

# Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

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Volume 39, Number 1, 1960

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300425ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/300425ar>

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### Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

### ISSN

0317-0594 (print)

1712-9095 (digital)

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### Cite this article

Saunders, R. M. (1960). Pierre Bayle: Skeptical Prophet of Enlightenment. *Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association / Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada*, 39(1), 44–56. <https://doi.org/10.7202/300425ar>

# PIERRE BAYLE : SKEPTICAL PROPHET OF ENLIGHTENMENT

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Frederick the Great of Prussia, chief of the enlightened despots of the eighteenth century, took time from the pressing affairs of war and state in the early 1760's to bring out a book of selections from Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique*. To the Prussian philosopher-king Bayle's work was "dies schätzbare Denkmal unsres Zeitalters" which he proposed to rescue from burial in private libraries in order that the author's demonstration of sound reasoning and wonderful logic should become a model for as many men as possible. "Er ist", says Frederick, "ein Brevier des gesunden Menschenverstandes und die nützlichste Lektüre für Personen jedes Ranges und Standes".<sup>1</sup>

Frederick's tribute to Bayle fell on many a willing ear. Those wealthy enough to own private libraries had indeed been purchasing the *Dictionnaire*, as Daniel Mornet was to rediscover when he made a study of the catalogues of some hundreds of these libraries a few years ago and found Bayle's massive volumes to be the work most frequently listed. Mornet concluded from his study that Bayle's *Dictionnaire* was probably "la plus grande œuvre" of the first half of the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

To Voltaire as to Frederick this conclusion of a twentieth century historian would have appeared eminently satisfactory for "the King of the *philosophes*" accorded to Pierre Bayle the title of "l'avocat-général des philosophes", and spoke of his "réputation immortelle".<sup>3</sup> Diderot added his tribute when he remarked that Bayle had few equals in the art of reasoning, perhaps no superior.<sup>4</sup> That the Encyclopedists, Diderot and d'Alembert in the lead, and many others of their temper made evident use of Bayle's great collection there is no doubt. In the opinion of Gustave Lanson the *Dictionnaire* was the arsenal from which came nearly all "l'érudition philosophique, historique, philologique, théologique" with which the *philosophes*

<sup>1</sup> Frederick the Great, "Vorrede zum Auszug aus dem historisch-kritischen Wörterbuch von Bayle", *Werke* (Berlin 1913), VIII, 40.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Mornet, *La pensée française au 18<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris 1938), 31.

<sup>3</sup> Voltaire, "Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne", *Œuvres complètes* (Paris 1877-85), IX, 476, note 1.

<sup>4</sup> Diderot, Art. "Pyrrhonienne", *Encyclopédie, Œuvres* (Paris 1876), XVI, 490.

armed themselves in their fight against the Church and religion.<sup>5</sup> But to Frederick, to Voltaire, to the makers of the Encyclopedia and how many others, Bayle's work was more than an arsenal, it was a model. Voltaire summarized this view in verse:

« J'abandonne Platon, je rejette Epicure,  
Bayle en sait plus qu'eux tous; je vais le consulter :  
La balance à la main, Bayle enseigne à douter.  
Assez sage, assez grand pour être sans système . . . »<sup>6</sup>

This attitude of mind Emile Faguet aptly fixed in his characterization of Bayle's *Dictionnaire* as "the Bible of the eighteenth century".<sup>7</sup>

Could Pierre Bayle have lived long enough to see his reputation mount so high he would likely have been both highly pleased and grimly amused. The tributes to his logic and his reasoning power might have reminded him of an entry in his personal journal made after his renunciation of Catholicism — his second alteration of religion in a year — "Année 1669, le mardi 19 de mars, changement de religion . . . le lendemain je repris l'étude de logique".<sup>8</sup> These are scarcely the words of a prodigal Huguenot son returning to the faith of his father. They are rather those of a man to whom religion is becoming of steadily lessening importance, and who will henceforth channel his unquenchable intellectual curiosity into the realm of philosophic enquiry. The decision so to direct his life was confirmed when he chose to become a professor of philosophy rather than a Huguenot minister.<sup>9</sup>

But the man in whom religious fervor was waning and who sought an easier field of intellectual endeavor in philosophy was not to escape the impact of religious and political strife. Having fled France as a relapsed heretic in 1669 Bayle was again forced into exile in 1681 when Sedan, where he was teaching in the Protestant Academy, was annexed by Louis XIV. He joined the stream of refugees flowing into the Netherlands where, through the intercession of a friendly Dutch student, he became Professor of Philosophy and History at the new academy, *L'Ecole Illustre*, in Rotterdam.

