Pierre Bayle. 1647-1706.

1. Life and Main Writings.

Pierre Bayle was born a French Protestant, son of a Protestant pastor, and thus a member of a religious minority (5% of the population). The poverty of his family meant Bayle had to wait till his older brother completed his education before he went to a Protestant academy aged 21. Finding the teaching poor, Bayle left to study at a Jesuit college in Toulouse, where he converted to Catholicism. After completing his degree and leaving the college, Bayle converted back to Protestantism. In 1598 at the end of a series of civil wars in France in which conflict between Catholics and Protestants played a large part, Henry IV had promulgated the Edict of Nantes which gave legal rights to Protestants in France. But already by 1660 the French authorities were pressing Protestants to convert to Catholicism, for the reason that national unity could be maintained only if Catholicism was the only lawful form of Christianity in France. In 1685 the Edict of Nantes was revoked. By reconverting to Protestantism in 1670, Bayle made himself a particular target for persecution, and fled to Protestant Geneva. He never again saw his native region nor any of his family except, briefly, his younger brother. Slipping back into France under cover, Bayle had a series of jobs as a tutor, and then as a professor at the Protestant Academy at Sedan until it was suppressed by the government in 1681. He then obtained a position at the Ecole Illustre at Rotterdam in The Netherlands where there was a community of exiled French Protestants. Bayle remained in Rotterdam until his death.

In the 25 years in which he lived in Rotterdam, Bayle wrote and published extensively. His first work appeared in 1682, *Miscellaneous Reflections on the Comet*. The comet in question had appeared in 1680, and Bayle’s ostensible topic is the reasons, both physical and theological, why the comet should not be interpreted as a portent of evil. However, the real topic is superstition, its causes and its effects. The term ‘superstition’ was widely used in theological writings to denote a corrupt form of religious belief, a corruption which has infected ‘true religion’ and led people astray. Allegedly writing as a Catholic in the *Miscellaneous Reflections*, Bayle argues that contemporary Catholicism is shot through with superstition and ‘idolatry’, that is, worship of something that is not divine. He also develops two themes which recur throughout his writings and arise from his personal experiences. These are religious toleration, and the relation between religious belief and morality. Given the way in which true religion can be corrupted by superstition and may be enforced by political power, so that the established religion of a state may well not be true, the sincere believer should be allowed to follow his or her conscience in seeking true religion. Bayle claims that conscientious sincerity should always be respected, even if it means that some people do not arrive at true religion. In regard to religious toleration, Bayle argues that it is not religious diversity in itself which undermines social cohesion. What does undermine society is persecution and the attempt to enforce beliefs against people’s conscience. As a corollary, Bayle argues that religious difference need not result in difference in social morality. Notoriously, he suggests that a community of atheists could still be a morally good society.
Shortly after the Miscellaneous Reflections Bayle published General Criticism of the History of Calvinism by M. Maimbourg in which he defends his religion, Calvinism, from attacks by an ex-Jesuit, Maimbourg. The main philosophical interest of this is Bayle’s critique of historical testimony, and in particular his argument that historical testimony is rarely sufficient to enable us to evaluate the intentions and thus the moral responsibility of those concerned in historical events. In 1685 Bayle’s elder brother was arrested by the French authorities in retaliation for Bayle’s General Criticism, and died in prison after a few months. This tragedy came a year after the death of Bayle’s father and younger brother. These events had a great impact on Bayle and especially on his commitment to religious toleration and the duty of the state to treat all citizens with impartial justice whatever their religious beliefs. The previous year Bayle had begun to edit a monthly review, News of the Republic of Letters, which had a wide circulation. As editor, Bayle received a constant supply of new books and his position placed him at the centre of an extensive European network of learned correspondents.

Bayle’s position on religious toleration was at odds with the views of the majority of French exiles in The Netherlands. Many of them supported the military and political ambitions of the stadholder of the Dutch republic, William of Orange, and believed that tyrannical monarchs, such as the French King, should be resisted by armed struggle. Bayle maintained that the only strategy that would persuade the French monarchy to cease persecuting French Protestants and re-establish the Edict of Nantes was to reassure the authorities that Protestants were not a political threat. In 1686 Bayle published the first two parts, and in the following year the third part, of Philosophical Commentary on the Words of Our Lord ‘Compel them to enter’. This is his fullest statement of his theory of religious toleration, and sets out to refute the Catholic interpretation of Christ’s words in the gospel of St Luke, ‘Compel them to enter’, which is that force may be used to bring about conversion to the true religion. There followed a lengthy and confusing debate about toleration between Bayle and the leading Protestant theologian in Rotterdam, Jurieu, the upshot of which was that Jurieu lost credibility and Bayle lost his job at the Ecole Illustre in 1693.

