

Religious Belief and Community Identity in Pierre Bayle's Defense of Religious Toleration

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Abstract

Pierre Bayle's treatise on universal toleration, the *Commentaire philosophique*, is both the opening volley in the Enlightenment battle for the autonomy of practical reason and a text offering a powerful defense of extra-rational, subjective conscience. In this paper I indicate that Bayle's argument reconciles two powerful, competing moral commitments but that it does so in a way that entails a dangerous conflation of religious thought and individual and community identity. The paper equally highlights a paradoxical relationship between the respect for extra-rational conscience and the need for popular enlightenment.

*Des idées réclamant le fameux sacrifice
Les sectes de tout poil en offrent des séqueilles
Et la question se pose aux victimes novices
Mourir pour des idées, c'est bien beau mais lesquelles?
Et comme toutes sont entre elles ressemblantes
Quand il les voit venir, avec leurs gros drapeaux
Le sage, en hésitant, tourne autour du tombeau.*

— Georges Brassens¹

¹ Georges Brassens, "Mourir pour des idées," from the album *Fernande*, Philips Music, 1972. "Ideas demanding the famous sacrifice / sects of all types offer their followers / And the novice victims pose themselves the question / to die for ideas, it is indeed beautiful, but which ones? / And, since all of them resemble one another / when he sees them coming, with their great flags / the sage, in hesitation, cannot make up his mind which way to die [literally, 'turns around the tomb', a play on the expression 'tourner autour du pot']."

I. Introduction

The partisans in the religious wars of early modernity were not overall a terribly admirable lot, but they had an intellectual merit lacked by the majority of modern day bigots—they murdered one another for complex doctrinal reasons. Of course this is a radically reductive explanation that lends excessive credence to people's overt justifications for their actions, but I wish merely to highlight the fact that the emergence of toleration discourse in the wake of the wars of religion was due to the fundamental importance accorded to doctrine. Tolerance discourse arose around religious controversy and the concern about the propagation of doctrines that would damn people in this life and the next. That which was tolerated—or not tolerated—was purportedly not people themselves, but beliefs and practices that were thought to be dangerous to all concerned. This needs to be recalled given the semantic shift that has taken place in recent years as the language of tolerance has been turned to the problems of racism and identity politics.²

In an age in which doctrine has come to have much less importance, the committing or suffering of violence for doctrinal reasons appears to be a mere perversion. Within Enlightenment toleration discourse there is a strong strain of doctrinal indifference: doctrine takes a back seat to a universal morality of humanity, or to a political *modus vivendi*. But not all defenders of toleration took this road. Pierre Bayle's *Commentaire philosophique sur ces paroles de Jésus-Christ Contrain-les d'entrer, ou Traité de la tolérance universelle* is one of the most philosophically rigorous defenses of toleration in the modern literature on the subject.³ Bayle is often characterized as a radical

² This trend is explored in Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

³ All citations are from Pierre Bayle, *Œuvres diverses*. 4 vols. (La Haye: Husson et al., 1727 [photoreprint ed.: Hildesheim: Olms, 1965]). The *Commentaire philosophique* is found in vol. 2. Footnote citations will be in volume: part, chapter, page number. Parenthetical citations within

sceptic and even a philosophical libertine, but his *Commentaire philosophique* defends conscience in a manner that is respectful of distinctive faiths. Unlike more popular Enlightenment treatments of toleration (e.g. Locke, Voltaire), Bayle gives a thorough defense of one's rights and duties towards one's conscience that cannot be reduced to anticlericalism, indifference, or the subjugation of faith to politics. His championing of individual conscience achieves a complex reconciliation of universal reason and particular confession.

This paper will indicate that Bayle's defense of the rights of conscience is both inside and outside of the mainstream secularist tradition. The tension at the heart of the *Commentaire philosophique*—that between a universal practical reason and a particular, non-universalizable conscience—is one that has led to a polarization within Bayle studies, with interpreters tending to line up on one side or the other of the divide between reason and revelation.⁴ I would

the text are all from the *Commentaire*, and are part: chapter, page. Original spellings have been retained. All translations are from the 1708 English translation (by an anonymous translator) reprinted by Liberty Fund: Pierre Bayle, *A Philosophical Commentary on These Words of the Gospel, Luke 14:23, "Compel Them to Come In, That My House May Be Full,"* ed. John Kilcullen and Chandran Kukathas (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2005).

⁴ Among those who stress the radical Enlightenment Bayle are Ludwig Feuerbach, *Pierre Bayle* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1967); Haydn T. Mason, *Pierre Bayle and Voltaire* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963); and more recently Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670-1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Robert Bartlett, "On the Politics of Faith and Reason: The Project of Enlightenment in Pierre Bayle and Montesquieu," *The Journal of Politics* 63 (2001): 1-28; and most importantly, Gianluca Mori, *Bayle philosophe* (Paris: Champion, 1999). Rainer Forst, *Toleranz im Konflikt: Geschichte, Gehalt und Gegenwart eines umstrittenen Begriffs* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003) tends towards this rationalist position, assimilating it (plausibly) to twentieth-century discourse ethics, but he equally recognizes a kind of reasonable fideism in Bayle's defense of belief. The most important voices in the fideistic interpretation are Elisabeth Labrousse, whose two volume *Pierre Bayle* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963-1964) did much to solidify the acceptance of this position; Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*. Revised and Expanded Edition

like to suggest that the tension that has so defined the scholarship on Bayle is precisely what makes him such a powerful and appealing thinker for late modernity, speaking as he does to two of our most profound and conflicting commitments. My intention here is not to resolve the tricky question of Bayle's true relationship to religion; rather I intend to offer an interpretation of the *Commentaire philosophique's* argument, highlighting the manner in which it attempts to overcome the antinomy of reason and conscience. Attempting to reconcile universalism and particularity, Bayle articulated a conception of conscience and the good that is worthy of retrieval. But I also wish to point out some ambivalent implications of Bayle's argument: his reconciliation of the universal and the particular comes at a price—in Bayle's conception of conscience, religious thought and community identity become conflated, a conflation that dogs debates about toleration and secularism to this day.