For a professor interested primarily in research and writing, as Bayle was, the situation in Rotterdam was nearly ideal. He had seven hours of lectures a week instead of the twenty at Sedan, and he was paid a comfortable salary of 500 guilders a year by the city. He

<sup>5</sup> Gustave Lanson, *Histoire illustrée de la littérature française* (Paris 1923), II, 36.

<sup>6</sup> Voltaire, *op. cit.*, 476-7.

<sup>7</sup> Emile Faguet, *Le dix-huitième siècle. Etudes littéraires* (Paris 1890), I.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Charles Lenient, *Etude sur Bayle* (Paris 1855), 26.

<sup>9</sup> For the facts of Bayle's life see: P. André, *La jeunesse de Bayle, tribun de la tolérance* (Genève 1953); C. Lenient, *op. cit.*; H. Robinson, *Bayle the Sceptic* (New York 1931).

had thus a great deal of leisure to devote to the intellectual interests that were his real concern. That he was pleased with his situation is evident in his refusal of an offer of advancement elsewhere. He explained his refusal thus: [At Rotterdam] "Je me lève et je me couche quand je veux; je sors si je veux et je ne sors point si je ne veux pas, excepté les deux jours de leçons."<sup>10</sup>

Obviously Bayle was now free to throw the bulk of his effort into the cause which was beginning to emerge as the chosen purpose of his life, a crusade to win men to doubt. He who could not persuade himself to become a minister of Protestantism was to develop into a fervent preacher of doubt.

The crusader openly turned his guns upon traditional beliefs for the first time as the result of the occurrence of a comet in 1680. Aroused to vehement protest by the popular reactions to this phenomenon he issued in his *Pensées diverses, écrites à l'occasion de la Comète qui parut au mois de Décembre, 1680* a blast against the then common idea that comets presage evil. Though written at Sedan the first important work from Bayle's pen was not published until 1682 when he had found refuge in Rotterdam. It is significant because of what it reveals of the author's views and methods. And because of the ready reception it received it is regarded as one of the most representative works of the dawn of Enlightenment.

The drift of Bayle's thinking in the direction of skepticism is evident. He has read Plutarch and Cicero, Charron and La Mothe le Vayer; above all, Descartes and Montaigne; indeed he is said to have known the writings of the last almost by heart. Now he brings this attitude to bear in the *Pensées diverses* where he insists that the occurrence of comets is a perfectly natural event in full accordance with the general laws of nature, having for humanity only the significance of showing how the Author of Nature follows always the great highway of law which He has Himself laid down. It is, therefore, no belittling of Providence to find natural causes for such events, "car en bonne Philosophie la Nature n'est autre chose que Dieu lui-même agissant . . ." Indeed, the regular ways of Nature are as much evidence of the powers of God as any miracles since it is, for example, as difficult "de former un homme par la voie de la génération, que de ressusciter un mort".<sup>11</sup>

The argument for natural law was accompanied by a long digression on the absurdity of pagan miracles, and by a discussion of the real and supposed relation of atheism to morality which permitted many chances of left-handed attack upon orthodox views. Concealed

<sup>10</sup> Cited in C. Serrurier, *Pierre Bayle en Hollande* (Lausanne 1912), 46.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Bayle, *Pensées diverses . . . , Œuvres* (La Haye 1727), III, 60-1.

attack of this kind was to become characteristic of Bayle. The book was markedly successful, going through four French editions in Bayle's lifetime, and before 1750 seeing nine editions in French and an English translation. Although the book was anonymous at first appearance Bayle was soon known as the author through the indiscretion of a friend to whom he had shown the manuscript.

