

# The Notion of Erroneous Conscience in Pierre Bayle

Jean-Pierre Cavaillé

**Abstract:** This essay explores the reciprocal contamination of the notions of error and erring at the beginning of the early modern time in Latin and Romance languages, through the example of the concept of “erroneous conscience”. This concept, for Pierre Bayle and those who followed him at least on this point, allows for the decriminalization of religious beliefs, and even those that challenge religion(s), by recognizing the “rights of the erroneous conscience”. This right is a right to error and to erring/wandering limited to religious convictions and apparently aimed solely at “tolerance” (supporting and excusing erroneous/wandering opinions). However, it did not escape contemporaries that it radically challenged the very idea that a universal truth could be universally known and established in this field.

**Keywords:** erroneous conscience, pyrrhonism, moral rationalism, atheism, intolerance.

This essay considers Pierre Bayle’s treatment of one of the most established notions of moral theology: “erring” or “erroneous consciousness” (as he translated from Latin “*errans*” and “*erronea conscientia*”), which he argues is inseparable from the theological notion of “invincible error” or “invincible ignorance.” Bayle’s explicit goal in invoking “the Rights of an erroneous Conscience” is to establish a doctrine of the broadest possible toleration in matters concerning the freedom of conscience and worship. Among the numerous studies dedicated to this particular doctrine of Bayle’s—which culminates in his *Philosophical Commentary* (1686)<sup>1</sup>—interpretations diverge about his peculiar philosophical approach, which can be detected on both the surface level as well as the deeper layers of his doctrinal texts. This is particularly the case concerning the extent and limits of his radical interpretation of Pyrrhonism,<sup>2</sup> a seemingly con-

<sup>1</sup> *Commentaire philosophique sur ces paroles de Jésus-Christ contrain-les d’entrer: où l’on prouve par plusieurs raisons démonstratives qu’il n’y a rien de plus abominable que de faire des conversions par la contrainte, et l’on réfute tous les sophismes des convertisseurs à contrainte, et l’apologie que S. Augustin a faite des persécutions*, Cantorbery, Thomas Litwel (Amsterdam, A. Wolfgang), 1686. Throughout this essay I refer to the 1708 English edition revised by John Kilcullen and Chandran Kukathas: Bayle 2005. See also the critical edition of Jean-Michel Gros: Bayle 2006.

<sup>2</sup> See the works of Labrousse 1963/1964, of Richard H. Popkin (above all: Popkin 1979) and more recently of Frédéric Brahami (2001; 2005). The theologian, atheist and Pyrrhonian Bayle has a special place in Cantelli 1969.

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tradictory position against his defence of an unfailing moral rationalism, which is more likely to foster resolutely atheistic thought (see McKenna 2012; 2018; Gros 2002; Mori 1999).

My aim in returning to these well-known texts, however, is not to solve the paradoxical aspect of Bayle's Pyrrhonism. Instead, I revisit the philosopher's work to demonstrate the lasting impact of his conception of error throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (above and beyond the artificial distinctions and oppositions between the two aesthetic categories of "Baroque" and "Classicism"). I pay close attention to Bayle's semantics of "erring" (wandering),<sup>3</sup> which is not only etymologically linked to "error," but also to "heresy," the theological notion of making the wrong choice or taking the wrong road. According to Bayle, the circuitous path of heresy diverges from the straight path of dogmatic truth and leads to loss, which is itself conceived as the metaphorical model of spatial bewilderment, the death of the soul, and eternal damnation. This is diametrically opposed to "orthodoxy," that is the sound path to truth and salvation. As Furetière simply states in his *Dictionary*: "taken absolutely, [error] means error in faith, heresy." In the second edition of the *Dictionary*, however, the editor Basnage de Beauval incorporated numerous citations from Bayle in the definition of error, wherein readers find an interesting juxtaposition of two examples: "we also call the erring peoples, who have no fixed habitation [...]. Heretics are also called our poor erring brothers" (Furetière 1701, entry "erreur"). Following this line of reasoning, when Jews are presented as an (or the) "erring nation," it means to say that they wander through the world and are obstinate in their error.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, Bayle—equipped with the theoretical means to refute these very notions of heresy and orthodoxy (as well as their opposition)—meticulously demonstrates how in matters of religion, the human mind is condemned to wandering and error, even and above all when it is convinced of the absolute truth of its beliefs.

## 1. Unwillingly Heretics

To get to the heart of the subject, it is helpful first to return to an extraordinary chapter of the *Various Thoughts*, entitled: *That some errors are not criminal*. In this section, Bayle's entire argument is based on the distinction between the moral faults and "errors" of opinion and belief: "it has never been permitted a man to give in to vice, whereas there is an infinite number of things one

<sup>3</sup> *L'errance* 2017.