II. The philosophical nature of the Commentary

A classic in the literature on toleration, Bayle's *Commentaire philosophique* was born of a very personal experience of persecution. The son of a Huguenot minister, the young Bayle had briefly converted to Catholicism and then back to Protestantism. As an apostate, he had fled to Geneva, and had only returned to France under an assumed name to teach at a protestant academy. In the buildup to the 1685 revocation of the Edict of Nantes, Bayle's protestant academy was shut down, and he fled to Rotterdam where he taught at a school for Huguenot refugees and published extensively. The French authorities burnt Bayle's defense of Calvinism, and, frustrated that they could not arrest Bayle, they decided to arrest his brother, Jacob, who died

in a grisly prison.⁵ This personal tragedy was daily reinforced by accounts of atrocities across the country related by Huguenot refugees joining Bayle's community of exiles. However, unlike his colleague and polemical opponent, Pierre Jurieu, Bayle did not respond to Louis XIV's intolerance with a call to holy war. Rather, he attempted to come to terms with the problem of religious difference, and specifically to defend the possibility that honest differences of opinion might reasonably exist. Bayle thus confronted the defense of persecution head on, dealing with the central biblical passage whose literal interpretation had been employed by defenders of persecution since Saint Augustine: Luke 14: 23. Briefly, in Luke, Christ relates the parable of a man who invites many to a feast but has his invitation refused on numerous pretexts. Angry, he decides to extend the invitation to the poor and infirm. But when this too fails to fill the seats, he orders his servant to "Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled."

This passage appears to be a straightforward justification of religious violence. The most that one can do is to question the meaning of 'compel': does it mean compel with the rack or compel with minor chastisements, or yet with arguments? What is striking in Bayle's presentation is that his four-hundred-page commentary on this biblical passage makes no use of the tools of biblical interpretation: "Je prétens faire un commentaire d'un nouveau genre, et l'appuier sur des principes plus généraux et plus infaillibles que tout ce que l'étude des langues, de la critique et des lieux-communs me pourroit fournir" (I: 1,367).⁶ The principles in question are those of the 'natural light', reason. His purpose was to demonstrate rationally that the passage in question simply could not be taken

⁵ Elisabeth Labrousse, *Pierre Bayle. Tome I: Du Pays de foix a la cité d'Erasmus* (La Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963), 199.

⁶ "My design is to make a Commentary of an uncommon kind, built on Principles more general and more infallible than what a Skill in Languages, Criticism, or Common-place can afford." *Philosophical Commentary*, 65-66.

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Walter Rex, *Essays on Pierre Bayle and Religious Controversy* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965); and Ruth Whelan, *The Anatomy of Superstition: A Study of the Historical Theory and Practice of Pierre Bayle* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1989).

literally as a call to persecute. Simply put, “tout sens littéral qui contient l’obligation de faire des crimes, est faux” (I: 1,367).⁷ This first chapter outlining the *philosophical* (as opposed to theological or scriptural) nature of his commentary belongs to the opening volley of the Enlightenment. Bayle lays down several logical laws—including the law of non-contradiction—as the essential touchstone of all interpretation. Reason, the ‘light of nature’, is God-given, and anterior to all revelation. Indeed, no revelation can contradict it, for it is the interpretative touchstone: “nous ne pouvons être assurés qu’une chose est véritable, qu’entant qu’elle se trouve d’accord avec cette lumière primitive, et universelle que Dieu répand dans l’âme de tous les hommes, et qui entraîne infailliblement et invinciblement leur persuasion, dès qu’ils y sont bien attentifs” (I: 1,368).⁸

If all people possess the natural light, how are errors committed? The reason is simple: men are insufficiently attentive—they allow themselves to be led astray by ‘passions or prejudices.’ Universal reason demands a certain ‘equity,’ and to know it we have only to look beyond the narrow confines of our particular situation. “[C]omme les passions et les préjugés n’obscurcissent que trop souvent les idées de l’équité naturelle, je voudrois qu’un homme qui a dessein de les bien connoître les considérât en général, et en faisant abstraction de son intérêt particulier, et des coûtumes de sa patrie” (I: 1,368).⁹ This proto-Kantian appeal to *a priori* practical reason contains within it a

demand that we leave our particular identities and desires at the door.¹⁰ We are morally obligated to set aside our particular commitments and to seek an impartial justification for moral norms.

The importance of such an appeal to impartiality is evident when we consider cases of extreme religious disagreement. We cannot possibly have an argument with someone of a radically different confessional position if we begin the argument with the premiss that the terms of argument themselves must be derived from our particular tradition. The entire *Commentaire philosophique* is an attempt, by appeal to a universal standard of extra-doctrinal reason, to overcome the begging of the question by any confessional group. The attempt of a particular confessional group to arrogate to itself the right to enforce opinion is, for Bayle, just this kind of question-begging exercise. While Bayle makes a number of other arguments for tolerance, the bulk of his claims depend on this procedural demand that we universalize every moral injunction. If God commands that the righteous should persecute, then everyone will think himself bound to persecute those who differ in

7. “. . . all literal Construction, which carries an Obligation of committing Iniquity, is false.” *Philosophical Commentary*, 66.

8. “. . . that we can never be assur’d of the truth of anything farther than as agreeable to that primitive and universal Light, which God diffuses in the Souls of Men, and which infallibly and irresistibly draws on their Assent the moment they lend their Attention.” *Philosophical Commentary*, 69.

9. “But as Passion and Prejudice do but too often obscure the Ideas of natural Equity, I shou’d advise all who have a mind effectually to retrieve ’em, to consider these Ideas in the general, and as abstracted from all private Interest, and from the Customs of their Country.” *Philosophical Commentary*, 69.