Once he was launched upon a crusade for the exposing of human error Bayle quickly found himself in the midst of controversy. Far from shunning such polemics he welcomed all opportunities to advance the cause. Hence, a tide of writing — books, pamphlets, letters — began to flow from the secluded study in Rotterdam.

Bayle's first sharp encounter came when Père Maimbourg, a Jesuit who was royal historiographer of France, published an *Histoire du Calvinisme* as part of the current attack upon the Huguenots. Bayle seized the chance and made a reply, a *Critique générale* of Maimbourg's work which appeared anonymously in 1682. To an historian it is of great interest that, although pivotal religious points are discussed, the main line of attack in Bayle's *Critique* is that the royal historiographer is a bad historian, and that this fact invalidates his whole work. The charge is that Maimbourg is so much a creature of his feelings that he cannot see the facts of history as they really are. Bayle professes pity for "un Historien, qui se laisse entraîner misérablement à la colère, par des préjugés d'éducation, par des motifs humains, et par cent autres illusions indignes de l'Homme", and concludes that "le bon sens veut qu'on n'ajoute point de foi à un Historien, qui est si peu Maître de sa préoccupation, que sa colère et sa haine sautent aux yeux de tout le monde."<sup>12</sup>

Bayle, soon known as the author of this *Critique* through the indiscretion of a publisher, saw his attack go to three editions in two years. He had registered a popular success to the great annoyance of his Huguenot colleague, Jurieu, whose long and heavy criticism of Maimbourg's book was a complete dud, and to the rage of Père Maimbourg who made no direct reply but who took steps that resulted in the issuance of a royal order in 1683 commanding Bayle's *Critique* to be torn to pieces and burnt by the public hangman, and requiring that the death penalty be administered to anyone found guilty of selling it in France.

The revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, and the associated persecution of the Huguenots which brought death and suffering to Bayle's family in France aroused him as nothing else was ever to do. Normally a man in whom ironic analysis and sardonic amusement predominate over strong feeling he was on this occasion moved to

<sup>12</sup> Bayle, *Critique générale de l'Histoire... de M. Maimbourg*, *Œuvres*, II, 10.

an expression of explosive bitterness. The pamphlet, *Ce que c'est que la France toute Catholique sous le règne de Louis le Grand*, published at the moment of greatest heat, is vitriolic. The longer and soberer *Commentaire philosophique*, largely written and published in 1686, is still sharp and bitter. The latter book is the important one, and is regarded as one of the most significant discussions of tolerance in any language.

In this book the argument for toleration centers upon the concept of "la conscience errante", an idea already used by Bayle in his criticism of Maimbourg. This is the idea that all men are liable to error in their thinking, that consequently no one can claim finality, and that error must be allowed for or tolerated if true freedom of thought is to exist. Applied to religion Bayle concluded that this meant that religious views, like all the opinions of men, are only an individual matter. If our opinions come to us properly under the aegis of reason and natural light, nevertheless allowance for error is as necessary to the use of reason as allowance for evil is in the practice of freedom. In any event men are really responsible to God not to men in matters of conscience, and every man who makes an honest effort to use his reason is orthodox in the eyes of God, and consequently "...la conscience erronée doit procurer à l'erreur les mêmes prérogatives, secours, et caresses, que la conscience orthodoxe procure à la vérité".<sup>13</sup> This individualistic and relativistic argument is one to which present-day ears are well accustomed; to Bayle's generation it was revolutionary.

To the appeal for a recognition of the right of toleration of "la conscience errante", he added the argument of our limited knowledge of other people's minds and the assertion that intolerance is fundamentally wrong because it breeds hypocrisy and irreligion. This last point he sharpened with a prophecy that the existing religious persecution in France would wreak havoc in the realm of orthodox religion and would evoke a great plea for the support of natural religion in the place of cults that sow eternally the seed of war, carnage, and injustice; a prophecy, incidentally, which accorded closely with the devout Fénelon's estimate of the same situation. Bayle was coming to the position of setting danger to public peace and security as the true test of tolerance. He makes it plain that, whereas public security and the majesty of the law must be upheld, so far as he is concerned diversity of opinion does not endanger these and persecution of opinions must, therefore, be deemed illegitimate; indeed, in persecution lies the real threat to the security of the state.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> This argument developed in detail and with lavish illustration in the *Commentaire* and its *Supplément*. See especially *Commentaire philosophique*, 2<sup>e</sup> partie, Ch. VIII, *Œuvres*, II, 422-7.

