith....

The mind rests when it finds evidence, and it is agitated when it does not, because evidence is the mark of truth. Hence, the error of skeptics and heretics arises from their doubting that the truth is to be found in the decisions of the Church, because they see no evidence there, and they think that truths of faith can be recognized by evidence.... [T]he truths of the faith are infinitely beyond their minds....

But if there are many people who err in refusing to submit to the authority of the Church, there are no fewer who err by submitting to the authority of men.... What the Church teaches us is infinitely superior to the power of reason; what men teach us is subject to our reason. Consequently, if it is... an intolerable conceit to search for the truth in matters of faith by following our reason with no regard to the authority of the Church, it is also frivolous... to

²⁹ Malebranche’s assertion that original sin, the necessity of grace, and the corruption of nature can be “proved by... reason” is, I take it, obviously controversial, but its validity is beyond the scope of our investigation.

blindly believe the authority of men on subjects which depend upon reason (*Search after Truth* 279-80; Book 4, Chapter 3, section 3).

There is a kind of category mistake, Malebranche argues, in applying the criterion of evidence to the truths of faith, that is, to the religious beliefs that go beyond “natural questions.” Evidence is certainly the source of epistemic authority for reason, but the Church is the ultimate source of epistemic authority for faith. So what happens if the epistemic authority of reason and the epistemic authority of faith come into conflict? Malebranche unapologetically asserts that the sheer authority of the Church trumps the evidence of reason.

All this is not to say that Malebranche should be read as some sort of fideist; on the contrary, Malebranche adopts the same robust conception of reason as Descartes and Arnauld, and has just as much confidence in reason’s ability to secure truth when a belief is clearly and distinctly perceived. His position further agrees with those of Descartes and Arnauld in recognizing that while rational warrant can be provided for many religious beliefs, this type of warrant cannot supersede or replace the warrant of ecclesiastical authority, which for Malebranche is the ground of any “truth of faith.” The acceptance of (RT), (EP), (IA), (OS), and (SD) by all three of these figures unifies their account by affirming reason’s independence in its interaction with faith.

1.5 The Specter of Skepticism: Huet on Reason and Faith

While the landscape of early modern theology was deeply shaped by Cartesian philosophy, the new system was not without its critics. Early modern figures

influenced by ancient skepticism provided an alternative way of thinking about the scope and epistemic authority of both reason and faith.³⁰ Even among early modern anti-Cartesians, however, there is a range of positions on the scope and epistemic authority of reason and faith. We will examine the position of Pierre-Daniel Huet in order to set the stage for a more detailed discussion in Chapter Four of Bayle's own position on the issue.

Consistent with his reputation as one of the most vehement anti-Cartesians of his time, Pierre-Daniel Huet takes a very different position on the scope and epistemic authority of reason and faith than the Cartesians, one that is often identified as fideist.³¹ Huet outlines his skepticism about the scope and epistemic authority of reason – and thus, his rejection of (IA) and (SD) – in his *Traité philosophique de la faiblesse de l'esprit humain* (1723), a posthumously published work intended to provide a succinct summary of his skeptical fideism. After presenting several arguments that show the weakness of human reason, Huet presents faith as “coming to the rescue of reason”:

God through His goodness repairs the defect of human nature by giving us the inestimable gift of faith, which solidifies unstable reason and overcomes the unavoidable difficulty over the knowledge of things. For with reason unable to allow me knowledge with complete evidence and perfect certainty that there are bodies, or what the origin of the world might be, and several other such things – after I have received faith, all these doubts evaporate, like specters at sunrise.

³⁰ The study of early modern skepticism has blossomed in the last several decades, thanks primarily to the careful attention of Richard Popkin (*The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*, OUP 2003) and his student Jose Maia Neto (*The Christianization of Pyrrhonism*, Kluwer 1995). They have pointed out the significance of Montaigne, Charron, La Mothe Le Vayer, and Pascal, among others, for the development of early modern skepticism.

³¹ Of course, the term itself did not arise until the nineteenth century, but for the purposes of clarifying our framework, it will be useful.

...In matters of faith, faith comes to the rescue of tottering reason; it also helps us in all the other things that we know by reason, to assure us in our doubts, and to reestablish reason in its rights, in which [reason] had been dethroned; that is to say, in the knowledge of the truth, which it naturally desires (Bk. II, Ch. II; 182-3,³² 187).

While Huet does not completely reject reason as a reliable epistemic authority in this passage, he paints it as “faulty,” “tottering,” and “dethroned,” while faith “corrects...doubt,” “reestablish[es] reason,” and is ultimately what provides “knowledge of the truth.” What is remarkable in this passage is that while reason *desires* knowledge of the truth, faith is what actually makes reason *able* to grasp it. This does not necessarily imply that reason and faith yield contradictory conclusions, but confirms the hierarchy that Huet established in his earlier works: faith is what enables reason to secure truth, and thus when the scope of reason and the scope of faith overlap, and when they yield contradictory conclusions, the epistemic authority of faith trumps that of reason.

Huet’s assumption of conflict – and hence of an overlap of scope – between what reason teaches and what faith teaches is even more apparent in his discussion in Book Two of “the most sure and legitimate way of philosophizing,” where he argues that faith is actually “the... master of reason,” and that reason is an unreliable teacher:

We are, above all, concerned to admit nothing that is contrary to revealed faith: holding as very certain and indubitable that which God has marked in our soul by faith, the guide and master of reason; and holding as doubtful all that reason teaches us (Bk. II, Ch. IX; 216-7).

³² This part of the translation is from Thomas Lennon’s “The Skepticism of Huet’s *Traité philosophique*” in *Scepticisme et modernité*, eds. Sébastien Charles and Marc-André Bernier (Publications de l’Université de Sainte-Etienne, 2005), 70.

Not only does Huet insist on the epistemic authority of revealed faith – a proviso that would not be necessary, were it not in danger of being challenged by reason – but he also questions reason’s ability to teach us *anything* truthful; we are to doubt *everything* that reason teaches us. It is at this point that Huet’s philosophical skepticism and complete rejection of (IA) becomes most apparent: Huet has already bolstered faith’s epistemic credentials by explaining, like Pascal, that faith is an “inestimable gift from God” directly, but his skepticism is what motivates his pessimistic account of reason’s epistemic authority. Assuming that faith, being a gift of God, teaches only truthful things, Huet implies that faith and reason will often teach us contradictory things; this makes the prospect of reconciling the two unlikely at best, and at worst, impossible.

Huet’s skepticism about the harmonization of the truths of faith and the truths of reason is evident in his fierce attacks on Descartes. One of Huet’s many objections to Descartes’ system in his *Against Cartesian Philosophy* (1689) is that it “offends faith” (*ACP* 200). Like Descartes, Huet accepts (RT) and (EP); however, Huet criticizes Descartes’ position on the relationship of reason and faith – or in any case, his understanding of Descartes’ position on the matter – in two ways. First, Huet asserts that Descartes “violates faith with the extravagance of reason”; second, he asserts that Descartes “extend[s] God’s power beyond the legitimate limits of right reason.” Huet’s worry is that reason’s arrogant presumption to divine knowledge impugns the mysteries of faith:

Would it not have been better to say that since faith teaches that the world was produced by God out of nothing, it is true and not contradictory that something can be made from nothing? [Descartes] would have thus determined reason by the rule of faith, as he should have done, and not have violated faith with the

extravagance of reason.... Nor would he have extended God's power beyond the legitimate limits of right reason... when, as if to correct one error of reason by another, he included among things contradictory by their nature things that are not contradictory at all. For it may be truly and piously said that the mysteries of faith surpass the human mind's comprehension, but not that they contradict reason (*ACP* 200-2).

Huet initially appears to be advocating a position that could be congenial to the Cartesian account; he admits that the “above reason/against reason” distinction is “true and pious.” But even in this passage, the seeds of his divergence begin to emerge. Huet assumes that the oppositions between the truths of faith – e.g., that God created the world *ex nihilo* – and the truths of reason – e.g., that nothing comes from nothing – are actual, and not apparent. This is evident in his proposed resolution to the example of conflict above: Huet suggests rejecting reason's principle that nothing comes from nothing, and presumably this would not be necessary if the truths of reason and the truths of faith could be reconciled in some other way. Already, then, Huet's explicit insistence on the negative consequences of (OS) sets him apart from Descartes and Arnauld; even though Huet affirms an overlap in scope, he is extremely pessimistic about resolving conflicts that arise as a result of this overlap.

Further, in this passage Huet advocates “determin[ing] reason by the rule of faith,” a forceful assertion of the epistemic authority of faith over reason, or (EP). This also, however, includes the implicit assumption that there is an actual conflict between reason and faith that requires a rule. Huet gives faith the epistemic authority to “determine” reason; not only must reason obey the dictates of faith, but its very functioning is grounded by faith. This sort of epistemic hierarchy would not be necessary, however, if the two sources of belief content never yielded contradictory

conclusions. Huet explicitly articulates the epistemic authority of faith over reason as part of his argument against Descartes, and exhibits no naïveté about the conflict between reason and faith; he sees the contradictions between the truths of reason and the truths of faith as real and substantive. Given Huet's skepticism about reason, then, his conclusion about the scope and epistemic authority of reason and faith seems clear: if the scope of reason and the scope of faith overlap, as he thinks they do, then a true and complete acceptance of (RT) and (EP) – that is, of Christian orthodoxy – entails the rejection of both (IA) and (SD).

1.6 Conclusion

We are now in a position to draw conclusions about the influence of Bayle's contemporaries on his conception of the relationship between reason and faith. I have argued that Descartes' position on the reason-faith question can be summarized in five basic theses, and that Arnauld and Malebranche follow Descartes in accepting all five of these theses, despite their divergence from Descartes on other important philosophical matters. Huet's position is radically different in that he rejects both (IA) – the independent epistemic authority of reason – and (SD) – reason's ability to set and respect its own boundaries. Significantly, the two “orthodoxy” theses ((RT) and (EP)) and the overlapping scope thesis (OS) are accepted not just by the Cartesians, but also by Huet and Bayle, as we shall see in Chapter Four. Bayle joins Huet, however, in rejecting (IA) and (SD).

The vehemence of Huet's rejection of (IA) is less manifest in Bayle; one certainly finds textual evidence of Bayle's regard for the authority of reason in

particular domains of inquiry. Bayle's rejection of (SD), however, is just as vociferous as Huet's, and we will see in Chapter Four that this raises serious problems for Bayle's conception of faith. The fact that Bayle accepts (OS) makes him susceptible to the following dilemma: either one must deny, or severely mitigate, the claims of reason and give epistemic priority to the claims of faith, making one a fideist; or one must deny or reinterpret the claims of faith and give epistemic priority to the claims of reason, making one irreligious – these represent the two poles of popular Bayle interpretation discussed in the Introduction. We have seen with the Cartesians, however, that giving epistemic priority to the claims of faith does not necessarily entail a rejection of reason; with Bayle, we will see that, similar to Huet, the most basic, minimal claims of faith actually serve as an anchor for the operation and reliability of reason itself. In contrast to Huet, who shares Bayle's acceptance of the conflict of overlapping scopes as actual and not merely apparent, Bayle attributes greater epistemic authority to reason, while still yielding ultimate authority to the "mysteries of faith."

This leads us to an obvious, but difficult, question: how can Bayle simultaneously maintain that there is a deep and intractable conflict between the dictates of reason and the dictates of faith, and yet not completely reject either the epistemic authority of reason, or the epistemic authority of faith? In order to fully answer this question, we need to engage in several tasks. The first is to come to terms not only with Bayle's theological commitments, but also the implications of those theological commitments for Bayle's epistemology. The second is to investigate

Bayle's conception of reason, not only his explicit statements on the nature of reason, but also his use of reason in argumentation. We will then be in a position to reconstruct his account of the relationship between these two sources of knowledge, and to articulate principles that govern the cases of overlapping scope.

Chapter 2 Pierre Bayle's Theological Evolution

An adequate articulation of Pierre Bayle's position on the relationship of reason and faith must begin with an investigation of Bayle's theology. This is not an easy task; Bayle authored several treatises that one might classify as theological, but unlike the works of his contemporaries, they are not systematic, and are often concerned with questions that turn out to be more philosophically interesting than theologically revealing.³³ His *Dictionnaire* contains articles on many figures from the Bible, perhaps most famously the Israelite king David. Despite the obvious religious themes that appear in these and other articles, however, Bayle rarely endorses a specific position on the particular issues of theology that arise in the course of these articles; instead, he articulates the strongest arguments available on all sides of a theological debate without drawing a conclusion. A cursory perusal of religious themes in his work thus yields no obvious information about Bayle's theology.

One might then be tempted to investigate Bayle's explicit statements about religious belief and the nature of faith in order to gain insight into his broader theological positions. Here again, however, the interpretive task is complicated: the sincerity of Bayle's affirmations of faith has always been hotly disputed, starting with

³³ See, for example, his *Objections to Poiret* (1679) on the problem of evil, *Commentaire philosophique* (1686) on religious toleration, and *Avis important aux réfugiés* (1690) on theological grounds for political obligation.

his own contemporaries and continuing to present-day interpreters. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there were both sympathetic and unsympathetic interpreters who read Bayle's exaltation of the virtues of faith as disingenuous. Sympathetic interpreters such as Voltaire were eager for a seventeenth-century ally in their Enlightenment project, and thus read Bayle's commendation of faith merely as an indicator of the constraints on the intellectual freedom of the period. Unsympathetic interpreters such as co-religionist and fellow refugee Pierre Jurieu were suspicious of Bayle's arguments in favor of religious toleration and the possibility that atheists could be moral; they read Bayle's professions of faith as duplicitous, concealing an antireligious agenda.³⁴ Even among those who affirmed the sincerity of Bayle's declarations of faith, there was an acknowledgement that Bayle's ironic style and painstaking argumentative charity made it difficult to discern the true nature of his religious beliefs. Almost all present-day interpreters of Bayle recognize these stylistic and structural considerations as elements of his thought, and this makes it problematic to use his encomia of faith as explicit evidence of his theological positions.

In light of the lack of an obvious starting point for the investigation of this aspect of his thought, this chapter will begin instead by examining the theological context of Bayle's intellectual formation. Bayle's theological pedigree is quite varied; beginning with a childhood steeped in orthodox Calvinism, it includes philosophical training in Catholicism at the Jesuit university in Toulouse, the heterodox Calvinism of Moïse Amyraut via his disciple Louis Tronchin in Geneva, and the anti-Catholicism

³⁴ See Guy Howard Dodge's classic study *The political theory of the Huguenots of the dispersion, with special reference to the thought and influence of Pierre Jurieu* (Columbia UP, 1947).

of Pierre Jurieu and the Calvinist academy at Sedan. I will argue that the Calvinist rationalism of Amyraut is a consistent thread that runs through each of the stages that follows it, and provides the general framework of Bayle's intellectual development.

After articulating this pedigree in the first two sections of this chapter, the subsequent sections will trace Bayle's theological evolution by way of four representative works: *Critique générale de l'histoire du Calvinisme* (1682), *Pensées diverses* (1683), *Avis aux refugiez* (1690), and *Entretiens de Maxime et de Thémiste* (1706). Examining these works will allow us to orient Bayle's theological views within Calvinism more precisely, and will provide the necessary context for understanding the aspect of Bayle's theology that is most relevant to his position on the relationship of reason and faith: his theology of faith. I will argue that in light of Bayle's emphasis on the ethical life that results from true faith, his conception of faith is primarily – though not decisively – Amyrauldian. It is tempered by Bayle's insistence on the inapplicability of human notions of justice to God, and by his view of the utterly irrational nature of the revealed mysteries most central to Christian theology.

2.1 Introduction: Calvinism and Bayle's "Theology of Faith"

Prima facie, the phrase "theology of faith" may seem redundant, but it denotes a particular subdiscipline within theology as a whole. While theology concerns every aspect of the study of God, the theology of faith is concerned with articulating the nature and function of faith. Specifically, the theology of faith includes studying not

only the objects of faith, but also the constitutive features of the act of faith itself. Focusing on Bayle's theology of faith, as opposed to his theology more generally, makes sense as an interpretive strategy, given the near impossibility of getting at his overall theology systematically. In addition, Bayle discusses faith much more explicitly than any other theological concept.

Given the central role that the concept of faith plays in Bayle's thought, the obvious question to ask is: what does Bayle mean by the term "faith"? There is a sense in which the meaning of the term is exactly the crux of the interpretive dispute, but at least one point is clear: on the most general level, Bayle typically contrasts the term "faith" with the term "reason"; there are myriad examples of this contrast in the Baylean corpus, and most interpreters agree that Bayle opposes these two concepts. As a working idea of what Bayle means by faith, we can construe it as something like belief in what is considered to be divinely revealed. This definition, however, clearly needs to be made more precise, since it leaves vague what exactly it is that is considered to be divinely revealed. This could refer, for example, either to the form of faith, or to its matter or content. The form of faith would refer to something like the structure of the act of faith. One can imagine the epistemological complications of the act of faith: How does one come to affirm divine revelation? Is it simply an act of the will? Or is the intellect involved? What role do the "heart" and the passions play in the act of faith? Another set of questions is raised when one considers the content of faith. These questions are traditionally associated with theological disputes, and typically concern doctrinal matters regarding what it is that the act of faith affirms.

While it is important to discern Bayle's positions on both sets of questions, we will focus most immediately on the latter set of questions concerning traditional doctrinal disputes.

The starting point for the examination of the content of faith in the Baylean corpus must be Calvinism, the theology in which Bayle was raised. Like many religious movements of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Calvinism was hardly a univocal theological position; there were important divergences within the confession that tracked cultural and socioeconomic differences. Still, a handful of core theological commitments can be outlined that were generally accepted by those who called themselves Calvinists. While Calvin himself took Scripture as fully authoritative on its own, without need of ecclesiastical interpretation, his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536) provide a definitive interpretation of several of the major doctrines of Calvinism. Calvinism is distinguished from other forms of Protestantism in its espousal of the following doctrines:

1) The Total Depravity of Mankind³⁵

According to Calvin, human nature is irremediably depraved. This corruption took place at the Fall of Adam and Eve, and has been passed down to all of humankind. Calvin seems to interpret corruption in an Augustinian way, such that corruption does not entail positive evil, but simply a lack of positive good. While the depravity is most literally of a spiritual nature, Calvin appears to assume that it

³⁵ The references are to John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), with the book, chapter, and line number listed (in this instance, 2:1:8).

includes not only spiritual and moral deficiency, but cognitive and, to some extent, physical deficiency as well.

2) Unconditional Election by God³⁶

This doctrine rejects the idea that God's electing an individual for salvation is based on anything having to do with the individual's merit; rather, Calvin argues that the election of an individual is based purely on God's own choice. The reasons that God chooses some individuals and not others are opaque to human reason, and Calvin argues that to seek such reasons is indirectly to challenge the sovereignty of God.

3) The Limited Atonement of Christ's Death

According to Calvin, Christ's death was an atonement only for the sins of the elect. This restriction of the significance of Christ's atonement is in contrast to almost every other movement of the Protestant Reformation, which typically held that Christ's death atoned for the sins of all of humankind: past, present, and future.

4) The Irresistible Grace of God

Calvin makes a distinction between grace that God extends to all of humankind, and grace that God extends to the elect. The grace that God extends to all of humankind is not efficacious for salvation, but the grace that God extends to the elect is not only efficacious, but also coercive, in the sense that the elect cannot refuse to accept the efficacious grace once God has extended it to them. Calvin denies that individuals choose their own salvation; this, according to him, is simply the illusion of free will.

5) The Perseverance of the Salvation of the Elect

³⁶ *ICR* 3:23:7; 3:21:5; 3:32; pg 232.

Calvin denies that an individual can lose his salvation once elected by God. This follows logically from the doctrine of irresistible grace. If the grace that God extends to the elect is irresistible, then the elect will receive salvation merely as a result of God willing his efficacious grace. If God is immutable, as Calvin also claims, then his will cannot change, and hence he will always will that the elect be saved.

Though only some Calvinists accepted all five tenets, all Calvinists accepted most of them.³⁷ While Bayle was consistently attacked by his coreligionists for failing to adhere to orthodox Calvinism, he nowhere denies any of these five major doctrines. Bayle's reconversion to Calvinism, after his brief conversion to Catholicism as a student, seems proof enough that Bayle was sincere in his Calvinism, and his lack of an explicit denial of these doctrines, in the face of many other denials of theological doctrines that he found unacceptable, would seem to indicate a friendly disposition, at the very least, towards Calvinism.

While the actual extent to which Bayle endorses all of these doctrines is questionable, especially given his protracted debates with the radical Calvinist theologian Pierre Jurieu, some of the doctrines – namely, total depravity and unconditional election – have philosophical implications that play a significant role in the development of Bayle's conception of the relationship between reason and faith. The relationship of faith to these doctrines of theology is that for Calvinists, faith is an *effect* of divine grace; it is not the *cause* of redemption, but is rather the *evidence* of it.

³⁷ See "The Spirit of Calvinism in the World Today," Chapter XXV of John Thomas McNeill's *The History and Character of Calvinism* (OUP, 1954), *passim*.

One implication of this is that no individual can be held accountable for a lack of faith, since it merely confirms one's status as nonelect. A second implication is that one can never be fully certain about one's election, since only God knows who is elect, and since total depravity affects all people, even the elect. These implications bear on Bayle's position on religious toleration, and on his conception of reason, respectively.

A full description of Bayle's conception of reason and its theological implications will be articulated in Chapters 3 and 4; first, however, we must examine Bayle's theological development, which can only be understood in the context of seventeenth-century heterodox French Calvinist rationalism. The following section will rely heavily on the excellent studies of this movement that have already been undertaken, and will highlight the elements of the movement that shaped Bayle's intellectual formation.³⁸

2.2 Amyrauldism and Heterodox French Calvinist Rationalism

Aside from a brief period of training in Catholicism during his time at the Jesuit university in Toulouse in 1669-70, most of Bayle's theological formation took place in Calvinist academies. The two most important Calvinist academies in France were Saumur and Sedan, and Saumur was the institution synonymous with French Calvinist rationalism. As one of two premier Protestant educational institutions in the country, it produced many of the most influential French Calvinist preachers of the

³⁸ These studies include Walter Rex, *Essays on Pierre Bayle and Religious Controversy* (Nijhoff, 1965); Brian Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy* (Wisconsin UP, 1969); François Laplanche, *L'écriture, le sacré, et l'histoire: érudits et politiques protestants devant la bible en France au XVIIe siècle* (APA-Holland UP, 1986).

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A notable historical irony of the development of French Calvinist rationalism is that one of its most significant progenitors was not actually French: John Cameron (1579-1623), a Scottish Calvinist, was professor of theology at Saumur from 1618 to 1620, and it is his theology that became largely synonymous with French Calvinist rationalism as a whole, and with Saumur in particular.

2.2.1 John Cameron

Cameron's theology is notable both for its content and its methodology. Cameron defines faith as a kind of persuasion; in the case of Christian faith, it is a persuasion that "we are loved and accepted by God in Christ" (Armstrong 69). This is a radical departure from the classical Calvinist conception of faith, according to which faith simply follows upon the bestowing of redemptive grace. As a kind of persuasion, Cameronian faith is both volitional and intellectual; that is, it requires both the insight of the intellect, and the affirmation of the will. In the Cameronian account of faith, the cognitive judgment of persuasion supersedes any independent inclination of the will; in fact, the affirmation of the will is guided by the judgment of the intellect. As one might expect from a Calvinist conception of faith, the will is directed by an external force; however, while most Calvinist accounts of the will pinpoint grace as the proximate determining force of the will, Cameron's account of the will includes grace only as a distal determining cause, allocating the role of efficacious

cause to the judgment of the intellect. According to Rex, “the relationship between the two faculties [intellect and will] has become that of cause and effect” (92).³⁹

Cameron’s privileging of the intellect in his account of faith reflects a rationalist turn in the methodology of Calvinist theology. The account of faith as what Rex describes as “a demonstration involving the faculty of reason” (97) means that the very process of coming to faith has rational demonstration as a defining element. While this conception of faith does not entail that reason is the exclusive determinant of the content of faith, it nevertheless articulates a significant role for rational demonstration in the act of faith. Further, the argumentative style of Cameron’s theological discussion is more rationalist than that of his predecessors. As Rex observes,

In attacking the reader with these compressed statements of essentials, posing and answering questions with such exactitude, Cameron is not only educating the reader in doctrine, but also in a method of thinking which in itself prepares the reader to agree with the substance of his contention concerning the vital role of reason and demonstration in theology (95).

Cameron’s theological style – his dense doctrinal formulations and the precision of his dialectic – exhibits the very rationalism contained in his account of the act of faith. Insofar as Cameron posits that reason plays a necessary role in the process of coming to faith, it seems only natural for him to make extensive use of rational demonstration in arguing for this conception of faith.

One final element of Cameron’s theology that made a distinctive mark on French Calvinist rationalism is his emphasis on ethics. *Prima facie*, it is not obvious

³⁹ This account of the will follows that of Walter Rex (91-5).

how this is related to Cameron's rationalism, but exploring his doctrine of hypothetical universalism yields a surprising connection. Hypothetical universalism is to be distinguished from the classical orthodox Calvinist doctrine of limited atonement. It is the doctrine that the atonement of Jesus Christ is both actually efficacious for the elect, and counterfactually efficacious for the nonelect; the atonement is thus universally sufficient for redemption, though only hypothetically so, since not all are actually redeemed. While hypothetical universalism still has at its foundation the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, whereby only those elected by God receive the efficacious grace that leads to faith, it nevertheless represents a more ethically sensitive position on the question of election than the classical Calvinist conception of atonement as limited to only those whom God elects. The universal atonement posited by hypothetical universalism means that God has already satisfied the demands of justice for the misdeeds of all people, not merely an arbitrarily selected group; the atonement is completely sufficient for all people. This removes the awkward issue of having to assert that Christ arbitrarily pays the penalty for the sin of some people, but not others. Universal atonement also avoids the sticky theological implications of positing that the atonement of Christ was sufficient to redeem some people, but not others. (This, of course, would represent an insufficiency in the work of Christ, which would be problematic for classical Calvinist theology.) This conception of God and the nature of atonement is perhaps less coherent than the classical Calvinist conception, insofar as it may appear to compromise the absoluteness of God's sovereignty, but is more

consistent with other attributes typically ascribed to God, such as justice and compassion.

Cameron's emphasis on these divine attributes, coupled with his rationalism, lays the foundation for a subtle transition in French Calvinist theology from a preoccupation with salvation and eternity to a concern for the process of sanctification and living ethically in the present life (Rex 97). This is evidenced in the theology of Cameron's foremost student at Saumur, Moïse Amyraut (1596-1664), whose name became synonymous with the Saumur academy. We shall examine Amyraut's account of the truths of faith in some detail presently, but regarding the question of intellectual heritage, it is important to note that Cameron's rationalism was adopted without much alteration by Amyraut, and then again by Amyraut's student, Louis Tronchin, who became a professor at the Calvinist academy in Geneva. It was at Geneva that Bayle found refuge from the religious persecution to which all *rélaps* (relapsed Calvinists) were subject (even before the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685), and the Geneva seminary was the site of Bayle's education into Calvinist rationalism.

2.2.2 Moïse Amyraut

In order to understand the nature of the theological rationalism to which Bayle was exposed at Geneva via Tronchin, it is necessary to examine the position of Amyraut, whose name became attached to a theological position – Amyrauldism – espousing the doctrine of hypothetical universalism. In particular, examining

Amyraut's conception of the truths of faith will illuminate the depth of his rationalism, and will lay the essential groundwork for understanding Bayle's own conception of the nature of faith.

Amyraut established his adherence to the doctrine of hypothetical universalism in his text *Bref Traité de la Prédestination* (1634), the work that cemented his status as one of the most progressive Calvinist theologians of the seventeenth century. It is in a later work, however, that Amyraut most clearly establishes his rationalist approach to questions of theology: *De l'élévation de la foi et de l'abaissement de la raison* ("On the Elevation of Faith and the Humbling of Reason," 1640), a treatise against Catholic antirationalism. The title is meant to be a summary of the position of Amyraut's Catholic contemporaries on theological questions, and the treatise is devoted to a defense of the legitimacy of the use of reason in theological discourse. In addition to establishing himself firmly in the Cameronian rationalist tradition, Amyraut also articulates a threefold distinction of religious truths that will provide a framework for our understanding of Bayle's own view of the relationship between reason and religious belief.

Amyraut begins *De l'élévation* with an acknowledgement of the limitations of our rational faculties after the Fall, and their impotence when faced with certain religious mysteries:

Religion contains certain things so high above that which is most excellent in our minds, that to desire a perfect understanding of them is an enterprise impossible to execute.... The reason of which we speak is not in us in the

[same] state that it was at the beginning.... We have rendered it perverse and dark.⁴⁰

This is Amyraut's attempt to find common ground with his interlocutors; virtually any self-identifying Christian of the seventeenth century would admit that a perfectly rational understanding of all religious truths is impossible.⁴¹ But Amyraut then argues that, despite the effects of sin, we are nevertheless justified in using our reason to make sense of theological truths, not only because humankind is unique among all other creatures in its capacity to reason, but also because of God's goodness in uniquely fitting our faculties to their function.⁴² He denies that revealed religious truths necessarily abolish reason, and asserts rather that they help to correct reason when it goes astray;⁴³ in fact, his conception of intellectual clarity is simply "the illumination of the understanding, [which is] nothing but the proper state of reason perfected by the intelligence of the doctrines of the Gospel."⁴⁴

⁴⁰ "[L]a Religion contient certaines choses tellement élevées au dessus de tout ce qu'il y a de plus excellent en nos esprits, que les vouloir comprendre parfaitement est une entreprise d'exécution impossible.... [C]ette raison dont nous parlons, n'est pas en nous en l'état auquel elle était au commencement.... [N]ous l'avons rendu perverse et ténébreuse." (Preface, p. 21-22)

⁴¹ As usual, it is important to note the exception of the Socinians, who rejected any point of doctrine that was not completely intelligible to reason.