10. I speak of practical reason because Bayle expresses some hesitancy about extending reason to all speculative doctrines. He insists that he will not go so far as the Socinians (an anti-Trinitarian heresy) in rejecting everything that does not accord with reason. But given his insistence on the principle of non-contradiction we may wonder if he is being entirely honest (the Trinity would seem to be a contradiction, after all). In the *Dictionnaire* he writes of the Socinians that they “s’étaient trompés en subtilisant, & en consultant avec trop de déférence la Lumière naturelle.... Leur principe avilit la religion, & la convertit en philosophie. La grandeur, l’autorité, & la souveraineté [sic] de Dieu demandent que nous cheminons ici par foi, et non point par vue.” “Socin (Fauste),” in Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique*. 5th ed. 4 vols. (Amsterdam, Leyde, La Haye, Utrecht: P. Brunel, et al., 1740), 4: 232, note H (accessible at <http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/node/60>). The two possibilities are the following: either Bayle was articulating a veiled approval for a heretical opinion (as his eighteenth-century readers would later suspect), or he was suggesting that practical reason has a certainty that exceeds speculative reason. This would accord more with the fideistic interpretation of Bayle insisted upon by Elisabeth Labrousse, *Pierre Bayle. Tome II: Hétérodoxie et rigorisme* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964).

the command for the righteous to persecute heretics. If it were evident that God had ordered the persecution of heretics, all pious people would think themselves bound to persecute. The objectively true religion would thus be persecuted as often if not more often than the objectively false ones. Since God must have known that a diversity of sects would exist he can't possibly have ordered persecution, for in so doing he would have known that he would be in effect condemning truth to suffer persecution (2: 10). Bayle loved to suggest that defending the principle of persecution at home is defending it for one's enemies as well—hence the defense of persecution would justify Roman persecution of Christians or Chinese intolerance of Christian missionaries (1: 5,377). Yet Bayle was not making this argument based on some unjustified insistence on fairness (he was not a Rawlsian *avant la lettre*). Bayle was able to make this claim by combining the objective, unitary nature of divine command with the plural and subjective nature of human mind. After all, if you attribute a doctrine to God you thereby suggest that all orthodox people should follow it. By attributing the order to God, you universalize it—for what confession does not believe itself to be orthodox? All who wish to follow God will follow this order—and the order will thus lead to consequences that God cannot have wanted.

What Bayle achieved with this argument was to draw out universalization as the necessary condition for theological argument. The procedural claim that all divine commands must be universalized is not simply assumed as a foundation, but it is shown to be a necessary presupposition for argument. The very moment that Augustine dips his feather in ink to defend a universal theological claim he has condemned himself to this procedure, for the very act of defending any act as divinely enjoined entails recommending it to all believers in the same God.

But Bayle went on to radicalize this marriage of universality and plurality. He made use of a premiss that was widely accepted but that contains an extremely subjectivist element—to obey one's conscience is to obey God: "Ia

conscience, par raport à chaque homme, est la voix et la loi de Dieu, connuë et acceptée pour telle par celui qui a cette conscience, de sorte que violer cette conscience est essentiellement croire que l'on viole la loi de Dieu" (1: 6,384).¹³ This definition of subjective conscience as objectively sacrosanct allows Bayle to draw the following conclusion: God cannot want people to act against their consciences for to act against one's conscience is to rebel against what one takes to be God's will. To act against one's conscience is always an impious act, regardless of whether God objectively approves of the act itself. Thus to force people to act against their conscience is to force them to disobey God: "tout homme qui juge qu'une action est mauvaise et déplaît à Dieu, et qui la fait néanmoins, veut offenser Dieu et désobéir à Dieu : et tout homme qui veut offenser [sic] Dieu et désobéir à Dieu, pêche dès là nécessairement" (2: 8,422-23).¹⁴ Since confessional diversity exists and will likely always exist (a premiss for which Bayle gives empirical and epistemological justification) and since people are nonetheless under an objective obligation to obey their subjective consciences (the voice of God within), it follows that if God had commanded intolerance he would have involved himself in the contradiction of demanding that people be forced to disobey Him.

If a person has honestly sought the truth and has come to the conclusion that a given action is what God commands, then her belief, however erroneous, takes on all the objective "rights of the truth."¹⁵ Among the numerous examples that Bayle gives is the famous case of Martin Guerre in which a woman lived with a man she erroneously thought

¹³ "Conscience, with regard to each particular Man, is the Voice and Law of God in him, known and acknowledg'd as such by him, who carries this Conscience about him: So that to violate this Conscience is essentially believing, that he violates the Law of God." *Philosophical Commentary*, 113.

¹⁴ "Whoever knows such an Action is evil and displeasing to God, and yet commits it, wilfully offends and disobeys God: and whoever wilfully offends and disobeys God, is necessarily guilty of Sin." *Philosophical Commentary*, 220.

¹⁵ *Œuvres diverses*, 2: 2,10,433.

to be her long-departed husband. Bayle excuses her of the charge of adultery; despite the fact that she was objectively in error, her action, based on an honest mistake, was not culpable but rather praiseworthy. Bayle does not say that all error is forgivable. If, for instance, the woman had taken up with the stranger without properly looking into the matter—if, for instance, she had allowed some carnal passion to blind her to the fact that the man was three feet taller and much more handsome than her real husband—she would merit blame (2: 9,442). Now, determining whether someone has erred honestly or has allowed his passions to overcome his reason is something God is better at doing than man, and Bayle insists that the reading of people's minds is not a power possessed by state authority.¹⁶ Indeed, condemning people's intransigence as stubborn 'opinionatedness' is mere assertion. (And, in any case, persecution would raise all sorts of passions that are unhelpful if dispassionate evaluation is required for moral judgment). Honest error, then, excuses. An ancient pagan who venerated idols could not be condemned but rather applauded for doing God's will to the best of his knowledge (2: 9). I will discuss the possible relativistic implications of this doctrine below.