<sup>14</sup> Bayle, *Idem*, Ch. VI, *Œuvres*, II, 415-9.

Bayle's *Commentaire philosophique* had a marked influence upon eighteenth century thought. It must be ranked with Locke's *Letter on Toleration*, published three years after Bayle's work. In the famous article on tolerance in the *Encyclopédie*, the reader in the end is referred to Bayle's *Commentaire* where, he is told, "ce beau génie s'est surpassé".<sup>15</sup> To the English historian Lecky the *Commentaire* formed "more than any other work the foundation of modern rationalism".<sup>16</sup>

During these same years Bayle's European reputation was being considerably extended by a venture into journalism for in 1684 he founded the *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* in Amsterdam. This journal achieved a wide circulation. Since it was a book review digest it enabled Bayle to display his remarkable capacity for analysis and summary, and also to follow his particular interests. The Royal Society in London congratulated him on this endeavor and proposed a regular correspondence. He was even commended by the *Académie française* and read widely in France despite a legal ban. The large correspondence which he maintained in his editorial capacity is one of the most interesting records of the intellectual life of the times. However, after three years of success Bayle decided that this venture was not wholly to his taste and turned over the journal to other hands.

In all of his publications the unorthodox trend of Bayle's thinking was evident. Hence, there arose a strong current of hostile opinion in Holland as well as in France. But whereas French authorities were limited to burning or banning his books, those in Holland could take more direct action. Jurieu, leading preacher of the exiled Huguenots in Holland and Bayle's long-time teaching colleague, vigorously took up the cudgels against his associate. Personal animosity no doubt sharpened the conflict between the two men, especially on Jurieu's part, but the latter's concern over Bayle's heterodoxy was just as real and intense as was that of Catholic leaders in France. Jurieu's case was strengthened when Bayle became suspected by the governing authorities of spreading dangerous political ideas. In war-time this was a very serious charge. Consequently in 1693 Bayle was dismissed from his professorship because of the "dommage qu'un maître, nourrissant des opinions dangereuses, pourrait causer à la tendre jeunesse". The "plusieurs thèses dangereuses" in his books were made grounds for action, and he was finally forbidden to give even private lessons in philosophy.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Art. "Tolérance", *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (Genève 1778-1779).

<sup>16</sup> W. E. H. Lecky, *History of Rationalism in Europe* (London 1865), II, 64.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in Serrurier, *op. cit.*, 159.

Since the attack did not go beyond this point he was able to go on living in Rotterdam. His tastes being simple, he could manage on a reduced income, and when the affair had blown over he appears to have been glad to be free of formal obligations. In fact, the new-found freedom from classes and lectures was so much to his liking he made no effort to get a new post, saying in explanation that he really had no love of the conflicts, intrigues and "*les Entre-mangeries Professorales*" which prevail in academic circles.<sup>18</sup> He would stay clear of these. The truth was he was now free to embark upon the great work of his life, the *Dictionnaire historique et critique*.

For the purpose of the Baylean crusade a more suitable instrument could scarcely have been found. The *Dictionnaire*, in reality an encyclopedia, was to be far more than a well of information. It became a vast storehouse of every argument and illustration that the indefatigable author-editor could devise or discover with which to castigate those people and institutions, those ideas and principles which he disliked. Everything he thought of as superstition, error, prejudice, injustice and unreason is heaped with scorn. The spirit which pervades the whole work is pointedly revealed in a letter written to a cousin in 1692. Bayle says in this,

« Environ le mois de décembre 1690, je formai le dessein de composer un dictionnaire critique, qui contiendrait un recueil des fautes qui ont été faites, tant par ceux qui ont fait des dictionnaires que par d'autres écrivains, et qui réduirait sous chaque nom d'homme ou de ville les fautes concernant cet homme ou cette ville... »<sup>19</sup>

Thus for Bayle the *Dictionnaire* was conceived originally as an instrument for the exposal of the faults of writers. In actuality it would become a mirror of the errors of man.