⁴² "Mais aussi d'autre côté l'homme étant seul entre les choses du monde, doué d'intelligence et de raison, ce n'est pas sans doute pour néant que Dieu lui en a laissé l'usage, même depuis sa transgression. Et quelques manquements qui lui soient arrivés par le péché, nous voyons en quantité de ses productions une infinité de belles marques de son excellence. D'ailleurs le souverain auteur de toutes choses est si bon, qu'il agit ordinairement en ses créatures d'une façon accommodée à leur nature et aux facultés dont lui-même les a ornées. De sorte qu'il n'y a point d'apparence qu'il ait voulu qu'en la religion nous ayons entièrement renoncé à l'usage de cette raison qu'il nous a donnée." (Preface, pp. 24-5)

⁴³ "Quant à la révélation qui est par dessus la nature... elle n'a pas été donnée pour abolir la raison; mais pour la radresser où elle s'égaré, et l'ennoblir de la connaissance des choses dont elle ne pouvait avoir aucune pure lumière d'elle-même." (Preface, pp. 31-2)

⁴⁴ "...l'illumination de l'entendement n'est rien sinon le bon estat de la raison perfectionnée de l'intelligence des doctrines de l'Evangile." (Preface 32)

Amyraut's conception of reason is operative in his tripartite distinction of religious truths in the first and second chapters of *De l'élevation*. He argues that the first class of religious truths is accessible to "every nation on earth" (Ch. 1, p. 43); these are the truths that are known by natural reason, even to those who are not of the Christian religion.⁴⁵ In this class of truths, Amyraut includes such propositions as "there is a Divinity," "the Divinity governs the world by providence," "there are certain fixed and inviolable laws of virtue that nature has established," and "there is some other place than this world, for which is reserved most [moral] reward and punishment" (Ch. 1, p. 44-49). According to Amyraut, the only function of faith in these cases is to give even more "weight and solidity" to that which is already known by reason (Ch. 1, p. 53-4). It is important to note that certain basic moral truths fall into this category; while Amyraut does not specify what these "fixed... laws of virtue established by nature" are, it seems clear that his claim includes not only the existence of such laws, but also their content. This inclusion of ethics among religious truths that are accessible to reason represents a distinctive line of theological inheritance from Cameron to Amyraut (and through Tronchin) to Bayle.

Amyraut's second category of religious truths consists of those truths not self-evidently known by reason, but nevertheless accessible to it.⁴⁶ Once these truths are revealed, Amyraut argues, the conscience consents to them and reason approves them, the "light of reason making them appear so beautiful and recognizable" (Ch. 1, p. 55). Here he has in mind such revealed truths as "man is corrupted with sin from birth,"

⁴⁵ Laplanche 589; *De l'élevation* 1:43.

⁴⁶ Laplanche 589; *De l'élevation* 1:55.

“without the assistance of God, [man] cannot... rise up from his [fallen] condition,” “that retribution must be accomplished both in the soul and in the body... whence necessarily follows the resurrection of the body” (Ch. 1, pp. 55-6). Amyraut’s position on reason’s affirmation of this second class of truths is quite strong:

And nevertheless, in order not to know [this second class of revealed truths]... one must either be completely destitute of understanding, or have voluntarily closed the eyes of his mind, so acutely are we convinced of them by our own conscience, and so commonly known and indissoluble is the link that they have with these other truths that are naturally known to us.⁴⁷

Amyraut asserts that any failure of reason to affirm these revealed truths implies that one is either “destitute of understanding” or has “voluntarily closed the eyes of his mind.” Once these truths have been revealed, Amyraut thinks that we are “forcefully convinced [of these truths] by our own conscience.” This is because there is an “indissoluble” relation between this class of truths and the other truths known by the natural light of reason.

Amyraut asserts this claim without much in the way of argument. One might plausibly suppose, however, that the truth of this second category of propositions is a necessary condition of the truth of the first category of propositions. That is, in order for it to be true that, for example, “there is some other place than this world, for which is reserved most [moral] reward and punishment” (from the first class of truths), it must be the case that there is a continuity between the soul and body. And in fact, this is just the claim that Amyraut seems to be making when he claims that “retribution

⁴⁷ “Et néanmoins pour ne les connaître pas [les vérités révélées]...il faut ou tout a fait être déstitué d’entendement, ou fermer volontairement les yeux de l’esprit, tant nous en sommes vivement convaincus par notre propre conscience, et tant est notoire et indissoluble la liaison qu’elles ont avec ces autres vérités qui nous sont naturellement connues.” (Ch. 1, p. 59)

must be accomplished both in the soul and in the body... whence necessarily follows the resurrection of the body” (Ch. 1, p. 55-6). It is this account of the relation between truths of reason and truths of revelation that are affirmed by reason that grounds Amyraut’s summary statement that “in elevating itself, faith does not lower reason at all, but raises it and brings it along with it towards things which had [previously] been unknown” (Ch. 1, p. 63).

Amyraut’s final category of religious truths is described in rather familiar terms as being “above reason,” prefiguring Leibniz’s account of the Christian mysteries.⁴⁸ By “above reason,” Amyraut means “[doctrines] which do not ruin [reason, but] touch upon subjects that are unknown to us in themselves, and consequently against which our reason cannot furnish any invincible argument” (Ch. 2, p. 65). Amyraut includes in this class of doctrines the subsistence of three persons in a single divine essence, the coexistence of divine and human natures in the single person of Christ, and the incarnation of the second person of the divinity.⁴⁹ Like Leibniz later on, Amyraut argues that the divine essence, by its very nature, is not fully comprehensible to human reason, so reason simply cannot grasp these doctrines, and thus can neither demonstrate their truth nor disprove them (Ch. 1, p. 66-9). Amyraut appears not to be concerned with critics who claim that reason might, in fact, be able to comprehend – and thus, be able to refute – truths of this class.

⁴⁸ See the preface to (but also throughout) Leibniz’s *Theodicy* (1710).

⁴⁹ The doctrine of the dual nature of Christ is separable from the doctrine of the incarnation of the second person of the divinity because it is possible for the *human* nature of Christ to take on a body without the *divine* nature actually being incarnated.

Given their incomprehensibility, Amyraut asserts that the proper attitude of reason towards truths in this category is a withholding of judgment:

Indeed, not to be able to refute something demonstratively, as they say – which is to say, by indubitable reasons, of which the force constrains the understanding to acquiesce – is, to a degree, to believe it; or at least an argument not to deny it, and to suspend one’s judgment.⁵⁰

This epistemological stance sounds somewhat Pyrrhonian, but Amyraut later provides further clarification of his position in order to avoid the skeptical conclusion:

...It is not enough to be unable to refute by indubitable reasons the doctrine in question. We also need certain arguments and unwavering foundations on which [the doctrine] rests. Otherwise the scruple will always remain that our natural imbecility, which keeps us from discoursing as solidly and as clearly as we should, would give us the articles of our faith, which we must then hold as the truth itself.... [I]f we cannot perceive the truth of the doctrine of the Trinity by looking at it in itself, we must necessarily be persuaded of it by some reasons that are around it, and that support it. Otherwise no sensible man would of himself be able to obtain in his mind the degree of belief and persuasion that is merited by this point of doctrine.⁵¹

Amyraut’s position here is a rather subtle one: he is *not* saying that this final class of religious truths, the class that he has just defined as incomprehensible to reason, must now be comprehensible; he still affirms that the truth of certain doctrines – such as the Trinity – cannot be perceived by reason, either self-evidently or upon being revealed. He does hold, however, that we can still demand reasons that provide a foundation for

⁵⁰ “Or ne pouvoir réfuter quelque chose démonstrativement, comme on parle, c’est-à-dire par raisons indubitables, et dont la force contraigne l’entendement à acquiescer, est un degré à la croire ; ou à tout le moins un argument de la nier pas, et de suspendre son jugement.” (Ch. 2, p. 69)

⁵¹ “[C]e n’est pas assez de ne pouvoir réfuter par raisons indubitables la doctrine dont est question. Il faut aussi des arguments certains, et des fondements inébranlables sur qui elle se repose. Autrement ce scrupule demeurerait toujours, que notre naturelle imbecilité, qui nous empêche de discourir si solidement et clairement comme il faudrait, nous donnerait les articles de notre foi, lesquels nous devons tenir de la vérité même.... [S]i nous ne pouvons apercevoir la vérité de la doctrine de la Trinité en la regardant en soi, il faut nécessairement que nous en soyons persuadés par quelques raisons qui soient à l’entour d’elle, et qui la soutiennent. Autrement nul homme bien sensé ne sçav(u)rait obtenir de soi-même de donner à ce point de doctrine en son esprit de degré de créance et de persuasion qu’il mérite.” (Ch. 2, pp. 74-6)

these doctrines, reasons that somehow point to the certainty of the doctrines; we can require “supporting” reasons until we have obtained “the degree of belief and persuasion that is merited” by the doctrine in question.

It is unclear exactly what would count for Amyraut as a “supporting” reason for an incomprehensible doctrine, but Amyraut addresses this issue by claiming that

these doctrines that nature has revealed to all nations, and these others that we have only from the revelation of heaven, but that our reason approves when God declares them to us, are so enclosed by this one: that if there were not several persons in the divinity, there could be no salutary religion in the world.⁵²

The logic here is enthymematic, but Amyraut seems to be saying that the ground for the incomprehensible truths of faith is, in some way, already present in the rationally self-evident truths of faith and in the truths of faith that reason affirms when they are revealed – that is, in the first two classes of religious truths. Later, Amyraut specifies that it is the “sentiments and movements of nature” in particular that rationally lead us to belief in the “most sublime” – that is, the most mysterious – elements of divine revelation (Ch. 2, p. 92). The use of reason is evident, he claims, because it sees the doctrine of the Trinity as “necessarily tied to certain other truths that, without [the doctrine of the Trinity] would not be true, and that nevertheless [reason] certainly understands as [true]” (Ch. 2, p. 93).

This logic suggests that, just as the truth of the second class of religious beliefs is a necessary condition for the truth of the first class, the truth of the third class of

⁵² “...[C]es doctrines que la nature a révélées à toutes nations, et ces autres que nous n’avons que de la révélation des Cieux, mais que notre raison approuve quand Dieu les nous a déclarées, sont tellement enclavées avec celle-ci, que s’il n’y a plusieurs personnes en la Divinité, il n’y peut avoir la Religion salutaire au monde.” (Ch. 2, p. 84)

revealed beliefs is a necessary condition for the truth of the second class. Just as the ability of reason to perceive the veracity of the truths of faith of the second class comes from their status as a ground – or a condition on the possibility of the truth – of the truths of the first class, the truths of faith in the third class can be said to have a similar relationship to truths of the second class. As an example, take the doctrine of the Trinity, undoubtedly in this third class of truths of faith. In order for “salutary religion” to exist – which, as a truth of the first class, it does – there must be some way of effecting this salvation. The only way for salvation to be efficacious in this way is if God himself satisfies his own demands for justice; this entails, however, some sort of multiplicity in God – hence the Trinity.

Finally, Amyraut distinguishes another category of religious doctrines from the category of incomprehensible truths of faith: those doctrines that are not merely above reason, but directly against it. These doctrines concern subjects about which we have sufficient comprehension, and that make claims against which reason provides us with “so many and such evident arguments that, in order not to assent to them [i.e., the arguments against the doctrines], we would have to go against nature” (Ch. 3, p. 97). This contrast class of doctrines is distinguished from the incomprehensible religious truths that are above reason but not contrary to reason. Doctrines in this final category are not to be affirmed, according to Amyraut, since they require a subversion of the natural faculty of reason, and thus such doctrines have no place in the tripartite scheme of religious truths.

Amyraut uses the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation as an example of a doctrine contrary to reason, and as one that requires an unnecessary submission of reason to faith:

Who therefore will say that [the Catholic doctrine of the Holy Eucharist] is only above reason, and not directly against it? Of course whether it is true that it is against reason, it at least appears as such by the procedure of those who have the use of some ingenuity in the defense of the doctrine of the Roman Church. If one must acknowledge the points on which they and we are in agreement against our common enemies, they make use of reason, to the extent of using it against heretics and pagans, even for the Trinity.⁵³

The upshot of this passage is not entirely clear, but one important point that Amyraut makes concerns the common methodology of the Calvinist rationalists and the Catholic apologists. His claim seems to be that while Catholic apologists rightly use reason in their defense of the Trinity against “heretics and pagans,” their use of reason to defend their doctrinal positions fails in the case of transubstantiation. According to Amyraut, the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation is not merely above reason, but actually against reason, and this places it outside of his tripartite classification of the truths of religion; for Amyraut, transubstantiation is not a “truth” at all.

This raises the question of why the argument structure that worked to support the third class of truths would not also apply for this set of propositions. Recall that the argument used the veracity of the third class of the truths of faith as a condition on the possibility of the veracity of truths of the second and first classes. If

⁵³ “Qui est-ce donc qui dira que [la doctrine de la Sainte Cène] soit seulement au dessus de la raison, et non directement contre elle? Certes qu’il soit vrai que cela est contre la raison, il en appert au moins par la procédure de ceux qui usent de quelque ingénuité en la défense de la doctrine de l’Eglise Romaine. S’il faut maintenir les points dont eux et nous sommes d’accord contre nos communs ennemis, ils se servent de la raison, jusques à l’employer contre les hérétiques et les païens pour la Trinité même.” (Ch. 3, 104-5)

transubstantiation were a condition on the possibility of the veracity of the truths of the second and first classes, then that argument could be used; however, there is no truth in the first or second class that depends on transubstantiation in the way that they depend on, for example, the doctrine of the Trinity. This, then, is the crucial difference between truths of the third class and purported truths that are contrary to reason: in the former case, other revealed truths (whose status is independently verified by reason) have the truth of propositions from the second and third classes as a necessary condition of their truth; however, there is no similar requirement of the truth of transubstantiation.

Amyraut's tripartite classification of religious truths provides a helpful framework for thinking about the relationship of reason and faith during this period. For the purposes of establishing Bayle's theological pedigree, however, what is most important about Amyraut is his continued insistence on the role of reason in religious belief. Reason not only provides us with the "common notions" of morality and monotheism, but it also provides confirmation of certain truths gleaned from revelation. For Amyraut, even the truths of revelation that are beyond reason's grasp have some sort of ground in the truths that reason has already affirmed.

Amyraut's Calvinist rationalism made its way to Geneva from Saumur via Amyraut's foremost student, Louis Tronchin. Tronchin himself was the son of a theology professor at the Geneva Academy, and followed in his father's footsteps

professionally, if not theologically.⁵⁴ Tronchin's "enlightened orthodoxy"⁵⁵ can be seen in his lectures from the period, where he espouses the position that "[n]othing should be affirmed that we do not perceive clearly either in nature itself or in that which God has taught."⁵⁶ Tronchin was an enthusiastic proponent of Cartesianism, and taught both Bayle, and the rationalist theologian who would later become one of Bayle's most important opponents, Jean Le Clerc.⁵⁷

2.3 The Anti-Catholic Turn: Bayle at Sedan

Despite the Amyrauldian influence of Tronchin on Bayle in Geneva, his Calvinist rationalism was tempered by his move to Sedan, an elite Protestant academy in France that was the primary rival of the Saumur academy. Upon Bayle's arrival at Sedan in 1675 to take up the post of chair of philosophy, he was immediately impressed with his colleague in theology, Pierre Jurieu.⁵⁸ Jurieu was a well-known

⁵⁴ The older Tronchin was quite opposed to the trends in theology that Saumur espoused; see Klauber 326.

⁵⁵ François Laplanche, "La Bible chez les réformés," *Le Siècle des lumières et la Bible*, eds Yvon Belaval and Dominique Bouvel (Paris, 1986), 459.

⁵⁶ Louis Tronchin, *Notae in libros duos Theologae sacrae Wendelini exceptae in praelectionibus Domini Tronchini theologiae in Cenevensi Academia professoris celeberrimi, quae habuit inter p (ri) vatos p (ar) ietes, annis 1671, 1672*, Archives Tronchin, vol. 84, folios 44-44v. The Archives Tronchin are located in the *Bibliothèque publique et universitaire* at the University of Geneva.

⁵⁷ According to a 1671 letter from Bayle to his brother, written while studying in Geneva under Tronchin, he (Tronchin) was "the most penetrating and the most judicious theologian of all of Europe" (Maria C. Pitassi, *Entre croire et savoir: le problème de la méthode critique chez Jean Le Clerc*; Leiden, 1987; p. 103). Bayle himself was also exposed to the works of Amyraut, and to his *De l'elevation de la foi* in particular (see Note h on page 106 of *Entretiens de Maxime et Thémiste*, OD IV, where Bayle makes a passing reference to *De l'élévation*). Outside of highly specialized theological circles, however, Tronchin's influence is relatively minimal; see, e.g., Martin I. Klauber's "Reason, Revelation, and Cartesianism: Louis Tronchin and Enlightened Orthodoxy in Late Seventeenth-Century Geneva," *Church History* 59:3 (Sep 1990), 329-339.

⁵⁸ Bayle wrote to his brother Jacob on 16 November 1676 that "[Jurieu] is the first man of our Communion, both for his judgment, and for his delicacy of spirit. One cannot better encounter the essence and point of view of all sorts of matters and questions than he does. Never has there been seen

Huguenot theologian, pastor, academic, and polemicist who typically defended a conservative form of Calvinism against both Catholic theologians and his more liberal co-religionists. When the Sedan academy was suppressed by Louis XIV in 1681, Bayle followed Jurieu to Rotterdam to take up a post in philosophy and history at the Ecole Illustre, where Jurieu was both a professor of theology and a pastor. Jurieu was known for his aggressive style of argumentation and for his virulent anti-Catholicism, traits that Bayle manifests in one of his earliest works, *Critique générale de l'histoire du calvinisme* (1682). In it, he attacks the accuracy of a recent history of Calvinism written by Louis Maimbourg, a Jesuit historian. Bayle's main task in this work is to point out Maimbourg's Catholic bias in the history; however, this work also constitutes early evidence of Bayle's preoccupation with history and the accurate reporting thereof.

The most obvious anti-Catholic argument of Bayle's *Critique générale* concerns the supposed infallibility of the Catholic Church. He asserts that

[the] infallibility of the Church must be known independently of the testimony that it gives itself.... We do not add an entirely certain faith to what God has revealed to us, just because we know from elsewhere, by the clear and distinct idea that we have of God, who represents himself to us as a sovereignly perfect Being, that God can neither deceive nor be deceived. It is therefore all the more false that we would add a complete and indubitable faith to what the Church decides, just because we know that the Church decides it; we would necessarily know it from elsewhere, that God gave it [the Church] the privilege of infallibility.⁵⁹

a more vast and fecund imagination, never has morality been treated in our positions with more brilliance and solidity" (*Correspondance* vol. II, p. 387).

⁵⁹ "[L]'infaillibilité de l'Eglise doit être connue indépendamment du témoignage qu'elle se rend à elle-même.... [N]ous n'ajoutons point une foi entièrement certaine à ce que Dieu nous a révélé, précisément parce que nous savons d'ailleurs, par l'idée claire et distincte que nous avons de Dieu, qui nous le représente comme un Etre souverainement parfait, que Dieu ne peut ni tromper, ni être trompé. Il est

Bayle here articulates a type of argument that was popular among orthodox Calvinists such as Jurieu at the time. The strategy is to attack the grounds for the authority of the Church by questioning the legitimacy of the Church's claim to infallibility. The standard argument for the Church's infallibility begins with the assumption that Scripture is infallible and authoritative, but that the laity lacks the spiritual resources to interpret it consistently and correctly. It then uses particular verses from the New Testament to argue for apostolic succession, that is, the idea that the infallible authority of Christ has been passed down through the apostles and their successors, including all of the popes. This entails that only those in the line of apostolic succession are assured of interpreting Scripture correctly, and thus that their interpretations of Scripture are the only authoritative and infallible ones.

Attacking the very foundation of the authority of the Church was a standard rhetorical strategy among Protestants; the principle of individual examination is one of the defining elements of the Reformation, and arose in response to just this kind of infallibility argument. This motivation for a classic anti-Catholic argument is representative of Bayle's thought at this stage of his career: while espousing Calvinist orthodoxy, he nevertheless continues to exhibit the sophisticated rationalism of his Amyrauldian heritage.

Bayle's anti-Catholicism is perhaps most obvious in another work from the period, *Pensées Diverses... à l'occasion de la comète* (1683), where Bayle – ironically – chooses to use a Catholic character as his mouthpiece. Bayle's project in *Pensées*

donc faux à bien plus forte raison, que nous ajoûtions une pleine et indubitable foi à ce que l'Eglise décide, précisément parce que nous savons que l'Eglise le décide; il faut nécessairement que nous connoissions d'ailleurs, que Dieu lui a donné le privilège de l'infaillibilité." (CG, Letter 26; 121a)

Diverses is to expose the popular superstitions associated with the appearance of a comet in late 1680 and early 1681. While the work was ostensibly a general attack on superstition, it was received as a thinly veiled attack on Catholic superstition in particular, and Bayle did nothing to discourage this. What the work is most famous for, however, is its novel argument that atheists can be moral. At first glance, it is not obvious how these two aims are related, but Bayle's arguments for the superiority of atheism over idolatry provide the missing link. These arguments also show the persistence of Amyrauldian rationalism as a methodology in Bayle's theological thought.

The general anti-Catholic tone of the *Pensées Diverses* is exemplified in the condemnation of the methods used by some Catholics to win converts:

I do not at all find that it enters into the true spirit of Christianity to extort conversions by dint of money, and by dint of making unhappy the fate of those who do not convert.... Frankly, I do not believe that it is the right way to make good Catholics out of them.... [I]nstead of enlarging the number [of Catholics] by this multitude of false converts... we should ask God to chase out of his Church all who dishonor it by their dissolute conduct.... No honest man would fail to condemn this manner of conversion.⁶⁰

This passage is an excellent example of Bayle's combination of a standard anti-Catholic grievance of the Huguenot community with a Cameronian emphasis on the importance of ethical living as part of sanctification.⁶¹ It is important to note that this is a different line of argument from the attack on superstition; it is, fundamentally, an

⁶⁰ "Je ne trouve point que ce soit entrer dans le véritable esprit du Christianisme, que d'extorquer des conversions à force d'argent, et à force de rendre malheureuse la destinée de ceux qui ne se convertissent point.... [F]ranchement, je ne crois pas que ce soit le vrai moyen d'en faire de bons Catholiques.... [A]u lieu d'en grosser le nombre par cette multitude de faux convertis..., il faudrait prier Dieu de chasser de son Eglise tous ceux qui la deshonnent par leur conduite déréglée.... Il n'y a point d'honnête homme qui ne condamne cette manière de convertir." (229-230, 232; §79-101)

⁶¹ While the *Pensées Diverses* is ostensibly written from a Catholic point of view, Bayle's own anti-Catholic sentiments are quite clear, as is the Cameronian emphasis on ethics and right *praxis*.

ethical argument. Bayle also makes what we might call an implicit *epistemological* argument regarding the nature of the beliefs of the converts: using coercive methods to convert people scuttles the prospect of verifying an actual change of belief, and this grounds Bayle's claim that the converts are "false" ones. If we take Bayle's point that the "true spirit of Christianity" does not include "extorting conversions," and we assume that extorting conversions counts as "dissolute conduct," then Bayle is implicitly arguing that those who extort conversions should be chased from the Church.

While the theology of the Church is never explicitly identified with the idolatry condemned by Bayle throughout the work, this implication was obvious to Bayle's readers, and it is this implication that makes Bayle's comparison of idolatry and atheism particularly significant.⁶² Bayle identifies idolatry as less coherent than atheism, and by implication, Catholicism as less coherent than irreligion:

No one of good sense, after having recognized that it is impossible for existence to be separated from the divine nature, fails to recognize that it is even more impossible that holiness, justice, and infinite power may be separated from the existence of the divine nature. If it would be more against reason that God would exist and would be subject to faults and weaknesses, than that he would not exist, then God would not exist at all. This is to prove, it seems to me, that the errors into which the pagans have fallen concerning the divine nature are at least as large a mark of infamy against human reason as atheism would be.⁶³

⁶² This is not the only place where Bayle implicitly equates idolatry with Catholicism; according to Sher Tinsley, Bayle does the same in his 1686 *Commentaire philosophique* ("Sozzini's Ghost: Pierre Bayle and Socinian Toleration," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 57.4, p. 609, 1996). Many Protestants of the time believed that much of Catholic ritual and practice owed more to ancient pagan rites than to early Christian tradition.

⁶³ "Il n'y a point d'homme de bon sens, qui après avoir reconnu qu'il est impossible que l'existence soit séparée de la nature Divine, ne reconnaisse qu'il est encore plus impossible que la sainteté, la justice, et le pouvoir infini soient separez de l'existence de la nature Divine: si bien qu'il serait plus contre la raison, que Dieu existast, et fust sujet à des fautes et à des foiblesses, qu'il ne le serait, que Dieu

Though it is important to remember that Bayle is still speaking as a Catholic here, his argument is fairly straightforward: if the only two conceptions of God on offer are an imperfect God and a nonexistent God, then the nonexistent God is more probable than the imperfect one. This is because, according to Bayle, the very idea of an imperfect God is “against reason,” or at least more “against reason” than atheism. Bayle simply draws out the consequences of the argument for the comparative reasonableness of atheism as against “idolatrous” imperfect conceptions of God. The extent to which the “idolatrous” imperfect conceptions of God can be identified with Catholic conceptions of God is of course questionable; however, a seventeenth-century Protestant reader of *Pensées Diverses* would have no trouble making the equivalence between a Catholic conception of God and an idolatrous one. This passage further highlights the extent to which Bayle uses Amyrauldian rationalism to bolster existing anti-Catholic arguments.

2.4 The Mature Bayle: Between Jurieu & the Rationalist Theologians

The anti-Catholicism of Bayle’s thought is most pronounced during his early years in Rotterdam, when he and Jurieu were still on good terms. Beginning with the *Pensées Diverses*, however, Jurieu became increasingly suspicious of Bayle’s theological positions, and these suspicions only intensified with the publication of the *Nouvelles Lettres de l’Auteur de la Critique Générale* (1685), the *Commentaire*

n’existast point du tout. C’est prouver, ce me semble, que les erreurs où sont tombez les Payens touchant la nature Divine, sont pour le moins une aussi grande note d’infamie à la raison humaine, que le saurait être l’Atheïsme.” (§123-4; 322)

philosophique (1686), and finally, with the publication of *Avis aux refugiez* (1690), which cemented Jurieu's opinion of Bayle as a heretic.⁶⁴ The *Avis* was a moral critique of the Huguenot diaspora, and though Bayle never claimed authorship of *Avis* – unsurprisingly, given the violent reaction it provoked – contemporary scholars have confirmed Jurieu's suspicion that it was Bayle's work, and Jurieu's critique of what he considered to be Bayle's heterodoxy never wavered from the publication of *Avis* until Bayle's death in 1706.⁶⁵

Jurieu was ostensibly upset by passages in the *Avis* that criticized the attitude and conduct of the refugees who fled France after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685; the following is a representative sample:

Make no mistake, there is no corruption more opposed to the spirit of Christianity than this satirical compulsion of which we are complaining; and it is in vain that you live in exile... if you do not root out of your heart the animosity and the desire for vengeance that makes you spew all over paper, and read with such joy an infinity of atrocious injuries, ridiculous falsities, and scandalous tales.⁶⁶

Bayle here makes the accusation that the Huguenot refugee community is engaged in behavior that runs contrary to the very heart of Christian ethics: the dictum to love one's enemies. This is a continuation of the ethical emphasis of Bayle's arguments: rather than engaging in theological arguments, he makes the ethical conduct of the

⁶⁴ It should be noted that Jurieu's disapproval was not particular to Bayle; Jurieu had a reputation for contentiousness, not only with respect to Catholic interlocutors, but also with his fellow Protestants.

⁶⁵ Gianluca Mori makes the definitive case for attributing the *Avis aux refugiés* to Bayle in the introduction to his 2006 edition of Bayle's *Avis*, and almost all Bayle scholars have now accepted Bayle as the author of this text.

⁶⁶ “[N]e vous y trompez point, il n’y a pas de corruption plus oppose à l’esprit du Christianisme que cet acharnement satyrique dont nous nous plaignons; et c’est en vain que vous vivez en exil... si vous ne déracinez de votre coeur l’animosité et le désir de vengeance, qui vous fait verser sur le papier, et lire avec tant de joye une infinité d’injures atroces, de faussetez ridicules, et de contes scandaleux.” (*Avis* I. Point, 584b-585a)

community the criterion for the legitimacy of their religious position. The exile of the Huguenots is “in vain” if they do not conduct themselves according to the true “spirit of Christianity.”

Bayle’s emphasis on ethical behavior rather than theological minutiae continues throughout the *Avis*, extending beyond the sphere of the individual to the sphere of the political:

Thank God, the corruption of the human race has not risen to such an excess that it is not still a principle of human law that acts of hostility committed by individuals, without the permission and commissioning of some sovereign power, are a crime as punishable as that of highway robbers.⁶⁷

The context of Bayle’s assertion is a discussion of whether or not it is appropriate for the banished Huguenots to support political activities intended to subvert the French monarchy. Interestingly, Bayle’s position on the illegitimacy of individual hostile acts committed without sovereign sanction makes no distinction between physical and verbal aggression. The implication for religious matters would have been clear to Bayle’s readers: without the permission of theological authorities, any individual engaging in unsolicited polemical attacks on theological – and of course, political – opponents is doing so illegitimately. Once again, this is primarily an ethical, not a theological, criticism.

This emphasis on ethical criticism rather than theological correctness, and Bayle’s inclination towards theological rationalism more generally, would seem to situate Bayle close to some of his less orthodox fellow Calvinists, such as Jean Le

⁶⁷ “Dieu merci, la corruption du genre humain n’est point montée à un tel excès, que ce ne soit encore un principe du droit des gens, que les actes d’hostilité commis par de simples Particuliers, sans l’aveu et la commission de quelque Puissance souveraine, sont un brigandage aussi punissable que celui des voleurs de grands chemins.” (II. Point, 613a)

Clerc (1657-1736) and Isaac Jacquelot (1647-1708). Le Clerc and Jacquelot were known for their extreme theological rationalism; Jacquelot's major work is entitled *Conformité de la foi avec raison* (1705), and Le Clerc's theology was often classified by more orthodox Calvinists as "Remonstrant," a form of Dutch Calvinism that was condemned by the Synod of Dordt in 1618. As mentioned previously, Bayle and Le Clerc were both students of Tronchin, and elements of Tronchin's rationalist influence pervade the writings of both men.

Bayle takes pains, however, to distinguish himself from these rationalist theologians, even – and especially – at the end of his life, when his writings are supposed to have become increasingly more heterodox.⁶⁸ In his final work, *Entretiens de Maxime et de Thémiste* (1706), Bayle responds to both Le Clerc's and Jacquelot's criticisms of his previous work. The first part of the work addresses Le Clerc's criticisms of Bayle in Le Clerc's *Bibliothèque choisie* (1703ff), and the second part of the work addresses Jacquelot's criticisms of Bayle in Jacquelot's *Examen de la théologie de Mr. Bayle* (1706).

Bayle argues that Le Clerc's rationalism leads not only to Socinianism, but to atheism; the title of *EMT* Chapter 9 is "M. Le Clerc delivers religion to atheists with its feet and wrists bound, and delivers even himself to them." According to Bayle, the atheist argument to which Le Clerc falls prey is the following:

- If the Christian God is false, then there is no God.
- But the Christian God is false if his conduct does not conform to common notions of goodness, holiness, and justice.

⁶⁸ Again, scholars of all interpretive persuasions agree that Bayle distances himself from Jurieu and becomes progressively more rationalist towards the end of his life; see both Mori 1999 and Bost 2006.