Some modern commentators have celebrated Bayle's appeal to the 'light of nature,' reason. Bayle's insistence that we not beg the question is a means of finding common ground by procedural fiat resting on the necessary conditions for rational public debate. It is not enough to argue with the presupposition that one's confessional position is correct. Rather, we have to attempt to speak across the gulf by appealing to impersonal, universal reason. Rainer Forst has given a Habermasian twist to this; Habermas himself terms it Rawlsian. That universal reason or the 'lumière naturelle' excludes at the outset 'comprehensive

¹⁶ *Œuvres diverses* 2: 2, 1,394. "Un convertisseur a-t-il les yeux assez perçans pour lire dans la conscience d'un homme?" "Is the Convertist sharp enough to read in the Book of Conscience?" *Philosophical Commentary*, 144. (We see that our translator has taken some poetic liberty here.)

doctrines' makes it sound quite a bit like the type of political argument that Rawls accepts in *Political Liberalism*.¹⁷ Rawls attempts to find a basis for common political life in a situation of deep diversity: when the society's 'comprehensive doctrines' are in essential conflict the members of that society can nonetheless deliberate on political matters by accepting that political justifications must appeal to a ground of public reason, a metaphysically and theologically neutral ground where the reasons given are such as can be endorsed by all. For the purpose of politics, certain comprehensive positions are excluded. For all the similarities between this position and Bayle's insistence on the 'lumière naturelle,' there is an essential difference. The second, more interesting element of Bayle's argument—the respect for the erring conscience—is itself a comprehensive doctrine that would be excluded on a Rawlsian delimitation of the political.

In the *Commentaire*, one's right and duty to follow the erring conscience are based on the supreme importance that the individual obey God. The conscience is not the autonomous person (either metaphysical or political).¹⁸ Bayle's defense of our duty and right to follow our conscience is a *comprehensive religious doctrine* that indicates an essential basis of what it is to live a good life as a human being. Thus, while Bayle insisted in another context that atheists are perfectly capable of leading virtuous lives, the theoretical requirements of the *Commentaire* require him to withhold freedom of speech from atheists:

¹⁷ Jürgen Habermas suggests as much in "Intolerance and Discrimination," *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 1 (2003): 2-12, on 6.

¹⁸ We will see this in greater detail below. For the moment let us just note the slight imprecision of Thomas Lennon's summary of Bayle: "[b]ecause the individual conscience is autonomous, it ought to be tolerated." Lennon, *Reading Bayle* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 85. Bayle's conscience bears very little relation to Kant's 'person': Bayle's conscience is sacred, not autonomous in any strict sense. As we will see in the following sections, it is heteronomous to a very high degree.

... c'est qu'un athée ne pouvant être poussé à dogmatiser par aucun motif de conscience, ne pourra jamais alléguer aux magistrats cette sentence de S. Pierre, *il vaut mieux obéir à Dieu qu'aux hommes*, que nous regardons avec justice comme une barrière impénétrable à tout juge séculier, et comme l'asile inviolable de la conscience. Un athée destitué qu'il est de cette grande protection, demeure justement exposé à toute la rigueur des loix, et dès aussi-tôt qu'il voudra répandre ses sentimens contre la défense qui lui en sera faite, il pourra être châtié comme un séditieux, qui ne croiant rien au dessus des loix humaines, ose néanmoins les fouler aux piez (2: 9, 431).¹⁹

The absolute inviolability of the conscience is a doctrine that is based on a claim about human being's duty to obey divine command over positive law.

There are good reasons to wonder at Bayle's sincere commitment to this view of conscience as the voice of God within. In a contemporaneous letter, he spoke of the *Commentaire* as a text that defends Socinians (although, as we have seen, the text itself attempts to distance itself from Socinianism), and there are certainly numerous grounds for reading this work in light of particular battles in the wake of the revocation of the édit de Nantes, not the least of which is Bayle's later move away from such a clear appeal to this doctrine of conscience as the voice of God within.²⁰

19. "That an Atheist, incapable of being prompted to vend his Tenets from any Motive of Conscience, can never plead that Saying of St. Peter, *It is better to obey God than Men*; which we look upon with reason as the Barrier which no secular Judg can get over, and as the inviolable Asylum of Conscience. An Atheist, void as he is of this main Protection, lies justly expos'd to the utmost Rigor of the Laws; and the moment he vends his Notions, after warning once given him, may be justly punish'd as a Mover of Sedition; who believing no Restraint above human Laws, presumes nevertheless to tread 'em under foot." *Philosophical Commentary*, 243.

20. Bayle to Jacques Lenfant, Feb., 1687, in *Œuvres diverses* 4: 629, lettre 88. Among those who make much of this letter is Gianluca Mori, *Bayle philosophe*, 280. I would like to thank an anonymous reader from this journal for drawing my attention to the letter to Lenfant. For the altered definition of conscience, see n. 22 below.

I do not propose to answer the tricky question of whether Bayle was actually a believer, nor do I wish to insist that the *Commentaire* defends the persecution of atheists. Bayle gives the standard reasons for banning public professions of atheism (e.g., that the belief in eternal judgment is necessary for public order), but his presentation does not indicate whether he finds this reason cogent: "les magistrats étant obligez par la loi éternelle de maintenir le repos public, et la sûreté de tous les membres de la société qu'ils gouvernent, peuvent et doivent punir tous ceux qui choquent les loix fondamentales de l'Etat, au nombre desquels on a coûtume de mettre tous ceux qui ôtent la providence, et toute la crainte de la justice de Dieu" (2: 9, 431).²¹ Now we know that Bayle thinks that atheists are not a cause of public disorder and thus ought not to suffer for their views—the right of persecution in this matter is tied to the degree to which atheism inspires disregard for law, and like Hobbes, Bayle thinks that government should regulate actions; it has no place trying to read minds.²² But if Bayle's withholding of tolerance to professions of

21. "... the Magistrate being, by the Eternal Law of Order, oblig'd to promote the publick Welfare and Security of all the Members of the Society under his care, may and ought to punish those who sap or weaken the fundamental Laws of the State; and of this number we commonly reckon those who destroy the Belief of a Providence, and the Fear of divine Justice." *Philosophical Commentary*, 242-43.