<sup>4</sup> The Roma ("Gypsies," "Bohémiens," etc.) are described in an even more negative fashion (if that is possible) as an "erring" or "wandering nation." [for example Lieber 1859: 123] Through this formula, they are targeted on the basis of their incessant movements, their erratic customs and practices (theft, palmistry), and their fundamental irreligion (the Roma always conform to the dominant religion, which "proves" that they have no real one, reasons for which they are victims of invincible ignorance).

can submerge oneself in with impunity.”<sup>5</sup> Bayle is quick to note that he is not interested in discussing the harmlessness of errors in philosophy, for that goes without saying. He is, however, fiercely critical of censorship, especially of the “most reasonable” philosophers: “For it is fairly manifest that there is nothing more innocent before God than being mistaken, with the Scholastics, about the nature of *Universale a parte rei*, about substantial forms, and so on.” “Errors,” or anything that can be considered errors in philosophy, are innocent before God and should be innocent also before men. Bayle allows his readers to draw the consequences that necessarily follow, because, of course, what is at stake is not only the abstruse notions of scholasticism, but those of entire philosophical systems, including those that are hardly compatible with established religions.

Accordingly, he is an heir to the claim of *libertas philosophandi*. Yet, while his predecessors justified this freedom as the search for truth, Bayle considers it, above all (and not without irony) as justified by the harmlessness of errors in philosophy. Moreover, the freedom to philosophise is itself justified by the claim that it refrains from intruding into the reserved domain of religion; philosophers had even invented a so-called “doctrine of double truth” in an attempt to protect their theoretical elaborations from the wrath of theology and ecclesiastical censorship. Bayle, on the other hand, follows an entirely different course, admitting that although the errors in philosophy are certainly legion, even a truth of the most impudent nature does no harm to anyone. He maintains, furthermore, that this also happens in theological discourse, and, more generally, in every matter of religious opinion and belief. As a result, this notion of error can thrive in both philosophy and theology: theological errors are, in fact, no more serious than the wanderings of philosophy: “I maintain that we all form a thousand judgments, concerning both the nature of God and his decrees, as false as falsity itself” (Bayle 2000, 248).

In order to demonstrate this point, Bayle does not find it necessary to directly question the truth of the dogmas of the “orthodox” Christian faith (apart from differentiating the orthodoxy between Catholics and Protestants); it is enough to note that, with regard to the fundamental dogmas shared by Protestants and Catholics, error—that is to say heresy—is everywhere, and in fact, in all minds:

I maintain that our people are anthropomorphites and Nestorians and that every peasant who, after having learned by heart both that God is a spirit and that Jesus Christ is God and man together in a unified person, forms ideas wholly contrary to what he repeats in the manner of a parrot. As a result—errors consisting in judgments of the mind—a man may be orthodox in the phrases he recites by heart, but he does not fail to be a Nestorian if he believes that Jesus Christ, as man, is a person as properly and perfectly as himself. Now, it is assuredly in this way that a peasant conceives of him, for he is not concerned to grasp the necessary distinction (Bayle 2000, 248).

<sup>5</sup> Bayle, *Pensées diverses sur la comète*, 1683, cap. CC. The citations provided are from the English translation: Bayle 2000, 248.

Behind the appearance of orthodox Christians reciting their creed hide “Nestorians” who ignore themselves and conceive of the human and divine natures of Jesus Christ as entirely separate. He goes so far as to call these Christians anthropomorphites and even heretics; those who represent God in the image of the man.

But several questions arise concerning the “Peasants” under discussion; namely, to what extent is calling out the discrepancy between the memorised creed and the commonly-held view of a “person” shockingly counter-intuitive (to use the “cognitive” parlance of our contemporary language)? Does not the orthodox image of Jesus Christ (the hypostatic union of divinity and man) concern most, if not all, Christians, including those learned doctors capable of grasping the subtleties of orthodox theology? Is it possible, in other words, not to be heretic? And what of the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of truly conforming to the demands of orthodox theology? Is not the omnipresence of “error” and “heresy” in people’s minds proof enough that orthodoxy itself is a web of “errors?” And finally, what about the Church fathers and theologians who the Church did not retain as heretics, who themselves multiplied the errors regarding the “truths” declared orthodox?:

How many errors there are concerning the nature of the angels and of reasonable souls! Several church fathers did not hesitate to place them among the corporeal beings and to say that the soul of the father engenders the soul of the son. In recent times, Cardinal Cajetan did not hesitate to teach that angels are material, hardly troubling over the authority of the Lateran Council held under Innocent III at which, several famous theologians say, the spirituality of the angels was asserted. One went so far as to say that God was corporeal (Bayle 2000, 248).