- Therefore, if the conduct of the Christian God does not conform to these notions, there is no God.⁶⁹

Bayle maintains that he (Bayle) denies the minor (that is, the second) premise, but that Le Clerc cannot object to the atheist argument since he (Le Clerc) accepts both premises. Presumably, Bayle has independent reasons for thinking that Le Clerc accepts the minor premise, but it is not difficult to see why: the rationalist understanding of “common notions” as ethically normative is shared by both Bayle and Le Clerc, but crucially, applying the “common notions” to the conduct of God is where Bayle draws the line.⁷⁰ This option, however, is not available to Le Clerc if he accepts the minor premise of the atheist argument.

Similarly, Bayle criticizes Jacquelot’s objection that Bayle’s account of human nature renders mankind completely passive. Jacquelot’s argument for free will seems to be based both on human phenomenology, and on absolving God of responsibility for sin:

...[W]e have a lively sentiment of the authority by which our will chooses one thing rather than another. But if this lively sentiment did not prove necessarily that we are our own masters, and that our freedom determines itself as it sees fit, then God would be the cause of our error.⁷¹

⁶⁹ “*Si le Dieu des Chrétiens est faux, il n’y a point de Dieu. Or le Dieu des Chrétiens est faux, si sa conduite n’est pas conforme aux notions communes de la bonté, de la sainteté, et de la justice. Donc si la conduite du Dieu des Chrétiens n’est pas conforme à ces notions-là, il n’y a point de Dieu.*” (EMT Ch. 9; OD IV, 24-25)

⁷⁰ See EMT Ch. 7 (OD IV, 22) for Bayle’s insistence on justice as inseparable from the divine nature (“Dès qu’ils savent par la Révélation que Dieu a fait une telle chose, ils sont fermement persuadés qu’elle est juste”), and yet he claims here that God is not subject to human standards of justice.

⁷¹ “... [N]ous avons un sentiment vif de l’autorité avec laquelle notre volonté choisit une chose plutôt qu’un autre. Or si ce sentiment vif ne prouvait pas nécessairement que nous sommes les maîtres chez nous, et que notre liberté se détermine elle-même comme bon lui semble, Dieu serait la cause de notre erreur.” (EMT II, xxxvi; OD IV, 106)

Bayle makes short work of Jacquilot's "phenomenological" argument by bringing up the fallacy of generalizing from Jacquilot's own experience to humankind in general. What is perhaps most interesting about this passage, however, is what Bayle does *not* address: Jacquilot's assertion that without freedom, God would be responsible for human error. This leads to the most pressing theological problem of all for Bayle, one with which Bayle wrestles throughout his entire career, and which he never resolves: the problem of evil.

The problem of evil occupies a unique place in Bayle's theology; it is the issue that most obviously separates Bayle from his Huguenot rationalist predecessors and contemporaries. As mentioned above, Jacquilot appeals to human free will to answer the problem of evil; Bayle, however, is dissatisfied with this reply. Since a hallmark of Huguenot theology is the complete sovereignty of God over all of creation, it is difficult for any Huguenot – or at least, for any orthodox Huguenot – to maintain that the freedom granted to humankind is sufficient to exculpate God of responsibility for the choices of his creatures. If God is truly as sovereign as Huguenot theology makes him out to be, then he would in some sense have control over the choices of human agents – minimally, he would have foreknowledge of the choices leading to the existence of evil, and it is thus reasonable to conclude that foreknowledge coupled with omnipotence entails a responsibility to act such that evil does not come into existence. If this is true, then God is indeed responsible for the existence of evil

insofar as he has not prevented it.⁷² And it does not appear that Bayle denies any part of this argument; indeed, at various points in the corpus, he affirms each of these premises, and is unwilling to gloss over or explain away different premises in the way that his predecessors and contemporaries do.

2.5 Conclusion: A “Creatively Deviant” Protestant

In light of Bayle’s resistance to the rationalist heterodoxy of his contemporaries, he may reasonably be labeled a “creatively deviant” Protestant. Bayle is not a radically heterodox rationalist theologian like Le Clerc or Jacquilot, but he also departs from orthodox Calvinism – particularly as represented by Jurieu – in important and philosophical significant ways. His theology is not static; it evolves throughout the course of his life. What is constant, however, is his position on the ability and appropriateness of reason to operate on revealed truth. His roughly Amyrauldian framework is the general background against which the rest of his theological and philosophical evolution takes place. While Bayle’s thought always bears the marks of the Amyrauldian tradition that he was trained in at Geneva, especially in his disputes with Jurieu, he nevertheless departs from his more radical contemporaries Le Clerc and Jacquilot on the question of the “Christian mysteries,” or the last group of truths in Amyraut’s tripartite structure of the revealed truths of faith. It is for this reason that I refer to this interpretation of Bayle as “philosophical fideism.” I will paint the complete picture of his philosophical fideism in Chapter

⁷² The Calvinist response to this argument is usually inspired by an Augustinian conception of evil: if evil is simply a lack of good, then strictly speaking, God is only responsible for good *not* existing; he is not responsible for evil *per se*.

Four. Before doing so, however, it will be important to work out exactly how “philosophical” this fideism is, and for that, we will have to examine Bayle’s conception of reason, our task in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 The Limits of Reason: Bayle’s Qualified Academic Skepticism

If only one word could be used to describe the generally accepted characterization of Pierre Bayle’s conception of reason – and of his philosophical position more generally – the choice is obvious: skepticism. Reading Bayle as a skeptic has a long history, going back to his own contemporaries and continuing through present-day commentators such as Richard Popkin and Thomas Lennon. The sense in which Bayle is considered to be a skeptic is not entirely straightforward,⁷³ but virtually all interpreters agree that Bayle exhibits a profound suspicion of the rationalists’ confidence in reason’s ability to deliver certain knowledge. In Bayle’s view, if left unchecked, reason eventually leads to its own undoing.

With the 1999 publication of Gianluca Mori’s *Bayle philosophe*, however, a new reading of Bayle emerged: that of the “Stratonian” rationalist.⁷⁴ This landmark work provides a detailed interpretation of Bayle as a rationalist philosopher, whose complicated dialectic reveals a willingness to draw out the logical consequences of his arguments as completely as possible. Mori’s conception of Bayle as a Stratonian

⁷³ See Lennon’s excellent article “What Kind of a Skeptic was Bayle?” in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XXVI (2002), 258-279.

⁷⁴ “[Bayle peut] garantir à la connaissance humaine une certaine autonomie, qui suffit pour fonder nos raisonnements et nos conclusions morales. Seule la théologie s’oppose à une telle autonomie de la raison” (Mori 44). Mori’s extensive discussion of Stratonianism is found in his Chapter 5, on atheism and fideism.

rationalist opens up the possibility of reading Bayle not as a “supersceptic,” as Richard Popkin argues, but as someone who allows reason to operate with a greater scope and authority than would a skeptic. Mori argues that Bayle’s conception of reason is extremely robust; it is one that allows reason to go *jusqu’au bout*, with complete authority to draw conclusions in every area of knowledge.

In this chapter, I will argue that Bayle’s conception of the nature and function of reason is in fact somewhere between the robust rationalism of Mori’s reading and the “supersceptic” reading of Popkin: reason is, as Popkin argues, incapable of establishing substantive and certain knowledge about the world, but nevertheless is able to deliver tentative, fallible conclusions. Following Thomas Lennon and José Maia Neto, I read Bayle as a kind of Academic skeptic. However, Bayle’s Academic skepticism is not that of antiquity, but rather represents a modern version that makes use of “good sense” (*le bon sens*) and allows for “right reason” (*la droite raison*) to determine moral truths.

3.1 The “supersceptical” conception of reason

The dominant reading Bayle is that he is a thoroughgoing skeptic: reason *seems* to be useful in enabling us to draw conclusions about the world, but it runs into so many contradictions and yields so many paradoxes that it ultimately undermines itself, and thus cannot be trusted. This is the classic skeptical account of reason used by seventeenth-century fideists: since reason cannot be trusted to guide us to truth, we must find some other, more reliable guide – faith, or revelation.

Pierre-Daniel Huet is perhaps the most famous advocate of this position in the seventeenth century, and he provides a helpful model for making sense of this interpretation of Bayle. Huet outlines his skepticism about reason in his *Traité philosophique de la faiblesse de l'esprit humain* ("Philosophical Treatise on the Weakness of the Human Mind," 1723), a posthumous work intended to provide a succinct summary of his skeptical fideism. In this work, Huet's mistrust of reason is evident; he argues not only that reason lacks certainty, but that we should actively harbor doubt about what it teaches. Huet argues that that faith is actually the "the... master of reason" because reason is not reliable.⁷⁵ We are therefore to doubt *everything* that reason teaches us. There seems to be no room in this conception of reason for any sort of reliable functioning apart from faith, and Richard Popkin identifies this position as "Christian Pyrrhonism." Huet is the most obvious, though according to Popkin far from the only, example of this school.⁷⁶

Popkin's reading of Bayle as a "supersceptic" holds that Bayle's conception of reason exhibits many of the same features as Huet's account, but that it is even more radical:

In each case, Bayle is not solely or merely concerned to challenge a theory but to use the occasion to generalize an attack to all theories and to show the hopeless abysses to which all human intellectual endeavors lead...⁷⁷

⁷⁵ « Nous avons principalement une grande attention à ne rien admettre qui soit contraire à la Foi révélée, tenant pour très-certain & indubitable ce que Dieu a marquée dans notre Ame par la Foi, guide & maîtresse de la Raison; & tenant pour douteux tout ce que la Raison nous enseigne » (Bk. II, Ch. IX; 216-7).

⁷⁶ See Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (OUP, 2003), 280; Jose Maia Neto, *The Christianization of Pyrrhonism* (Kluwer, 1995) and "Academic Skepticism in Early Modern Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Ideas* April 1997 (58:2), 199-220; Craig B. Brush, *Montaigne & Bayle: Variations on the Theme of Skepticism* (Nijhoff, 1966), 264-266 *et passim*.

⁷⁷ Popkin 289.

Popkin bases his interpretation primarily on Bayle's famous statements in the *Dictionnaire* about the self-destructive nature of reason. In a remark on the article "Pierre Bunel," Bayle uses the colorful analogy of Penelope to demonstrate the extent to which reason undoes itself:

I am delighted that such an author [Reginald Polus] furnishes me with that which confirms what I establish in various places, that our reason is only appropriate for blurring everything, and for causing us to doubt everything: it has no sooner built a work, than it shows you the ways to ruin it. It is a veritable Penelope, who during the night undoes the cloth that she had made during the day. In this way, the best usage that one could make of studying philosophy is to understand that it is a way of confusion, and that we must search for another guide, which is the revealed light.⁷⁸

This picture of how reason functions is consistent with Popkin's reading of Bayle as a "supersceptic": the conclusions of reason cannot be trusted, because reason itself can always "undo" them. It merely confuses and leads astray, and is far inferior to the guide of "revealed light." This is the familiar fideist trope: why settle for the unreliable guide of the natural light when the revealed light is reliable and certain?

Popkin sees Bayle's skepticism as being primarily of a Pyrrhonian variety, as represented by Sextus Empiricus, in contrast to the Academic skepticism of figures such as Carneades and Arcesilas. The textual center of Popkin's reading is, not surprisingly, the extensive entry on Pyrrho in the *Dictionnaire*, particularly the conversation between the two abbots that occurs in Remark B. The radical nature of

⁷⁸ « [J]e suis ravi qu'un tel auteur [Reginald Polus] me fournisse de quoi confirmer ce que j'établis en divers endroits, que notre raison n'est propre qu'à brouiller tout, et qu'à faire douter de tout: elle n'a pas plus tôt bâti un ouvrage, qu'elle vous montre les moyens de le ruiner. C'est une véritable Pénélope, qui pendant la nuit défait la toile qu'elle avait faite le jour. Ainsi le meilleur usage que l'on puisse faire des études de la philosophie, est de connaître qu'elle est une voie d'égarement, et que nous devons chercher un autre guide, qui est la lumière révélée » ("Bunel (Pierre)," Rem. E).

Bayle's skepticism is, according to Popkin, revealed in the rejection of *évidence* as a criterion of truth:

With reason, you maintain that *évidence* is the certain mark of Truth; for if *évidence* is not this mark, nothing else would be. Very well, he will say to you, I will meet you there; I will make you see things that you reject as false, which are without any doubt whatsoever.... Let us profit from the temerity with which those who lived before the Gospel affirmed to us as true certain evident doctrines, of which the Mysteries of our theology revealed the falsity.... If there were a mark according to which the Truth could be known with certainty, it would be *évidence*: however, *évidence* is not such a mark, since it allows for falsehoods; therefore...⁷⁹

This passage from the mouth of one of the abbots questions the very notion of self-evidence, or *évidence*. While the specific details of Bayle's rejection of *évidence* warrant further study, his general point is clear: *évidence* is not enough to secure truth, since there are many "doctrines" that bear the mark of *évidence* that are nevertheless false, according to the lights of revealed truth.⁸⁰

The most graphic formulation of this "supersceptical" conception of reason is in a remark on the article on Uriel Acosta, where Bayle uses a gruesome medicinal analogy to articulate the full extent of reason's destructive power. In the context of discussing Acosta's rejection of both Catholicism and Judaism, Bayle claims that

⁷⁹ «Vous lui soutiendrez avec raison que l'évidence est le caractere sûr de la Vérité; car si l'évidence n'étoit pas ce caractere, rien ne le seroit Soit, vous dira-t-il, c'est là où je vous attens, je vous ferai voir des choses que vous rejettez comme fausses, qui sont de la dernière évidence.... Profitons de la témérité avec laquelle ceux qui vivoient avant l'Évangile nous ont affirmé comme véritables certaines doctrines évidentes, dont les Mysteres de notre Théologie nous ont révélé la fausseté.... S'il y avoit une marque à laquelle on pût connoître certainement la Verité, ce seroit l'évidence: or l'évidence n'est pas une telle marquée, puisqu'elle convient à des faussetez; donc » ("Pyrrhon," rem. B; *DHC* III:732b-733a).

⁸⁰ Todd Ryan's work *Pierre Bayle's Cartesian Metaphysics* (Routledge 2009) includes, among other insightful analyses, a full account of Bayle's arguments against *évidence* as a criterion for truth; see especially pp. 2-5 and 21-26.

without the assistance of God, reason is a misleading guide, and then offers the following analogy:

Philosophy can be compared to powders so corrosive that, after having consumed the oozing flesh of a wound, they would gnaw away the living flesh and would decay the bones and would pierce all the way to the marrow. Philosophy first refutes errors, but if it is not stopped there, it attacks truths, and when it is left to its own whims, it goes so far that it no longer knows where it is, or where to rest.⁸¹

Assuming here that reason is the primary instrument of philosophy – a fair assumption, given the Cartesian context in which Bayle is writing the *Dictionnaire* – this is a rather damning indictment of reason’s inability to self-regulate. The natural tendency of reason, if it is not properly limited, is to indiscriminately devour both truth and falsity, and to lose itself in an intellectual morass.

There is much of Popkin’s “supersceptic” reading in this quotation; however, even as the destructive images take primacy of place in the analogy, it is important not to overlook the “medicinal” function that reason serves in this comparison. Reason can still clear away the “oozing wounds” of falsities and errors if it is properly limited. The possibility of a “healing” function for reason casts a small shadow of doubt on the reading of Bayle as a “supersceptic” whose goal is merely to show that reason is exclusively cannibalistic, as Popkin argues. In order for reason to function salutarily, it needs boundaries on its “whims” so that it remains properly “oriented.” Reason’s medicinal function softens the radical nature of Bayle’s skepticism, and gives lie to

⁸¹ « On peut comparer la philosophie à des poudres si corrosives qu’après avoir consumé les chairs baveuses d’une plaie, elles rongeraient la chair vive et carieraient les os et perceraient jusqu’aux moelles. La philosophie réfute d’abord les erreurs, mais si on ne s’arrête point là elle attaque les vérités ; et quand on la laisse faire à sa fantaisie, elle va si loin qu’elle ne sait plus où elle est, ni ne trouve plus où s’asseoir » (“Acosta,” Rem. G).

Popkin's claim that Bayle is out to discredit reason completely. This is consistent with Bayle's position in the *Entretiens de Maxime et Thémiste* (1707), his final work, where he appears "to give preference to some evident maxims of reason over some other evident axioms of reason" (EMT II, viii; OD IV, 47a) – which are, as we shall see later, the basic moral maxims delivered by "right reason." What we garner from these texts is that Bayle's *rejection* of reason is not a total *renunciation* of it, and that Bayle still recognizes principles of preference among maxims, despite his rejection of *évidence* as a criterion of truth. This recognition of principles of preference is indeed consistent with skepticism, but not skepticism of the Pyrrhonian kind – it is consistent with skepticism of the Academic variety.⁸²

Among the evidence of Bayle's engagement with Academic skepticism is his inclusion in the *Dictionnaire* of lengthy articles on Arcesilas and Carneades, two prominent Academic skeptics. Further, in the article on Chrysippus, Bayle contrasts the "lawyering" of the Stoics with the "reporting" of the Academic skeptics, to the advantage of the latter.⁸³ The upshot of this is that if Bayle's skepticism is indeed closer to the Academic than the Pyrrhonian variety, then his critique of reason is less radical than the "scorched earth" version of the Pyrrhonians. Unlike the total suspension of judgment characteristic of Pyrrhonian skepticism, Academic skepticism allows for reason to draw likely, though fallible, conclusions. While Bayle is not entirely consistent in his characterization of his skepticism – as Popkin's evidence

⁸² The standard source for ancient Pyrrhonism is Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*; the Academics, however, are known primarily through the secondhand reports of Cicero (*Academica*) and Augustine (*Contra Academicos*).

⁸³ *DHC*, "Chrysippus," Rem. G; see below for a fuller discussion of the significance of this remark.

shows – nevertheless, if José Maia Neto and Thomas Lennon are correct,⁸⁴ then Bayle’s conception of reason is much more like that of the “reporter” Academicians, who weigh the pros and cons of every argument, without defending any one position over the others, merely judging some as more persuasive or probable than others. I will develop Maia Neto’s and Lennon’s interpretation more fully, and defend a qualified version of it, in the final section of this chapter.

3.2 The “Stratonian” conception of reason

3.2.1 Mori’s “Stratonian” atheism

An influential alternative to Popkin’s “supersceptical” reading of Bayle – and of Bayle as a skeptic more generally – is the interpretation of Bayle as a “Stratonian rationalist,” defended by Gianluca Mori, most notably in his *Bayle philosophe* (1999). As I discuss in the Introduction, in chapter 5 of *Bayle philosophe*, Mori constructs an interpretation of Bayle’s “Stratonianism,” a position Bayle discusses at length in his *Continuation des Pensées Diverses* (henceforth *CPD*). The distinctive theses that Mori associates with modern Stratonianism are that matter is eternal and infinite, and that there can be order in Nature without a guiding intelligence. These two commitments distinguish Stratonians from seventeenth-century Christian philosophers, even though they share other commitments, such as rationalism, mechanism, and determinism (223). This leads Mori to describe Bayle’s Stratonianism as a “virtual atheism” (222). Mori’s case for attributing the Stratonian

⁸⁴ Maia Neto, “Bayle’s Academic Skepticism” in *Everything Connects: In Conference with Richard Popkin* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 263-276; and Lennon, “What Kind of a Skeptic was Bayle?” *op. cit.*

position to Bayle has already been laid out in the Introduction; however, it is important to remember that it rests on the assumption that Bayle never argues directly for a position that he supports; his arguments are typically critical. Mori argues that in light of this, if Bayle fails to provide compelling objections to a position, he (Bayle) is implicitly endorsing it.

With this strategy in mind, rather than reconstructing Bayle's argument for Stratonianism within the context of the *CPD* itself, Mori draws on textual evidence from throughout the *CPD* to attribute the Stratonian position to Bayle. On Mori's reading of *CPD*, one of the principles of the Stratonian position with the clearest atheistic implications is that "reason teaches us...that matter is eternal, that it cannot have a beginning, that it is infinite" (223). This is because, according to Mori, the principle *ex nihilo nihil fit* is one of the most evident truths of reason. If nothing comes from nothing, then this implies a first cause that exists *a se*. But *ex nihilo nihil fit* also implies that nothing is created from nothing – which is just what Christianity's doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* denies. Thus, the universe itself must exist eternally and *a se*. The other tenet of Stratonianism with atheistic implications is its denial of the principle of *quod nescis* ["that of which you are ignorant"], which Mori glosses as the principle that only an intelligent being can establish and regulate the laws of nature (223). If cognition is not necessary for nature to behave in a lawlike fashion, then the idea of God becomes explanatorily superfluous. According to Mori, Bayle fails to respond definitively to the Stratonians' arguments for the eternity and infinity of matter, and to their denial of *quod nescis*. Therefore, since Bayle has no definitive

response to the Stratonian position, he has no rational grounds for rejecting it. Mori argues that Bayle thus concedes the Stratonian position to be superior to Christian theology.

In addition to his argument that Bayle concedes the superiority of Stratonianism to Christianity, Mori argues that reason itself favors Stratonianism over Christianity – the implication here is presumably that Bayle, being eminently rational, would never have defended a less rational position if a more rational alternative were available. Mori argues first, that from a metaphysical point of view, the Stratonian position provides a simpler and more elegant explanation of the laws of the universe than Christian theology does (223). If God himself is bound to respect the same necessary, eternal, and universal laws of nature that govern the cosmos, then he is, in some sense, explanatorily superfluous; the laws of nature themselves can fill the role of God in providing the explanation of the order of the universe. Secondly, Mori argues that from an epistemological point of view, the Stratonian position does not require the denial of self-evident truths of reason as Christian revelation does (225). The doctrines of the Trinity, of creation *ex nihilo*, and of divine intervention in creation seem to require the denial of the principle of non-contradiction, the principle *ex nihilo nihil fit*, and the universality of the laws of nature, respectively. Finally, Mori argues that the Stratonian position is clearer and simpler than Christian theology on the question of theodicy (226). Since matter, the first principle of the Stratonians, is neither good nor evil in itself, there is no basis for a moral evaluation of its order. Christian theology, on the other hand, is forced to create a complicated – and not

obviously successful – account of the reconciliation of a wholly good First Principle with the existence of evil in the created order.

Much rests, then, on whether or not Bayle endorses the Stratonian argumentation that Mori finds in the *CPD*. The *CPD* is not, however, the only text that Mori uses to attribute the Stratonian position to Bayle. The main text outside of the *CPD* that he uses to ground this interpretation is the *Réponse aux Questions d'un Provincial*. While Mori generally refers to this work only in footnotes, and rarely quotes any passages from it, he claims that many of the arguments for and against Stratonianism in the *CPD* reappear there. Mori notes that the *RQP* is where Bayle seems to express resistance to the Cartesian principle of the absolute free will of God (*RQP* II.89; Mori 232). He combines this text in the *RQP* with the assertion in the *CPD* that the absolute free will of God is the only possible resource for Christian theologians in the face of the Stratonian arguments (233). Taken together, Mori says, these two texts show that Bayle's considered position – at least, from the time of the *RQP* onward – is that Christian theology has no recourse against Stratonian atheism.

Since the Stratonian position is a sort of “anti-theology,” Mori claims that Bayle's argumentative method does not require that the Stratonian position be without flaws; it requires only that the Stratonian position be more rationally defensible than the rival position (234-5). The Stratonian conception of reason, Mori says, is committed to continued inquiry (235-6). Mori here cites Bayle's assertion in the *Réponse aux questions d'un provincial* that Strato considered his theses “as [objects] of opinion, which does not preclude the fear of being mistaken” (3.xiii; *OD* III, 931b).

Despite the Stratonian's metaphysically substantive conclusions, Bayle says that Strato considered these conclusions to lack complete certainty. According to Mori, this approach is ultimately what gives Stratonianism an advantage over Christian theology. Stratonianism makes no claim to certainty about its conclusions, while Christian philosophy is tied to the claims of Christian revelation. But Stratonianism is not a skeptical position; Mori argues that Bayle's paradigm of skepticism is a suspension of judgment more characteristic of Pyrrhonism than of Stratonianism (236). For Mori, the Stratonian conception of reason is not skeptical because instead of limiting or diminishing reason, it pushes reason absolutely *jusqu'au bout* – as far as it can go.

3.2.2 An Alternative Reading of Bayle's "Stratonian" Texts

Mori's attribution of the Stratonian position to Bayle rests on the arguments found primarily in the *Continuation des Pensées Diverses* and in the *Réponse aux Questions d'un Provincial*. In evaluating the strength of Mori's interpretation, then, it is essential first to situate those texts within Bayle's corpus, and then to consider the significance of the passages in question within the context of each of the works. I intend to show here, through a careful reading both of the *CPD* and of the *RQP*, that Bayle consistently keeps a critical distance from the Stratonian position, in a fashion more typical of Academic skeptics than of Stratonians.

3.2.2.1. Continuation des Pensées Diverses

The occasion for the writing of the *Continuation des Pensées Diverses* was the publication of the fourth edition of Bayle's *Pensées Diverses* in 1704. The *CPD* was Bayle's painstaking attempt to refute all of the objections that Pierre Jurieu had raised ten years earlier to his *Pensées Diverses*.⁸⁵ In particular, Bayle reaffirms his position from the *PD* that idolatry is a worse evil than atheism, and that atheists can be moral, since morality is separate from religious belief. The context of Bayle's reconstruction of the Stratonian position is a complicated discussion comparing the strengths and weaknesses of the positions of pagan philosophy and atheism on issues in metaphysics and morality, and, following Bayle, Mori takes it for granted that the debate between Stratonians and pagans is analogous to the debate between "modern," seventeenth-century Stratonians and Christian philosophers.

Bayle's explicit presentation of the Stratonian position begins in §106 as an exercise to see if the ancient technique of *rétorsion* used against pagan philosophers by Strato and his followers could be used by "modern" Stratonians – in the context of *CPD*, Bayle uses the example of Chinese philosophers – against Christian philosophers. Bayle first explains the Stratonian argumentative strategy of *rétorsion*, whereby one demonstrates that the position of one's opponent faces the same difficulties as one's own position:

You cannot ignore this turning of the mind of men when, having embraced a hypothesis, the difficulties that then follow do not at all cause them to give it up, if they see either that their antagonists share those difficulties, or that the

⁸⁵ My major source for the historical context of these works is Labrousse's introduction to Volume 4 of Bayle's *Oeuvres Diverses*.

difficulties are no greater than those that they'd run across elsewhere. One could not reasonably blame those who do not give themselves up to an argument that they push back [*rétorque*]; for all argument that wounds the dogma of the attacker as much as the dogma of the one being attacked, proves too much, and from that he proves nothing. It would thus be unreasonable ranting to claim that a man who does not at all wish to change his opinion while his adversaries are subject to the same difficulties, or to as great difficulties as him, is an obstinate person who intentionally blinds himself. His refusal very much conforms to the rules of reason.⁸⁶

Bayle describes the technique of *rétorsion* as the refusal to change one's own position in spite of difficulties brought out by one's opponents, on the grounds that the opposing position suffers from similar (or greater) difficulties than one's own position. Bayle argues that this strategy is a plausible response of an ancient Stratonian to teleological arguments for the existence of an intelligent first cause, which use the existence of apparent purposiveness and order in nature as evidence that there must be a creator and designer of nature:

There was nothing, it seems to me, more overwhelming for a Stratonian philosopher than to tell him that a cause destitute of cognition could not in any way make this world, where there is such a beautiful order, such exact mechanism, and laws of movement so just and constant.... Only this question was necessary to make the Stratonians feel as though their hypothesis was incomprehensible, and to reduce them to absurdity. The only thing that could have been left for them was the conclusion that they reduced their adversaries to the same state.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ « Vous ne pouvez pas ignorer ce tour de l'esprit des hommes qu'après avoir embrassé une hypothese, les difficultez qui la suivent ne la leur font point quitter, s'ils voient ou qu'elles leur sont communes avec leurs antagonistes, ou qu'elles ne surpassent pas les difficultez qu'ils rencontreraient ailleurs. On ne saurait raisonnablement blâmer ceux qui ne se rendent pas à un argument qu'ils rétorquent; car tout argument qui frappe le dogme de l'attaquant aussi-bien que celui du sùtenant, prouve trop, et dès là il ne prouve rien. Ce serait donc faire le déclamateur mal à propos que de prétendre qu'un homme qui ne veut point changer d'opinion pendant que ses adversaires sont sujets aux mêmes difficultez ou à d'aussi grandes difficultez que lui, est un opinionâtre qui s'aveugle malicieusement. Son refus est très conforme aux règles de la raison » (§106; 333b).

⁸⁷ « Il n'y avait rien, ce me semble, de plus accablant pour un Philosophe Stratonicien que de lui dire qu'une cause destitutee de connaissance n'a point pù faire ce monde, où il y a un si bel ordre, un mécanisme si exact, et des loix du mouvement si justes et si constantes.... Il ne falait que cette

According to Bayle, when the Stratonian is faced with this objection, his response is not to show that an intelligent cause does not exist, but that the defender of the existence of an intelligent cause has just as many difficulties as the Stratonian. The former is left with the same explanatory problem pushed one step back, and therefore the Stratonian has no reason to concede the existence of an intelligent cause. In this case, the Stratonian's response is, sensibly, not to attempt a proof of a negative existential claim; rather, it is to show that the explanatory holes in the Stratonian account have exact parallels in the account of those who defend the existence of an intelligent cause. This exemplifies the strategy of *rétorsion*, which seems to be consistent both with Stratonian methods of reasoning, and with skeptical ones. Bayle shows later in §106 how ancient Stratonians can in this way counter the arguments of the Stoics, the Platonists, and the Aristotelians.

What is crucial to note about this passage is that it provides evidence that, at most, Bayle endorses an argumentative tactic – *rétorsion* – of the Stratonians. There is no evidence here that Bayle accepts any of the major tenets of Stratonianism; he simply notes that the Stratonian use of *rétorsion* as an argumentative strategy is a particularly effective philosophical weapon. Thus while it seems that Bayle implicitly recommends a Stratonian argumentative strategy, and to that extent can be seen as recommending the Stratonian conception of reason, it is inaccurate to draw the inference that Bayle affirms the philosophical commitments of the Stratonians.

question pour faire sentir aux Stratoniciens que leur hypothèse était incompréhensible, et pour les réduire à l'absurde. Il ne leur pouvait rester que cette conclusion, c'est qu'ils réduiraient au même état leurs adversaires » (§106; 334a).