22. In this sense, Mori is certainly correct to point out that this refusal to tolerate atheists is of a purely tactical nature. Gianluca Mori, *Bayle philosophe*, 291-92. In later life, Bayle would expand the conception of 'conscience' to include the atheists' rational judgment, indicating that a kind of practical reason was possible. *Œuvres diverses* 3: 29, 986; *Réponse aux questions d'un provincial*, III: 29. Mori makes much of this passage, *Bayle philosophe*, 307-308. This is an important development in Bayle's thought, but it clearly contradicts the use of the term in the *Commentaire philosophique*. That said, the expanded definition can be reconciled with the argument in the *Commentaire philosophique*, but I have not the space to engage in that question here. Suffice it to say that one can lend to the sentiment of conscience that attends an atheist's practical reason the same respect and reverence and that one affords to piety. But how comprehensive such a practical reason can be is a matter for debate; as we will see below, the requirement for conscience is born of reason's limitations.

atheism is merely tactical and if we can read in these passages a defense of the private possession of non-belief, it is nonetheless important to recall that the fundamental basis for tolerance in the *Commentaire philosophique* is not the privatization of religious and metaphysical belief, but rather the public acceptance of the sacred nature of individual conscience.

III. Religious Beliefs and Communal Identities: From Religious Tolerance to Multiculturalism

"L'intolérance naît, selon Bayle, lorsque nous faisons de notre propre persuasion une vérité absolue, dont la possession nous autoriserait à forcer à la conversion les adeptes des autres sectes," writes Gianluca Mori.²³ Yet as we have seen, this presentation of a Millian Bayle who defends tolerance on the basis of fallibilism requires qualification. It is not the raising of our own view to absolute truth that is the problem; it is treating truth as if it should possess coercive power—the second part of Mori's sentence—that is the error. It is our absolute duty to follow the dictates of our conscience that makes the forcing of consciences a crime. In Bayle's defense of tolerance, subjective conscience is granted the authority we would traditionally grant to universal truth. The difficulty is that subjective conscience arises out of the instruction that we receive from our parents.²⁴ We hold tenaciously to the religious and moral opinions we have been taught, and we cannot be blamed for holding to errors we had no capacity to discern. Opinions are to this degree hereditary, and Bayle himself could attest to the great difficulty of breaking with the faith of our upbringing.

Bayle was dealing with the same problem of pluralism that has so exercised late modern debates over

multiculturalism and identity politics. He wished to cross the divide between radically different ways of seeing the world. At first glimpse, however, Bayle's position appears exceedingly naive compared to the hermeneutical complexity of the challenge. With the *lumière naturelle*, Bayle appears to carry the flag for a self-confident Enlightenment project that runs roughshod over all parochial traditionalism in the quest for a pure rational morality. However, the natural light is only part of the story. If one were to be content with this alone, one might treat all particular doctrines as either morally indifferent or morally blameworthy and fanatical.

There is a fundamental tension at the heart of the *Philosophical Commentary* that should be evident from our above discussion. On the one hand, Bayle offers a very optimistic philosophical universalism with his appeal to the 'natural light' of reason. There are certain general truths—primarily ethical truths—that are innate and anterior to all revelation. Adam could only understand God because God had first given him a natural light to evaluate claims. Adam sinned because his passion obscured his natural light. Thus, Bayle insists that every claim—even the claims of miracle-wielding prophets—needs to be judged before the infallible court of natural light, something that entails abstracting oneself from the "côutumes de sa patrie". At the same time, Bayle gives a radically subjective description of conscience, insisting with all his strength that when people err sincerely—when they err despite having honestly sought to set aside their passions and prejudices in search of the truth—they are to be excused. Indeed, "dès aussitôt que l'erreur est ornée des livrées de la vérité, nous lui devons le même respect qu'à la vérité" (2: 10,433).²⁵ More bafflingly, in different places he identifies both of these faculties as our moral 'touchstone' (1: 1,369; 2: 10,437). This has caused some readers of Bayle to confound these two faculties. This is an error. If reason were sufficient we

²³ Gianluca Mori, *Bayle philosophe*, 274: "Intolerance is born, according to Bayle, when we make of our own persuasion an absolute truth, the possession of which authorizes us to forcibly convert the initiates of other sects."

²⁴ *Œuvres diverses* 2: 2, 10,437; 440; 442.

²⁵ "... when Error is dress'd out in the Vestments and Livery of Truth, we owe it the same Respect as we owe to the Truth itself". *Philosophical Commentary*, 250.

would have no need for conscience. Conscience is born of reason's limitations. This is the paradox at the center of Bayle's epistemology. Innate, universal reason is the basis for reflection and communication, but the mind is so heavily determined by its education that the very appeal to a universal, public reason is extremely difficult.

Some writers have thought that this points to an essential contradiction,²⁶ but the tension between subjective conscience and objective reason is precisely what makes the book so much more powerful than free-thinking diatribes about reason's superiority to faith. But to see the strength of this position we need to look into the epistemological and psychological arguments about the nature of conscience.

First, we need to ask why consciences should differ at all. Bayle defends this difference by offering a striking critique of public reason. Bayle, who popularized the phrase the 'republic of letters' and who spent his life pursuing public disputations, expressed pessimism about the capacity for any given set of arguments to be universally convincing. "[L]'evidence," he wrote, "est une qualité relative":

... c'est pourquoi nous ne pouvons guere répondre, si ce n'est à l'égard des notions communes, que ce qui nous semble évident le doit paroître aussi à un autre. Cette évidence que nous trouvons dans certains objets peut venir ou du biais selon lequel nous les envisageons, ou de la proportion qui se trouve entre nos organes & eux, ou de l'éducation, et de l'habitude, ou de quelques autres causes ; ainsi il n'y a point de conséquence de nous à notre prochain, parce qu'un autre homme n'envisage pas les choses du même biais que nous, n'a pas les organes qui servent à la compréhension modifiez comme nous, n'a pas été élevé comme nous, et ainsi du reste (2: 1,396).²⁷

²⁶ E.g., Walter Rex, *Essays on Pierre Bayle and Religious Controversy*, 181ff.