Being in exile, with all his immediate family dead, and now without a job, Bayle was in dire straits. Fortunately a Dutch publisher came to his aid, and provided support. The publisher knew that Bayle had started work on a massive project, his Historical and Critical Dictionary, and believed that if he were to become its publisher, he could do well. He was right. The first two volumes of the Dictionary went on sale in 1696 and was an immediate success, with a second edition appearing in 1702. Bayle’s Dictionary was one of the commercially most successful philosophical works ever written. Research on public and private library holdings in the 18th century have shown that the Dictionary overwhelmed all other learned works in the century, leaving well behind works by thinkers we are now more familiar with, such as Locke, Newton, Voltaire and Rousseau. At this time, anyone with serious intellectual interests got hold of a copy of Bayle’s Dictionary.

Here is what a recent editor of selections, Richard Popkin, says about the Dictionary:

“Pierre Bayle, working in Rotterdam in the 1690’s, was able to wander hither and yonder through the world of man’s intellectual and moral thought, from the beginning of written history to yesterday’s newspapers and café gossip, and could portray
enough of it from A to Z to encompass all that his age had to offer, and to reveal so many of its failings in such sharp relief. One man’s portrayal of the ancient sages, the Biblical heroes and heroines, the kings and queens, the courtiers and courtesans, the theologians, the philosophers, the crackpots of all times, could fascinate men such as Leibniz, Voltaire, Bishop Berkeley, David Hume, Thomas Jefferson, and Herman Melville. Bayle had roamed from seductions to perversions to murders to massacres to visions to paradoxes, in dazzling fashion, as he marched from ‘Aaron’ to ‘Zuylichem’. He had provided a wondrous suite of themes and variations, on such problems as those of cuckoldry and castration fears, and religious intolerance, and historical accuracy, and of finding certitude in philosophy, science and religion.”

In modern terms, the Dictionary is a kind of encyclopaedia, but with no clear rationale for the selection of the topics, which are listed alphabetically. It provides information about books, authors, historical and mythical figures, philosophical, scientific and religious ideas and movements, and much else. With the revisions and supplements Bayle added in successive editions, it runs to about seven million words. Each of the articles has a main text, varying in length, and then a sequence of often very long footnotes. These contain nearly all the material of philosophical interest.

As we have already seen, Bayle criticises religious intolerance, taking on three main kinds of arguments that have been put in favour of enforcing religious uniformity. These are (1) that it is necessary to prevent the religious dissident from being a danger to the cohesion of society; (2) that it is necessary to prevent the religious dissident from harming himself by departing from the true way to salvation; (3) that it is a religious duty to root out heresy. To argument (1) Bayle replies, as he does in other works, that it is intolerance itself which most harms society, that morality is not dependent on religious beliefs, that many religious leaders have in fact been evil men, and that, conversely, even atheists can live morally good lives. To argument (2) he replies that genuine adherence to religion requires inner conviction, so that forced conversion does nothing to assist the individual’s salvation. To argument (3) he replies that religious persecution is itself contrary to God’s will because it obstructs the duty to follow the dictates of one’s conscience. These are, of course, arguments characteristic of Protestantism, and hardly settle the matter. They are historically important for their interest to later philosophers like Hume and Kant. But the most lasting legacy of Bayle’s Dictionary was the battery of arguments it contains in favour of philosophical scepticism, and the puzzling relationship between his scepticism and his avowals of religious faith. The particular way in which Bayle seems to understand this relationship is what is called sceptical fideism. To understand Bayle’s sceptical fideism it is necessary first to review a little of the history of philosophical scepticism.

2. Pyrrhonian Scepticism.

The form of scepticism which Bayle practises is known as Pyrrhonian scepticism, the name derived from Pyrrho, a Greek philosopher of about 360-270 BC. His scepticism is said to have been taught in Plato’s Academy by Arcesilaus (315-240 BC), whom Bayle mentions early in the Dictionary article on Pyrrho. It was then further developed by Aenesidemus, who wrote around 80 BC. The methods of argument of these Pyrrhonian sceptics were recorded and described by Sextus Empiricus, and it is from his writings that most of what is known about ancient Pyrrhonism is obtained.
Sextus was a Greek doctor who wrote three main works, probably sometime between AD 180 and AD 240. These are *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, *Against the Dogmatists*, and *Against the Professors*.

The targets of Pyrrhonian scepticism are ‘dogmatists’, which comes from the Greek word for belief or conviction. In this sense a dogmatist about some question (whether of philosophy, theology, mathematics or science for example) is someone who believes or is convinced that a certain answer to the question, P, is true and so its negation ‘not P’ is false. Very roughly, a Pyrrhonian will try to show that there is no more reason to believe P than there is to believe not P. So the Pyrrhonian will say that he himself has no belief on the matter one way or the other. Or perhaps more accurately, he will say that he has no reason to believe one way or the other. This form of scepticism, then, is directed at claims to have reasons to believe P rather than not P. It is not directed at claims to knowledge, by arguing for example that we cannot know that P (or not P) is true because there is at least some possibility of error.