3.2.2.2. Réponse aux Questions d'un Provincial

Further evidence of Bayle's engagement with the Stratonian position and conception of reason is found in the *Réponse aux Questions d'un Provincial* (1704-7; henceforth *RQP*). Bayle wrote the *RQP* over a period of three years, and it appeared in four parts, the last of which was published posthumously. It ranges over a variety of topics, but one of its major themes is the problem of evil. Bayle's position on the problem of evil was so influential that it provided the occasion for Leibniz to write his *Théodicée* (1710) as a direct response to Bayle. The third part of the *RQP* appeared in November 1706, just a month before Bayle's death, and the entire work represents Bayle's attempt to articulate his last thoughts on the most pressing topics discussed in his corpus. Mori cites passages from *RQP* I.25 and II.180 as evidence of Bayle's endorsement of the Stratonian position. Again, I will argue that the textual evidence from the *RQP* does not provide support for Stratonianism as a position, but only for the Stratonian use of *rétorsion*.

One of the many passages in the *RQP* that Mori cites as evidence for the attribution of the Stratonian position to Bayle concerns the order of Nature and plastic natures:

The philosopher Strato, who recognized only Nature as the cause of all beings, made it the principle of motion and rest, and... he believed that it was endowed with several active faculties, such as the faculty to form a tree or an animal, for example.... He said that Nature exists of itself with all of its faculties.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ « Le Philosophe Straton qui ne reconnoissaient que la Nature pour la cause de tous les êtres...la faisait le principe du mouvement et du repos, et... il la croïait douëe de plusieurs facultez actives, telle qu'est par exemple la faculté de former un arbre, ou un animal.... [I]l disoit qu'elle [Nature] existe d'elle-même avec toutes ses facultez » (*RQP* §180; 881b).

The Stratonian holds that Nature is the only cause of all that is, and contains within itself all the “faculties” needed to explain the order in the world. Bayle follows this summary of the Stratonian position with two objections that ancient philosophers could make against Strato:

The one [objection], that it is incomprehensible that a being destitute of intelligence exists of itself with such-and-such faculties precisely so, neither more nor less; the other [objection], that it is incomprehensible that some faculties which are directed by no cognition, produce things where there is as much regularity as we see in military technology, and in the bodies of animals.⁸⁹

Bayle shows how the Stratonians can respond to the first objection using the technique of *rétorsion*; he notes that if the gods can exist of themselves with the precise faculties they have, in just the way that they have them, Nature could exist with the same faculties in the same way. Against the second objection, again using the technique of *rétorsion*, Bayle argues that if the ancient philosophers admit that a plant can produce fruit without any cognition or knowledge of what it is producing, then the same could be true of Nature as a whole (*RQP* §180; 882a). That is to say, the modern Stratonian *rétorsion* is to point out uncontroversial instances of noncognitive organisms “produc[ing]... regularity.” To be sure, the parallel is not exact; in the case of the ancient Stratonians, the issue is whether or not Nature can exhibit the same faculties as the gods, while in the case of the modern Stratonians, the issue is whether or not matter is uncreated. Despite the disanalogy, however, it appears as though the

⁸⁹ « [L]’une qu’il est incompréhensible qu’un être destitué d’intelligence existe de lui-même avec telles et avec telles facultez précisément, ni plus ni moins: l’autre qu’il est incompréhensible que des facultez qui ne sont dirigées par aucune connaissance, produisent des choses, où il y ait autant de regularité que nous en voïons dans une grenade, et dans les corps des animaux » (*RQP* §180, 881b).

response of the ancient Stratonians is a viable option for the modern Stratonians as well.

Shortly thereafter, however, Bayle shows that while the ancient Stratonian position can turn back the objections of the ancient philosophers, the modern position fares differently against Christian philosophers. With respect to the first objection, the gods are no longer at issue; the question now is whether matter (the modern Stratonian equivalent of the ancient Stratonians' "nature") can exist without intelligence of itself. If God can exist uncreated *in se*, the modern Stratonian might argue, then matter can as well. Except for a small number of philosophers who hold that matter is uncreated, however, the first objection – that it is impossible for a being without intelligence to exist of itself with such-and-such faculties precisely so – stands without a reply from the Stratonians (*RQP* §180; 882b).⁹⁰ The Stratonian *rétorsion* only works against those who allow that it is possible that matter is eternal; the Christian philosophers who hold that matter can only exist insofar as it is created do not share the premise on which the *rétorsion* relies. Here again, the text does not explicitly endorse the Stratonian position; it only provides evidence that Bayle is making use of Stratonian argumentative tactics.

The Stratonian's reply to the second objection, however, is more troublesome for Christian philosophers who "give to creatures a true activity... without them having thought" (*RQP* §180; 882b). Recall that the second objection denies the possibility that noncognitive faculties could produce the kind of regularity evidenced

⁹⁰ Bayle himself in this passage allows for the possibility of Christian philosophers (presumably Socinians) who hold that matter is uncreated, though admittedly this seems paradoxical.

in technology or living organisms. The modern Stratonian *rétorsion* to this objection is to point out uncontroversial instances of noncognitive organisms “produc[ing]... regularity” that their opponents would accept. Before providing a response, Bayle spends several pages explaining the concept of “plastic natures” in order to lay the groundwork for a reply.

Bayle begins his discussion by referring to the accounts of plastic natures given by Ralph Cudworth and Jean Le Clerc. *RQP* §179 provides the dialectical context for this discussion of plastic natures: Cudworth, the English Cambridge Platonist, developed an account of the plastic natures of objects as immaterial substances that are causally efficacious, but without cognition.⁹¹ He conceived this account because he did not think that God was the cause of the immediate production of living things, but neither did Cudworth think that material beings were its cause (881a). For Cudworth, while God is ultimately responsible for the creation and sustenance of all things, he invests this causal power in the plastic natures of objects, and it is these natures which are causally efficacious in the material world. Bayle objects to Cudworth’s conception of plastic natures because it creates an opportunity for a Stratonian *rétorsion*: if plastic natures are causally efficacious themselves, then there exist efficient causes that are devoid of cognition. If there exist efficient causes that are devoid of cognition, then it is possible that matter itself, which is devoid of cognition, is an efficient cause of the order and structure of nature, as the Stratonians maintain.

⁹¹ *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678).

Bayle recounts Le Clerc's defense of Cudworth's view in §180. According to Bayle, Le Clerc argues that God is still necessary to direct plastic natures, and that though plastic natures act with regularity, they are still under the guidance of God, who "intervenes however and whenever He likes" (885a). Le Clerc reaffirms Cudworth's conception of plastic causes as noncognitive active efficient causes, but argues that they are nevertheless in need of "divine intervention and direction" (§180; 885a). Bayle objects that Le Clerc's response on behalf of Cudworth does not circumvent the Stratonian *rétorsion*, for it entails one of the following two consequences: either plastic natures "obey" the direction and guidance of God, which is absurd because it requires obedience from unthinking objects;⁹² or plastic natures act as active efficient causes in an orderly way apart from God's immediate direction, in which case, Bayle argues, the position reverts to Cudworth's account.

If Bayle offered no further response to the Stratonian *rétorsion* against Le Clerc's emendation of Cudworth's position, then Mori's interpretation of Bayle as a Stratonian might seem justified. What Bayle does instead, however, is to draw a distinction between plastic natures considered as active efficient causes in themselves (albeit directed by God), which is Cudworth's conception as emended by Le Clerc, and plastic natures as passive instrumental causes under God's direction. Bayle argues that because plastic natures are devoid of cognition, they are necessarily in need of God's direction, and therefore God is the only efficient cause of that which he directs, even if he uses plastic natures instrumentally:

⁹² Bayle asks, "But before acting under the orders of God, mustn't one know what they are?" (§180; 885a).

[P]lastic natures know nothing, and... they cannot be made to act like a machine that goes on its own for some length of time, for according to M. Cudworth, they are immaterial, and efficient causes. Indeed, it is certain that a machine is, properly speaking, only an instrumental cause. Therefore we say that they [plastic natures] can only serve to organize animals insofar as God applies them or directs them. It must be the case, then, that he does it from the beginning to the end.... They are therefore only passive instruments of which God makes use in order to organize bodies. He is therefore their sole efficient cause, as the Cartesians say, and it would be in vain to attribute efficient faculties to plastic natures; for since these faculties have no more cognition than the substances to which they belong, joining these substances with these faculties is like the blind leading the blind. Since these faculties are continuously applied by the maker of matter, they can only be considered a passive instrument. Nothing is gained by supposing that these substances are immaterial and alive; it rather increases the difficulties, since it is more difficult to conceive of the force of motion in an incorporeal creature than in a corporeal one, and if they [plastic natures] did not have the force to move matter, one could not comprehend how they could organize anything.⁹³

Bayle claims that if plastic natures are devoid of cognition – as Cudworth, Le Clerc, and Bayle all hold – then they cannot organize matter in the way that Cudworth and Le Clerc claim. What is important about this “blind leading the blind” objection is that it is equally applicable to the Cudworth/Le Clerc position, and to the Stratonian position, according to which matter is devoid of cognition. Indeed, in the next paragraph, Bayle says that while Cudworth and Le Clerc are subject to the Stratonian

⁹³ « [L]es Natures plastiques ne connaissent rien, et... on ne peut pas les faire agir sur le pied d'une machine qui va d'elle-même un certain temps; car selon M. Cudworth elles sont immatérielles, et causes efficientes. Or il est certain qu'une machine n'est à proprement parler qu'une cause instrumentale. Disons donc qu'elles ne peuvent servir à organiser les animaux qu'à mesure que Dieu les applique, ou les dirige. Il faut donc qu'il le fasse depuis le commencement jusques à la fin.... Elles ne sont donc que des instrumens passifs dont Dieu se sert pour organiser les corps. Il en est donc seul la cause efficiente, comme les Cartésiens disent, et ce serait en vain qu'on alléguerait les facultez efficientes des Natures plastiques; car ces facultez n'ayant pas plus de connaissance que les substances à qui elles appartiennent, c'est mettre un aveugle sous la conduite d'un aveugle que de joindre ensemble ces substances et ces facultez. Outre que ces facultez étant continuellement appliquées par le directeur de l'ouvrage, ne peuvent être considérées que comme un instrument passif. On ne gagne rien en suposant que ces substances sont immatérielles et vivantes, c'est au contraire augmenter les difficultez; vû qu'il est plus difficile de concevoir la force motrice dans une Créature incorporelle que dans un Créature corporelle, et l'on ne saurait comprendre qu'elles puissent organiser si elles n'avaient pas la force de remuer la matiere » (*RQP* II.180; 885b-886a).

rétorsion, the Cartesian view of bodies as mere *res extensa* avoids the *rétorsion* because it holds that the nature of bodies as mere extension is purely passive, and that therefore God's direction is necessary in order to produce motion and order in bodies (§180; 886a). The Cartesians are not subject to the Stratonian objection that "blind" extension is cognizing, since it is God that is doing all of the cognizing, producing all of the motion and order in extended bodies.

Since Bayle endorses the "blind leading the blind" objection in the passage quoted above, and shows that the Cartesians have a reply to this objection, it is clear that he does not allow the fall of Cudworth's position to the Stratonian *rétorsion* to represent the fall of Christian philosophy to Stratonian atheism; rather, since the Cartesian position avoids the Stratonian *rétorsion*, it implies that the burden of proof is back on the Stratonians to provide an objection to the Cartesians. Bayle's demonstration of how Cudworth's position on plastic natures falls prey to Stratonian *rétorsion*, then, should not be taken as a demonstration of the superiority of the Stratonian position over Christian philosophy, but rather simply as another instance of Bayle employing the Stratonian method of argument as a tool of clarification. In contrast to Cudworth's account of plastic natures, the Cartesian account survives Bayle's rational examination, and he provides no further objection (in the plastic natures debate, at least). This tells against Mori's interpretation of Bayle as implicitly endorsing the Stratonian position by showing that no other philosophical position can

withstand its *rétorsion*. It does not entail that Bayle has any positive commitments to Cartesianism, but only that he sees it as a reasonable retort to the Stratonian.⁹⁴

While Mori's systematization of the many nuances of Bayle's work is the most extensive account of Bayle's conception of reason, the texts that Mori relies on do not support his attribution of Stratonianism to Bayle. The *Continuation des Pensées Diverses* is Bayle's fullest presentation of Stratonian atheism, but the text fails to evidence Bayle's endorsement of the Stratonian position in the way that Mori claims. Similarly, while the *Réponse aux Questions d'un Provincial* gives hints at how a Stratonian might argue for, or against, pressing philosophical issues of Bayle's time, it also lacks the strong endorsement of the Stratonian position that is necessary to support Mori's reading, and in some places, Bayle seems to imply that the Cartesian position withstands the Stratonian tactic of *rétorsion*.

The texts discussed here do not demonstrate that Bayle himself endorses Cartesianism; on the contrary, there are many other places in Bayle's corpus that highlight his misgivings about the Cartesian position, and in particular, about its radical voluntarism.⁹⁵ What this evidence does show is that while Bayle is far from endorsing Stratonian atheism, he affirms the use of *rétorsion* as an argumentative technique. This reveals a crucial point of agreement between Bayle and the Stratonians on the function of reason: reason *can* be used positively to defend one's own philosophical position by exposing an opponent's weaknesses that mirror the

⁹⁴ But see Todd Ryan's recent *Pierre Bayle's Cartesian Metaphysics* (Routledge, 2009), particularly his chapters on causation and preestablished harmony, which together make the argument that Bayle consistently defends Malebranchean positions with respect to causation.

⁹⁵ See, for example, Mori 232-3, where he cites *RQP* II.89, and contemporaries of Bayle, as evidence that Bayle attributes only "fictional" advantages to the Cartesian hypothesis.

weaknesses of one's own position. In the next section, I explain how this use of *rétorsion* is consistent with another reading of Bayle's conception of reason: that of qualified Academic skepticism.

3.3 The qualified skeptical conception of reason

This section will defend reading Bayle's conception of reason as that of an Academic skeptic, taking José Maia Neto's and Thomas Lennon's interpretations of Bayle as a starting point.⁹⁶ In this section, I follow Maia Neto and Lennon in highlighting the Academic skeptic's role of *rapporteur*, and argue that *rétorsion* is consistent with the "reporter" role of the Academic. Just as Bayle uses ancient Stratonianism as the model for modern Stratonianism in the *Continuation des Pensées Diverses*, I argue that Bayle's use of the methods of ancient Academic skepticism is the basis of a modern Academic skepticism. Further, I argue that Bayle's use of *bon sens* is evidence of his mitigated Academic skepticism. I depart from Maia Neto and Lennon, however, in my account of reason's relationship to moral maxims in Bayle; far from merely probable principles, Bayle endorses moral maxims as certain.

Maia Neto's and Lennon's reading of Bayle as an Academic skeptic is rooted first and foremost in the *DHC* article on Chrysippus, a Stoic philosopher who was a contemporary of Arcesilas and Carneades, the two most prominent Academic skeptics. Maia Neto argues that Bayle's analysis of the role of reason in ancient philosophy sheds light on Bayle's own position:

⁹⁶ See primarily Maia Neto 1999 and Lennon 2002.

[Chrysippus] would like those who teach a truth to speak but softly of the arguments for the opposing position, and that they imitate lawyers. This is the general attitude of dogmatists; only the Academics gave the arguments of both sides with the same strength. Now, I maintain that this method of dogmatizing is bad, and that it differs very little from the deceptive art of the rhetorician sophists that made them so odious, and which consists in converting the worst case into the best; for one of their main tricks was to hide all the advantages of the case they were attacking along with the weaknesses of the one they were defending, yet without failing to include a few objections selected from those easiest to refute. This is what Chrysippus would have philosophers do....

Antiquity had two sorts of philosophers. One sort was like the lawyers [at a trial] and the other like those who report a trial. The former, in proving their case, hid as best they could the weak side of their own case and the strong side of their opponents' [case]. The latter, namely the skeptics or the Academics, represented faithfully and without any partiality both the weak and strong sides of the two parties....⁹⁷

According to Bayle, ancient philosophers fall into two categories. On the one hand, the “lawyers” – such as Chrysippus and the other Stoics – were those philosophers who were concerned only to prove their own positions and to demolish the position of their opponents. Bayle rejects this way of philosophizing as a kind of trickery, akin to the “odious rhetoricians” who specialized in making the weaker position appear to be the stronger. On the other hand, the “reporters” – such as Arcesilas, Carneades, and other Academics – “gave the arguments of both sides with the same strength”; that is,

⁹⁷ « [Chrysippe] vouloit que ceux qui enseignent une vérité ne parlissent que sobrement des raisons du parti contraire, & qu'ils imitassent les Avocats. C'étoit l'esprit général des Dogmatiques : Il n'y avoit guere que les Académiciens qui proposassent avec la même force les Argumens des deux Partis. Or je soutiens que cette méthode des Dogmatiques étoit mauvaise, & qu'elle différoit très-peu de l'Art trompeur des Sophistes Rhétoriciens qui les rendit si odieux, & qui consisoit à transformer la moins bonne cause en la meilleure ; car l'un de leurs principaux artifices étoit de cacher tous les avantages de la cause qu'ils combattoient, & tous les lieux foibles de celle qu'ils soutenoient, sans oublier néanmoins pour la forme de se proposer quelques Objections, choisies entre les plus aisées à réfuter. Voilà dans le fond ce que Chrysippe vouloit que les Philosophes pratiquassent....

« Notez que l'Antiquité avoit deux sortes de Philosophes ; les uns ressembloient aux Avocats, & les autres aux Rapporteurs d'un Procès. Ceux-là, en prouvant leurs opinions, cachotent autant qu'ils pouvoient l'endroit foible de leur cause, & l'endroit fort de leurs Adversaires. Ceux-ci, savoir les Sceptiques ou les Académiciens, représentoient fidèlement & sans nulle partialité le fort & le foible des deux Partis opposés.... » (*DHC*, “Chrysippus,” Rem. G). Cf. Maia Neto 1999, 270ff.

they did not attempt to engage in sophistry, and were impartial in their representation of their opponents' position. According to Maia Neto, Bayle's condemnation of the "lawyers," and his naming of the "reporters" – the Academic skeptics – as "faithful" and "impartial," implies that Bayle endorses the "reporter" philosophers – that is, the Academics – as against the "dogmatist" philosophers, Stoic or otherwise.

Perhaps Maia Neto's strongest argument in favor of reading Bayle as an Academic skeptic comes from a passage in *La Cabale Chimérique* (1691), a work in which Bayle defends himself from Jurieu's accusation that Bayle is making a mockery of the truths of religion:

I recognize myself in what [Jurieu] says about my way of philosophizing, and I admit that, except for the truths of religion, I regard other disputes as only mind-games in which it is a matter of indifference to me whether the pro or the con is proven. If those with whom I live are happier with Aristotelianism than with Gassendism or Cartesianism, I will leave them be, and my friendship and devotion to them will not thereby be diminished, nor am I put off when contradicted, but instead shift my view innocently and without chagrin whenever some greater probability is presented. This has been throughout the ages the spirit of the Academic philosophers.⁹⁸

Bayle admits that from his point of view, philosophy is a "game," in which it matters not which side is ultimately "proven." This implies that what are ultimately at stake in philosophy are not conclusions, but methods of inquiry.⁹⁹ Even more, Bayle asserts his willingness to shift positions according to their relative probabilities. This, Bayle

⁹⁸ « Je me reconnois à ce qu'il dit de ma maniere de philosopher, & j'avouë qu'excepté les véritez de Religion, je ne regards les autres disputes que comme un jeu d'esprit où il m'est indifférent qu'on prenne le pour ou le contre. Si ceux avec qui j'ai à vivre s'accommodent mieux du Péripatétisme que du Gassendisme, ou du Cartésianisme, je les y laisse tranquillement, je n'en suis pas moins leur ami & leur serviteur, je ne trouve nullement mauvais qu'on me contredise; & dès qu'une plus grande probabilité se présente, je me range là sans peine ni honte. C'a été de tout tems l'esprit des Philosophes Académiciens » (*La cabale chimérique* II, xi; OD II, 676a).

⁹⁹ Or, as Bernard Williams might put it, not "truth" but "truthfulness"; see his excellent *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton 2002).

argues, is just the spirit – and, we might add, the method – of Academic skepticism, which supports the affirmation of that which is persuasive (*to pythanon*). Maia Neto notes that the Greek term *pythanon* refers not to what is probable (as one might be tempted to infer from Cicero’s translation of *pythanon* as *probabile*), but to “the non-committal kind of assent given by the Academics to the appearances or views that strike them as persuasive.”¹⁰⁰ This is meant to counter the charge of Pyrrhonism. Were Bayle truly a Pyrrhonist, he presumably would not admit any view as *pythanon*, but would suspend judgment entirely. Bayle’s willingness to shift his view means that he is shifting *judgments*, and so his judgment is not suspended; this method of inquiry is thus that of a “modern” Academic skeptic.

We are now in a position to interpret *rétorsion* as an argumentative tactic consistent with an Academic skeptical method of inquiry. Though I have shown in the previous section that Bayle does not endorse a Stratonian position, it is clear nevertheless that he is drawn to the Stratonian tactic of *rétorsion*. Recall that *rétorsion* is the tactic of taking an opponent’s objection, and pointing out the respects in which her argument is as vulnerable to the objection as one’s own argument is. If it is the case that an Academic skeptic is committed to reporting both sides of an argument as fairly as possible, and to judging both sides well, then this will require making full use of one’s philosophical arsenal, so to speak, in order to report and judge well. If the Academic standard for judging is not certainty but *pythanon*, as discussed earlier, then using *rétorsion* as an argumentative tactic is really just an instance of an Academic

¹⁰⁰ Maia Neto, “Bayle’s Academic Scepticism,” in Force & Katz, eds., *Everything Connects: In Conference with Richard Popkin* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 272.

skeptic's using good sense to aim at *pythanon*, though always being ready to shift position if necessary.

The Academic skeptic's use of "good sense" to aim at what is *pythanon* is, I suggest, just what is meant by *bon sens* for Bayle. The use of *bon sens* to describe some of the operations of reason goes back to Descartes.¹⁰¹ It is important to note that *bon sens* is different than "the natural light," which illuminates certain truths of reason; rather, *bon sens* is concerned with what the Academic skeptics might call *pythanon* judgments – those judgments that seem plausible. A complicated discussion on the skeptical use of reason and of the function of good sense can be found in remark F of Bayle's *DHC* article on Arcesilas, where Bayle engages the views of Lactantius, a patristic skeptic:

[Lactantius] claims to ruin all philosophy by establishing, as Socrates did, that we can know nothing, and as Zeno did, that we should only believe that which we know. He supports his claim by the great numbers of sects into which philosophy was divided. Each attributed to itself truth and wisdom, and claimed error and foolishness to be shared among the others.

In this way, no matter which particular sect was condemned, one could count on the vote of the philosophers who were not of that sect: you could therefore be assured of the vote of the greatest number of sects, while condemning all of them; for each one individually would have approved your judgment with respect to all the others, and could not have disagreed with you that the testimony that it gave for itself determines in its own case that is, consequently, unworthy of belief.

Here is the way that Lactantius uses all of the sects of ancient philosophy to destroy each other: "They devour themselves, and none is left alive," he says. "The reason for this is that they certainly have a sword, but no shield; they have the power to wage an offensive war, but not a defensive one...."

"Seeing this, Arcesilas... armed himself against everyone, and founded a new sect of philosophy that consisted in no philosophizing at all.... If you prove that we have no knowledge, and thus that we are not philosophers, then

¹⁰¹ See CSM I.111 for Descartes' identification of *bon sens* and reason (*Discours de la méthode* I).

you are not one, either; for you confess that you know nothing.... By the very fact that you know nothing, you know one thing.”

This first part of the passage represents Bayle’s attempt to explain the method of the ancient skeptics through their influence on later figures such as Lactantius. In Lactantius’ voice, Bayle describes the lack of self-reflection among ancient philosophers about the truth or falsity of their own positions; in familiar Baylean terms, they are only *avocats*, not *rapporteurs*. “Lactantius” criticizes Arcesilas, in particular, for his supposedly self-refuting assertion that he has no knowledge; according to “Lactantius,” this leads to the self-contradictory view that one knows that one knows nothing.

Bayle then critiques Lactantius’ analysis of Arcesilas’ argument:

Let’s make a few small remarks on this dispute.... The criticism of contradiction has less solidity than false brilliance; it’s more subtlety than convincing argument: good sense [*le bon sens*] soon unravels this quandary. If I dream that I must not believe in dreams, there I am trapped; for if I do not believe it, I believe it; and if I believe it, then I do not believe it. Where is the man who does not see that in this case, one must make an exception for dreams that, in particular, warn me not to believe in dreams?¹⁰²

¹⁰² « Je veux parler de Lactance: il prétend ruiner toute la philosophie, en établissant avec Socrate que l’on ne peut rien savoir, et avec Zénon qu’il ne faut croire que ce que l’on sait. Il confirme sa prétention par le grand nombre de Sectes en quoi la Philosophie étoit divisée. Chacune s’attribuoit la vérité & la sagesse, & donnoit l’erreur & la folie en partage à toutes les autres. Ainsi, quelque Secte particuliere que l’on condamnât, on avoit pour foi le suffrage des Philosophes qui n’étoient point de celle-là: vous pouviez donc être assuré du suffrage du plus grand nombre, en les condamnant toutes; car chacune en particulier auroit approuvé votre jugement par rapport à toutes les autres, & n’auroit pu vous opposer que le témoignage qu’elle se rendoit à elle-même, juge en sa propre cause, & par conséquent, indigne de foi. Voilà de quelle manière Lactance détruit toutes les sectes de l’ancienne philosophie les unes par les autres: « Elles s’entr’égorgent, il n’en reste aucune en vie, *dit-il*: la raison en est, qu’elles ont bien une épée, mais non pas un bouclier; elles ont des forces pour les guerres offensives, mais non pas pour les défensives.... Arcésilas voyant cela, *continue-t-il*, s’arma contre toutes, et fonda une nouvelle secte de philosophie, qui consistait à ne point philosopher.... Si vous prouvez que nous n’avons point de science, et qu’ainsi nous ne sommes pas philosophes, vous ne l’êtes point non plus; car vous confessez que vous ne savez rien.... Par cela même que vous ne savez aucune chose, vous en savez une ».... « Faisons quelques petites remarques sur cette dispute.... Le reproche de contradiction a moins de solidité que de faux brillant; c’est plutôt une subtilité qu’une raison convaincante: le bon sens débrouille

This passage provides evidence that even the most critical conception of reason must be appropriately limited in order not to cannibalize itself. Those who criticize reason for being contradictory are only “falsely brilliant,” says Bayle, implying that reason has the resources to overcome its own paradoxes. Bayle here seems to rely on “good sense” to “unravel” the self-contradictions of reason; reason’s self-contradictions are merely “subtleties,” not “convincing argument.” This leaves open the possibility that reason can still function effectively, so long as reason can govern itself (assuming that “good sense” is part of reason, as Descartes argues) to resolve cases where it produces paradoxical or contradictory conclusions. “Good sense” described in this way bears a close resemblance to the Academic skeptic’s stance: what is important in both cases is to have judged well – to use a modern turn of phrase, to have exercised due diligence with respect to one’s reasoning and judging.

This notion of “judging well,” or of exercising due diligence with respect to one’s reasoning and judging, is what Maia Neto and Lennon both refer to as integrity.¹⁰³ Maia Neto notes the importance of intellectual integrity to the ancient Academic skeptics, and glosses intellectual integrity both as giving assent “only to propositions that are thoroughly and completely examined,” and as keeping the intellect “fully able to exercise its main faculty, that of judgment.”¹⁰⁴ Lennon argues that for

bientôt cet embarras. Si je songe que je ne dois pas croire aux songes, me voilà bien attrapé; car si je n’y crois pas, j’y croirai; et si j’y crois, je n’y croirai pas. Où est l’homme qui ne voie qu’en ce cas-là il faut excepter des autres songes celui en particulier qui m’avertit de ne croire pas aux songes? » (*DHC*, “Arcesilas,” Rem. F).

¹⁰³ See Lennon, *Reading Bayle* (1999), Ch. 2 *passim* and Maia Neto, “Bayle’s Academic Scepticism,” *Everything Connects* (1999), 263-276.

¹⁰⁴ See Maia Neto, “Academic Skepticism in Early Modern Philosophy,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58:2. (April 1997), 199-220

Bayle, integrity means not only “possess[ing his] power of judgment uncurtailed,” but allowing those “with whom Bayle creates a conversation in his work... to preserve their autonomy.”¹⁰⁵ The Academic skeptic thus emphasizes the integrity of the process over achieving conclusions – that is, preserving “good sense.” We can now see that the views being attributed to Arcesilas by Lactantius are more characteristic of Pyrrhonian skepticism – undermining the very possibility of philosophy – than of Academic skepticism, which is characterized by the pursuit of integrity and, as Maia Neto notes, the avoidance of error.¹⁰⁶ This explains Bayle’s criticism of the view that Lactantius was attributing to Arcesilas: as an Academic skeptic, Bayle rejects the blanket undermining of philosophy insisted on by Pyrrhonian skeptics. According to Bayle, the use of “good sense” is the obvious way out of the Pyrrhonian skeptic’s “quandary.”

A good example of Bayle demonstrating reason’s ability to “hold to the sense that seems best to us” occurs in his discussion of the Catholic “way of authority” (as opposed to the Protestant “way of examination”) that occurs in Book One of his *Commentaire philosophique* (1686). Bayle’s purpose in writing the *Commentaire Philosophique* was to refute an errant reading of Jesus’ words from the Gospel of Luke, “Compel them to enter the fold,” a reference to unbelievers.¹⁰⁷ This is a particular interpretation of a dogma that seventeenth-century Catholics purported to find in Scripture in order to justify the forced conversion of Huguenots to Catholicism:

¹⁰⁵ Lennon here cites Cicero’s *Academica* (II.iii.8) to describe the Academic definition of integrity: possessing an “uncurtailed” power of judgment.

¹⁰⁶ Maia Neto (1997), 207.

¹⁰⁷ Luke 14:23.

Without thinking, [Catholics] go the long way around, coming back after countless efforts, to the place where others have gone directly. Others say frankly, and without beating around the bush, that we must hold to the sense that seems best to us; but [the Catholics] say that we must guard against that, because our “light” could lead us astray, and that our reason is nothing but shadows and illusion, and that we must therefore hold to the judgment of the Church.

But isn't this itself using reason? Isn't it the case that one who prefers the judgment of the Church to his own, is doing so on the basis of the following reasoning: *The Church has more “light” than I do, and is therefore more credible than me?* So it is by his own “lights” that each man decides; if he believes something to be revealed, it's because his good sense [*bon sens*], his natural light, and his reason tell him that the proofs that it has revealed are good ones.

This is a very rich passage, and it provides several insights into Bayle's use of reason. The first is that the “default” position of (non-Catholic) reasoners is to “hold to the sense that seems best to us”— that is, to take as true that which seems *prima facie* reasonable unless given evidence to think otherwise. The upshot of this insight is that the burden of proof is on those who advocate a suspicion of reason. Bayle here again emphasizes the role of “good sense” and reason, which he argues for as playing an implicit role in grounding the authority of the Church.