²⁷ "... Evidence is a relative Quality; and therefore we can't answer, except with regard to common Principles, that what appears evident to our selves, must likewise appear so to others. That Evidence which

This scepticism about reason's capacity to secure universal conviction is a powerful counter-Enlightenment claim made by one of the Enlightenment's founding parents. Outside of the small store of infallible universal maxims, we are entirely subject to the contingencies of our education. And, indeed, the degree to which the infallible natural light is perceivable is unclear. Certainly, the capacity for conscience to *err* suggests that it is not to be equated with the natural light, even if the natural light enjoins the obedience to conscience. The inerrant light of nature so often fails to illuminate our minds because our thought is so greatly influenced by our education (I: 1,368).

This is the paradox at the center of Bayle's epistemology. Innate universal reason is the basis for communication, but the mind is so heavily determined by its education that the very appeal to a universal, public reason seems fraught with difficulties. How can one convince someone of something? Certainly, threatening someone is not the best means:

Bref, comme il ne dépend pas de nos passions que la neige nous paroisse noire, mais qu'il faudroit pour cela ou qu'on la noircit, ou qu'on nous mit dans un certain poste et avec de certains yeux, qui causassent dans notre cerveau les mêmes modifications que les objets noirs, il faut pour nous faire affirmer ce que nous nions, qu'on le rende vrai à notre égard; ce qui suppose une certaine proportion entre les objets et nos facultez, laquelle n'est pas en notre puissance toujours (1: 6,386).²⁸

we perceive in certain Objects, may proceed from the Situation and particular View by which we consider 'em, or from a proportion betwixt them and our Organs, or from Habitude, Education, or any other Cause: so that there's no arguing from our own case to our Neighbor's, because another may not consider things by the same View that we do, has not his Organs form'd exactly like ours; has not had the same Education, &c." *Philosophical Commentary*, 146-47.

²⁸ "In a word, as it depends not on our Passions to make Snow appear black; but it's necessary to this end, either that it be tinctur'd black, or that we be plac'd in a certain Situation, and with a certain kind of Eyes, which might cause such Modifications in the Brain as black

Now, the premiss here is dubious. Our passions can and do influence our beliefs, and one does not have to have Orwellian insight into torture to recognize this. Bayle himself remarks elsewhere that threats and bribes can indeed raise our passions and thus obscure our judgment.²⁹ But the implication of this passage that I would like to highlight is not that reason is always separate from passion in practice, but that argument is not some activity that takes place on some neutral ground of public reason. That is, if Bayle maintained the ideal of rational neutrality, the natural light, this was something that was *always* obscured by the perspectival nature of human cognition. With geometry and certain logical sciences, achieving concord appears easier. Yet with complex moral and doctrinal matters, we are left with an enormous task: to reach an understanding, people of radically different upbringing and characters need to see the world through the eyes of their interlocutors. As we have seen, this cannot be accomplished through threats, but only—if at all—through long and careful persuasion.

We are, then, caught between the relativity of cultural difference and the universality of eternal reason. Debating with an 'other', we are forced to adopt a complex interpretative stance whereby the other's views are understood on their own terms. The great difficulty of attaining such

Objects usually do: so it's necessary, in order to make us affirm what we formerly deny'd, that the Matter be render'd true with regard to us, which depends on a certain Proportion between the Objects and our Facultys, and is a Circumstance not always in our own power." *Philosophical Commentary*, 117.

²⁹ As he asks regarding the pretension that persecution helps get people to consider one's view with an open mind, "Croient-ils qu'un homme qui compare ensemble deux raisons, dont l'une est soutenuë par l'esperance d'un bien temporel, et l'autre afoiblie par la crainte d'un mal temporel, soit en état de bien trouver l'équilibre, ou le juste panchant naturel de la balance?" (*Œuvres diverses* 2: 2, 1,394) "Do they indeed believe, that a Man who compares two Reasons together, one of which is supported by the hopes of temporal Advantage, the other weaken'd by the dread of temporal Misery, is in a good way for finding out either the just Poise, or the true and natural Inclination of the Scale?" *Philosophical Commentary*, 140.

a fusion of horizons is the basis for Bayle's pessimism about the possibility of ever attaining universal agreement on matters of faith. The demand that we step back from our particularity is, paradoxically, both a moral imperative and an enormous practical challenge: "... il est vrai en général de tous les hommes du monde, à quelques-uns près qui changent par raisonnement, que c'est à l'éducation qu'ils doivent ce qu'ils sont plutôt d'une religion que d'une autre (car si nous étions nez à la Chine, nous serions tous chinois, et si les chinois étoient nez en Angleterre, ils seroient tous chretiens" (2: 10,440).³⁰ There is a paradox here, then, because Bayle is raising a temple to the highly individualistic, Protestant conception of conscience, but he is equally demonstrating that this individual conscience is largely a product of one's upbringing. The bulk of our thought is derived from our community.

In part two, book ten, Bayle gives a brief description of human understanding and its relationship to divine revelation. He begins by claiming that man is composed of soul and body. At a young age, we are without reason and discernment: they exist merely as an innate capacity. We believe everything that we are told, and our mind is constantly filled with confusion due to its attachment to bodily sensations and bodily needs. Thus, before we have developed our reason, we become creatures of habit and prejudice. This places numerous obstacles to our understanding. In addition, "Dieu n'a pas imprimé aux vérités qu'il nous révele, à la plupart du moins, une marque ou un signe auquel on les puisse sûrement discerner; car elles ne sont pas d'une clarté métaphisique et géométrique; elles ne produisent pas dans notre ame une persuasion plus forte que les faussetez" (II: 10,437).³¹ The

³⁰ "But as it is true in the general of all Men in the world, except a very few who change perhaps upon rational grounds, that 'tis owing to Education that they are of any one Religion rather than another (for if we had bin born in *China*, we shou'd have bin all of the *Chinese* Religion; and if the *Chinese* were born in *England*, they'd have bin all *Christians*...)." *Philosophical Commentary*, 268.