The choice of these “so crude errors” is not insignificant, since they reduce all spiritual entities to corporeal beings, which not only ironically aligns great theologians with anthropomorphic peasants, but moreover demonstrates the difficulty of the human spirit to conceive spirits absolutely separated from all qualities and attributes of matter. Thus, this text shows us how Bayle exploits the notion of error not only to call into question the category of orthodoxy (and the division that it presumes between truth and errors in matters of religion), but also to undermine the Christian religion and even religion itself, which is inextricably bound to error and erring (wandering).

## 2. Equality Between Erroneous and Enlightened Consciences

As we dive deeper into Bayle’s discussion of error, it becomes evident that his aims are much more limited and much less corrosive than what we might have thought at first. In the following passage, Bayle contrasts errors in philosophy and theology with moral faults to argue that, in relation to the latter, the former are innocent, provided that those who profess them consider them to be true:

our anthropomorphic, Nestorian people, and those who believe that all minds have extension, and the philosophers who form so many imperfect conceptions about the nature of God, and the theologians who distinguish so many varieties of the will of God, so many sciences, and so many decrees; all these, I say, err

without offending God, and there is no calumny, however small, that is not a greater crime than all these lies. The reason for this is that theses and errors are altogether involuntary and that one forms these shadowy judgements without malice as well as without liberty, whereas there is no moral vice, from the greatest to the smallest, that we do not come to freely and with the knowledge of the evil we are to commit (Bayle 2000, 248–9).

In these involuntary errors without malice we may recognize the notion of invincible error or invincible ignorance of the theological tradition. This notion plays a central role in Bayle's elaboration on the nature of error, not least because he associates it with that of erroneous conscience in his texts on toleration. Yet here he only defends the idea that this type of error, unlike moral fault, does not offend God. In the *Philosophical Commentary*, Bayle raises the issue with more significant consequences, asserting that the censorship of (so-called) erroneous religious opinions and practices and, *a fortiori*, the persecution of heretics cannot be justified in any way; they are in fact crimes, pure and simple.

Bayle had already clearly established this argumentative strategy in the ninth of the *New Letters by the author of the General Critique of the History of Calvinism by Mr Maimbourg*:<sup>6</sup> "Where is spoken of the right of erroneous conscience, and *bona fide* errors." The conceptual background of this reflection is based on a paradox well known to theologians and casuists,<sup>7</sup> supported by the authority of Thomas Aquinas, who already used the double formulation *conscientia errans / erronea*.<sup>8</sup> In practical judgments the will must imperatively follow what reason presents as true, so that "the will which does not obey reason, even when it is mistaken, is bad. So the will which obeys reason, even when the latter errs, is good."<sup>9</sup> This doctrine is consistent with Pauline teaching: "everything that does not come from good faith is sin" (Romans 14. 23), which is to say, as Aquinas explains, "against conscience." Therefore "the will which opposes the erroneous reason is bad". Bayle, however, points to the contradiction and gross error of condemning heretics who are forced by violence to convert, a practice carried out in the name of orthodoxy since Saint Augustine.<sup>10</sup> Bayle relies on a somewhat questionable

<sup>6</sup> Bayle 1685, t. I, 244 ff. (we translate ourselves all the quotations).

<sup>7</sup> "A man can never act against the lights of his erroneous conscience without committing a crime [...] [This] is the common opinion of the Casuists, and if [this proposition] is false, I do not know what the principle of Morality of which we could be assured," Bayle 1704, 592 (author's translation).

<sup>8</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae, q. 19, art 5 et 6 and *De veritate*, qu. 17 art. 3. It is also the case for modern casuists writing in Latin. See for example Rossell 1660, chapt. XXXV, where the author quotes many predecessors, including Azor, Vasquez etc.

<sup>9</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae, q. 19, art 5 et 6. On the link between Bayle and Thomas Aquinas, see Turchetti 1991, 289–367. On this point of doctrine in Thomas Aquinas, see de Finance 1974, and Vigo, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Augustine of Hippo, Letter 185: "There is an unjust persecution, which the ungodly do to the Church of Christ; and there is a righteous persecution, which the Churches of Christ do to the ungodly [...]. The Church persecutes out of love, and the ungodly out of cruelty." See Brown 1964.

interpretation of a short phrase from the parable of the rich man who marries his son in the Gospels—“*Compelle intrare: Compel them to come in*”—to fault those who persecute others they regard as heretics and convert them by force.