Although this work was offered to the public as an encyclopedia Bayle made no attempt to be encyclopedic. He wrote only about what interested him, i.e., mostly about philosophy, religion and recent history, and excused himself for this by saying that he was merely trying to correct Moréri's *Grand Dictionnaire historique*. Patently this was an excuse to enable him to do what he pleased, and, in fact, he proceeded throughout with the utmost freedom of form and content. An article was usually just a pretext for Bayle's remarks. These comments, which constitute the overwhelming mass of the material, are in the notes and not in the body of the text. No doubt this procedure was a prudent device for baffling potential critics and foes but it also reflects a lifelong habit of approaching serious subjects in an indirect and devious manner. His cunning interweaving of traditional and unconventional opinions on dangerous subjects made

<sup>18</sup> Bayle to M. Minutoli, March 8, 1694, in *Œuvres*, IV, 703-4.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in P. Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne*, I, 140.



the reading of Bayle's articles fascinating riddles to his contemporaries. The popularity of this pursuit was not unlike the passion for detective stories today, and, then as now, the persistent reader was sure to discover the murderer in the end.

In some ways the *Dictionnaire* fails to reflect the new developments in ideological fashion. For instance, there is little mention of natural science. Bayle was not interested. In a highly literary age literature has a small part in this work. On the other hand Bayle's strong emphasis on recent history and the contemporary scene, — over two-thirds of the articles concern persons of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, — mirrors faithfully the growing inclination to forget the remoter past, to emphasize present and future. Bayle, it is true, had originally intended to deal more fully with the ancients but gave this up as poor business, unappealing to the public and unlikely to sell. He slighted the Middle Ages thoroughly, and dealt with only those Biblical characters that suited his aims. Clearly he sensed and he sympathized with the dawning triumph of the "moderns" over the "ancients". Despite any gaps the measure of Bayle's attunement with the spirit of a new age may be seen in the immediate and enormous success of the *Dictionnaire*. The demand for the first volume exceeded the supply before the second was published. The immediate favor accorded this work was but the start for it was greeted with a steadily mounting enthusiasm which was to make this sprawling publication indeed "the Bible of the eighteenth century".

Favor was not unaccompanied, however, by opposition and the stronger the approval the fiercer became criticism and attack. French publishers, seeking to issue an edition in France, found the Chancellor requiring an examination of the work before granting allowance. But the report, made by Abbé Renaudot of the *Académie française*, was highly unfavorable, condemning the *Dictionnaire* as licentious, obscene and irreligious. Publication was forbidden. In Holland Jurieu took up the attack. Using mostly Renaudot's arguments he accused Bayle anonymously in 1697 of being "a finished Pyrrhonian, or a Deist, whose general aim is the ruin of all faith and all religion".<sup>20</sup> Bayle, aware of his accuser's identity, poked fun at him in a later edition of the *Dictionnaire* and issued a pamphlet in direct reply. But his opponent had the authorities behind him. Summoned before the Walloon Consistory at Rotterdam Bayle was officially warned, and told that he would have to revise certain articles, notably the ones on David, Epicurus, the Manichaeans, Pyrrho, and others. He paid little heed to the warning, giving hardly more than lip-service to the revision. Indeed, in the case of the article on David he used the attack to foster publicity for his own views.

<sup>20</sup> Cited in Robinson, 144.

Both those who praised and those who attacked saw in the *Dictionnaire* an instrument of negation and destruction. Those who were reacting against the authoritarianism of Louis XIV, against all authority and tradition, received Bayle's mockery with delighted approval. They would readily have approved Professor Howard Robinson's judgment that whereas the *Dictionnaire* may have proven a severe emetic the patient was the better for it.<sup>21</sup> Those others, however, who saw their world tumbling about their heads regarded Bayle's work as a diabolical invention; and many, who were not unsympathetic to his criticism of existing conditions and views, were convinced that his attitude, his method, his principles and conclusions were alike ruinous, leading not to truth and sound reform but to chaos and confusion.