³¹ "... God has not printed any Characters or Signs on the Truths which he has reveal'd, at least not on the greatest part of 'em, by

sentiment of certainty that we have when we consider a geometrical proof differs from the sentiment that we have when we consider a claim about divine revelation. Given that we are made this way, we must accept that where revelation is concerned the respect we owe to the truth must translate into respect for what *we take to be* the truth. There may be an objective truth, but both our corporal condition and the nature of revelation (which is attuned to our limited capacities) render our access to it essentially subjective. Given the nature of mind, even if we accept that one group has truth, we must acknowledge that diversity is inescapable.

Given that we do not have any essential inner sign attached to revealed truths, we require something else to give us fixity. "Cela veut dire que la conscience nous a été donnée pour la pierre de touche de la vérité, dont la connoissance et l'amour nous est commandée" (II: 10,437).³² Conscience is a kind of judgment, but not one in possession of the natural light's infallibility, which can be found in the "propriété des nombres, ou des premiers principes de métaphisique, ou des démonstrations de géométrie" (II: 10,437).³³ In moral and religious matters, we are obligated to seek the truth as dispassionately as possible, but our corporality renders certainty impossible. Yes, we have an innate "natural equity" (although our prejudices often deafen us to its claims), but beyond such simple claims we find ourselves unable to give full accounts for our confessional positions and their practical implications.

Bayle's account in the *Commentaire* entails a curious mixture of innatism and an empiricist *tabula rasa* account

which we might certainly and infallibly discern 'em, for they are not of a metaphysical or mathematical Evidence; they don't produce in our Souls any stronger Persuasion than Falshoods do, they don't excite any Passions which Errors do not excite." *Philosophical Commentary*, 259.

³² "This imports, that Conscience is given us as a Touch-stone of Truth, the Knowledge and Love of which is injoin'd us." *Philosophical Commentary*, 261.

³³ "... Properties of Numbers, or the first Principles of Metaphysicks, or Geometrical Demonstrations". *Philosophical Commentary*, 261.

of how knowledge develops. On the one hand, Bayle offers the account of innate, universal reason, the 'natural light,' which he associates with the soul. On the other, he offers a developmental description of mind that makes its content dependent upon sense-experience. This is the bodily element in cognition, and it is the source of "involuntary obstacles" (2: 10,436) to our discernment of truth.³⁴ There is a series of very important questions raised by this theory of the understanding, but there is not the space here to permit a full inquiry into Bayle's account of mind. I wish merely to insist that we attend to this extra-rational element of conscience that is often missed by authors who place their emphasis on Bayle's philosophical radicalism. Jonathan Israel, for instance, writes that Bayle "justifies staking so much on the individual conscience by claiming that what is good and valid there flows from our natural reason."³⁵ This is not so. What is true is that Bayle's argument for toleration rests on natural reason because it depends on spotting outright contradictions in the defense of persecution. Nevertheless, conscience itself is not to be equated with reason. It cannot defend itself rationally, and is even tenacious in the face of argument. This is good, because if we did not have this capacity for an inner sentiment that something is true, we would be frozen in indecision or condemned to moral indifference. For without this inner sentiment we would have no means of settling on any religious position, and would thus spend our lives in

³⁴ There are other perplexities engendered by his account of our assent to geometric proofs. He suggests that certainty in these matters rests on a 'mark', an inner 'persuasion' that the thing is true. Truth appears to rest upon this psychological condition. This raises more philosophical questions than it solves, and unpacking Bayle's meaning here would have to take us beyond the *Commentaire*. For our present purposes it suffices to note that Bayle thinks doctrinal matters have not the clarity of geometrical demonstrations and, both because of this and because of their practical importance, they thus make greater demands upon the "sentiment of conscience" (*Œuvres diverses* 2: 2, 10,441).

³⁵ Jonathan Israel, "Pierre Bayle's Political Thought," in *Pierre Bayle dans la république des lettres*, ed. Antony McKenna and Gianni Paganini (Paris: Champion, 2004), 349-79, on 362.

a state of frozen inaction, afraid lest we court eternal damnation. For, after all, can anyone truly decide on the basis of reasoning alone which faith will lead to their salvation? Does such a question not require an eternal study of such magnitude as to be even beyond a scholar as productive as Bayle himself? Conscience is an essential moral shortcut in a world of uncertainty.

However, consciences differ according to education, and it is hard to speak across the divide of separate upbringing. If you think the snow is black and you want to convince someone who sees it as white you've got to actually alter their very eyes, their very brains—their entire perspective must be changed (I: 6,386). You can't just discard prejudice and debate on some neutral ground of public reason.

Bayle's defense of the erring conscience had the effect of giving universal validity to subjective states of mind. Was this not effectually the denial of all universalism? What if someone honestly declared it to be their duty to God to slay their neighbor? Naturally, Bayle did not think that the state must accept such dangerous beliefs. The bounds of the tolerable are clearly overstepped when one seeks illegally the bodily harm of another—sovereigns have a duty to see to the public peace, after all, and politics here trumps piety.³⁶ But what of the moral situation? Is the conscientious murderer excused for his error? Would God excuse his error (‘they know not what they do’)? Bayle naturally foresaw this question, and attempted this tepid response: “La lumière naturelle et l'écriture sont si claires contre le meurtre, et la doctrine qui l'enseignerait a quelque chose de si odieux, et même de si périlleux, que très-peu de gens sont capables de s'égarer assez pour acquérir cette sorte de conscience” (2: 9,432).³⁷ This is clearly not convincing since the very

³⁶. *Œuvres diverses* 2: 2, 5,412-13. This accounts for Bayle's desire to keep Catholics out of government. Despite his call for a universal tolerance, he argues that overt Papal justification of intolerance makes Catholics incapable of being trusted in positions of power. But in all other matters they should remain at liberty.