Bayle also recognizes in this passage, however, that implicitly grounding the authority of the Church on the proofs that the “[natural light] has revealed [as] good ones” is a perilous position – if reason is compromised, then the authority of the Church is compromised as well:

But where will we be, if someone challenges reason as a “shadowy and illusory” principle? Shouldn't we also, in that case, challenge reason when it says, *The Church has more “light” than I do, and is therefore more credible than me?* Shouldn't we be afraid that reason is mistaken, both with respect to the principle [“the Church has more light than I do”] and with respect to the

conclusion that it draws from the principle [“the Church is more credible than me”]?...

Since, therefore, this would lead to appalling chaos and Pyrrhonism of the most detestable kind imaginable, we must necessarily draw from this that *every particular dogma, whether it is advanced as one contained in Scripture, or whether it is proposed in some other context, is false if it is refuted by the clear and distinct notions of the natural light, principally with respect to morality.*¹⁰⁸

This brings to light a kind of skepticism that underlies the Catholic appeal to authority. The upshot of this insight comes later in the passage, when Bayle shows the self-defeating nature of this notion of reason; Bayle critiques the Catholic argument for the way of authority, and thus destabilizes the conception of reason that undergirds it. He even explicitly asserts that the “chaos” that results from such a skeptical conception of reason is “appalling.” Interestingly, though, Bayle specifies that it is “Pyrrhonism” that is “detestable” and “chaotic,” not skepticism *tout court*. Insofar as Bayle can be considered a skeptic, then, it is not Pyrrhonian skepticism that attracts him. This leaves open the possibility that Academic skepticism may yet be an acceptable way to conceive of reason for Bayle. If so, then Bayle’s skepticism would be Academic

¹⁰⁸ « Sans y penser, ils ne font qu’un grand circuit pour revenir après mille fatigues, où les autres vont tout droit. Les autres disent franchement & sans ambages, qu’il faut s’en tenir au sens qui nous paroît meilleur : mais eux ils disent qu’il s’en faut bien garder, parce que nos lumieres nous pourroient tromper, & que notre Raison n’est que ténèbres & qu’illusion ; qu’il faut donc s’en tenir au jugement de l’Eglise. N’est-ce pas revenir à la Raison ? Car ne faut-il pas que celui qui préfère le jugement de l’Eglise au sien propre, le fasse en vertu de ce raisonnement : *L’Eglise a plus de lumieres que moi, elle est donc plus croïable que moi ?* C’est donc sur ses propres lumieres que chacun se détermine ; s’il croit quelque chose comme révélé, c’est parce que son bon sens, sa lumiere naturelle, & sa Raison lui dictent que les preuves qu’elle est révélée sont bonnes. Mais où en sera-t-on, s’il faut qu’un particulier se défie de sa Raison, comme d’un principe ténébreux et illusoire ? Ne faudra-t-il pas s’en défier lors même qu’elle dira, *l’Eglise a plus de lumieres que moi, donc elle est plus croïable que moi ?* Ne faudra-t-il craindre qu’elle se trompe, & quant au principe, & quant à la conclusion qu’elle en tire ?... « Comme donc ce seroit le plus épouvantable cahos, & le Pirronisme le plus exécrationnel qui se puisse imaginer, il faut nécessairement en venir-là, *que tout dogme particulier, soit qu’on l’avance comme contenu dans l’Ecriture, soit qu’on le propose autrement, est faux, lors qu’il est réfuté par les notions claires & distinctes de la lumiere naturelle, principalement à l’égard de la Morale* » (CP I.i; OD II, 370b).

insofar as it makes use of the ancient Academic notion of *pythanon* – or, as Bayle might say, *bon sens* – in order to engage in accurate “reporting.” The above passage also points to a significant limit to this skepticism, however: the “clear and distinct notions of the natural light” with respect to morality.

Thus, a final and significant qualification of Bayle’s Academic skepticism is necessitated by Bayle’s conclusions with respect to moral truths. The ultimate conclusion that Bayle draws from the demonstration in the above passage is that “every particular dogma, whether it is advanced as one contained in Scripture, or whether it is proposed in some other context, is false if it is refuted by the clear and distinct notions of the natural light, principally with respect to morality.” This conclusion initially appears to be quite heterodox; if read in its most radical form, it seems to imply that any Christian doctrine that is refuted by reason (“the natural light”) is false. It is important, however, to read this claim more carefully. What Bayle asserts here is *not* the falsity of *any* Christian doctrine that is against reason; rather, he asserts only the falsity of *particular* dogmas that are *purported* to be in Scripture. For Bayle, the “natural light” reveals the immorality of the forced conversions for which Catholics purported to find justification in Scripture, and their immorality invalidates their purported justification. This highlights the most important consequence of the passage: that the natural light trumps the claims of dogma *principally with respect to morality*. Bayle has already shown in his rejection of *évidence* that the natural light is fallible, and can be self-contradictory in some

domains. It appears, however, that the natural light is reliable with respect to moral truths.

Bayle reiterates the reliability of the natural light with respect to moral truths consistently throughout the *Commentaire Philosophique*, unsurprising since the text is a defense of the morality of religious toleration. What is important to keep in mind, however, is that this position is consistent across other texts as well. In an extended passage from *Pensées diverses* (1683) where Bayle argues that atheists can be moral, he notes that certain moral principles are not only rational, but that moral praise and blame can be rationally assigned to those who live accordingly:

In this way, every man will recognize that it is rational to honor one's father, to observe the conventions of a contract, to help the poor, to have gratitude, etc.; [every man] will also recognize that those who practice these things are praiseworthy, and that those who do not practice them at all are blameworthy.¹⁰⁹

The context of this passage is whether or not an atheist is equipped to tell the difference between virtue and vice. The objection is that without divine direction as a guide to ethical action, the atheist has no basis for acting morally or for making moral judgments. Just before the passage cited, Bayle argues that the atheist has access to “la droite raison,” or “right reason,” and that right reason confirms these moral truths. Later on in the same work, Bayle reaffirms that “it is very easy to know that it is rational to respect one's father, to hold to one's word, to console the afflicted, to help

¹⁰⁹ « Ainsi tout homme qui connoitra qu'il est conforme à la raison d'honorer son pere, d'observer les conventions d'un contrat, d'assister les pauvres, d'avoir de la gratitude, &tc. connoitra pareillement que ceux qui pratiquent ces choses sont loüables, & que ceux qui ne les pratiquent point sont blamables » (OD III 406a).

the poor, to have gratitude for one's benefactors, etc."¹¹⁰ Significantly, these passages do not countenance any of the skeptical doubts about reason that Bayle characteristically raises; this suggests that Bayle is using a different notion of reason here.

Proof of Bayle's insistence on the universal accessibility of moral truths to reason is also found in one of the final texts of Bayle's life, *Réponse aux questions d'un provincial* (1706). In a section of the work where Bayle is responding to the position of Bernard that moral truth must be grounded in the immutable nature of an eternal and intelligent being, Bayle reaffirms his position from the *Pensées diverses*:

Let's clear away the equivocation here: If morality could only be conceived by an idea that essentially included the command of an eternal Legislator accompanied by promises and threats, it would be incontestable that atheists would not be able to judge that there was a distinction between good and evil; but if, independently of this command, one can know the conformity of virtue with right reason, and the principles of morality as one knows the principles of logic, the objection of Bernard has no force. He must then prove that, independently of this command, one can discern the rules of logic, but not of morality. Indeed, how will he prove that?¹¹¹

We can see in this passage that Bayle's position is essentially the same as his position in the *Pensées diverses*: atheists can be moral because they can "know the conformity of virtue with right reason." He concedes that if this were not true – that is, if morality

¹¹⁰ « J'ajoute qu'il est très-facile de connoître que l'on se conforme à la raison quand on respecte son pere, quand on tient ce qu'on a promis, quand on console les affligés, quand on assiste les pauvres, quand on a de la gratitude pour son bienfaiteur, &c. » (OD III 406a).

¹¹¹ « Otons les équivoques : si la moralité ne pouvoit être conçue que par une idée qui renfermât essentiellement l'ordonnance d'un Législateur éternel accompagnée de promesses & de menaces, il seroit incontestable que les Athées ne pourroient juger qu'il y ait de la distinction entre le bien & le mal moral ; mais si indépendamment de cette ordonnance l'on peut connoître la conformité de la vertu avec la droite raison, & les principes de la morale comme l'on connoît les principes de Logique, l'objection de M. Bernard n'a plus de force. Il faudra donc qu'il prouve qu'indépendamment de cette ordonnance l'on peut discerner les regles de la Logique, mais non pas les regles de la morale. Or comment prouvera-t-il cela ? » RQP III, Ch. XXIX; OD III 984a.

were only clearly conceivable through revelation – then atheists could not be moral. According to Bayle, however, “right reason” is as universal as the “principles of logic.” Bayle’s point here is not to highlight the universality of the principles of logic, but simply to note that if one is willing to countenance the authority of principles of logic, then the sort of reason at issue here – “right reason” – should enjoy the same privileges.

To sum up Bayle’s conception of reason, then, it seems clear that he has both skeptical tendencies and what we might call “common sense” tendencies. On the one hand, Bayle is a skeptic concerning the *évidence* of clear and distinct perception; that is, he does not believe we are able to derive substantive philosophical or theological truths based on reason alone. On the other hand, he does not discount the value of the process of *reasoning*, which is an essential feature of the Academic notion of integrity; the principles of logic are accepted as valid, if only because we cannot rationally question their validity, since to do so would presuppose the same principles. This is the basic notion of *bon sens*, consistent with Descartes’ use of the term: it is our ability to *reason*, as evidenced in the Stratonian’s use of *rétorsion*. Finally, over and above “principles of logic,” Bayle seems to have an additional positive commitment to basic principles of morality, identified with the deliverances of “right reason.” It is the commitment to the truth of these moral maxims that qualifies his Academic skepticism.

3.4 Conclusion

To be sure, there are problems with the straightforward identification of Bayle as an Academic skeptic; most importantly, as Bayle notes in his *DHC* article “Pyrrho,” he is willing to make what appears to be an unprincipled exception to his skepticism for the “truths of religion,” which somehow have a different epistemological status. One of the tasks of the next chapter will be to show how Bayle combines the fallibilism of Academic skepticism with the certainty of the truths of religion. Bayle’s skeptical employment of reason implies that his conception of reason is simultaneously powerful and weak. It is powerful, in the sense that it is capable of annihilating falsities and errors, but this ability to annihilate is also its Achilles heel; left unchecked, reason annihilates even itself. This conception of reason as destructive requires some sort of limit on reason’s power in order for it to function effectively as a litmus test for true propositions. Popkin simply accepts that reason is doomed to self-destruction, while Mori sees Stratonian atheism as a necessary end of the reliance on reason.

My reading argues, with Popkin, for Bayle’s affirmation of the epistemic priority of revealed truths, and for the doxastic overlap between some religious and some rational beliefs. However, Popkin would reject the assertion that Bayle allocates any independent authority to reason, or that reason has any ability to limit its own operation. On the other hand, Mori’s reading implies that Bayle would deny the epistemic priority of revealed truths, even as it allows that Bayle could affirm the existence of the doxastic overlap between religious and rational beliefs. What is

distinctive about Mori's reading of Bayle is that it requires Bayle both to accept that reason has independent epistemic authority based on *évidence*, and to deny that reason has any ability to limit its self-destructive powers.

Bayle's willingness to shift positions according to the persuasiveness of arguments is evidence that reason is more than a tool of destruction for him; it can discern the plausibility of truths, and recommend assent accordingly. What it cannot do is render a verdict on the "truths of religion." Identifying these truths and the explanation for reason's inability to analyze them is the task of the following chapter.¹¹²

¹¹² An earlier version of Chapter 3, "The Limits of Reason: Bayle's Qualified Academic Skepticism," has been published as "La philosophie comme méthodologie: la conception sceptico-rationaliste de la raison chez Bayle," *Kriterion: Revista de Filosofia* (January 2010).

Chapter 4 The Christian Mysteries at the Core of Bayle’s Philosophical Fideism

This chapter will provide an account of how Bayle reconciles his conception of the nature and function of reason with his conception of the epistemological status of religious belief. In the previous two chapters, I have argued for the minimal, though still orthodox, nature of Bayle’s theological commitments, and for a reading of Bayle’s conception of reason as a qualified form of Academic skepticism. In this chapter, I will argue that for Bayle, reason, as primarily – though not exclusively – a critical faculty, construes Bayle’s minimal theological commitments as irrational, and that it is ultimately faith that allows these principles epistemic immunity from reason’s corrosive effects.

Given Bayle’s repeated explicit affirmations of the epistemic authority of religious faith, a consistent, coherent, and charitable interpretation of Bayle must include at least the most central truths of Christian revelation as among his core principles. According to Bayle, reason does not penetrate the small set of core religious doctrines that he refers to as the “Christian mysteries.” These “Christian mysteries” are the basis of seventeenth-century theological orthodoxy, but as “mysteries,” they have an uncomfortable relationship with an overly robust conception

of reason – that is, one that sees the “mysteries” as not merely *above* reason, but *against* reason.

While Chapter Five will establish the conscience as the source of the doxastic content and the moral force of these “mysteries,” or core principles, the present chapter argues that faith is the source of the epistemic immunity of these core principles. The immunity that faith attaches to the core principles allows them to function as a kind of epistemic foundation for the operation of reason in other theological debates. So the central truths of Christian revelation are immune to the critical scrutiny of reason both because of their status as core principles (whose content comes from conscience), and because of the independent authority of faith. Conscience and faith thus serve related, though distinct, functions with respect to the core principles. In this chapter, I exposit the texts that ground the independent authority of faith, leaving the investigation of conscience until Chapter Five.¹¹³

4.1 The Structure of Bayle’s Philosophical Fideism

My reading of Bayle is a systematic way of reconciling his position as both a critical philosopher and a fideist; I will therefore refer to his position as “philosophical fideism.”¹¹⁴ Briefly, I take the basic claims of Bayle’s philosophical fideism to be the following:

¹¹³ It is important to remain clear on this distinction throughout the remainder of this chapter; unlike the quotidian usage of “faith,” I will here establish that Bayle’s use of the word “faith” primarily denotes a privileged epistemic status *vis-à-vis* the epistemic status of reason. The picture is complicated, of course, by Bayle’s usage of the term to describe particular religious traditions, but the philosophically substantive usages conform to what I have described above.

¹¹⁴ My usage of the term “fideism” conforms roughly to that of Popkin, as discussed in my Introduction, sec. B.1.

- (1) Reason can be used to criticize and to reveal error.
- (2) Reason can also be used to make tentative and fallible endorsements of philosophical conclusions.
- (3) The conclusions of reason contradict some claims of revealed theology.
- (4) Reason is not an infallible judge of truth.¹¹⁵
- (5) Faith provides epistemic immunity for the central claims of revealed theology.

The fourth claim is what makes Bayle a skeptic, and the last is what makes him a fideist, while the first and second claims are what make his fideism “philosophical.”¹¹⁶

The third claim is a denial of the dominant position of most early modern Christian philosophers that the claims of reason never contradict those of revealed theology.

Taken together, claims (1)-(5) yield a complete picture of Bayle’s philosophical fideism.

I have already established claims (1) and (2) in my discussion of Bayle’s conception of reason in Chapter Three. My specific goal in this chapter is to defend claims (3), (4), and (5) above.¹¹⁷ I will defend these claims through a close analysis of Bayle’s most important text on the topic, the *Eclaircissements* to his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1702). The *Eclaircissements*, or “Clarifications,” are Bayle’s considered responses to accusations of heterodoxy, and they represent the most direct

¹¹⁵ See the previous chapter, where I discuss the proper use of reason as showing merely what is *pythanon* (“plausible”). There is, of course, the issue of “right reason” and its endorsement of basic moral truths. These moral truths will be discussed in Chapter Five; it is important to Bayle that they have no relation to the “Christian mysteries.”

¹¹⁶ Claim (5) above is essentially the same as the (EP) thesis of Chapter 1.

¹¹⁷ I have already mounted a partial defense of claims (3) and (4) in Chapter 1 (see my discussion of (OS) with reference to (3), and my discussion of Huet’s denial of (SD) with reference to (4)), and will rely on that account to bolster my argument here.

and unequivocal statements of his own positions in his corpus.¹¹⁸ While it is important to note that Bayle's position on the reason-faith relationship is more ambiguous in later texts such as *Réponse aux questions d'un provincial* and *Entretiens de Maxime et Thémiste*, I believe that the historical importance and interpretive centrality of the "Clarifications" among Baylean texts warrants assigning a privileged place to them.¹¹⁹

4.2 The Tension: Contradictions between Claims of Reason and Claims of Revealed Theology

To understand the significance of Bayle's position on the relationship of reason and religious belief, it is important to understand the dominant model of this relationship among his contemporaries. As we saw in Chapter One, Bayle's most famous philosophical contemporaries conceived of the relationship between philosophy and theology as harmonious and complementary. For them, while truths of revelation are more authoritative than those of rational philosophy, philosophy can accommodate revealed truths because revealed truths do not contradict reason; the revealed truths that are within reason's grasp are consistent with reason, and the others

¹¹⁸ Lennon (1999) points out that the *DHC* is the only work of which Bayle ever explicitly claimed paternity. Further, the judgment of the central importance of the "Eclaircissements" is not idiosyncratic; Hubert Bost notes in the official program of the international conference "Les 'Eclaircissements' de Pierre Bayle" (2006; translation mine): "These long justificatory remarks... constitute a text the interpretation of which is definitive for the understanding of Bayle's thought... Moreover, the text of the Clarifications offers a privileged observatory to question the interpretation of previous works... and [those] of the latter part of his life.... One might say that, having arrived at [intellectual] maturity, the philosopher of Rotterdam, interrogated on the content of his *magnum opus*, delivers in these Clarifications certain interpretive keys to his thought."

¹¹⁹ Except for section 4.2, all translations of passages from the *Dictionnaire*, including passages from the Clarifications on the Pyrrhonians and on the Manicheans, are mine unless otherwise noted.

are simply beyond reason's grasp.¹²⁰ This position is not a novelty of the seventeenth century; there are many historical antecedents for this position, including Clement of Alexandria and Thomas Aquinas. By the early modern period, however, philosophical giants such as Descartes, Malebranche, and Leibniz simply took some version of it for granted, and it is not an exaggeration to say that the denial of any contradiction between reason and revelation is roughly equated with theological orthodoxy – or orthodox Catholicism, at least – and those who insist upon a conflict between the two are seen as theologically suspect.¹²¹

Bayle's insistence upon this conflict, then, is a minority position. The "Clarifications" to the second edition of his *Dictionnaire* is the text in which he highlights this tension most explicitly.¹²² In them, he paints a stark picture of the incompatibility of the "articles of the Christian faith" and the "natural light." Unlike his rationalist contemporaries, who hold that "the natural light" of reason is a manifestation of God's divine intellect, Bayle puts the two sources of truth squarely in opposition to one another:

[Many] are irritated and annoyed when they see someone affirm that all the articles of the Christian faith, maintained and opposed by the weapons of philosophy alone, do not emerge in good shape from the battle, and that there are some that give way and are forced to retire to the fortresses of Scripture and to request that in the future they have permission to arm themselves in a

¹²⁰ For Bayle's contemporaries, philosophy is roughly equivalent with "the domain of reason" and theology "the domain of faith or revelation," with a harmonious convergence of the two in the realm of natural theology. For Bayle, however, the distinction is more complex, as we shall see in this chapter.

¹²¹ This is not to say that those who hold that reason and faith coexist harmoniously affirm *everything* that philosophers assert on the basis of reason, only to say that they see no inherent conflict between reason and faith.

¹²² Little attention has been paid to the *Eclaircissements* as a unified body of work; typically, they are cited individually, as part of some larger thematic argument. Fortunately, the November 2006 conference on the *Eclaircissements* remedied this situation; the proceedings are forthcoming, and include several careful textual studies.

different way, for otherwise they would refuse to enter the fray. Those who get angry at finding themselves thus harassed in their possession of an image of complete triumph are also afraid that in admitting a kind of inferiority, religion is exposed to a total defeat, or at least a notable lessening of its certainty, and that the cause of the enemies of the Gospel is aided.... [F]ar from being a property of these truths that they conform to philosophy, it is, on the contrary, of their essence that they are incompatible with its dictates.¹²³

In addition to using the imagery of warfare to characterize the relationship between philosophy and theology, in this passage Bayle makes the extraordinary claim that it is of the very essence of the truths of the Gospel that they be incompatible with the conclusions of philosophy. While Bayle makes an exception for theological teachings that are consistent with reason (“that... can easily be reconciled with the natural light”), for example, the moral dicta of Christ in the Gospels, it looks as though the mysteries of the Gospel cannot be reconciled with reason.

The most direct evidence of Bayle’s insistence on the conflict between reason and faith comes from his infamous “Clarification on the Pyrrhonians,” where he boldly proclaims the incompatibility of philosophy and Christianity:

One must necessarily choose between philosophy and the Gospel. If you do not want to believe anything but what is evident and in conformity with the common notions, choose philosophy and leave Christianity. If you are willing to believe the incomprehensible mysteries of religion, choose Christianity and leave philosophy. For to have together self-evidence and incomprehensibility is something that cannot be.... A choice must necessarily be made (428-9).

While this quotation is admittedly a hyperbolic formulation of Bayle’s position, it nevertheless captures the basic difference between Bayle and his contemporaries: while most rationalists argue that the “mysteries of the Gospel” can be both incomprehensible to reason and consistent with it, Bayle argues that there is a

¹²³ From Popkin translation, 409-10 (“Second Clarification on the Manicheans”); all translations in Section 4.2 are his.

fundamental incompatibility between the “self-evidence” of rational truths and the “incomprehensibility” of the “mysteries of religion” – presumably here, the “Christian mysteries.” This is a radical departure from the tendency among Bayle’s contemporaries to attribute the incomprehensibility of the mysteries to their being “beyond” or “above” reason; Bayle’s position seems to be that the very notion of combining the incomprehensibility of the mysteries with the self-evidence of reason is a kind of epistemological impossibility, “something that cannot be.”

Bayle tempers this radical position slightly in several other passages in the “Clarifications,” one of which appears in the “Clarification on the Manicheans”:

[T]he mysteries of the Gospel, being of a supernatural kind, cannot and should not be at all subject to the laws of the natural light. They were not made to stand the test of philosophical disputations. Their grandeur, their sublimity, does not permit them to submit to it. It would be contrary to the nature of things for them to emerge victorious from such a combat. Their essential characteristic is to be an object of faith and not an object of knowledge. They would no longer be mysteries if reason could resolve all the difficulties concerning them. And thus, instead of finding it strange that someone admits that philosophy can attack them but not repel the attack, one ought to be scandalized if someone said the opposite. *Footnote: Observe that there is no desire here to condemn those who try to reconcile these mysteries with philosophy. Their motives can be good, and their work can sometimes be beneficial, if it has God’s blessings.* (412)

In this passage, Bayle’s explanation of the relationship between philosophy and theology initially sounds not very different from that of his contemporaries: the mysteries of the Gospel are not “subject to the laws of the natural light,” and are too “grand” and “sublime” for philosophical disputation.¹²⁴ Bayle even concedes that some of his contemporaries who attempt to reconcile theology and philosophy are

¹²⁴ In another passage from the “Clarifications” that will be discussed later, Bayle uses the imagery of a mountaintop to describe the relationship of revealed truths and philosophical ones; the revealed truths are safe on the mountaintop from the storm of philosophical disputation below.

doing work that is “beneficial.” But even in this passage, the radical nature of Bayle’s position emerges; he notes that “it would be contrary to the nature of things” for the mysteries to withstand the test of philosophical disputations, to “emerge victorious from such a combat.” This suggests that, absent any extenuating circumstances, the mysteries would be demolished by reason’s interrogation. Further, Bayle seems to emphasize that it is actually scandalous to expect philosophy to be able to repel its own criticisms of the mysteries of the Gospel; this implies, however, that the mysteries are not beyond reason, since reason is able to mount “attacks” of the mysteries. It would be foolish, Bayle argues, to think that the mysteries could survive these attacks of reason. What is perhaps most interesting about this passage, however, is that even in light of reason’s attacks, Bayle does not seem to think that the rational defenselessness of these mysteries is a particularly negative consequence. This is a surprising conclusion, but we shall see why Bayle is untroubled by the irrational status of the mysteries in the following section.

4.3 Epistemic Reliability and Authority

Bayle’s relatively blasé attitude about the defenselessness of the mysteries from reason raises an obvious, but important, question: why is the defenselessness of the mysteries from reason so unproblematic for Bayle? If this tension is ultimately irresolvable, and these mysteries truly are *against* reason rather than merely *above* reason, what epistemic status remains for the mysteries? The resources for answering these questions are found in Bayle’s conception of reason itself, and in the nature of the authority that Bayle attributes to the mysteries. Our examination of these two

issues will provide an occasion to defend claim (4) – that reason is not an infallible judge of truth – and claim (5) – that the tenets of revealed theology have ultimate epistemic authority over the claims of reason.

4.3.1 The Limits of Reason

As we saw in Chapter Three for Bayle, reason is primarily a critical faculty, useful for exposing errors and inconsistencies. Far from the rationalist conception of reason as a robust faculty that functions as a source of truths about the world and oneself, Bayle’s conception of reason is skeptical, and its positive function is limited to evaluating how “persuasive” beliefs are. As the examination of Bayle’s discussion of plastic natures in the *Continuation des Pensées Diverses* demonstrates, reason is useful for determining validity, ferreting out contradictions, performing *reductios* and other logical operations, and raising objections. It does not, however, provide either belief content or certainty regarding substantive philosophical knowledge; the most significant function that it serves is to verify that the conclusion of a valid argument is true if its premises are true – hypothetical knowledge – and to give us brute certainty about basic moral maxims through “right reason.”

Yet for Bayle, reason has a more insidious character as well: it often attempts to continue raising objections in such a way that it undoes its own salutary work. Two passages already quoted from the *Dictionnaire*¹²⁵ show that Bayle conceives of reason as a deeply corrosive force:

¹²⁵ See Chapter Three, Section 3.1.

Philosophy can be compared to some powders that are so corrosive that, after having consumed the oozing flesh of a wound, they eat away the living flesh and decay the bones, piercing them to the marrow. Philosophy first refutes errors, but if it is not stopped there, it attacks truths; and when it is left to its fantasies, it goes so far that it no longer knows where it is, and no longer finds anywhere to sit. This must be imputed to the weakness of the human mind, or to the improper usage that it makes of its supposed strengths. (“Acosta,” Rem. G)

[O]ur reason is proper only for confusing everything and for making us doubt everything: no sooner has it constructed a work, than it gives you the means to ruin it. It is a veritable Penelope, who, during the night, undoes the cloth that she had made during the day. The best usage, then, that can be made of the study of philosophy is to understand that reason is a path of mental turmoil and that we must search for another guide, which is the revealed light. (“Bunel,” Rem. E)

While the last passage is admittedly more provocative than persuasive, taken together, these passages – from the very work to which the “Clarifications” were appended – highlight the particular conception of reason that is the focus of the “Clarifications.” Reason – here “philosophy” – is indeed helpful as a purifying element in dialectic; it can “eat away” diseased argumentation, and expose chicaneries and faulty reasoning. But this purifying function quickly becomes destructive if it is unleashed on truths. This observation is important, because it means that truths, all by themselves, are just as susceptible to being razed by reason as falsehoods. According to the second passage, it is not just truths independent of reason that are imperiled by reason’s operation when it ceases to “guide” well; even truths that reason itself has painstakingly constructed and verified by its own resources are subject to its acidic dissolution.

This picture of reason is standard fare among Pyrrhonian skeptics, and it is these types of passages that have led scholars such as Richard Popkin to classify Bayle

as a “supersceptic” (2003; 283). The account of reason as the source of its own undoing is a classic Pyrrhonian narrative used to demonstrate that reason is unreliable, and that one should withhold assent from *all* propositions that reason recommends. It is important to keep in mind, however, the lessons of the previous chapter here: while a true Pyrrhonian skeptic uses reason to confound itself, Bayle seems to think that reason can function usefully when used appropriately. If Bayle accepts the skeptical picture of reason’s self-devouring tendencies, and yet allows the possibility that reason can function reliably, then he must have some way of neutralizing his own Pyrrhonian arguments concerning reason’s operation. What is it, then, that makes Bayle’s conception of reason immune to these Pyrrhonian arguments?

The answer to this question is twofold: it is both reason’s ability – established in the previous chapter– to have certainty about basic moral truths (the function of *la droite raison*), and reason’s ability to make judgments that are *pythanon* (“plausible” or “persuasive”) (the function of *le bon sens*). Reason’s access to basic moral truths is important for Bayle’s philosophical fideism because it provides a counterexample that forces a qualification of the radical Pyrrhonism in the above passages. The weakening of this radical skepticism about reason means that for Bayle, reason is not necessarily doomed to self-destruction – at least not in the moral realm. Further softening Bayle’s skepticism is reason’s ability to yield “persuasive” (*pythanon*) judgments when using *le bon sens* – “good sense,” a notion that I argue in Chapter Three tracks the Academic skeptical notion of “integrity.” When “good sense” is used in the operation of reason, it yields “plausible” conclusions – tentative conclusions of reason, arrived at with

integrity. These two functions of reason – the deliverance of the certainty of basic moral maxims via *la droite raison*, and the deliverance of “plausible” judgments via *le bon sens* – temper Bayle’s skepticism as Academic rather than Pyrrhonian.

The possibility of using of *la droite raison* to discover basic moral maxims and *le bon sens* to yield “plausible” (*pythanon*) judgments, however, still does not provide an answer to skeptical worries about the impotency of reason to deliver *certain* knowledge *outside* of the moral domain. Bayle is not unaware of this predicament, as evidenced by the end of the passage from Remark E of the “Bunel” *Dictionnaire* article quoted above. There, he suggests that a new guide is necessary, “the revealed light.” The nature and function of this “revealed light” and its interaction with reason will occupy the rest of this chapter.

4.3.2 The Independent Authority of the “Christian Mysteries”

The end of the passage from Remark E of the “Bunel” *Dictionnaire* article indicates Bayle’s proposal for a replacement “guide” for reason: the “revealed light” of faith. We shall see in this section is that the “revealed light” of faith functions as a replacement “guide” in cases where reason is unreliable or uncertain. This entails that the knowledge that is uncovered by this “revealed light” of faith – the “Christian mysteries” – is epistemically superior to the knowledge that the “natural light” of reason yields. It is the absolute reliability of the new “guide” of faith that grounds the certainty of the knowledge that the “revealed light” provides, and this certain

knowledge thus functions as an anchor for the operation of reason.¹²⁶ The revealed light of faith is more reliable than the natural light of reason, since it (the revealed light of faith) is taken to be revealed by God directly, while the natural light of reason is mediated by human nature (and thus, by human error).¹²⁷ This gives faith an epistemic certainty or “immunity” from reason that attaches to the “Christian mysteries,” or what Bayle sometimes calls “principles peculiar to the Gospel.”¹²⁸ Due to their certainty, these core principles can then function as a kind of “epistemic center” from which reason can operate.