The immediate popularity of Bayle's *Dictionnaire* is comprehensible in a generation that was repudiating one faith and had not yet confessed to a new one. Bayle's temper fitted the mood of such a period. But the *Dictionnaire* as "the Bible of the eighteenth century", of the *philosophes*, of the Enlightenment, is incomprehensible, except as the later period remained still an age of transition, of negation, with the work of destruction still incomplete. That such a situation did exist until the Revolution is true, of course. It is likewise true, it seems, that Bayle's successors took from his work much that he did not intend, or used only those parts which suited them and utilized his authority to uphold a new faith, a new system, which he would have been the first to deny and to mock.

Yet, to a later generation caught up in a fever of optimism, of devotion to the idea of progress, of conviction of the rightness of Descartes' promise that men by the right use of reason might become "the lords and possessors of nature",<sup>22</sup> there could be little hesitation or query about the using of the Baylean purge. It was manifest to them that its only result must be to clear the way for a new and better world. Keen-eyed Voltaire understood that Bayle, "le plus grand dialecticien qui ait jamais écrit, n'a fait qu'apprendre à douter",<sup>23</sup> and both he and Frederick the Great valued Bayle for his throwing doubt upon all systematizers, starting with Plato and Aristotle. Still, for them it was part of the great crusade. As Frederick said in a letter to Voltaire about his edition of Baylean excerpts, "... ce ne sont que de légères chiquenaudes que j'applique sur le nez de l'inf...; il n'est donné qu'à vous de l'écraser".<sup>24</sup> Yes, "écraser l'infâme", this is the watchword, the crusade and the dream. Crush the world of unreason, clear away the rotten past that is holding

<sup>21</sup> Robinson, 194.

<sup>22</sup> René Descartes, *Discours de la Méthode, Œuvres et Lettres* (Paris 1952), 168.

<sup>23</sup> Voltaire, *op. cit.*, 468.

<sup>24</sup> Frederick to Voltaire, Nov. 25, 1765, *Correspondance, Œuvres*, XLIV, 118.

down the present and the gates will open on a brave, new world. While the introspective Diderot might balance between a desire to use Baylean iconoclasm to smash religious bonds and a fear of Baylean skepticism as a dangerous tool;<sup>25</sup> while Jean-Jacques Rousseau could issue a thumping assault upon Bayle and his method of doubt,<sup>26</sup> the use of the skeptic's purge became the order of the day, and the conviction grew that its use was preliminary to the ushering in of something like Utopia.

It was the weapons of doubt and skepticism that they found in Bayle's arsenal which formed unquestionably the main attraction of his work to eighteenth-century admirers. Only, when they chose to believe that with such weapons they were clearing the way for the founding of some new Utopia, they went off the Baylean track for Bayle had no faith whatsoever in Utopias of any kind. This most failed to see. When Bayle exhibited a strong hatred of ecclesiasticism, a profound distrust of ecclesiastical authorities, when he lavished pages on the uncovering of irregularities in the lives of ecclesiastics they felt that progress was being made. When he used article after article to wage a thorough debunking campaign against the Bible they were delighted. His ceaseless discussion of oracles, aimed at showing that credulity amongst pagans was not dissimilar to that amongst Christians, was accepted as a victory for reason and science.

The men of the Enlightenment, who claimed to be proponents of Bayle's ideas, deliberately overlooked or blindly failed to see that the weapon they eagerly seized and used with such avidity against revealed religion, ecclesiastical authority and other things that they did not like could be as easily used against themselves and all they revered, indeed, was so used by Bayle.

As early as 1673 Bayle had written a letter in which he declared Pyrrhonism to be "la chose la plus commode" in the world since it enabled one to discuss and to criticize with the minimum of trouble. "En un mot, vous contestez; et vous *daubez* sur toutes choses tout votre saoul, sans craindre la peine du Talion." As practitioners of this mode he cited Montaigne, Plutarch, Socrates, Cicero, La Mothe le Vayer and others. The note of approval is evident in the terms in which he discusses these men, and he clearly feels a pull in their direction.<sup>27</sup> From this youthful inclination Bayle seems never to have deviated. It became gradually a fixed habit of mind, a favored approach to all questions. His was a mind that would not or could

<sup>25</sup> Diderot, Cf. plea for iconoclasts in "Salon de 1765", *Œuvres*, X, 391, with warning against skepticism in Art. "Pyrrhonienne", *Encyclopédie*, *Œuvres*, XVI, 471-492.