Similarly, in *The Nouvelles Lettres*, Bayle notes: “God compels us to love and respect the truth as long as we know it; it is evident that as soon as the truth is unknown to us, it loses all its right with regard to us, and that as soon as the error is known to us under the form of the truth, it acquires all the rights with regard to us” (Bayle 1685, 253). What truth demands of us, error too, when we take it to be true, requires. Indeed, if “all the rights of truth depend on this condition: *provided it is known*<sup>11</sup> [...] by virtue of this right, error disguised as truth obliges us to the same things as truth” (Bayle 1685, 263).

To provide evidence of this proposition, which is somewhat difficult to accept, Bayle offers several comparisons. A janitor who must only allow people with an entry ticket to enter the house of his absent master, will refuse to welcome those who have lost their ticket, but will inevitably let in an undesirable person who has found a ticket on the way, or who has provided himself with a counterfeit ticket impossible to distinguish from the genuine ones. Thus the understanding (*entendement*) of truth appears to the janitor of the soul, which must let in only that “which presents itself clothed with the characteristics of truth.” Bayle continues: should not the guardian of a fortress receive someone who presents himself as having been sent by his prince with all the required dignity, even if it is learned later that he was an impostor or a spy? Does not a son owe all respect and filial duties to his presumed father, even though he was unknowingly born of adultery? And are not all paternal rights, in this situation, granted to the presumed father?

To make an even stronger case, Bayle quotes at length Molière’s famous comedy *Amphitryon*. No one doubts Alcmené’s innocence when she is seduced by Jupiter, who has taken on the features of her husband Amphitryon (Bayle 1685, 280–1). The themes on display here—travesty, imposture, error taking on the appearance of truth—were undoubtedly familiar to Bayles’ contemporaries, whose entire literary, theatrical and philosophical culture was haunted, even possessed by what one might call a “metaphysical illusion,” that is the extreme difficulty or even impossibility of distinguishing appearances from reality, dreams from awoken experience, actors from the characters they represent, and of course true opinions from errors and wanderings of the mind. In other words, Bayle’s citations have a remarkable disruptive effectiveness, which goes well beyond the letter of the text, where the divergence between error and truth in matters of religion is not questioned precisely because it should not be in order to reach an explicit objective: to place persecutors face to face with their own contradictions without ceasing to concede to them that they live in truth while the accused heretics live in error. But how can they avoid facing the implications of doubt? Could it not be that they are themselves, at the very moment when they

<sup>11</sup> N.B.: Italics in quotations are in the original text.

claim with passion and sincerity their orthodoxy, victims of a “comic illusion?” Are they all not as Alcène deceived by Jupiter, as fortress guardians cheated by the enemy, as bastard sons ignorant of their illegitimate birth?

But Bayle does not find it necessary to dwell excessively on such horrors; it is enough to establish the equality of rights between heretics and the orthodox:

This is nevertheless a picture of the Heretics and the Orthodox: these are the children of the truth and believe to be such; others believe him to be such, and are not such. The destinies of these two kinds of people are very different, but with regard to the right to respect and cultivate what they take to be truth, they are quite equal (Bayle 1685, 273).

Nonetheless the lesson is clear: for heretics, the orthodox are nothing but heretics themselves, whose truth consists only of error and lies:

Nothing is gained by maintaining that error disguised as truth does not participate in the rights of truth, for as each sect convinces itself that it is the only one who takes for truth what is effectively so, each applies all that is said in favour of the truth and rejects on others all that is said against falsehood; and this is the means of having no longer any common Principle of reasoning, and of reducing the destiny of Religions to the laws of the strongest, and to these ridiculous maxims: *this is very good when I do it, but when another does the same, it is a detestable action* (Bayle 1685, 291).

The persecution of heretics is good and pleasing to God for those who possess the conviction of both being in the truth and acting in accordance with the truth, but in reality this is only the exercise of the “law of the strongest,” since no reciprocity is granted to heretics. Heretics, nevertheless, believe that they hold the truth just as much, and, accordingly, should be able to act in the same way to impose it on those they judge to be in error. For there, as we shall see, lies the crucial question for Bayle: it is not one that concerns religious opinions, which in themselves—as aberrant as they appear—do no harm to anyone, but rather of the actions that they command or those that are justified by them: “error disguised in truth in our soul acquires the right to make us do the same actions, which the truth would command us” (Bayle 1685, 294). From here it follows that the relations between “the sects,” that is to say all religions, can only be regulated by political power that either favours a religion and supports it in its fight against all the others (e.g. “toute catholique” France versus the Protestants), or that which understands that civil peace has more to gain by establishing the freedom of conscience and of worship.