We can already see part of the evidence for the independent authority of the mysteries in a passage from the “Clarification on the Manicheans” quoted above:

[T]he mysteries of the Gospel, being of a supernatural kind, cannot and should not be at all subject to the laws of the natural light. They were not made to stand the test of philosophical disputations. Their grandeur, their sublimity, does not permit them to submit to it. It would be contrary to the nature of things for them to emerge victorious from such a combat. Their essential characteristic is to be an object of faith and not an object of knowledge. They would no longer be mysteries if reason could resolve all the difficulties concerning them. And thus, instead of finding it strange that someone admits that philosophy can attack them but not repel the attack, one ought to be scandalized if someone said the opposite. (*op. cit.*)

Bayle here looks to ground the independent authority of the mysteries on an epistemological distinction. As we have already seen, the “mysteries of the Gospel”

¹²⁶ Ironically, Bayle asserts that reason itself recommends the path of faith over its own path: “It has pleased the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, Christians ought to say, to lead us by the path of faith, and not by the path of knowledge or disputation. They are our teachers and our directors. We cannot lose our way with such guides. And reason itself commands us to prefer them to its direction” (“Clarification on the Pyrrhonians” 642; Popkin 423).

¹²⁷ Bayle does not explicitly take up the rather obvious question of whether the “revealed light” of faith can be misinterpreted in the same way that the “natural light” of reason can. He seems to be aware of the issue, however, as evidenced by his vociferous argument against misreadings of Scripture in the *Commentaire philosophique*, among other instances; see Chapter 5 for a more extensive discussion.

¹²⁸ See, e.g., “Clarification on the Pyrrhonians” 644; Popkin 429.

cannot – and, what is even stronger, *should* not – be subjected to the “rules of the natural light”; they are too “sublime” to be considered in such a manner. But what grounds this “sublimity”? It is not *merely* an ontological distinction, based on the natural and supernatural order; rather, it is the epistemological consequences of that distinction that ground the authority of the mysteries. What are the epistemological consequences of this distinction? They are exactly what Bayle suggests implicitly in the “Bunel” passage above: knowledge that comes from a “superior” (that is, a more reliable) guide is simply better than knowledge that comes from an “inferior” (that is, a less reliable, more error-ridden) guide. To say that it is “contrary to the nature of things” that the mysteries would be victorious in a combat with reason, and then to say that the mysteries of the Gospel must not be subjected to the rules of reason, implies that the mysteries have a presumption of normative epistemological superiority.¹²⁹

This epistemological distinction becomes clearer if we examine a passage from the “Clarification on the Pyrrhonians,” immediately preceding the passage cited in section 4.2:

A true believer, a Christian, who knows the genius of his religion, does not expect either to see it conform to the aphorisms of the Lyceum, or to be able to refute the difficulties of reason by the force of reason alone. He knows very well that natural things are not proportional to supernatural ones, and that if one were to ask a philosopher to put on the same level, and in a perfect harmony, the mysteries of the Gospel and the axioms of the Aristotelians, one would be demanding of him that which the nature of things does not admit.

¹²⁹ It is essential to note that this does not in any way imply that there are *no* elements of revelation that are part of the “nature of things,” the natural order, and therefore the domain of reason; the moral dicta of Christ in the Gospels, for example, are accessible to reason. But the central truths of the Gospel – the “mysteries” – belong to the supernatural order.

According to this passage, there is a disproportionality between natural things and supernatural ones; there is a difference of “level,” a kind of “[dis]harmony.” Given the examples that Bayle uses here, we can infer that the “mysteries of the Gospel” belong to the supernatural order, while the “axioms of the Aristotelians” functions as an archetype of “natural things.” While it is true that this is a kind of ontological distinction, both of Bayle’s examples are *doxastic* – that is, both examples deal with beliefs on different “levels,” which I read as delineating levels of belief. So for Bayle, to say that there is a disproportionality between these levels of belief implies that it would be contrary to “the nature of things” for these two sets of beliefs to be epistemically equal. An obvious implication of this passage, then, is that this disproportionality yields a similar epistemic inequality in the level of certainty of these beliefs.

In a subsequent passage from the same “Clarification on the Pyrrhonians,” Bayle finally reveals which set of beliefs have the epistemic upper hand. The language he uses there suggests that the “principles that are peculiar to the Gospel” – a synonym for “the mysteries of the Gospel” – have an independent source of epistemic authority:

[A] true Christian, well versed in the characteristics of supernatural truths and firm on the principles that are peculiar to the Gospel, will only laugh at the subtleties of the philosophers... Faith will place him above the regions where the tempests of disputations reign. He will stand on a peak, from which he will hear below him the thunder of the arguments and distinctions; and he will not be disturbed at all by this – a peak, which will be for him the real Olympus of the poets and the real temple of the sages, from which he will see in perfect

tranquility the weakness of reason and the meanderings of mortals who only follow that guide.¹³⁰

Bayle describes philosophy as “the region... where the tempests of disputations reign,” implying that these disputations are interminable, and ultimately provide only “the thunder of arguments and distinctions,” without certainty. He asserts that philosophical argument – based on the “axioms of the Aristotelians” – is unable ever to yield the “tranquil” certainty of the “supernatural truths and... principles that are peculiar to the Gospel.” Bayle uses the metaphor of a mountaintop peak to describe the place of the “principles peculiar to the Gospel” *vis-à-vis* philosophical arguments, implying that these principles enjoy the privilege of an epistemic authority that far outstrips whatever authority the “weak” guide of reason might claim for itself.

It is important again to recognize that Bayle’s claim that reason is a “weak” guide is consistent with his Academic skeptical conception of reason. Bayle’s metaphor of reason as a guide is quite instructive: While reason may not be able to show you the way on its own, and may very well get you lost should you decide to trust its directions only, it can function quite well *if* it has a map; it can provide you with a quick, accurate route, and can tell you when you have made a wrong turn. The claim, then, is not that reason is unreliable full stop, but only that the certainty of the mysteries is what should provide the “polar star” (as Bayle says earlier in this “Clarification”) of its operation. It is here that Bayle’s Academic skeptical conception of reason becomes useful; with the certainty of the mysteries as the “polar star” of its

¹³⁰ 644; Trans. Popkin, 429.

operation, *le bon sens* can deliver judgments that are not only “plausible,” but based on certainties that *le bon sens* by itself is incapable of producing.

4.4 The Domain of Faith’s Epistemic Authority

Before we go on in Section 4.5 to examine the ground of the certainty of the mysteries, an important question to answer in order to fill in the picture of Bayle’s “philosophical fideism” concerns the domain of these mysteries, the “principles peculiar to the Gospel.” The previous passages from the “Clarification on the Pyrrhonians” make it clear that Bayle means to assign ultimate epistemic authority to faith, but how far does this authority extend? It is here that one must consider Bayle’s use of reason in theological arguments. Insofar as Bayle is willing to use reason to criticize theological arguments, he is limiting the domain of the “principles peculiar to the Gospel,” for if the epistemic authority of these principles is higher than that of reason, then they should not be subject to reason’s criticisms. Anything that Bayle uses his reason to criticize, then, must fall outside of the domain of these core principles.

One example of Bayle’s use of reason in theological argument is his *Pensées Diverses* (1683), written to dispel superstition about astronomical phenomena. Throughout this work, Bayle makes a sustained argument that atheists can be morally upright and that many Christians are not. He cites as an example of morally lax Christians a group of German monks who were allowed concubines so long as they paid an annual tribute to their prelate:

[I] am right to say that religion is not a brake capable of restraining our passions. Indeed, in this case the Christian religion is so incapable of moderating incontinence that it sees itself forced to sacrifice one group of women to save the others, and to avoid a greater crime (avarice) which has nevertheless become very common.¹³¹

Bayle's conclusion from this concrete instance of "incontinence" (sexual misbehavior) among a Christian community that explicitly identifies such behavior as transgressive according to their own standards of sin is that theological beliefs cannot guide moral action. He also finds evidence of virtue among the ancient Epicureans:

[M]any praiseworthy and upright actions were observed among the Epicureans, which they performed without fear of punishment, and in which they sacrificed utility and desire to virtue. Reason dictated to the ancient sages that the good must be done for the love of itself, and that virtue must be held as its own reward, and that only a vicious man abstains from evil because he fears punishment.¹³²

From the existence of atheists (Epicureans) who act morally, Bayle concludes that to believe in a god who exacts punishment on evildoers and bestows rewards on the upright – which includes belief in the Judeo-Christian God – is not necessarily to act morally. Bayle uses these examples of morally upright atheists and morally corrupt Christians not only to make theological points, but also to represent a positive use of reason: he establishes that both atheists and Christians have access to ideas of virtue as the rational basis of moral conduct, even though as a matter of fact humans are primarily driven by passions. Bayle's destructive use of reason to criticize

¹³¹ “[J]’ai eu raison de dire, que la Religion n’est pas un frein capable de retenir nos passions. En effet, voilà la Religion Chretienne si peu capable de modérer l’incontinence, qu’on s’est vû forcé de lui sacrifier une partie des femmes, afin de sauver l’autre, & d’éviter un plus grand crime, qui n’a pas laissé néanmoins de devenir très-commun” (PD §165 ; 105b, OD III).

¹³² “[O]n a vû faire aux Epicuriens plusieurs actions louables & honnêtes, dont ils se pouvoient dispenser sans craindre aucune punition, & dans lesquelles ils sacrifioient l’utilité & la volupté à la vertu. La raison a dicté aux anciens Sages, qu’il falait faire le bien pour l’amour du bien même, & que la vertu se devoit tenir à elle-même lieu de récompense, & qu’il n’appartenoit q’à [sic] un méchant homme, de s’abstenir du mal par la crainte du châtement” (PD §178 ; 114a, OD III).

irresponsible theology, and his constructive use of reason to develop the concept of moral virtue show that reason has epistemic authority in the domain of philosophy, and can function critically in the domain of rational theology to point out interpretive errors.

Another example of Bayle's use of reason in theological argument is found in his *Commentaire philosophique* (1686), which is a commentary on Luke 14:23, where Jesus uses the phrase "compel them to enter the fold." This verse was often interpreted by Catholics as a command to force conversions to Catholicism, and was a popular justification of the religious persecution in France. In this work, Bayle engages in a sustained argument that includes a reinterpretation of the passage from Luke that makes clear the need for religious toleration, not only as a demand of morality, but also as a particular duty of those practicing the Christian faith. Bayle uses reason to criticize the improper interpretation of Scripture. Bayle's primary use of reason in this theological debate is to introduce a hermeneutic principle that he calls a "principle of the natural light," which is "that every literal meaning that contains the obligation to commit crimes is false."¹³³ While he also cites Augustine as an authority in support of this principle, he goes on to defend the supremacy of the "clear and distinct light that illuminates all men"¹³⁴ and counsels us to "never lose from view the natural light, which is that which comes to us in order to form propositions to do this or that in relation to Morality."¹³⁵

¹³³ CP I.1; 367a, OD II.

¹³⁴ CP I.1; 368a, OD II.

¹³⁵ CP I.1; 369a, OD II.

These examples show that not all theological teachings are beyond dispute. Exactly which doctrines *do* get the distinction of “Christian mysteries,” however, is a difficult question, since Bayle never provides an exhaustive list of them. The only guideline by which to construct a list of such mysteries is to examine the theological positions *against which* Bayle argues, so as to rule out some theological doctrines, and then to examine the remaining Christian doctrines to see which ones are accepted by both Catholics and Protestants. As we shall see, this leaves only the most central claims of the Christian faith, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, the dual nature of Christ, and the resurrection of Jesus. Bayle argues vociferously and at length against the Socinians, a sect that denied the doctrines of the Trinity and the divine nature of Christ (Rem. B, “Socinus (Marianus)”).¹³⁶ This is evidence that Bayle does not consider antitrinitarianism or the denial of Christ’s divine nature to be compatible with belief in the Christian mysteries. Perhaps the most convenient summary of doctrines accepted by all major branches of seventeenth-century Christianity is the Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed was produced by the Council of Nicea in 325 in order to define the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy in response to the rise of Arianism, the doctrine that Christ was not an eternal, uncreated being. The definition of orthodoxy, according to the creed, includes the affirmation of such truths as the triune nature of God, the dual nature of Christ, and the resurrection of Jesus.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ See also *Commentaire philosophique* I:1 367b & 368.

¹³⁷ The Nicene Creed also contains other affirmations that are equally central to Christianity, but are not distinctive to Christianity, or even *necessarily* contrary to reason, such as the role of God as creator of the universe, an assertion that Judaism, Islam, and deism all accept (though of course Stratonians would challenge this).

The Nicene Creed, then, is perhaps the closest approximation to Bayle's conception of the "Christian mysteries" that are outside the domain of reason. The only epistemic authority of these doctrines is that of faith; for Bayle, however, that is sufficient to establish their certainty. As discussed above in section 4.3.2, since the epistemic authority of faith is grounded in the immediacy of the "supernatural light," the Christian mysteries are absolutely certain, even more so than the truths of reason which are perceived most "clearly and distinctly," as many of Bayle's rationalist contemporaries claim. Further, for Bayle, not only are these truths absolutely certain, but they are true in spite of reason's claims to the contrary. Bayle uses the Trinity and the Incarnation as examples of Christian mysteries that are true in spite of violating principles of reason. In the case of the Trinity, although the principle of contradiction entails that one and one and one add up to three, and not one, the mystery of the Trinity entails that three persons nevertheless constitute one God. In the case of the Incarnation, although one principle known by the natural light is that a single entity cannot have more than one essence, the mystery of the Incarnation entails that the same entity – the second person of the Trinity – has both a human and a divine essence simultaneously. Bayle addresses these two doctrines explicitly at the beginning of the

Commentaire philosophique:

God forbid that I should extend the jurisdiction of the natural light and the principles of metaphysics as far as the Socinians do, when they propose that every meaning given to Scripture that does not conform to this light and to these principles is to be rejected, and who, in virtue of this maxim, refuse to

believe in the Trinity and the Incarnation: No! No, this is not what I propose, without bounds or limits.¹³⁸

Notice, importantly, that Bayle does not reject “the natural light” completely; in fact, the first chapter of the *Commentaire philosophique* is itself a defense of the use of the “natural light” in the interpretation of Scripture. So this does not invalidate the principle of contradiction wholesale; it simply means that, in the domain of these Christian mysteries, reason is not applicable.

4.5 Faith as Certainty

We have seen that Bayle argues aggressively for the epistemic authority of the Christian mysteries as against the principles of reason, even as he maintains an obvious regard for reason in the domain of moral truths. What is it, then, that provides such certainty and authority to these mysteries for Bayle? The intuitive answer is obvious: faith. What faith *is*, however, is less obvious. One place to begin to explore Bayle’s conception of faith is to look at the ecumenical conception of faith common to Catholic and Protestant philosophers in the seventeenth century. The most theologically uncontroversial conception of faith – one on which seventeenth-century Catholics and Protestants could agree – can be found in the New Testament letter to the Hebrews (11:1, 3; RSV)¹³⁹:

¹³⁸ “A Dieu ne plaise que je veuille étendre, autant que font les Sociniens la jurisdiction de la lumiere naturelle, & des principes Métaphysiques, lors qu’ils prétendent que tout sens donné à l’Ecriture qui n’est pas conforme à cette lumiere & à ces principes-là est à rejeter, & qui en vertu de cette maxime refusent de croire la Trinité & l’Incarnation: Non non, ce n’est pas ce que je prétens sans bornes et sans limites” (CP I.1; 367b, ODII).

¹³⁹ The authorship of this letter is disputed.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.... By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear.

This conception of faith is a merely nominal one, since it does not speak to whether or not faith “assures” or “convinces” in a manner that is contrary either to reason or to the senses; it remains neutral on this question.¹⁴⁰

For Bayle and his more philosophically inclined contemporaries, faith includes not only religious belief itself, but also the certitude that attends such beliefs. Bayle addresses this issue explicitly in a passage from the “Clarification on the Manicheans” in his *Dictionnaire*:

This passage from St. Paul, ‘We walk by faith, and not by sight,’ alone should suffice to convince us that there is nothing to gain from one philosopher to another for the person who undertakes either to prove the mysteries of the Christian religion or to take the defensive position. For here is what the difference between the faith of a Christian and the knowledge of a philosopher consists in. This faith produces a perfect certitude, but its object will never be evident. Knowledge, on the other hand, produces together both complete evidence of the object and full certainty of conviction. If a Christian then undertakes to maintain the mystery of the Trinity against a philosopher, he would oppose a nonevident objection to evident objections. Would this not be to fight blindfolded and with hands tied while having as an antagonist a man who can make use of all his faculties? If it were the case that the Christian could answer all the objections raised by the philosopher without making use of anything but the principles of the natural light, it would not be true, as St. Paul affirms, that we walk by faith and not by sight. Knowledge, and not divine faith, would be the Christian’s share.¹⁴¹

There is much of interest in this passage, but it reveals two very important features of Bayle’s conception of faith. First, walking by faith is contrasted to walking by sight.

A hasty reading of this contrast might lead one to infer that faith is therefore blind in

¹⁴⁰ There are, of course, many different treatments of the nature of faith; see, e.g., Chapter 4 of Richard Swinburne’s *Faith and Reason* (OUP, 1981) for a nice taxonomy. Swinburne’s distinctions, however, are orthogonal to the ones that are of interest in this chapter.

¹⁴¹ Trans. Popkin 414-5.

some sense. However, another possible construal of this contrast is that just as sight functions as a crucial guide in allowing us to walk, faith plays a similar role when sight is either unavailable or unreliable as a guide. Second, even though Bayle consistently contrasts faith with knowledge in this passage, he nevertheless ascribes certitude to both. The relevant distinction between faith and knowledge for Bayle is not at the level of certainty, but rather at the level of content: objects of knowledge are *évident* – that is, perceived clearly and distinctly – while objects of faith are not.

There are two elements of this conception of faith that make it particularly robust epistemologically. First, faith includes not just mere belief, but belief with superadded conviction, usually described as certainty.¹⁴² Second, faith confers a kind of epistemic immunity on the content of what is believed. Insofar as the certainty of the objects of faith is grounded in faith itself, the objects of faith are immune to refutation by reason; the only possible opening for rational investigation of religious beliefs, then, would be if the beliefs in question were not, in fact, grounded in faith, but rather in desires, emotions, passions, or some other non-rational epistemically relevant attitude. In cases where religious belief is not grounded in faith, the beliefs in question are not “objects of faith,” but rather objects of some other attitude that does not confer certainty on the belief. One might desire, hope, or wish for heaven to exist in the afterlife; but if one “has faith” in the existence of heaven in the afterlife, “having

¹⁴² There are many potential problems in using the word “certainty” to describe the conviction that accompanies faith, not the least of which is that “certainty” typically implies some sort of objective truth claim. Using “conviction,” however, fails to capture the epistemic import of faith, namely, that it functions in a justificatory role for religious belief (for better or worse). Also, since Bayle here uses the word *certitude* of faith, I will follow his usage.

faith” denotes a certainty that is not present in the attitudes of desiring, hoping, or wishing.

One final, but absolutely crucial, point is that even assuming an epistemically robust conception of faith, the doxastic content of that faith is indeterminate. This is important because it means that despite all of its other epistemic functions, faith can never serve as a *source* of belief; ultimately, it is devoid of content. This implies, somewhat counterintuitively, that one could be, for example, a “faithful” rationalist; if one believed that reason were the only true source of knowledge in the world, and had certainty about that belief, but could not rationally justify it, the label of “fideistic rationalist” would be accurate. This is admittedly a hyperbolic case, but it is meant to emphasize the purely formal nature of faith; in contrast to the vulgar use of the term “faith” as a particular system of religious claims, this purely formal and epistemological conception of faith provides no substantive belief content. For Bayle, this means that while the “mysteries of the Gospel” enjoy epistemic privilege as a result of faith, faith cannot function as an explanation of their *content*; the *doxa* of the mysteries must come from elsewhere.

This purely formal and epistemological conception of faith leads naturally to the question: if faith only provides epistemic privilege to these “core mysteries” without providing the content, then what *does* provide the content? In the following

chapter, I will argue that for Bayle, the conscience provides both the doxastic content and the moral force behind these core beliefs.¹⁴³

¹⁴³ An earlier version of Chapter 4, “The Christian Mysteries at the Core of Bayle’s Philosophical Fideism,” has been accepted for publication as “La foi et la croyance chez Pierre Bayle,” *Doxa: Études sur les formes et la construction de la croyance* (ed. Pascale Hummel), and will appear later this year.

Chapter 5 The Role of Conscience in Bayle’s Philosophical Fideism

This chapter will explore the role of conscience in Bayle’s philosophical fideism. In Chapter 4, I argued that Bayle’s position is that the core principles of faith – what Bayle refers to as the “Christian mysteries” – are immune to reason’s critical investigation. I established the epistemic immunity of the core principles to reason by arguing that the independent authority of faith is the source of this epistemic immunity. In this chapter, I will argue that for Bayle, it is conscience that provides the doxastic content and moral force of the core principles. I will also show that a crucial element of Bayle’s conception of conscience is that it can be mistaken; that is, the conscience can cause one to believe things that are in fact false. I will then demonstrate that this conception of the “erring conscience” is consistent with Bayle’s philosophical fideism, and is ultimately what grounds his defense of religious toleration.

In the “Clarifications” to his famous *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1702), Bayle claims that the Christian mysteries have an epistemic authority that is rooted in the “supernatural light” of faith rather than the evidence of reason. Yet in his earlier works, *Nouvelles lettres de l’auteur de la Critique générale de l’Histoire du calvinisme* (1685) and *Commentaire philosophique* (1687-88), he argues that the “natural light”

of reason demands toleration of those whose religious beliefs, rooted in conscience, require the denial of these mysteries. How can Bayle simultaneously promote the authority of the supernatural light of faith, while arguing that the natural light of reason dictates toleration of those whose conscience requires the negation of the conclusions of the supernatural light of faith?

Through an examination of Bayle's grounding of religious toleration in his doctrine of the erring conscience, I argue that this doctrine is in fact consistent with an interpretation of Christian mysteries as Bayle's religious first principles – if we assume that their authority comes not only from *faith*, but also from *conscience*.¹⁴⁴ While faith provides epistemic *authority*, conscience provides doxastic *content* and *moral* authority. If Bayle's affirmation of the authority of Christian mysteries as independent from reason is consistent with his doctrine of the erring conscience, then this greatly increases the significance of Bayle's doctrine of the erring conscience. If the content of all religious first principles – including Christian mysteries – comes from conscience, whose moral authority is absolute, then reason, though still able to function critically in examining religious claims, would be impotent to mitigate the rights and duties obtained by the most basic claims of religion. One cannot in good conscience, therefore, be intolerant of those who articulate alternative religious "core principles" since their doxastic source and moral force are from the conscience itself. Since faith is the true light of divine revelation, this fact about its origin accounts for its epistemic authority. Yet whether or not one has received faith – that is, whether or

¹⁴⁴ Any moral authority would of course not come from faith, but rather from conscience.

not one's conscience is "truly" illuminated, as we will see later – the moral maxims given by "right reason" govern the actions of every conscience, erring or accurate. However, it is not "right reason" that grounds the duties and rights of conscience, but rather one's being in "good faith," having examined one's conscience to the extent that one is able.

We shall proceed, first by looking at the ways that Bayle characterizes conscience; second, by examining the duties and rights that attend conscience; third, by attending to Bayle's doctrine of the erring conscience; and finally, by establishing how and why the doctrine of the erring conscience grounds Bayle's defense of religious toleration. This process will make clear how reading Bayle as a philosophical fideist, with the core principles having the epistemic authority of faith and the "persuasion" of conscience behind them, provides the most consistent ground for Bayle's defense of religious toleration. In each of these steps, we will revisit many of the same passages, each time with a slightly different focus.

The notion of *conscience* – a brief semantic note

Before examining the role of conscience in Bayle's philosophical fideism, it is important to clarify the notion of *conscience* itself, and in what sense Bayle is making use of this notion, in both standard and nonstandard ways. The French term *conscience* is derived from the Latin *conscientia*, which can be translated as "knowledge," "awareness," or "conscience," depending on the context. In Bayle's time, as in contemporary French, *conscience* retained a similar semantic duality to its Latin cognate: it includes both an epistemic or doxastic component ("I am conscious"

– in French, *conscient* – “of his desire to depart” has an equivalent meaning to “I know that he desires to depart”) as well as a moral or prescriptive component (the standard English usage of “conscience,” e.g., “Always let your conscience be your guide”). When examining the notion of *conscience* in the works of Bayle, then, it is important not to assume in advance that he is making reference merely to the prescriptive component or to the doxastic component of *conscience*; both connotations of the term must be considered, with careful attention to the context of usage and to the possibility of multiple meanings and *double entendre*, of which Bayle is a master.¹⁴⁵

5.1 Bayle’s conception of conscience

Bayle addresses the issue of conscience as early as 1675, in his lecture notes from the philosophy courses that he taught at Sedan. In the section of his course on morality, Bayle makes the following remark about conscience:

[The conscience] cannot be a legitimate rule of moral goodness, unless it is rid of prejudices and errors; for the superstitious man feels no less pricking of conscience when he does something that he is falsely persuaded to be illicit than if he in fact violates the natural law. However, you would be wrong to conclude from this that this act, considered in itself, does not conform to right reason (*la droite raison*). I say, considered in itself; for if the act is considered insofar as it is done by a man full of certain opinions, it is possible that it is a bad act, although considered in itself, it would be a legitimate one With respect to a heretic who falsely believes that a particular act is licit and who commits it without a reluctant conscience, his action is bad and contrary to

¹⁴⁵ Gianluca Mori has a somewhat helpful discussion of terminology on pp. 297-8 of his chapter on conscience and toleration in *Bayle philosophe* (1999); he specifically mentions the multiplicity of meaning, and notes that Malebranche is one of the first philosophers to use the term “conscience” to denote knowledge by *sentiment intérieur* (298). Labrousse (1964), Rex (1965), and Mori all note the influence of Malebranche on Bayle, and on the usage of the term “conscience” in the *Commentaire philosophique* in particular.

right reason, because the act is done with an erring conscience, even though it conforms to the man's conscience.¹⁴⁶

Since this is a basic course in morality, we can assume that Bayle would only address what he considered to be the most important elements of conscience. It appears, then, that the most crucial features of conscience – the ones that he wanted his students to remember, in any case – are the following. First, the conscience can be affected by “prejudices & errors,” and unless it is rid of those, it cannot function as a moral guide. Relatedly, a conscience can be falsely persuaded of the licitness or illicitness of a particular action; presumably, this is a result of the “prejudices and errors” of conscience that Bayle mentions above. Finally, a person whose conscience is falsely persuaded can still commit acts that are in conformity with “right reason,” even though her erring conscience is telling her that such acts are illicit. Similarly, a person who commits a wrongful act deemed by his erring conscience to be licit is still acting against “right reason,” despite the conformity with conscience.

This early remark by Bayle is important, because it points towards all of the major elements that Bayle will develop later with respect to the conscience – perhaps most significantly, it provides a straightforward account of the relationship between conscience and “right reason.” Bayle will later defend the duties and rights of the

¹⁴⁶ « Pour ce qui est la conscience, il faut observer qu'elle ne peut être une règle légitime de la bonté morale, à moins qu'elle ne soit dégagée des préjugés & des erreurs ; car le superstitieux ne sent pas moins les remords de sa conscience, lors qu'il fait quelque chose qu'il se persuade faussement être un crime, que si en effet il viole le droit naturel. Cependant vous auriez tort d'en conclure que cet acte considéré en lui-même n'est pas conforme à la droite raison. Je dis considéré en lui-même ; car si on le considère entant que fait par un homme imbu de certaines opinions, il se peut qu'il soit mauvais, quoique considéré en lui-même, il soit légitime.... Quant à un Hérétique qui croit faussement qu'un certain acte est licite, & qui le commet sans remords, son action est mauvaise & contraire à la droite raison, parce qu'elle est faite avec une conscience erronée, bien qu'elle soit conforme à la conscience de cet homme. » (*Système de Philosophie*, « Cours Morale » ; OD IV, 263b). Original orthography is preserved in all French quotations, and translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

erring conscience; however, he never wavers from the distinction between conscience and “right reason.” While conscience delivers verdicts on the morality of particular actions by particular individuals, “right reason” is the ultimate arbiter of morality *in general*. This provides a significant external check on the “instincts” that drive the “force” and “persuasion” of conscience. We will return to this issue at the end of this chapter, after exploring the other complexities of conscience.

While Bayle touches briefly on the notion of conscience in his *Système de Philosophie* above, the two primary works in which he develops his account at length are *Nouvelles Lettres de l'auteur de la Critique générale de l'Histoire du calvinisme* (1685) and *Commentaire philosophique* (1686).¹⁴⁷ Not coincidentally, both works were written at the time of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, a royal decree withdrawing political and legal protection from the French Calvinist minority that had been extended by Henry IV in 1598. The *Nouvelles Lettres* elaborate the concerns raised in Bayle’s *Critique générale de l'Histoire du calvinisme* (1682), an analysis of Louis Maimbourg’s *L'Histoire du calvinisme* (1682) that pointed out instances of inaccuracy and anti-Calvinist bias. The *Commentaire philosophique*, however, is Bayle’s most systematic treatment of the question of religious toleration. In it, he argues against the use of Scripture to compel religious conversions, and defends a principle according to which any interpretation of Scripture that requires one to commit crimes is false.

¹⁴⁷ Bayle mentions conscience briefly in letters 13, 20, & 21 of his *Critique générale*, but the treatment is extended in the *Nouvelles Lettres*.

One aspect of conscience that Bayle emphasizes early on is its persuasive power and instinctual nature. In the *Critique générale*, Bayle calls conscience “the force of persuasion that makes us act, and not the reasons that we have to be forcefully persuaded.”¹⁴⁸ Bayle adds in the *Nouvelles Lettres* that this persuasive power is characteristic of both the accurate conscience, the conscience that is “truly persuaded,” and the “erring” conscience, the conscience that is “falsely persuaded”: “Those who are falsely persuaded that a particular doctrine is true are just as obligated to love it, defend it, and make it flourish, as if they were truly persuaded of it.”¹⁴⁹ This association of conscience and persuasion is consistent with Bayle’s picture of conscience as the determiner of instinct: “If we are more obligated to act according to the instincts of the erring conscience than according to the laws of absolute truth that we do not know, it is evident that the error clothed in truth in our soul acquires the right to make us do the same actions as the truth would command us.”¹⁵⁰ This text will become relevant in our discussion of the duties and rights of conscience in sec. 5.2, and of the erring conscience in sec. 5.3, but here it suffices to note that the conscience – or at least, the “erring” conscience – appears to determine instincts, and the instincts of conscience are in contrast to the “laws of absolute truth that we do not

¹⁴⁸ « C’est la force de la persuasion qui nous fait agir, et non pas les raisons que nous avons d’être fortement persuadez » (*CG* II, Letter 20; *OD* II: 86).