Someone may say that we cannot be absolutely certain that P is true because there is some possibility of error, even though he or she considers that it is more probable that P is true rather than that not P is true. If it is said that knowledge requires absolute certainty, then such a position might be said to be sceptical about the possibility of knowledge on the question. Pyrrhonism, to repeat, is directed at the claim that there is any good reason whatever to hold even that P is more probable than not P.

The Pyrrhonian, then, makes no judgement on the question whether or not P is true; he suspends his judgement. The Greek term for this is epoche. Sextus’s *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* is in effect a handbook of ways of arguing on any question so as to produce epoche, suspense of judgement. The value of this is supposed to be as follows. When we are faced with a question about which we are concerned in philosophy, theology or science we are uneasy until we have an answer. Dogmatic philosophers, theologians or scientists offer an answer, and if we accept it we gain peace of mind and satisfaction. But if we find there are competing answers, and we do not see which we should accept, we are again uneasy and dissatisfied. Satisfaction of the mind is called, in Greek, ataraxia. Pyrrhonism claims to achieve ataraxia not by accepting one answer rather than another, but precisely by epoche, by suspending one’s judgement altogether. It is a bit like getting rid of the uneasiness when unable to decide which mobile phone to buy by ceasing to want to have a mobile at all.

To get a feel for Pyrrhonian arguments take the question whether sugar is sweet. Certainly it tastes sweet to me, that is to say it appears sweet. This is not the sense of “appears” in which sugar appears to be sweet. Rather it is the phenomenological sense of “appears”, as when we say that in the Muller-Lyer illusion one of the lines appears longer than the other, even though we have measured them and know they are equal. So what I can say is that in the circumstances in which I find myself at present, sugar appears sweet. However, to some people in other circumstances, or perhaps to other animals, sugar does not appear sweet. Appearances can conflict. Suppose then I claim that sugar is sweet, on the ground that it appears sweet to me in my circumstances. Then I make myself and my circumstances the standard for how things really are. Do I have any reason for doing this? If not, then I am being simply dogmatic. I have no good reason for believing that sugar is sweet. What then is my reason for making myself and my circumstances the standard for how things really are? If there is to be a standard, it must be such as to deliver correct judgements about how things really
are. Do I have a good reason for believing that the standard I adopt is correct? If not, then I am being simply dogmatic. Another person to whom sugar does not appear sweet could with equal justification judge that sugar is not sweet. But how can I judge that my standard, or indeed any other standard, is correct unless I have good reason to believe that judgements in accord with the standard are true. Yet to have such good reasons seems to require that I have yet another standard for judging which purported standards are correct, and so a regress threatens. In this way I find myself unable to regard the judgement that sugar is sweet as epistemically preferable to the judgement that sugar is not sweet. I have arrived at epoche, and rest content with where I began: I note that sugar appears sweet to me in my present circumstances.

This kind of argument can be used in many different areas, for example in ethics. It appears to me unjust to leave all one’s wealth to one’s son and nothing at all to one’s daughter. But I know of people to whom this has appeared right and proper. Do I have good reason to believe that actions that appear just to me in my circumstances (society, culture) really are just? If I believe this without good reason, I am dogmatic. Do I have standard to judge what moral standards are true? How could I have good reason to adopt a standard for judging putative standards unless I could already claim to know what is really just? And so on.

There are a number of comments to be made about such Pyrrhonian arguments. First, we see that the sceptic does not deny that things appear to him or her in particular ways in particular circumstances. But the sceptic does not count these as beliefs. When I say that sugar appears sweet to me, I am not saying that I believe it appears sweet. Sugar appearing sweet to me here and now is something that is happening to me, and I can report it. I am not expressing a belief, just as when I say I am tired, I am not expressing a belief. Second, I may have a disposition to eat things that appear sweet to me, or to do things that appear just. I can act on the basis of appearances. Sextus says that the sceptic still acts, make choices, and so on, without belief, and in doing so the sceptic is following “nature” or “custom”. This is relevant because Pyrrhonians were often ridiculed on the ground that without belief they had no reason to act one way rather than another. As Bayle says in his article on Pyrrho, “We must consider as bad jokes or impostures the stories…that Pyrrho did not prefer one thing to another and that neither a chariot nor a precipice could ever make him take a step forward or backward and that his friends who followed him around often saved his life.”