### 3. Freedom of Conscience as the Right to Error

The arrival at this political situation is the goal that directs Bayle’s entire argument in the *Philosophical Commentary*, which fully confronts a crucial question concerning the extreme yet practical effects of religious conscience; namely, the abolition of any objective criterion for distinguishing between truth and er-

ror in religious matters, a position that comes to be confused with the erroneous or erring conscience. In the *Philosophical Commentary*, under an assumed name (Jean Fox de Bruggs), Bayle affirms to have read the ninth letter against the Catholic apologist Maimbourg (another letter that Bayle did not sign) and to have been convinced by its thesis: “Error in the guise of Truth, enters upon all the Rights and Prerogatives of Truth.” As he readily admits:

This sounds somewhat harsh and extravagant; and I own I have met with other Expressions of this kind in the same Author, which to me appear’d somewhat crude and undigested at the first reading: but upon better thoughts I am clearly of his Opinion, to wit, that when Error is dress’d out in the Vestements and Livery of Truth, we owe it the same Respect as we owe to the Truth itself (Bayle 2005, 250).

Bayle further cites several examples from the letter that stand out on account of their particularly enlightening and bold nature, such as the one “of a onvinc’d Father, who exercises all the Rights and Functions of paternal Authority as rightfully as any true and real Father” (Bayle 2005, 233). He also reuses, with some modifications, the example of the fortress protector, who in this case is a “Servant” of a Master who unknowingly lets a spy into his Master’s house. Here, a Crook (*flou*), acting as a “faithful Messenger” warns that if the servant does not let him in, he would be, in truth, betraying his master. But Bayle points out a “remarkable Difference:” the crook and the servant are two different people, since the crook, “conscious he has no right to come with the Master’s Orders, can’t do this without a Sin (*sans crime*).” The heresy, however, “being nothing distinct from the Heretical Soul in which it exists (for the Modifications of the Mind are not Entitys distinct from the Mind) is no way conscious of its being only the fantom to Truth, and consequently the Heretical Soul knows not that it either deceives or is deceiv’d. Now fully persuaded of her being in a good State, she has quite another Right of imposing such and such Acts on herself, which in the eternal Order of Morality are to follow upon such and such Persuasions; she has, I say, much a better right in this respect than the Sharper” (Bayle 2005, 251).

The heretic soul, unlike the crook’s, is perfectly innocent and acts in good faith, however erroneous it may be, and therefore, has “the Right” to dictate to itself the acts that its errors command. Thus, in no way does Bayle temper his own doctrine in the *Philosophical Commentary*; he actually goes far beyond the limits he claims to give himself by advocating for the toleration of the most consensual moral theology, and in particular, for a “Principle” that embodies a truth that no one will be able to deny him: “*Whatever is done against the Dictates of Conscience is Sin.*” Bayle’s definition of conscience is a nominal one, which no one can seriously question: “*Conscience is a Light dictating that such a thing is good or bad*” (Bayle 2005, 220). But Bayle, surreptitiously so, moves from moral goodness, which leaves no room for doubt (since it is wrong to act against one’s conscience),—to the truth. Everyone knows that anybody can accept falsehood as the truth in all conscience, that is with the sincere conviction of being right. Such is the proper or “actual” state of an erroneous or erring conscience: it is a



deluded conscience, one hijacked by what the theological tradition calls invincible ignorance or invincible error.

The consequence is obvious, and Bayle, sure of the force of his argument, does not hesitate to formulate it in a provocative way: “the erroneous Conscience challenges all the same Prerogatives, Favors, and Assistances [*secours, et caresses*] for an Error, as an Orthodox Conscience can challenge for the Truth” (Bayle 2005, 226). The heretic is thus justified in all conscience and therefore in all moral innocence to cherish his errors, just as the orthodox cherishes his truths. When reading these lines, however we cannot be fooled: these truths are truths only for the self-declared orthodox, who has neither more nor less good reason for holding and in declaring them such than the heretic in believing and professing his errors. Bayle’s example of transubstantiation, which is a dogmatic truth for Catholics while a sovereign error for Protestants, is enlightening in this respect (Bayle 2005, 266–7, 273). He adds other examples, even more troubling (if that is possible):

As to the Distinction of Persons and Nature in God, there’s reason to believe, that a Turk or a Jew wou’d find it as hard to frame their Minds in such a manner as to be entirely onvince’d of these Truths, as to discover the Intrigues [*infidélités*] that their Mother might have had (Bayle 2005, 273).