¹⁴⁹ « [C]eux qui se persuadent à tort qu’une certaine doctrine est véritable, sont aussi obligez de l’aimer, de la soutenir, & de la faire fleurir, que s’ils en étoient justement persuadez » (*NLCHC* *OD* II: 223b).

¹⁵⁰ « Si l’on est plus obligé d’agir selon les instincts de la conscience erronée, que selon les loix de la vérité absoluë, & que l’on ne connoît point, il est évident que l’erreur travestie en vérité dans notre ame acquiert le droit de nous faire faire les mêmes actions, que la vérité nous commanderoit » (*NLCHC* *OD* II: 228a).

know.” This implies that, unlike the unknown abstractions of “the laws of absolute truth,” the instincts of conscience are both particular to, and known to, the individual.

Conscience also functions for Bayle as a “touchstone” of something outside of the individual. Bayle is inconsistent in his explanations of what the conscience is a touchstone of; he proposes several candidates in the *Commentaire philosophique*. Bayle states in part eight of *CP* that conscience is a kind of recognition of the voice of God inside one’s heart: “Every honor rendered to conscience, each submission to its judgments and to its rulings, shows that we respect the eternal law and the divinity whose voice we recognize in the tribunal of the heart.”¹⁵¹ This is, however, the strongest statement of the connection of conscience to any force outside of the individual; more often in the *CP*, Bayle refers to conscience as a kind of test or guide for more abstract notions, such as truth: “Conscience was given to us in order to be the touchstone of truth, which we are commanded to know and love.”¹⁵² This gloss on conscience is compatible with conscience being the “voice of God”; however, notice that Bayle simply states the original intention behind conscience – to function as the “touchstone of truth.” He leaves open (or at least ambiguous) here the possibility that conscience may not *actually* be functioning as the touchstone of truth that it was intended to be. This is consistent with Bayle’s affirmation in his moral lectures that conscience can be affected by “prejudices and errors,” which would presumably derail

¹⁵¹ « [T]out hommage rendu à la conscience, toute soumission à ses jugements et à ses arrêts, marque qu’on respecte la loi éternelle et la Divinité dont on reconnoit la voix dans la tribunal de son cœur » (II:8 ; 424a, OD II) ; see also 384b for similar language. Labrousse (1964) and Rex (1965) read this as an insistence upon the “sacred vertical relation [between man and his Creator]” (Labrousse 575) and the “voice of God, so far as [man] can tell” (Rex 178).

¹⁵² « ...[L]a conscience nous a été donnée pour la pierre de touche de la vérité dont la connoissance et l’amour nous est commandée... » (CP II.10; 437b, OD II).

the ability of the conscience to discern truth; we will have more to say about this in sec. 5.3. More characteristic of Bayle is his description of conscience as a touchstone of appropriate conduct: “God, having united our soul to a body... gave it a guide as a touchstone, in order to discern that which is appropriate among this rabble of objects and different dogmas; this touchstone is the conscience, and the interior sentiment of this conscience, and its full and whole conviction, is the particular character of conduct to which each one must hold.”¹⁵³ While Bayle still describes the conscience as “God-given,” it here serves the purpose of discernment among “objects and dogmas” – no mention of truth *per se*. Further, the “interior sentiment” of conscience, which is a kind of knowledge, is where the “touchstone” becomes concrete; it is this sentiment that directs the individual towards appropriate conduct.

A “touchstone” is not the only metaphor that Bayle uses to describe the conscience; he more frequently refers to the conscience as a kind of “light.”¹⁵⁴ In the *Nouvelles lettres*, Bayle asserts that “it is an incomparably worse sin to act against the lights of one’s conscience than to act against laws of which one is ignorant; therefore a soul that finds itself in the state of perplexity discussed by the author is obligated to follow the lights of his [i.e., the soul’s] conscience.”¹⁵⁵ We will return to the notion of the obligations of conscience in 5.2; it is enough here to note that the conscience is

¹⁵³ « ... Dieu aiant uni notre ame à un corps... lui a donné un guide & comme une pierre de touche, pour discerner ce qui lui seroit propre parmi cette cohue d’objets & de dogmes diférens ; que cette pierre de touche est la conscience, & que le sentiment intérieur de cette conscience, & sa conviction pleine & entiere, est le caractere certain de la conduite que chacun doit tenir » (CP II.10; 441a, OD II).

¹⁵⁴ The reader is right to hear Cartesian undertones in this description of conscience; cf. Ryan 2009.

¹⁵⁵ « Or c’est un péché incomparablement plus grand d’agir contre les lumieres de sa conscience que d’agir contre des loix que l’on ignore ; Donc une ame qui se trouve dans cet état de perplexité dont parle l’Auteur est obligée de suivre plutôt les lumieres de sa conscience » (*NLCHC* OD II: 227b); see also CP II.8 ; OD II 425a: « [T]oute action qui est faite contre les lumières de la conscience est essentiellement mauvaise » ; *et passim*.

equated with a means of finding one's way, of seeing a path of action that one should take. We also learn in the *Nouvelles lettres* that the light of conscience is not always accurate: "So having three [possible] positions to adopt for a man who is firmly persuaded of a heresy – (1) to follow the false 'lights' of his conscience; (2) to do exactly the opposite [of his conscience]; and (3) to hold in suspense – it happens that the first is the least bad [option] of all..."¹⁵⁶ Bayle here highlights the possibility of a conscience providing "false light" – conscience can "illuminate poorly," or lead astray. What is instructive in this particular passage is the example Bayle uses of a conscience "illuminating falsely": a heretic. Bayle's use of belief as a domain in which the conscience can provide "false light" means that Bayle is conceiving of the conscience as being not only a guide to *action*, but also a guide to *belief*. This means that for Bayle, conscience has both a moral and a doxastic function.

Bayle maintains this dual function of the "lights" of conscience in his *chef d'oeuvre*, the *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697/1702). As is his fashion in the *DHC*, Bayle summarizes a Dutch dispute on the issue of conscience, and then provides his own commentary on the matter:

This last question reminds me of some writings that appeared in Holland some time ago on the rights of the erring conscience. It was proven in them, in a compellingly demonstrative manner, that every action done against the lights of conscience is essentially bad, and it must necessarily and indispensably be avoided; [and] that those who wanted to combat this doctrine have fallen into the fearful sentiment '*that one need not always act according to the lights of one's conscience,*' from which it follows that one sometimes does a good

¹⁵⁶ « De sorte qu'y ayant trois partis à prendre, pour un homme qui est fermement persuadé d'une Hérésie : le premier, celui de suivre les fausses lumieres de la conscience ; le second, celui de faire tout le contraire, & le troisieme, celui de demeurer en suspens, il se trouve que le premier est le moins mauvais de tous : donc on est obligé de le prendre préféablement aux deux autres ; donc on a un droit légitime de le faire » (*NLCHC* OD II : 228a).

action in acting against the lights of one's conscience. [This is a] monstrous doctrine, which upends all morality, and in comparison with which the most extreme probabilism is an innocent sentiment.¹⁵⁷

This passage has much to add to our discussion of the duties and rights of the conscience in the next section, but here we need only note that Bayle emphasizes the moral element of the lights of conscience. The lights of conscience recommend particular actions, and an individual then chooses to act in conformity with, or contrary to, what the lights of conscience have “illuminated.”

In an article on the heretic Arius, Bayle again emphasizes the doxastic dimension of the lights of conscience: “I cannot understand why one must commit crimes against heretical teachers; they [merely] make use of a method that is proportionate to simple minds in order to instruct them [i.e., the simple minds] according to the false ‘lights’ of their [i.e., the teachers’] conscience.”¹⁵⁸ Bayle here describes the actions of heretical teachers who instruct lay people according to the “false lights” of their (the teachers’) consciences. Presumably, the “false lights” of the heretics’ consciences does not refer to the consciences’ directives *vis-à-vis* particular actions; in an article on one of the most famous heretics of the Church, the “false light” at issue is surely one of particular false beliefs. This is further evidence that

¹⁵⁷ « Cette dernière question me fait souvenir de certains Ecrits, qui ont paru en Hollande depuis quelque tems sur les droits de la conscience erronée. On y a prouvé d'une manière si démonstrative, que toute action faite contre les lumieres de la conscience est essentiellement mauvaise, & qu'il la faut éviter nécessairement & indispensablement, que ceux qui ont voulu combattre cette doctrine se sont précipitez dans ce sentiment affreux, *qu'il ne faut pas toujours agir selon les lumieres de sa conscience*; d'où il s'ensuit, qu'on fait quelquefois une bonne action en agissant contre les lumieres de sa conscience: Monstre de doctrine, qui renverse toute la Morale, & en comparaison duquel le Probabilisme le plus outré est un sentiment innocent» (« Ailli (Pierre d') », Rem L, *DHC*).

¹⁵⁸ « [J]e ne saurois comprendre qu'il faille faire des crimes particuliers à des Docteurs Hérétiques, de ce qu'ils se servent d'une méthode proportionnée à l'esprit des simples, pour les instruire selon les fausses lumieres de leur conscience » (« Arius », Rem. L, *DHC*).

when Bayle uses the term “conscience,” he has in mind not only the forceful and persuasive recommendation of particular actions by the conscience, but also the forceful and persuasive recommendation of particular beliefs.

So for Bayle, the conscience is an “interior sentiment,” a deep-seated instinct that functions as a kind of measuring stick for truth and appropriate behavior. This measuring stick can become warped by prejudice and error; however, that does not mitigate the force and persuasion with which it “lights up” or recommends certain actions or beliefs. The force and persuasion of conscience make particular demands upon the individual, and in the next section, we will see what duties – and corresponding rights – Bayle allocates to the conscience, whether the conscience lights “falsely” or accurately.

5.2 The duties and rights of conscience

As we have started to see in the previous section, Bayle’s conception of conscience is a normative one; it recommends both beliefs and actions with conviction. Bayle goes further, however, in holding that we have a duty to follow the convictions of conscience. And he argues that with the duty to follow one’s conscience comes the right to pursue that duty.¹⁵⁹ This lays the foundation for his

¹⁵⁹ Kilcullen (1988) is excellent on establishing the duties and corresponding rights of conscience in Bayle; see particularly pp. 62, 76-7, and 93-4. Lennon (1999) picks up on Kilcullen’s analysis in his chapter on conscience and toleration, particularly p. 92 and 172-3; the following discussion owes much to their accounts. Representative selections: “[R]ights arise out of duties, and consist in duties on the part of others. If I have a duty to do something then I have a right to do it, consisting in other human beings’ having a duty not to try to persuade me voluntarily not to do it, and not to blame or punish me if I do it. This is a crucial premiss of Bayle’s case for the rights of heretics: people have a moral right to do their duty” (Kilcullen 62). “[Bayle’s] view [is] that conscience is autonomous in that belief that one has a duty entails that one has that duty” (Lennon 92).

notion of the erring conscience, which will be developed in 5.3, where we will see that the erring conscience has all of the same features as, and thus all of the same duties and rights that attend, the accurate conscience.

The duties of conscience, according to Bayle, are many. First, the individual has a duty to act in accordance with that which is revealed by the lights of conscience. As we have seen above in a passage from the *Nouvelles lettres*, “it is an incomparably worse sin to act against the lights of one’s conscience than to act against laws of which one is ignorant; therefore a soul that finds itself in the state of perplexity discussed by the author is obligated to follow the lights of his [i.e., the soul’s] conscience.”¹⁶⁰ Bayle here notes that the lights of conscience oblige obedience, and that to act against them is a sin – not merely a moral failing, but a spiritual one. But Bayle also holds that we ought to have a positive posture towards that which conscience “lights up” for us; skepticism or neutrality towards that which conscience reveals as “truth” constitutes a failure of duty:

To remain neutral while conscience has taken sides, to be indifferent towards a truth that is recognized as indubitable, is only a slightly lesser crime than to do the contrary of that which conscience dictates. So having three [possible] positions to adopt for a man who is firmly persuaded of a heresy – (1) to follow the false ‘lights’ of his conscience; (2) to do exactly the opposite [of his conscience]; and (3) to hold in suspense – it happens that the first is the least bad [option] of all: therefore, we are obligated to adopt it as preferable to the other two; therefore, we have a legitimate right to do so.¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ See note 151.

¹⁶¹ « Demeurer neutre lors que la conscience a pris son parti, avoir de l’indifférence pour une vérité que l’on reconnaît indubitable, est un crime qui n’est gueres moindre que celui de faire le contraire de ce que la conscience nous dicte » (*NLCHC OD II* : 228a) ; see note 152 for the continuation of the quotation.

Bayle here assimilates “truth that is recognized as indubitable” and “that which conscience dictates,” and thus implies that the duties that we have towards that which we recognize as truth are the same as the duties that we have towards that which conscience dictates. So an epistemic failure – an indifferent posture towards that which appears to us as true – is equated here with a moral failure, a neglect of duty to conscience.

Another duty of conscience is that we must act on our conscience in a way that is proportionate to its force of persuasion. As early as the *Critique générale*, Bayle notes that the persuasion of conscience can be just as forceful as “demonstrative reasons”:

A man is no less obligated to act according to the motives of his erring conscience than according to the motives of his truly-lit conscience. It is the force of persuasion that makes us act, and not the reasons that we have to be forcefully persuaded. If a less-than-solid reason strikes me and convinces me as fully as a demonstrative reason convinces someone else, since my state of persuasion is just as forceful as his, I am obligated to be as zealous as him; otherwise, one must say that a country bumpkin who firmly believes in God without knowing why, and having never reasoned about it, is in no way obligated to love God, nor to suffer for His name, as is a learned theologian.¹⁶²

Bayle says that we must act in conformity with the “motives” of conscience, with zeal proportionate to the forcefulness of conscience. What is striking here is that Bayle separates out reasoning about the conclusions of conscience from the forcefulness of its persuasion, arguing that the obligation of conscience attaches not to the solidity of

¹⁶² « [U]n homme n’est pas moins obligé d’agir selon les motifs de sa conscience erronée, que selon les motifs de sa conscience bien éclairée. C’est la force de la persuasion qui nous fait agir, et non pas les raisons que nous avons d’être fortement persuadez. Si une raison peu solide me frappe et me convainc, aussi pleinement qu’une raison démonstrative convainc une autre, ma persuasion étant aussi forte que la sienne, je suis obligé d’avoir autant de zèle que lui; autrement il faudroit dire qu’un Païsan, qui croit fermement en Dieu sans savoir pourquoi, et sans jamais avoir raisonné sur cela, n’est point obligé d’aimer Dieu, ni de souffrir pour son nom, autant qu’un savant Théologien » (*CG* II, lettre 20; 86).

reasons, but rather to the “zeal” with which one is persuaded – that is, not to the epistemic authority of the belief itself, but rather to the *conviction* of the belief. Presumably, then, a “weakly lit” (as opposed to “falsely lit,” or erring) conscience – that is, one whose persuasion is not particularly forceful – would have only a weak duty to act on that which was “lit,” while a “strongly lit” (as opposed to “truly lit,” or accurate) conscience would have a strong duty to act on that which was “lit.”

This duty to act according to the lights of one’s conscience holds even in the face of temporal authority, according to Bayle in the *DHC*. He approvingly cites the example of Amyraut, the heterodox Calvinist theologian, as one who not only preached fidelity to conscience, but acted upon it in the face of political pressure to do otherwise:

(R) Regarding that which pertains to conscience, he [i.e., Amyraut] exhorted disobedience.] This came to light while the seneschal of Saumur communicated to him a ruling of the Council of State, which ordained to those of the [Calvinist] religion to put out in front of their houses [celebrations of] the Fete-Dieu day. [The seneschal] communicated this to [Amyraut] the day before the holiday, and asked him to give an order that this ruling should be observed, [being] fearful that disobedience would make the people rise up against [the Calvinists]. Amyraut responded that to the contrary, he was going to exhort his flock not to [put anything out] at all, and that he would be the first not to [put anything out] at all. [He responded] that he had always preached that we must obey the superior powers, but that he had never meant it in regards to the kinds of things that pertain to conscience. In leaving the dwelling of the seneschal, he went from house to house exhorting his parishioners to suffer everything rather than implement this ruling. The seneschal made it [i.e., the ruling] known by the sound of his horn: the consistory assembled, thanked Amyraut for his conduct, and charged the elders to help out so that no one would [put anything out]. The lieutenant of the king refused to lend a hand to the seneschal, and quelled the uprising that had started to form.¹⁶³ (emphasis mine)

¹⁶³ « (R) *En ce qui regardoit la Conscience, il exhortoit à desobéir.*] Cela parut, lors que le Sénéchal de Saumur lui communiqua un Arrêt du Conseil d'Etat, qui ordonnoit à ceux de la Religion de tendre

Bayle uses an incident regarding the forced celebration of a Catholic holy day to highlight the imperatives of conscience over and against the imperatives of the state. Despite a general disposition to obey “superior powers” – a disposition which Bayle shares¹⁶⁴ – Amyraut makes an exception for those things that pertain to conscience. In this case, the “thing pertaining to conscience” is being forced to act in a way that assumes assent to a particular set of religious beliefs. More interestingly, however, Bayle also seems to hold that the duty to act according to the lights of one’s conscience holds not merely as against political authority – the realm of action – but also as against religious authority – the realm of belief. In his short work *La foi réduite à ses véritables principes* (1687), Bayle writes:

This last evidence proves, above all, that the authority of councils and synods can never prevail over the conscience of individuals; and this is seen by the example of the council of the apostles that took place at Jerusalem, the implementation of which the apostles left to the liberty of the faithful, without trying to hinder their [i.e., the faithful’s] conscience regarding that which they [i.e., the apostles] had decided.¹⁶⁵

devant leurs maisons le jour de la Fête-Dieu. Il le lui communiqua la veille de cette Fête, & le pria de donner ordre qu'on s'y conformât, de peur que la desobéissance ne fît soulever le peuple contre ceux de la Religion. Mr. Amyraut lui répondit, qu'au contraire il s'en alloit exhorter ses ouailles à ne point tendre, & qu'il seroit le premier à ne tendre point; qu'il avoit toujours prêché qu'il faut obéir aux Puissances supérieures, mais qu'il n'avoit jamais entendu cela à l'égard de semblables choses, qui intéressent la conscience. En sortant du logis du Sénéchal, il alla de maison en maison exhorter ses Paroissiens à tout souffrir plutôt que d'exécuter cet Arrêt. Le Sénéchal le fit publier à son de sa trompe: le Consistoire s'assembla, remercia Mr. Amyraut de sa conduite, & chargea les Anciens de tenir la main à ce que personne ne tendit. Le Lieutenant de Roi refusa de prêter main forte au Sénéchal, & empêcha le tumulte qui commençoit à se former. L'Arrêt fut révoqué quelque tems après » (« Amyraut (Moïse) », Rem R, *DHC*).

¹⁶⁴ See, among others, Labrousse’s & J.C. Laursen’s remarks on Bayle’s monarchism (1964; 2004).

¹⁶⁵ « On prouve surtout avec la dernière évidence, que l’autorité des conciles ou des synodes ne peut jamais prevaloir sur la conscience des particuliers; et on le fait voir par l’exemple du Concile des Apôtres tenu à Jerusalem, dont les Apôtres eux-mêmes laisserent l’exécution à la liberté des fideles, sans entreprendre de gêner leur conscience sur ce qu’ils avoient décidé » (*La Foi Réduite à ses Véritables Principes, et Renfermée dans ses Justes Bornes* ; OD V-1: 210).

The example that Bayle cites here is a Biblical incident from the book of Acts where some apostles argued that newly converted Gentile Christians should be required to conform to Judaic customs, including circumcision.¹⁶⁶ The apostle James ultimately says that Jewish Christians must not make it difficult for Gentiles to become Christians, and Bayle affirms a similarly open posture in this passage: since the apostles left the implementation of this directive (“do not make it difficult for Gentiles to become Christians”) to the “liberty of the faithful,” so too should all religious councils and synods leave as much as possible to the conscience of the individual. Once again, then, Bayle affirms the duties and rights of conscience not only in the moral realm, but also in the doxastic realm.

Perhaps Bayle’s strongest affirmation of the duties and rights of conscience comes in a negative form: the notion that moral, and even spiritual, sanction awaits those who do not follow the “inspiration” of conscience. In the *CP*, he asserts that

... the first and most indispensable of all our obligations is never to act against the inspiration of conscience, and... every action done against the lights of conscience is bad by definition, with the result that just as the law to love God is without exception, because hating God is a bad act by definition, in the same way the law not to offend the lights of one’s conscience is such that God can never except us from it, seeing as how it would actually be permitting us to scorn or to hate Him, an intrinsically criminal act by its nature. There is therefore an eternal and immutable law that obliges man, at risk of the greatest mortal sin that he could possibly commit, to do nothing that scorns or is against the dictates of his conscience.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ See Acts 15: 1-35.

¹⁶⁷ « [L]a première et la plus indispensable de toutes nos obligations est celle de ne point agir contre l’inspiration de la conscience et... toute action qui est faite contre les lumières de la conscience est essentiellement mauvaise ; de sorte que, comme la loi d’aimer Dieu ne souffre jamais de dispense, à cause que la haine de Dieu est un acte mauvais, essentiellement, ainsi la loi de ne pas choquer les lumières de sa conscience est telle que Dieu ne peut jamais nous en dispenser, vu que ce seroit réellement nous permettre de le mépriser, ou de le haïr, acte criminel *intrinsece* et par sa nature. Donc il y a une loi éternelle et immuable qui oblige l’homme, à peine du plus grand péché mortel qu’il puisse

The familiar language of acting in accordance with the lights of conscience is present here, but combined with language connecting conscience with one's posture towards God. Presumably, the assumption is that if conscience is, in some way, meant to be a conduit of God's desire or will, then we owe conscience the same duty that we owe God. And we know from section I that according to Bayle, conscience is meant to serve something like the function of a guide; hence, Bayle's conclusion that one's duty to conscience is an "eternal and immutable law."

The argument against those who act contrary to the lights of conscience continues in the *Dictionnaire*:

This last question reminds me of some writings that appeared in Holland some time ago on the rights of the erring conscience. It was proven in them, in a compellingly demonstrative manner, that every action done against the lights of conscience is essentially bad, and it must necessarily and indispensably be avoided; [and] that those who wanted to combat this doctrine have fallen into the fearful sentiment '*that one need not always act according to the lights of one's conscience,*' from which it follows that one sometimes does a good action in acting against the lights of one's conscience. [This is a] monstrous doctrine, which upends all morality, and in comparison with which the most extreme probabilism is an innocent sentiment.¹⁶⁸

Bayle notes that those who have tried to argue against the duty always to follow one's conscience are forced to defend the position that it is sometimes permissible (and even commendable) not to act according to one's conscience. Bayle's position on this, however, is clear: if we allow that one need not always act according to one's conscience, then all of morality is undermined. While he does not defend this claim here, we can easily see the contours of the argument: if it is true that conscience is an

commettre, de ne rien faire au mépris et malgré le *dictamen* de sa conscience » (II.8 ; 425a, OD II). On the next page, Bayle asserts that a crime against conscience is « le plus noir de tous les péchez... » (II.8; 426b, OD II).

¹⁶⁸ See n.153 above.

interior sentiment that is meant to be a guide to morality and truth, then if we abandon that guide, we are left without a connection between our inner life (our *doxa*, or beliefs) and our outer life (our *praxis*, or actions). Notice, though, that the argument can also be made as a *reductio*, without reference to the connection between God and conscience: if it is true that one need not always act according to the lights of one's conscience, and that one sometimes does a good action in acting against the lights of one's conscience, then there are times when one is still obligated to act according to the lights of one's conscience. This requires a criterion or principle to distinguish between when one should and should not act according to conscience, but in the absence of such a principle, we are thrust into "extreme probabilism," which is in Bayle's mind a moral monstrosity.

So the duty to act in accordance with one's conscience – and the corresponding right to do so, since if you have a duty to do something, then you have a right to do it – is grounded in the force and persuasion of the "interior sentiment" of conscience, what we might call the "strength of its light." There is some suggestion that the duty to conscience is grounded in some sort of higher connection to truth, morality, or God, though Bayle seems to be inconsistent on that point. He also leaves open the possibility that conscience can provide a "false light," – that is, it can be an erring, or inaccurate conscience. We will lay out Bayle's doctrine of the erring conscience in the next section, and will see that if the force of persuasion (or "inspiration" or "sentiment") is what grounds the duties and rights of conscience, then it appears that

Bayle is committed to the claim that the erring conscience entails the same duties – and thus acquires the same rights – as the accurate conscience.

5.3 The doctrine of the “erring conscience”

Bayle’s doctrine of the erring conscience is built on the assumption that we have a duty and a right to act according to the lights of conscience. This is a less controversial claim when the lights of conscience illuminate accurately; however, Bayle’s doctrine of the erring conscience entails that even when the lights of conscience illuminate falsely, the same duties and rights of conscience obtain. To be sure, there are some conditions on the erring conscience’s acquiring these duties and rights. The erring conscience possesses the duties and rights of the accurate conscience only if it is “in good faith” – that is, that the “error” is sincere. Bayle consistently holds to the “good faith” requirement in both the *NL* and the *CP*; in the *NL*, he writes that “[a]ll good faith errors have the same right over conscience as orthodoxy, whether we embraced those errors a bit too lightly, or whether we ran them through the most rigorous examination that we could manage.”¹⁶⁹ Bayle places the good faith errors of the sincere lay person on the same footing as the good faith errors of the rigorous intellectual – and, most significantly, on the same ground as orthodoxy. A passage from the *CP* reaffirms and elaborates this position:

In the condition in which man finds himself, God is content to require of him [merely] that he search for truth as carefully as he can and, believing himself to have found it, that he love it and order his life by it. This... is proof that we

¹⁶⁹ « [T]outes les erreurs où l’on est de bonne foi, ont le même droit sur la conscience, que l’Orthodoxie, soit que l’on ait embrassé ces erreurs un peu trop légèrement, soit qu’on les ait fait passer par l’examen le plus rigoureux dont on ait été capable » (*NLCHC OD II*: 226b).

are obligated to have the same regard for putative truth as for real truth... It is enough that each person consult in good faith and sincerely the lights that God gives him and, upon doing so, that he holds to the idea that seems to him the most reasonable and in conformity with the will of God. He is, by such means, orthodox in the eyes of God.¹⁷⁰

This passage draws on Bayle's recognition, discussed in 5.1, that even though the conscience is supposed to be a kind of doxastic and moral guide, it is still subject to "prejudices and errors." Given that this is part of the human condition, Bayle says that God essentially "lowers the bar" and requires only due diligence in one's search for truth, not perfect accuracy. Presumably, since God is the one lowering the requirements, Bayle infers that our regard for "due diligence" should be the same as for actual truth. Bayle's final assertion, however, is the most surprising; he seems to argue that as long as one is in good faith and sincere in following the lights of one's conscience – whether accurate or false – one actually becomes orthodox in God's eyes. Significantly, Bayle does not say that the individual is orthodox, full stop; being orthodox in the eyes of God is still different from one's conscience being accurate in its illumination of truth. But the shift here is unmistakable, and unsurprising, given Bayle's steeping in the Calvinist rationalist tradition, which emphasized ethics and right action over systematic theology.¹⁷¹ Labrousse calls this a shift from orthodoxy to orthopraxis – Bayle seems to be separating correct belief from correct action, still

¹⁷⁰ « ...[D]ans la condition où se trouve l'homme, Dieu se contente d'exiger de lui qu'il cherche la vérité le plus soigneusement qu'il pourra et que, croiant l'avoir trouvée, il l'aime et y règle sa vie. Ce qui... est une preuve que nous sommes obligés d'avoir les mêmes égards pour la vérité putative que pour la vérité réelle... Il suffit à chacun qu'il consulte sincèrement & de bonne foi les lumières que Dieu lui donne, & qui suivant cela il s'attache à l'idée qui lui semble la plus raisonnable & la plus conforme à la volonté de Dieu. Il est, moyennant cela, Orthodoxe à l'égard de Dieu... » (II.10 ; 438b, OD II).

¹⁷¹ See Ch. 2, especially the discussion of John Cameron.

recommending both, but with a greater tolerance for wrong belief than for wrong action.¹⁷²

It is important to note that Bayle recognizes the rights of truth in principle – that is, of the accurate conscience – though he also recognizes the rights of falsity with respect to the individual. In *NL*, he contrasts truth in the abstract with truth for individuals:

I hold, with these gentlemen, that if one considers truth and falsity in a strictly abstract sense, only truth has the right to ask for a hearing and to make us obey it. But it is something else entirely when we descend from these abstract considerations and logical precisions where we see truth and error absolutely and in themselves; it is, I say, something else entirely when we descend from a general point of view to the particular consideration of truth and error in relation to each person. Almost always, it is to pass from black to white; absolute falsity is changed into relative truth, as relative falsity is made from absolute truth. This is to say (for I well know that everyone does not understand terms borrowed from the barbarity of the Scholastics) that that which is true in itself, is not such with respect to certain people, just as that which is false in itself, is not such for many people. Experience makes us see this only too well.¹⁷³

¹⁷² 576; 1964. See also Kilcullen (1988), who discusses the relation of conscience and the natural light *vis-à-vis* truth: “[W]hether the natural light is infallible or not, the judgment of conscience may be mistaken, and yet ‘absolute’ in the sense that one must act on it; and the act may be good though wrong” (104). His distinction between good/bad and right/wrong is also relevant: “Bayle identifies moral goodness with deserving praise and badness with deserving blame and punishment; he distinguishes between goodness and rightness and between evil and wrongness, and holds that a wrong act may deserve praise; it follows that an act may be both morally good, and wrong” (175).

¹⁷³ « J’avouë avec ces Messieurs, que si on considere la vérité et le mensonge dans une vûë tout à fait abstraite, il n’y a que la vérité qui ait droit de nous demander audience, et de se faire obéïr. Mais c’est toute autre chose, quand on descend de ces considérations abstraites, et de ces precisions de Logique, où l’on voit la vérité et l’erreur absolument et en elles-mêmes; c’est, dis-je, toute autre chose, quand on descend de ces vûës générales, à la considération particuliere de la vérité et de l’erreur, par raport à chaque personne. Presque toujours c’est passer du blanc au noir; la fausseté absoluë se change en vérité respective, comme la fausseté respective se fait de la vérité absoluë; c’est à dire (car je sens bien que tout le monde n’est pas obligé d’entendre de termes empruntez de la barbarie de l’Ecole) que ce qui est vrai en lui-même, ne l’est pas à l’égard de certaines gens, comme ce qui est faux en lui-même, ne l’est pas pour plusieurs personnes. L’expérience ne nous le fait que trop voir » (*NLCHC* 9 :6 OD II : 218b-219a). Cf. Mori’s remark about 221b, that the rights of absolute truth are compromised when one does not possess it (“Pierre Bayle, the Rights of the Conscience, and the Remedy of Toleration” *Ratio Juris* 10:1, 1997; 46-7).