Third, we should note that the sceptic does not deny that there is a truth of the matter concerning the questions about which he or she suspends judgement. That is implicit in the claim to have no beliefs about what is really the case. So scepticism is different from relativism, meaning by that the view that whether P is true or not is itself relative to the person making the judgement and the circumstances in which the judgement is made. Relativism in that sense can allow that P is true-for X in circumstances C, while not P is true for Y in circumstances C*. What the sceptic says is that he or she can find no good reason to believe claims about what is actually true or false. But that assumes there is an actual truth of the matter, which, according to the sceptic, escapes the power of reason to determine.
Fourth, many of the sceptical arguments described by Sextus strike us as pretty weak. But Sextus himself remarks that he has no beliefs about which arguments are good and which are bad. As a sceptic, all that can be said is that an argument appears good or bad. But it is important that very often it is not how the argument appears to the sceptic that matters, but how it appears to his dogmatic opponent. In other words, Pyrrhonian arguments are usually ad hominem – the sceptic uses premises that the dogmatist believes and forms of argument that the dogmatist endorses, for example standard syllogisms, to argue for a proposition, and equally to argue for its negation. This technique is particularly prominent in Bayle’s writings. He often adopts premises and forms of argument used by his opponents, to such an extent that, in typical sceptical fashion, his own position, if he has one, is submerged.

I will conclude with some consideration of how and why the tradition of Pyrrhonian scepticism was important to Bayle.

3. Religious Disputes and Scepticism.

In 1562 a French scholar, Henri Estienne, published the first printed edition of Sextus Empiricus’s *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. This constituted the rediscovery of Pyrrhonian scepticism in Europe and its impact was great because of the religious and scientific crisis of the times. In the sciences there was controversy about method. How to adjudicate between Aristotelian and scholastic methods on the one hand, and the new mechanical philosophy on the other? What criterion of scientific truth should be adopted? As long as everyone knew that the earth was the centre of the cosmos, there was peace of mind on the question. But the successive claims of Copernicus, Galileo and Kepler brought at first only uncertainty and disquiet. How was it possible to know what is or is not a good reason for believing one or other of the competing theories? How can it be determined what is the criterion of truth in science?

The religious crisis was equally great. Martin Luther at first supported his proposals to reform the Church by arguments based on the accepted criterion of truth in religion – the Catholic position that religious propositions are to be judged true or false by their agreement with Church tradition, councils and Papal decrees. But as his dispute with the religious authorities deepened, he adopted a new criterion, the testimony of Scripture read in the light of individual conscience and the application of clear reasoning. To decide what should be believed in religion now required a criterion by which to judge the rival criteria of religious truth. From the Catholic perspective, Luther’s criterion is mistaken, just as from Luther's perspective is the Catholic criterion. Is there some more fundamental criterion to resolve the conflict? If so, what is it? What justifies it? What if it is challenged in its turn? It is not difficult to see why, in these circumstances, Sextus’s *Outlines* had a great impact.

One result of the rediscovery of Pyrrhonism is a book by a French nobleman, Michel de Montaigne, called *Apology for Raymond Sebond*. Sebond had published a work of scholastic natural theology, that is, purportedly rational arguments about the existence and nature of God, but many readers found the arguments it contained were weak. Montaigne defended Sebond on the ground that rational arguments about the existence and nature of God are bound to be weak, because of the weakness and limits of human reason. And to support this claim about human reason in its turn, Montaigne adopted and extended arguments from Sextus. He sets out a variety of grounds for
agreeing with the Pyrrhonian position, that human reason is unable to provide our beliefs with positive justification. He points out that dogmatic philosophers cannot give a satisfactory account of the human mind or its powers of reasoning. He adopts Sextus’s critique of the senses as unable to justify beliefs about reality. He makes much use of the recent discoveries of people in the New World with seemingly radically different moral codes, customs and ways of life to argue that there is no criterion by which to judge between European and American Indian beliefs. Most importantly, Montaigne concludes with a statement of sceptical fideism. Reason cannot determine religious truth. One must base ones religion on faith alone, and on the traditions in which one finds oneself.

Montaigne’s work influenced Descartes, who set himself the task of refuting the sceptics. It also influenced Bayle, who followed Montaigne’s example, but with even greater elaborations of sceptical arguments. The point of these, he says, is to free us from a mistaken trust in the power of reason to determine how we should live, and to enable us to turn in faith to religious revelation.

This is what Bayle claims to be doing. But many readers doubted it. Bayle’s sceptical attack on religious reasoning about the existence and nature of God was so strong that they doubted his sincerity, and soon Bayle found himself charged with indirectly arguing for atheism. So next time we will look in more detail at Bayle’s sceptical critique of philosophical theology, and especially of all attempts to find a reasoned response to the problem of evil.