<sup>26</sup> J.-J. Rousseau, *Emile*, *Œuvres* (Paris 1846), II, 600 and Note 1.

<sup>27</sup> Bayle to M. Minutoli, Jan. 31, 1673, in *Œuvres*, IV, 535-9.

not believe. He seemed to fear commitment or attachment to either persons or ideas. Always he was ready to ridicule, facing life in a spirit of levity and mockery. His genius lay in his ability to analyze, to criticize, to poke fun. He became known as a man who could expose all the difficulties in any situation or problem.<sup>28</sup> Bring them out, yes; but resolve them, no. Bayle's was an ideal that made a virtue of irresolution.

More perceptive *philosophes* like Diderot read Bayle, laughed with him, used his arguments and warned against the corrosive effects of skepticism. Others simply assumed that their path, their goals, were those of this popular author. This they did in spite of his paying scant attention to their touchstone of progress, the development of science. His failure to offer incense at that altar, they overlooked. And they did not notice that though he sympathized with the moderns in their war upon the ancients he did not claim, as they did, that the victory of the moderns would mean progress. In fact, Bayle contended that "La vie humaine n'est presque autre chose qu'un combat continu des passions avec la conscience, dans lequel celle-ci est presque toujours vaincue";<sup>29</sup> and that "L'homme est un animal incorrigible; il est aujourd'hui aussi méchant qu'aux premiers siècles".<sup>30</sup>

Disregard of science and disbelief in progress were associated in Bayle's mind with a sardonic evaluation of humankind for he shared neither *philosophe* rationalist optimism nor Rousseauan belief in the natural goodness of man. He might sometimes assert that in matters of morality we should be content with common sense, and that examples of good conduct are to be found in every country, age and religion, thereby causing his reader to feel that he supported the concept of natural morality believed to be common to all reasonable men. So he did, in theory; the only trouble in his mind was to find the reasonable and sensible men. They were everywhere and at all times extremely few; nor was this paucity to yield to the tutelage of reason. Man on the whole was to Bayle a vain, weak, ignorant mediocrity, ruled largely by passion and instinct.

True it is that he repeatedly counsels men to be reasonable, but he scarcely expects them to be so. He lays down precepts of reliance upon clear thinking and learning from experience whereby men may improve their lot, and he then devotes the whole, vast *Dictionnaire* to demonstrate that they neither learn from nor act upon such precepts. Even reason and good principles, we are told, may lead men astray as easily as they set them aright.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. J. Delvolve, *Religion critique et philosophie positive chez Pierre Bayle* (Paris 1906), 2<sup>e</sup> partie, Ch. XI; and Lenient, *op. cit.*, 104.

<sup>29</sup> Bayle, Art. "Hélène", *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (Paris 1820), VII, 549.

<sup>30</sup> Cited in Lenient, 141.

« En un mot, le sort de l'homme est dans une si mauvaise situation que les lumières qui le délivrent d'un mal le précipitent dans un autre. Chassez l'ignorance et la barbarie, vous faites tomber les superstitions, et la sottise crédule du peuple si fructueuse à ses conducteurs, qui abusent après cela de leur gain pour se plonger dans l'oisiveté et dans la débauche; mais en éclairant les hommes sur ces désordres, vous leur inspirez l'envie d'examiner tout, ils épluchent et ils subtilisent tout, qu'ils ne trouvent rien qui contentent leur misérable raison. »<sup>31</sup>

Thus the reason that ought to lead men into paths of virtue succumbs to human passions, and ends by turning men to uncertainty and discontent.