The fundamental theological concepts of Christianity are just as difficult for infidels to accept as for a son to accept the idea that he might have been the product of adultery (a rather salacious comparison, to say the least.) And on the topic of belief, Bayle professes: “I even believe there are a great many Orthodox Peasants, who are no otherwise Orthodox with regard to these Mysteries, than as they are honestly resolv’d not to believe any thing tant destroys the Doctrines of the Church: for any thing further, they have not the least Idea of ’em, that’s conformable to the Truth” (Bayle 2005, 273–4). Bayle, in this passage, is referring to the invincible ignorance by which the Church excuses the errors about the mysteries of Christianity into which simple and uneducated minds almost infallibly fall, provided that these *idiotes* content themselves with saying that they believe what the Church commands to believe.<sup>12</sup>

Here we find Bayle taking up the same lesson of his *Various Thoughts*: in matters of religious opinions, no truth is based on anything other than the subjective conviction of those who profess it. It is, in fact, only a question of “putative truth.” But Bayle lets his readers think either that the truth, at least in religious matters, is unattainable (the philosopher from Rotterdam would then be Pyrrhonian, beyond an apparent fideism; see Brahami 2001; 2005,) or that any form of religion is erroneous (moving Bayle toward atheism; see especially Mori 1999).

<sup>12</sup> “The subtle *Scotus* teaches, there’s an invincible Ignorance with relation to these Points, in a Man of a very mean Understanding, who comprehends not what is meant by the Terms Person or Nature; and that it’s sufficient for this sort, if they believe in gross as the Church believes,” Bayle 2005, 274.

He even goes so far as to make it a matter of personal taste, comparing it to the taste for food!

It's sufficient, in like manner, that the Conscience of every particular Person shew him not what Objects are in themselves, but their relative Natures, their reputed Truth. Every one will by this means discern his own Nourishment. He must, 'tis true, endeavour to find the best, and employ his utmost diligence in the Search; but if when fairly offer'd, his Conscience kecks, finds an utter disrelish for it, and a longing for some other thing, let him in God's name leave the one, and cleave to the other (Bayle 2005, 271).

In his *Various Thoughts*, Bayle endeavoured to analyse the shapes and contents of what he calls "taste:" the opinions that one holds concerning strictly religious duties ("the way of serving God") depend on education and habit, and vary as much as "the laws of propriety" (we could no doubt speak of culturally or socially constructed taste), but also—on the contrary—of the dominant passions and temperaments of individuals that are more or less the same in all human societies.<sup>13</sup>

Despite his purpose for writing the *Philosophical Commentary*, which was to nullify all justification for religious persecution and to establish freedom of conscience, Bayle nevertheless emphasises the innocence of those who err in matters of religion. He also mutes the strong temptation to show that error and wandering are consubstantial with any religion. He thus strategically insists on the obligation "to follow the Suggestions of an erroneous Conscience," as one would of an "enlightened Conscience," noting that the actions that result from these errors proceed "often without crime," such as when they do not violate moral laws (or "fundamental condition," which we will return to). For, whether erroneous or enlightened, conscience compels action, and moreover, according to Bayle, nothing would be worse than suspending this imperative voice of conscience for the sake of doubting whether it is truly enlightened or not, which is always a possibility:

<sup>13</sup> "Whence comes it, I beg you, that although there is among men a prodigious diversity of opinions bearing on the manner of serving God and of living according to the laws of propriety, one nonetheless sees certain passions consistently ruling in all countries and in all ages? Why are ambition, avarice, envy, the desire to avenge oneself, shamelessness, and all the crimes that can satisfy these passions seen everywhere? Why are Jew and Mohammedan, Turk and Moor, Christian and Infidel, Indian and Tartar, the inhabitant of the firm earth and the inhabitant of the isles, nobleman and commoner, all the sorts of peoples who in other respects have as it were nothing in common except the general notion of man—why are they so similar in regard to these passions that one might say they copy one another? Whence comes all this, if not from the fact that the true principle of the actions of man (I except those in whom the grace of the Holy Spirit is deployed with all its efficacy) is nothing other than the temperament, the natural inclination toward pleasure, the taste one contracts for certain objects, the desire to please someone, a habit gained in the commerce with one's friends, or some other disposition that results from the ground of our nature, in whatever country one may be born, and from whatever knowledge our mind may be filled with?" Bayle 2000, 169. See the commentary on this passage in Brahami 2005.