Bayle uses the Scholastic distinction between absolute and relative truth and falsity to explain why, although in the abstract only truth legitimately accrues the duties and rights of conscience, it is nevertheless the case that the individual's perspective on truth and falsity is the only one that can be action-guiding. And the perspective shifting from considering truth and falsity in general to considering truth and falsity with respect to the individual is monumental; Bayle says that it can even change "absolute falsity into relative truth" – just what happens in the case of the erring conscience.

Given this picture of the erring conscience, where it has all of the same features as the accurate conscience – with the exception of false lights rather than accurate ones – Bayle accepts that the erring conscience obtains all of the same duties and rights as the accurate conscience. This means that doxastic error on the part of the conscience does not imply moral culpability; in fact, the erring conscience is owed the same support, rights of action, and respect as the accurate conscience. Bayle asserts in the *NL* that "[t]hose who are falsely persuaded that a particular doctrine is true are just as obligated to love it, defend it, and make it flourish, as if they were truly persuaded of it."¹⁷⁴ Heretics obtain the same rights of action as the orthodox,¹⁷⁵ and as long as their errors are in good faith, they are owed the same respect.¹⁷⁶ Good faith, in fact, plays a crucial role in guaranteeing these rights for the erring conscience:

¹⁷⁴ « [C]eux qui se persuadent à tort qu'une certaine doctrine est véritable, sont aussi obligez de l'aimer, de la soutenir, & de la faire fleurir, que s'ils en étoient justement persuadez » (*NLCHC OD II* : 223b).

¹⁷⁵ « [S]i le véritable Religion a droit de faire une chose, la fausse Religion l'a pareillement » (*NLCHC 9:5, OD II* ; 218b).

¹⁷⁶ « Dès aussitôt que l'erreur est ornée des livrées de la vérité, nous lui devons le même respect que la vérité » (*Supplément au Commentaire OD II, P. 507a*).

All good faith errors have the same right over conscience as orthodoxy, whether we embraced those errors a bit too lightly, or whether we ran them through the most rigorous examination that we could manage. For by what right would we suspend [judgment], despite being persuaded as we were that something is revealed by God? Could there be a single moment without loving it [i.e., that which we are persuaded is revealed] with such a persuasion? If we suspect that it is not revealed, we should suspend our love; very good, I consent to that, and not only that, but I advise as strongly as possible that we suspend [judgment] and that we examine it strongly and firmly. But if we have not the least suspicion, the better option that we could choose is assuredly to love that which we believe with so much certainty comes from God.¹⁷⁷

This captures the “due diligence” requirement of conscience: that we check the lights of conscience to the extent that we are able. If the force of persuasion is sufficiently strong, then Bayle says that there is no reason for suspicion or doubt; in fact, the persuasion is just what obligates belief and obedience.

Bayle specifically notes that the persuasion of the erring conscience even obligates zeal for its religious opinions:

It certainly must be the case that it is sometimes permitted to be zealous about opinions that one has not examined: for if it were not permitted, what would become of the zeal of a great number of upstanding people who are of the true religion, without ever having read the least book of controversy?¹⁷⁸

On the surface, this passage seems to contradict the “due diligence” requirement of conscience, but in fact, the context here is the zealous faithful who have *never* been

¹⁷⁷ « [T]outes les erreurs où l'on est de bonne foi, ont le même droit sur la conscience, que l'Orthodoxie, soit que l'on ait embrassé ces erreurs un peu trop légèrement, soit qu'on les ait fait passer par l'examen le plus rigoureux dont on ait été capable. Car de quel droit se tiendrait-on en suspens, malgré la persuasion, où l'on seroit, qu'une chose est révélée de Dieu ? Peut-on être un seul moment sans l'aimer, avec une telle persuasion ? Si l'on soupçonne qu'elle n'est pas révélée, qu'on suspende son amour ; à la bonne heure, j'y consens ; & non seulement cela, mais je conseille de toutes mes forces qu'on le suspende, & qu'on examine fort & ferme. Mais si on n'a pas le moindre soupçon, le meilleur parti qu'on puisse choisir, est assurément d'aimer ce qu'on croit avec tant de certitude venir de Dieu » (NLCHC OD II: 226b).

¹⁷⁸ « Il faut bien qu'il soit quelquefois permis d'avoir du zèle pour des opinions que l'on n'a pas examinées : car si cela n'étoit pas permis, que deviendrait le zèle d'un si grand nombre d'honnêtes gens, qui sont dans la bonne Religion, sans avoir jamais lû le moindre Livre de Controverse ? » (NLCHC OD II: 226b)

exposed to intellectual rigor. The reason for their lack of examination is not lack of due diligence, but rather a lack of exposure to methods of examination. This lack of exposure does not make the demands of conscience – even of the erring conscience – any less binding; recall that the nature of persuasion is what demands action:

A man is no less obligated to act according to the motives of his erring conscience than according to the motives of his ‘well-lit’ conscience. It is the force of persuasion that makes us act, and not the reasons that we have to be forcefully persuaded. If a less-than-solid reason strikes me and convinces me as fully as a demonstrative reason convinces someone else, since my state of persuasion is just as forceful as his, I am obligated to be as zealous as him; otherwise, one must say that a country bumpkin who firmly believes in God without knowing why, and having never reasoned about it, is in no way obligated to love God, nor to suffer for His name, as is a learned theologian.¹⁷⁹

The context of the unlearned is important here; Bayle does not want to make the duties and rights of conscience – whether erring or accurate – subject to the development of the intellect. However, since a “country bumpkin” with an accurate conscience is only accurate due to epistemic luck, Bayle cannot allow the binding nature of conscience to rest on the accuracy or inaccuracy of its “light” – hence his move to persuasion.

Another reason for Bayle’s move to persuasion as the ground for the duties and rights of conscience – even in the erring case – is the irresistibility of the instincts of conscience:

Each one believes to have his conscience in conformity with absolute truth; each one exhorts his adversaries to sincerely renounce their heresies. We are so persuaded most of the time that what appears true to us actually is, that we never dream of discarding it. Indeed, it is not possible that we suspend the instincts of conscience while in this state of quietude. To remain neutral while conscience has taken sides, to be indifferent towards a truth that is recognized as indubitable, is only a slightly lesser crime than to do the contrary of that which conscience dictates. So having three [possible] positions to adopt for a

¹⁷⁹ See n. 158.

man who is firmly persuaded of a heresy – (1) to follow the false ‘lights’ of his conscience; (2) to do exactly the opposite [of his conscience]; and (3) to hold in suspense – it happens that the first is the least bad [option] of all: therefore, we are obligated to adopt it as preferable to the other two; therefore, we have a legitimate right to do so.¹⁸⁰

Notice that Bayle calls persuasion a kind of “quietude,” and that he moves from the irresistibility of the instincts of conscience to a duty to follow them. To be fair, Bayle implies that none of the options available to the heretic are particularly attractive (“the first is the least bad [option] of all”), but given the fact of the heretic’s erring conscience, he should follow its lights, false though they may be.

Just as the erring conscience gains all of the duties and rights of the accurate conscience, Bayle also thinks that those with an erring conscience who fail to act according to it are subject to the same sanction as those who fail to act in conformity with their accurate conscience:

It is an incomparably worse sin to act against the lights of one’s conscience than to act against laws of which one is ignorant; therefore a soul that finds itself in the state of perplexity discussed by the author is obligated to follow the lights of his [i.e., the soul’s] conscience.... If we are more obligated to act according to the instincts of the erring conscience than according to the laws of absolute truth that we do not know, it is evident that the error clothed in truth in our soul acquires the right to make us do the same actions as the truth would command us.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ « Chacun croit avoir sa conscience conforme à la vérité absoluë, chacun exhorte ses Adversaires à renoncer sincerement ses Hérésies. On est si persuadé la plûpart du temps, que ce qui nous paroît véritable l’est en effet, qu’on ne songe nullement à s’en défaire. Or il n’est pas possible que pendant cet état de quiétude, l’on suspende les instincts de la conscience (see n17 for following) » (*NLCHC OD II* : 228a).

¹⁸¹ « Or c’est un péché incomparablement plus grand d’agir contre les lumieres de sa conscience que d’agir contre des loix que l’on ignore ; Donc une ame qui se trouve dans cet état de perplexité dont parle l’Auteur est obligée de suivre plutôt les lumieres de sa conscience.... Si l’on est plus obligé d’agir selon les instincts de la conscience erronée, que selon les loix de la vérité absoluë, & que l’on ne connoît point, il est évident que l’erreur travestie en vérité dans notre ame acquiert le droit de nous faire faire les mêmes actions, que la vérité nous commanderoit » (*NLCHC OD II*: 227b-228a).

Bayle takes up several different themes here: the discrepancy between “the laws of absolute truth” and the lights of one’s conscience, the gravity of sin associated with acting against the lights of one’s conscience, and the rights and duties of “error clothed in truth.” It is worth pointing out, however, that while the sin of acting against the lights of one’s conscience is the most grave, this implies that acting against the laws of absolute truth is still some kind of sin. Similarly, Bayle phrases the comparison between acting in accordance with the instincts of the erring conscience and acting in accordance with the laws of absolute truth as a “more than” relation: although we have a stronger obligation to act according to the instincts of conscience (whether erring or not), we nevertheless have a (less binding) obligation to the laws of absolute truth, whether or not we are ignorant of them. In any case, Bayle is clear that there is moral and spiritual sanction for those who act against their (erring or accurate) conscience.¹⁸²

Taken to its fullest conclusion, if the erring conscience really does have all of the same duties and rights as the accurate conscience, it not only acquires the duty of obedience, but also has the right to refuse belief and action that is against its own lights. If the erring conscience does not perceive the truth as such, Bayle writes, “[m]en are only obligated to obey the truth on the condition that it presents itself to them in the guise of truth.”¹⁸³ This means that the erring conscience, just as much as the accurate conscience, has the right to defy political, and even religious, authority in the same way and to the same degree that the accurate conscience does. As with the previous examples of the apostles in Jerusalem, who chose not to “hinder the

¹⁸² See n. 153.

¹⁸³ « [L]es hommes ne sont obligez d’obéir à la vérité, qu’à condition qu’elle se présente à eux, sous la forme de la vérité » (*NLCHC OD II* : 227a).

conscience of the faithful,” or with the example of Amyraut, who defied local authority, the erring conscience of the individual has the right to refuse obedience. The example of Amyraut is particularly instructive here since, according to the local authorities, Amyraut’s Calvinism was heresy, and thus Amyraut would be considered to have an erring conscience. Situations such as these are what motivated Bayle to provide the reinterpretation of Luke 14:23 – “*compel them to enter*” – that is the catalyst for his defense of religious toleration. The next section draws out the implications of the doctrine of the erring conscience for Bayle’s position on religious toleration.

5.4 Religious toleration and the erring conscience

As we have seen, Bayle’s concern with the rights of conscience is not limited to the *Commentaire philosophique*, his most systematic work on religious toleration. The *CP*, however, is where Bayle most explicitly makes the case for religious toleration based both on the doctrine of the erring conscience, as previously developed in the *Critique générale* and the *Nouvelles Lettres*, and on the principle of the “natural light,” according to which any reading of Scripture that implies a moral crime is a false reading.¹⁸⁴ Both ways of grounding religious toleration are necessary in order to prevent coercion of – or by – those who act from conscience (whether accurate or erring).

¹⁸⁴ « Je m’appuie pour [la] réfuter invinciblement, sur ce principe de la lumière naturelle, *que tout sens littéral qui contient l’obligation de faire des crimes est faux* » (I.1 ; OD II, p. 367a).

One obvious issue raised by the doctrine of the erring conscience is the problem of fanaticism: if the erring conscience has all of the same duties and rights as an accurate conscience, what is to keep an individual from following a fanatical conscience?¹⁸⁵ Bayle addresses this situation in the *DHC*:

There are those who have fallen into this fearful sentiment ‘*that one need not always act according to the lights of one’s conscience*,’ from which it follows that one sometimes does a good action in acting against the lights of one’s conscience. [This is a] monstrous doctrine, which upends all morality, and in comparison with which the most extreme probabilism is an innocent sentiment. What is exceptional in this is that it is the fanatics who have fallen into this precipice: they who, more than anyone, have an interest in working for the rights of conscience.¹⁸⁶

Ironically, Bayle says, it is the fanatics – those who would most benefit from the doctrine of the erring conscience – who promote the principle that acting against one’s conscience can be a good. This provides an important bit of information about Bayle’s conception of fanaticism: fanatics are the sort of people who are willing to “upend all morality,” and to undermine the rights of their own conscience, in order to undermine the rights of others. Unfortunately, the fanatics often do not recognize that they are doing so, since, as Bayle notes in the *NL*, they are persuaded that they are “the only one[s] who correctly perceive truth for what it actually is”:

Since each sect is persuaded that it is the only one which correctly perceives truth for what it actually is, each one applies to itself all that is said in favor of

¹⁸⁵ For a quick summary of Bayle’s reply to this question, see Kilcullen p. 99: “[Bayle’s] answer to the common question whether we must tolerate the intolerant: we cannot persecute them, but we must prevent them from persecuting others, and we can take precautions against them.” Cf. *CP* 411b, 412b, 413b; *SuppCP* 560a.

¹⁸⁶ « [Il y a] ceux qui... se sont précipitez dans ce sentiment affreux, *qu’il ne faut pas toujours agir selon les lumieres de sa conscience*; d’où il s’ensuit, qu’on fait quelquefois une bonne action en agissant contre les lumieres de sa conscience: Monstre de doctrine, qui renverse toute la Morale, & en comparaison duquel le Probabilisme le plus outré est un sentiment innocent. Ce qu’il y a de rare en cela, c’est que ce sont des fanatiques, qui se sont jettez dans ce précipice: eux, qui ont plus d’intérêt que personne à travailler pour les droits de la conscience » (« Ailli (Pierre d’) », Rem L, *DHC*).

truth, and shifts to the others everything that is said against falsity, and this is the way to be without any common principle of reasoning, and to see the destiny of religions reduced to the laws of the strongest, and to these ridiculous maxims, *this is very good when I do it, but when another does it, it is detestable*.¹⁸⁷

If a fanatic is convinced that he is in the right – that is, that the lights of his conscience are accurate – then he will feel free to “apply to himself what is said in favor of truth” against those who are “in the wrong.” The fanatic’s shifting of the burden of falsity exclusively to those with whom he disagrees is a way of discharging doubt or discomfort, while simultaneously creating the double standard that Bayle points out so succinctly. What fanatics fail to grasp when they argue vociferously for the rights of truth (presumably in order to justify the persecution of those whom they believe to be in error – that is, religious intolerance) is that if the roles were reversed – that is, if the persecuted party were in a position of power – the fanatics would then be arguing vociferously in favor of religious toleration.¹⁸⁸

Here Bayle’s moral principle against committing crimes complements his defense of the doctrine of the erring conscience: if the accurate conscience did indeed have the right to coerce, it would only be a right considered from an abstract point of view. As Bayle has taken pains to explain, the abstract point of view is not the one

¹⁸⁷ « [C]omme chaque Secte se persuade, qu’elle est la seule qui prend pour la vérité ce qui l’est effectivement, chacune s’applique tout ce qui se dit en faveur de la vérité, & rejette sur les autres tout ce qui se dit contre le mensonge, & c’est le moien de n’avoir plus aucun principe commun de raisonnement, & de voir réduire la destinée des Religions aux loix du plus fort, & à ces ridicules maximes, *ceci est très-bon quand je le fais ; mais quand un autre le fait, c’est une action détestable* » (NLCHC OD II : 227a).

¹⁸⁸ In “La tolérance et le problème théologico-politique” (2003), Jean-Michel Gros advocates reading Bayle’s criticisms of fanatical intolerance as a general criticism of Christianity; however, while Bayle recognizes the inherent tension between a religion that makes universal claims and toleration, he nowhere says that these two things are mutually exclusive. Further, Gros’ primary concern is with the theory and practice of toleration, not with its foundation in the conscience, *per se*.

from which the conscience operates; conscience is a phenomenon of the individual, providing direction for the particular beliefs and actions of a particular person. So setting aside the “objective” abstract point of view, the only way to justify coercion is by appeal to the conscience itself, whose accuracy is just what is at issue. Indeed, since the only justification available to conscience is the force of its persuasion, then “if the true Church had been ordered by God to persecute the false, the false church would also have the right to persecute the true.”¹⁸⁹ This picture of rampant persecution is the epitome of moral breakdown, and Bayle thinks that no such situation can be justified with an appeal to Scripture. In fact, he says to his readers, “we must not concern ourselves with forcing others in the case of religion; but if we do force, and as soon as we force, we do a very villainous act, very opposed to the spirit of every religion, and especially of the Gospel.”¹⁹⁰ Religious coercion is not only morally villainous, but it violates the very heart of all religions – and most importantly for Bayle’s readers, it violates the heart of Christianity.

So Bayle’s principle of the natural light – that no reading of Scripture can be true that justifies the commission of moral crimes – adds moral sanction to the spiritual sanction against coercion. It also provides a kind of common ground upon which those of differing consciences can agree. If the argument from Chapter 3 is correct, then the revelation of the natural light that Bayle cites here – that committing crimes is always immoral no matter what the justification – is in fact from *la droite*

¹⁸⁹ Rex 178.

¹⁹⁰ « Et moi je dis à mes lecteurs... qu’il ne faut pas regarder à quoi l’on force en cas de religion ; mais si l’on force, et dès là que l’on force, on fait une très vilaine action et très opposée au génie de toute religion et spécialement de l’Evangile » (CP III ; OD II 461a).

raison, right reason, the part of reason that provides access to basic moral maxims. Recall, also, that this faculty is supposed to be equally accessible to both atheists (as Bayle argues in the *Pensées diverses*) and believers – whether heretical or orthodox. What this means is that everyone, without exception, is subject to the same moral maxims, including the absolute prohibition on using religious motives (or presumably any other kind of motive) to justify committing crimes. Notice, too, that this prohibition of the natural light only governs action – that is, it prohibits committing crimes, which is the realm of action.

This principle of natural light, then, is meant to separate religious beliefs – where Bayle seems to be rather permissive – from the moral sphere, where only right reason has sway.¹⁹¹ This has two major benefits. First, it allows Bayle to hold all individuals of every belief to the same set of moral maxims; these maxims apply equally, across all those with access to the “natural light” of right reason. Second, it allows Bayle to maintain that we may still have good reason to condemn heresies as beliefs, but that rather than condemning heretics themselves, we should condemn those who profess to be in good faith but are not – a sin not merely of belief, but of action, what Labrousse might call *heteropraxis*. Bayle specifically tackles this issue in his *DHC* article on a prominent fourth-century heretic:

We have a very great reason to condemn heresies, and to pity those who profess them [i.e., heresies] in good faith, and to hold in abomination those

¹⁹¹ Kilcullen has a nice description of what this looks like in practice: “those who do what is actually wrong in obedience to conscience do not deserve blame or punishment and should not be tempted *voluntarily* not to do what they mistakenly think they ought to do, but their mistake should be combated by argument, and the act should be forcibly prevented if it threatens the rights of others. They have a moral right to try to do the wrong act, their effort to do it against opposition is praiseworthy, but others may have a moral duty to prevent it even while respecting their conscientiousness” (105).

who teach them without believing them; for among such teachers are monsters of ambition and malice; but I cannot understand how one should commit crimes against heretical teachers; they [merely] make use of a method that is proportionate to simple minds in order to instruct them [i.e., the simple minds] according to the false lights of their [i.e., the teachers'] conscience.¹⁹²

The group for whom Bayle reserves his strongest condemnation is not the heretical teachers that are in good faith, instructing lay people in a simple way, according to their (the heretical teachers') consciences; in fact, Bayle sees "good faith" heretical teachers as objects of pity. Instead, his strongest words are for the heretical teachers who teach heresy *without believing it*, "monsters of ambition and malice." Presumably, the force of Bayle's condemnation rests not on the heresy of such teachers, but on their hypocrisy – a trait which is arguably just as present in the orthodox teachers as the heretical ones!

What is interesting about Bayle's sustained defense of religious toleration is that for all of Bayle's emphasis on right action over right belief, he still leaves room for a distinction between valuable and worthless beliefs. Labrousse captures this distinction nicely: "To say that all opinions must be tolerated is not to hold that all are valuable, nor to renounce any ambition to achieve an understanding among men founded on something other than mutual condescending pity – it is to propose that the abstract point of view is not the essential one, and that the divisions among men to

¹⁹² « On a une très-grande raison de condamner les Hérésies, & de plaindre ceux qui les professent de bonne foi, & d'avoir en abomination ceux qui les enseignent sans les croire; car de tels Docteurs sont des monstres d'ambition, & de malice: mais je ne saurois comprendre qu'il faille faire des crimes particuliers à des Docteurs Hérétiques, de ce qu'ils se servent d'une méthode proportionnée à l'esprit des simples, pour les instruire selon les fausses lumieres de leur conscience » (« Arius », Rem. L, *DHC*).

which [Bayle] testifies must not make us forget that morality reunites them.”¹⁹³ Labrousse’s emphasis here is, as with Bayle, on the primacy of right *praxis* over right *doxa*; however, she also notes that this does not imply that all opinions are equally valuable. This is consistent with Bayle’s statement above that “we have a very great reason to condemn heresies,” that is, to maintain orthodox beliefs. What is most novel about Bayle, however, is his incorporation of the ethical emphasis of Cartesian Calvinism into his defense of religious toleration, and his recalibrating of the essence of religion: what is *most* important is not right belief, but right action – and right action requires toleration.

5.5 Conclusion

Bayle’s conception of conscience, then, is both doxastic and moral. Conscience provides the content of one’s core beliefs, while faith provides the epistemic authority for them. The moral authority and deep conviction, however, come from conscience – as we have seen here, the duties and rights that Bayle ascribes to the conscience are absolute for both the erring and the accurate conscience. The only moral authority superior to the conscience for Bayle is that of the moral maxims of “the natural light” – foremost among them being the principle that any

¹⁹³ « Dire que toutes les opinions doivent être tolérées, ce n’est pas poser que toutes se valent, ni renoncer à toute ambition de procurer une entente entre les hommes, fondée sur autre chose que sur une mutuelle pitié condescendante ; c’est postuler que le plan spéculatif n’est pas l’essentiel et que les divisions dont il témoigne entre les hommes ne doivent pas faire oublier que la morale les réunit » (582). Kilcullen is similar on this point: “That a proposition (true or false) has the rights of truth over those, and only those, who believe that it is true means that those who believe it (even if their belief results from self-deception or other fault for which they will in the end answer to God) have (while they believe it) certain genuine moral duties which other human beings cannot rightly blame or punish them for performing, or try to induce them voluntarily not to perform – though others can rightly try to change their belief or physically prevent their action” (66-67).

interpretation of revealed truths that implies a moral crime is in error. This provides an example of right reason functioning to interpret revealed truths, to the ultimate benefit of both faith, whose epistemic authority remains secure, and conscience, whose moral authority remains unimpeached.

Conclusion

We are now in a position to return to the question that began this project: how can Bayle simultaneously maintain that there is a deep and intractable conflict between the dictates of reason and the dictates of faith, and yet not completely reject either the epistemic authority of reason, or the epistemic authority of faith? The answer to this question is found in the interpretation of Bayle as a philosophical fideist – one whose core beliefs come from the conscience and gain their epistemic authority from faith, but whose use of reason is consistent with making plausible judgments and ascertaining basic moral truths.

The features of Pierre Bayle's philosophical fideism should by now be clear – or as clear as they can be, given the interpretive difficulties associated with his texts. These features are unsurprising, given his philosophical and theological background, and contribute to the qualified nature of his skepticism, his moral rationalism, and his fideism with respect to core religious commitments. Bayle's philosophical fideism includes elements of previous readings of Bayle – Bayle the Cartesian, Bayle the Calvinist, Bayle the skeptic, and Bayle the fideist – but combines the most plausible elements of these interpretations in a coherent way.

We have seen that Bayle's Cartesian inheritance is too extensive to permit an unqualified classification of him as a simple skeptic or a naïve believer. He follows the Cartesians in accepting the ability of reason to reveal error and to criticize

arguments. Further, he makes use of Cartesian formulations in describing different operations of reason: *le bon sens* (“good sense”) on the one hand, and *la droite raison* (“right reason”) on the other. These rational functions are evidence of a Cartesian respect for reason not present in radical skeptical or classical fideist positions. Cartesianism also makes its way into Bayle’s thought through the Calvinist rationalism of Amyraut, who emphasized the application of reason to particular classes of religious belief.

It seems equally obvious, however, that Bayle’s position cannot be described as Cartesian *tout court*. His rejection of the independent self-verifying epistemic authority of *évidence* – that which provides reason with certainty – is a radical step away from Cartesianism. Further, since he denies reason’s ability to limit itself to that which it perceives clearly and distinctly, he is left with profound pessimism about the prospect of certainty regarding the claims of reason. Bayle’s use of classically skeptical arguments to make these two points makes him closer to a kind of skeptic rather than a kind of Cartesian.

We have also seen that the question of Bayle’s skepticism is more complicated than it initially appears. On the one hand, Bayle’s best-known statements on the nature of reason – that it is corrosive and self-destructive – lead one to attribute to him a kind of extreme Pyrrhonism. On the other hand, Bayle argues that “right reason” has the ability to discern basic moral maxims by the natural light, and grants those truths moral authority even over the dictates of conscience. He also seems happy to allow that reason, functioning as “good sense,” can make plausible – though revisable –

judgments. These provisos are the ground for classifying Bayle as a “qualified Academic skeptic.”

The interpretation of Bayle as a qualified Academic skeptic provides a template for how to go about understanding Bayle’s fideism. On the one hand, the passages where Bayle’s picture of reason seems Pyrrhonian are often followed by an exaltation of faith, leading the reader to infer a Montaigne-like fideism built on the ruins of reason. On the other hand, Bayle does not shy away from the use of reason in theological debates, to clarify and correct misguided readings of Scripture. Indeed, we have seen that he uses a principle of the natural light – “that every literal interpretation which implies the obligation to commit crimes is false” – as a litmus test for proper interpretation of Scripture. These elements of Bayle’s rational engagement with religious belief are the ground for classifying Bayle as a philosophical, rather than a radical, fideist.

That Bayle is nonetheless a fideist, however, is clear by the priority that he gives to a set of core religious principles, the minimal theological commitments of the “Christian mysteries.” As we have seen, Bayle is explicit in calling these mysteries irrational – that is, against reason rather than merely above reason – but is equally explicit in his affirmation of their epistemic authority. The source of the epistemic authority of these mysteries, given their offensiveness to reason, must be faith itself; it is the origin of these mysteries in faith – that is, their revealed status – that grounds their epistemic immunity from reason’s prosecution. This immunity allows the mysteries to function as an epistemic anchor for the operation of reason in other

theological debates. The fact that these mysteries are at the core of Bayle's doxastic commitments also gives them a kind of epistemic priority with respect to other beliefs.

This way of reading Bayle on reason and faith leaves open an important question: what role does the conscience play in determining these core principles? Since it is clear that conscience plays a crucial role in Bayle's thought, any adequate account of Bayle's conception of the reason-faith relation must provide an explanation for the nature and function of conscience. I have argued that the conscience provides both the doxastic content of, and the moral force behind, these core beliefs, and that the moral authority of conscience inherited by these beliefs reinforces the epistemic authority of faith behind these beliefs. The moral force of conscience is what grounds the duties and rights generated by these beliefs, and this moral force cannot be mitigated by reason, since the duties and rights of the conscience with accurate beliefs (the "well-lit" conscience) are the same as the duties and rights of the conscience with false beliefs (the "erring" conscience).

Thus, reading Bayle as a philosophical fideist, with the core principles having the epistemic authority of faith and the moral force of conscience behind them, provides the most consistent ground for Bayle's defense of religious toleration. If both the erring and the accurate conscience have equal moral force behind them – and thus obtain the same duties and rights – then there is no ground for coercion or forced conversion; according to Bayle, the rights of conscience are essentially absolute. The sole check on the moral authority of the conscience is that of the basic moral maxims delivered by "right reason." This conclusion is consistent with Bayle's repeated

emphasis not on orthodoxy – “right belief” – but on orthopraxis – “right action.” Religious toleration, then, is a natural consequence both of orthopraxis and of right reason.

There are several outstanding issues for this reading of Bayle, of course, that require further investigation. I have sketched the framework of Bayle’s philosophical fideism based only on the most familiar texts; a fuller account would include a catalog of Bayle’s treatments of the notions of reason and faith in each of his texts individually, with attention to the context of, and motivation for, each work. Bayle’s views on many topics changed over time, though the extent of this change is unclear, and this sort of comprehensive textual treatment would allow more careful consideration of Bayle’s positions, leaving room for an evolutionary account of his thought on reason and faith.

Also, in the service of systematicity, I have glossed over many of the knottiest interpretive questions of Bayle’s work, such as the role of form and style in his texts; a more nuanced account would engage the Straussian reading of Bayle, and discuss the consequences for philosophical fideism of irony and satire in Bayle’s treatment of otherwise serious subjects. I have also left to the side the question of Bayle’s status as a philosopher, and thus have not mounted an explicit defense of the value of reading Bayle specifically as a philosopher; a complete account would highlight Bayle’s philosophically substantive exchanges with his contemporary interlocutors as evidence of his significance to the early modern philosophical tradition.

Relatedly, reading Bayle as a philosophical fideist raises substantive epistemological and metaphysical questions, many of which fall under philosophy of religion, broadly construed. A natural extension of this project, then, is to draw out the implications of Bayle's philosophical fideism for some of the classic questions raised in philosophy of religion, such as the problem of evil, religious pluralism, and whether or not rational argument should be the ground for religious belief. Bayle has much to offer contemporary philosophy of religion on these topics. Further, much of contemporary philosophy of religion focuses narrowly on questions in epistemology and metaphysics, and while the literature has begun to reflect the increasing interest in ethical questions, there is still a lacuna with respect to the socio-political implications of topics in philosophy of religion. Bayle's account of religious toleration, and my grounding of it in Bayle's philosophical fideism, provides a natural and fruitful model for contemporary accounts of the connection between philosophy of religion and socio-political philosophy.

There is still much to do, then, in the development of Bayle's philosophical fideism. This is not only because of the sketchiness of the present account, but also because of the relative dearth of Anglophone scholars working on Bayle; most readings of Bayle on the reason-faith question, and of Bayle more generally, have been offered by European scholars. While this makes for a largely unconstrained field of research, it also makes for an impoverished and idiosyncratic community of Bayle interpretation. By further developing the interpretation of Bayle as a philosophical fideist in the ways mentioned above, and by drawing out the consequences of this

reading for issues in contemporary philosophy – particularly philosophy of religion – I hope to both remedy the current skeletal nature of my account, and enrich the conversation among Bayle scholars both domestically and abroad.

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