« La raison humaine... c'est un principe de destruction, et non pas d'édification : elle n'est propre qu'à former des doutes, et à se tourner à droite et à gauche pour éterniser une dispute... elle n'est propre qu'à faire connaître à l'homme ses ténèbres et son impuissance, et la nécessité d'une autre révélation. C'est celle de l'Écriture. »<sup>32</sup>

This view is another refrain that one meets time and again in Bayle, that the only resolution of all doubt is through faith. And Bayle informed the Walloon Consistory that he wished to remain and to die in the faith in which he had been raised. One is reminded of Voltaire's later prudent maneuvers at Ferney when faced by similar criticism. Alongside such assertions of the need of faith and revelation may be placed a strongly Cartesian view of God which Bayle expressed in 1686,

« Par les plus pures et les plus distinctes idées de la raison nous connaissons qu'il y a un être souverainement parfait, qui gouverne toutes choses, qui doit être adoré de l'homme, qui approuve certaines actions et les récompense, et qui désapprouve d'autres et les punit. »<sup>33</sup>

Such statements are by no means isolated affirmations, nor are they limited to his earlier years. Nonetheless, they no more accord with the general spirit of the *Dictionnaire*, or with the record of Bayle's career, than do his avowals of belief in reason and common sense. In reality, there is but one position, one attitude which does so agree, i.e., skepticism.

Bayle was above all the skeptic, the classic Pyrrhonian. So Diderot was to remark, "Mais le scepticisme n'eut, ni chez les Anciens, ni chez les modernes, aucun athlète plus redoutable que Bayle".<sup>34</sup> That Pierre Bayle understood Pyrrho and skepticism thoroughly is evident in his excellent article on that ancient Greek in which he points out that Pyrrho sought all his life for the truth, "mais il se ménageait toujours des ressources pour ne tomber pas d'accord qu'il l'eut trouvée", and where he defines Pyrrhonism or

<sup>31</sup> Bayle, Art. "Takiddin", *Dictionnaire*, XIV, 22-3.

<sup>32</sup> Bayle, Art. "Manichéens", *Ibid.*, X, 199.

<sup>33</sup> Bayle, *Commentaire philosophique, Œuvres*, II, 371.

<sup>34</sup> Diderot, Art. "Pyrrhonienne", *Encyclopédie, Œuvres*, XVI, 486.

skepticism as "l'art de disputer sur toutes choses, sans prendre jamais d'autre parti que de suspendre son jugement . . ." <sup>35</sup> Nothing could better describe Bayle's own attitude and practice than these words of his, and this in spite of the fact they are associated with an assertion that he desires not to fall into this view. Skeptical even about skepticism no one could see better than he the dangers that lay along this path. Possibly it is true that Bayle somehow hoped to avoid, to escape from the chaos of skepticism. The son of the Huguenot minister may really have had a nostalgic longing after the security of faith. If so, he never achieved his goal. Disillusioned in youth he never recovered a hold upon his father's faith, nor did he win a new faith except his paradoxical assurance that through skepticism, through a willing acceptance of "la conscience errante", the best might be made of this unhappy world.

This one last conviction seems to have been the main source of his drive, this and the intellectual pride which permitted him to amuse himself at the sight of the follies of mankind, and to feel superior to such fools. His crusade for toleration, his plea for freedom of thought were real and honest. Yet, how were these ends to be attained? Not, it would appear, by sweeping men's minds free of error, not by leading them into a world of clear truth and reason. No, this was impossible. Man's greatest error, and the one from which all persecution and intolerance springs, is to believe that his own error is truth. He must learn through a study of other men's follies that he too is steeped in folly and error, that like other men he is weak, vain and ignorant. Once he sees this, and how men have not the wit to escape from their own imperfections, then he will realize how stupid it is for one group of men to persecute another group of men for their beliefs. Then, and then only, will tolerance prevail. So reasoned Pierre Bayle. The apostle of skepticism would lead the world into the peace of confessed uncertainty, the serenity of nothingness, the harmony of "Je ne sais pas".

Yet, even as he preached his gospel, true to his skepticism even in the midst of his hopes, he realized that this was a road few men would travel. He knew that by nature man is a believing being. Of this he could have had no greater confirmation than the fact that out of his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* the men of the Enlightenment made a "Bible", that from this new scripture they preached a new faith, the faith of reason. One of the world's greatest skeptics had become a saint of a new faith. What a grim smile that would have brought to Bayle's lips, for one thing he knew for sure, whatever may be the value of a good purge it can never be a cure for "la conscience errante".

<sup>35</sup> Bayle, Art. "Pyrrho", *Dictionnaire*, XII, 99.