If what I here advance were not true, Man wou'd be reduc'd to the strangest state of Pyrrhonism that e'er was heard of: for all our Pyrrhonists hitherto have contented themselves with barring all Affirmations and Negations upon the absolute Natures of Objects; they left our moral Actions uncontested, nor ever disapprov'd Mens proceeding in the Dutys of civil Life, upon the Judgment of Conscience. But here's a Pyrrhonism which deprives us of this Liberty, and changes us into so many Stocks or Statues which can never venture to act for fear of eternal Damnation. This I prove, because the only certainty we have that all the Acts which to us appear righteous and well-pleasing to God, ought to be practis'd, is our perceiving interiorly in our Consciences that we ought to practise 'em (Bayle 2005, 270).

Bayle, as has often been observed, has a gift for “retortion,” for slinging such irrational Pyrrhonism at those who, like his adversary Jurieu, refuse the erroneous conscience to let itself be guided by its own convictions, and who therefore affirm that “his Certainty is no Criterion [*marque*],” and that we have to practise “the Acts which to us appear righteous and well-pleasing to God.” Thus, according to such a doctrine, “there is not a Man in the world who ought not to apprehend [*croire*] that he risks eternal Damnation, by practising what his Conscience suggests as necessary in order to Salvation” (Bayle 2005). The fear, even the perpetual terror, of being in error when one follows one's conscience would make any form of moral action impossible. But this is the case insofar as pleasing or displeasing God is considered the touchstone for weighing the morality of actions. This is precisely the core of the problem, even though it is not explicitly raised in *Various Thoughts*. The important thing here is to prove “that a sincere Heretick, even an Committeefidel, committees accountable to God only for his evil doings committed under the Conscience of their being evil” (Bayle 2005, 273). On the other hand, he is innocent before God of the bad deeds he believes to be good, an assertion that Bayle does not dodge, writing that while “an erroneous Conscience gives a Right of committing Evil,” it can also be difficult to accept (Bayle 2005, 250).

### 3. The “Right of Committing Evil”

Certainly our philosopher makes a crucial distinction—on which rests his radical refutation of any justification of religious persecution,—between *doing* evil, in the sense of, for example, teaching a false religious doctrine (which is “evil” therefore if we think that the heretic is erring, but not the orthodox), and *doing* evil, in the sense of transgressing the moral commandments of “natural light.” The very content of religious revelation cannot legitimately emancipate itself from the laws of universal moral reason. Thus Bayle upholds the principle that any literal meaning of Scripture “which carries an Obligation of committing Iniquity,” is false.<sup>14</sup> On this basis he refutes the interpretation of *Compel them*

<sup>14</sup> In another formulation: “all particular Doctrines [dogme], whether advanc'd as contain'd in Scripture, or propos'd in any other way, are false, if repugnant to the clear and distinct Notions of natural Light, especially if they relate to Morality,” Bayle 2005, 370.

*to come in* by the supporters of the persecutions, whatever their confession (in other words, whether they are orthodox or heretical).

It is also on this basis that he defends religious freedom against the “public disorder” caused by the formation of new “sects.” In effect, if expressions of religious freedom cause “mighty Combustions and Revolutions,” it can only be “accidental,” “or in this case Jesus Christ and his Apostles had bin justly reputed Disturbers of the State, as they attack’d the establish’d Religion, and set up Altar against Altar, from which infinite Disorders must of necessity originate in human Society” (Bayle 2005, 289). The “Disturbers of the publick Peace” are “only those who scour the Country, plunder Villages and Towns, and rob upon the Highway; they who stir up Seditions in a City; they who smite and buffet their Neighbor, as soon as they have got an advantage of him.” Jesus, the Apostles and first Christians, on the contrary, “contented themselves with shewing Men the Falseness of certain Opinions, and the Iniquity of certain Actions; they whom they converted became more dutiful and more obedient to the Laws of the Empire than ever” (Bayle 2005, 289).

Here again, the opposition between orthodoxy and heresy is worth nothing:

seeing Error therefore and Truth have this in common, that when they make their first appearance in a Country where People are settled in a contrary Religion, they equally occasion Stirs and Disturbances; ’twere absurd to maintain, that they who come to preach an erroneous Doctrine are punishable,

otherwise one would have to justify the persecution of the early Christians, who preached the truth in the Empire still shrouded in the errors of paganism (Bayle 2005, 289–90). This point is obviously crucial to make in order to demonstrate the civil benefits of toleration, in opposition to the more commonly voiced argument for public disorder: if the Multiplicity of Religions prejudices the State, it proceeds purely from their intolerance of one another,

but on the contrary endeavouring each to crush and destroy the other by methods of Persecution. [...] Did each Party industriously cultivate that Toleration which I contend for, there might be the same Harmony in a State compos’d of ten different Sects, as there is in a Town where the several kinds of Tradesmen contribute to each others mutual Support. All that cou’d naturally proceed from it wou’d be an honest Emulation between ’em which shou’d exceed in Piety, in good Works, and in spiritual Knowledge [science] (Bayle 2005, 415).

Such reciprocal toleration is only possible, of course, if the believers of these religions either submit their beliefs according to the principles and rules enacted by the “natural light,” or if they are restricted and constrained by positive law and the authority of the prince. Otherwise, how does one ensure that the conscience—whether erroneous or (so-called) enlightened—does not lead to transgressing the limits of natural morality and lapsing into intolerance and crime? Cannot the persecutor himself be absolutely convinced that he is conscientiously obeying, that is, in good faith, what he believes to be the divine commandments? The interpretation of *Compel them to come in* held by so many theologians after

Saint Augustine (the great light of the Church)—such as the Catholic doctors who inspired the revocation of the Edict of Nantes,<sup>15</sup> or even Protestant authors like Jurieu<sup>16</sup>—demonstrates that this was very ordinarily the case.

Bayle makes a very disturbing concession in asserting that “Natural Reason and Scripture are so express against Murder, and the Doctrine which maintains it has something so horrible and even hazardous, that few are capable of being so much beside themselves as really to take up this Persuasion from a Principle of Conscience” (Bayle 2005, 245). He goes on to say

This is never to be apprehended, except from Minds over-run with Melancholy, or flaming Zealots, into whom their Directors of Conscience, flagitious Men, may possibly inspire a King-killing Principle, where the Prince is of a different Religion from theirs; whereof *France* and *England* have memorable Examples (Bayle 2005, 246).

To these two sorts of people (fanatics ready for anything and their villainous leaders) must be added at least all the examples, *en masse*, of pious souls calling for the persecution and slaughter of heretics and infidels. Moreover, customs and education—what we would call “culture”—are decisive agents in the undeniably existent persecution of societies. Bayle goes so far as to make the following hypothesis, which all but rejects the autonomy of the human mind:

Tis very probable, shou’d People agree in making all the Children of a City believe, that ’twas the Will of God they shou’d kill all the Inhabitants of another City, they wou’d firmly believe it, and never come off of this belief, unless they went thro a new course of Instruction (Bayle 2005, 275).

Finally, doubt is no longer permitted: in truth, any religious conscience, beyond the (decidedly) pointless distinction between erroneous and enlightened, is capable of obscuring the natural light and of acting against what Bayle calls “universal reason” (see on this topic Mori 1999, chapt. 6). In other words, religious opinions or beliefs are not only rationally unfounded and therefore all likely to be errors, but because of their ambiguous and unstable relationship with natural light, they are all potentially dangerous and may prove to be criminal errors. Only their submission to the positive law of sovereign political authority can compel them to respect civil peace and prevent them from engaging in the persecution of believers of other religions.

In considering the framework of this extremely pessimistic anthropology of religious error, contemporary readers may be able to make sense of what might

<sup>15</sup> See for example the reuse of the *Letters* of Saint Augustine against the Protestants, to which Bayle in fact responds directly in the *Commentary: Conformité de la conduite de l’Église de France pour ramener les protestants avec celle de l’Église d’Afrique pour ramener les Donatistes à l’Église catholique*, Paris, 1685.

<sup>16</sup> See Pierre Jurieu’s answer to the *Philosophical Commentary: Des droits des deux souverains en matière de religion, la Conscience et le Prince pour détruire le dogme de l’indifférence des religions et de la tolérance universelle Contre un livre intitulé Commentaire philosophique*, Rotterdam, 1687.

at first appear in Bayle to be scandalous or egregious paradoxes. His acknowledgment of the “virtue” of atheists (Bayle 2000, par. 122, 129, 144) for example, emerges not as problematic in this context, but rather logical and enlightening, since the atheist’s moral conscience is unaffected by the errors of religion. So much can be said of the viability of an atheist society (Bayle 2000, par. 172,) perhaps even its superiority—from the point of view of promoting peace and harmony—over “real” societies (that is to say societies currently existing) where religious zeal is both the cause and pretext for so many social crises. This context reveals, moreover, how religious error, admittedly on a completely theoretical and abstract level for Bayle, is correctable, since, if its control by political authority renders it entirely inoffensive and negligible, it will always remain susceptible to criminality. This possibility exists because the religious conscience, which always considers itself enlightened, encounters the supernaturalism of its “lights” precisely by going beyond the bounds of natural light, even if only by declaring any dissenting religious opinion as false, erring, erroneous and pernicious (in other words, all that encompasses the notion of heresy). Thus the commandments of erroneous conscience, which is none other than religious conscience itself, are always liable to result in acts of intolerance, injustice and persecution.

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