³⁷. “Natural Reason and Scripture are so express against Murder, and

zealots against whom Bayle was arguing did believe that murder can be a holy act. And, indeed, he seems to throw up his hands here. While temporal judges will necessarily condemn and punish such a view, we do not know if God, who alone can judge hearts, will condemn or forgive this apparently erroneous conscience.³⁸

What prevents this doctrine from descending into a morally pernicious and intellectually vacuous relativism? This is one of the most persistent problems in the interpretation of this text and in all appeals to conscience. Might not persecutors have recourse to his defense of the erring conscience, claiming that if they err theirs is a conscientious error? This obvious problem was raised by Jurieu,³⁹ and Bayle admitted that it was “l'instance la plus embarrassante qu'on me puisse faire” (*Supplement*: 21, 540).⁴⁰ His response is that such an error, requiring as it does that one suppress one's humane and otherwise moral inclinations, should be extremely suspect to us. It strikes him as the type of error most likely to arise in one who allows his judgment to be clouded by passions, particularly the passions of malice and laziness—one who does not follow his moral duty and study the question. But he admits that it is indeed possible that someone should nonetheless err in

the Doctrine which maintains it has something so horrible and even hazardous, that few are capable of being so much beside themselves as ready to take up this Persuasion from a Principle of Conscience.” *Philosophical Commentary*, 245.

³⁸. *Œuvres diverses* 2: 2, 9,432. Bayle notes that God judges by intent while man necessarily judges by effect: “C'est-à-dire, qu'on prétend qu'outre les modifications de l'ame, Dieu se regle encore sur les suites du mouvement de la matiere, avec quoi les hommes exécutent leurs desirs ; en sorte qu'il croie que ce soit un plus grand crime de tuer un homme, lors qu'on n'a intention que de le blesser, que de ne faire que le blesser, lors qu'on a intention de le tuer. C'est un grand abus, et néanmoins je ne blâme pas que les juges se gouvernent sur ce pié-là, puis qu'ils ne sont pas les scrutateurs des reins et des coeurs.”

³⁹. Pierre Jurieu, *Des droits des deux souverains en matière de religion, la conscience et le prince* (Rotterdam : Henri de Graef, 1687), 45. Jurieu points out that Ravaillac, the fanatically intolerant murderer of Henri IV, would be excuplated according to Bayle's doctrine.

⁴⁰. “This, I own, is the most perplexing Difficulty that can be propos'd to me.” *Philosophical Commentary*, 513.

this matter: "Enfin, je dis, que quand même cette erreur & ses suites pourroient jür du privilège des maux qu'on fait involontairement, il ne faudroit pas laisser d'employer tous les soins possibles, pour corriger de cette erreur ceux qui en seroient atteints" (*Supplement*: 21, 540).⁴¹

And this explains the urgency of Bayle's own task. It is not enough to convince his readers that people have the duty to follow an erring conscience: if such a duty exists, it is essential that people not err in this regard. People must be reminded of their duty to seek diligently employing all of their natural light.⁴² Bayle *must* convince his readers that intolerance is immoral and against the will of God.⁴³

Je ne nie pas que ceux qui sont actuellement persuadez qu'il faut, pour obéir à Dieu, abolir les sectes, ne soient obligez de suivre les mouvemens de cette fausse conscience, et que ne le faisant pas ils ne tombent dans le crime de désobéir à Dieu, puis qu'ils font une chose qu'ils croient être une désobéissance à Dieu. Mais 1. il ne s'ensuit pas qu'ils fassent sans crime ce qu'ils font avec conscience. 2. Cela n'empêche pas qu'on ne doive crier fortement contre leurs fausses maximes, et tâcher de répandre de meilleures lumières dans leur esprit (2: 9,430-31).⁴⁴

⁴¹ "Last of all, I say, that tho this Error and its Consequences shou'd be suppos'd to enjoy the Privilege of those Evils which are committed involuntarily; yet all possible Care shou'd be taken to correct it in those who are deceiv'd". *Philosophical Commentary*, 513-14.

⁴² For Rainer Forst, this entails the duty to engage in the universalization that informed Bayle's original attempt to prevent question-begging. Idem, *Toleranz im Konflikt*, 338-39. This is an excellent observation, and Forst is correct to note a proto-Habermasian appeal to universal justification. In Forst's presentation, Bayle's strength is both his appeal to reciprocal justification (the universalization), and his argument about the limits of reason. For Forst, this latter raises Bayle above Kant, because it offers a basis for "reasonable disagreement" (632).

⁴³ *Œuvres diverses* 2: 2, 9,430. Kilcullen equally makes this point: "So, as Bayle says, even if those who persecute do so sincerely and err involuntarily we ought to correct their error, which is the purpose of the reciprocity argument and of his book." Idem, *Sincerity and Truth*, 92.

⁴⁴ "I don't deny but they who are actually persuaded that 'tis their Duty to extirpate Sects, are oblig'd to follow the Motions of their false Conscience; and that in not doing so, they are guilty of a Disobedience

The two poles of Bayle's thought, universal reason and subjective conscience, are inseparable. To insist on reason without conscience is to overestimate our capacity for moral certainty in this world, but to insist on conscience without reason is to cast us into an inescapable relativism.

Bayle does not excuse all conscientious sin, but he insists that an erring conscience must be obeyed. This puts the possessor of the erring conscience into a bit of a double bind, being damned for the sin his conscience demands or damned for failing to obey the voice of God within. Now if Bayle allowed this logic of double jeopardy, he tended more to the conclusion that God was merciful. Nonetheless, the difficulties raised by the problem of evil and divine justification were lifelong preoccupations for the Huguenot exile.

Whatever the final status of the conscientious sinner, Bayle's insistence on the rights and duties of conscience raised the stakes of the work considerably. Bayle might have offered a number of defenses of toleration that did not entail the radical possibility that a sinner might think his sin a commandment of God. But pragmatic defenses of tolerance would lead to half measures that he was not prepared to accept. His perverse intellectual cleanliness led him to condemn all 'ces messieurs demi-tolérans' as confused and impious: if God had truly demanded that one use all one's might to force consciences then nothing short of absolute measures against all heretics would do (2: 7,421; 2: 3,402ff.). Bayle forced the defenders of persecution to the extreme conclusion that no quarter can ever be given, nor any sect spared if persecution is truly the law of God.

Given Bayle's argument about the difficulties involved in changing someone's mind, we are forced to conclude that terminal violence is the only sure means, for other

to God, because they persist in not obeying what they believe to be his Will. But, 1. It does not follow, that they act without Sin, because they act by Conscience. 2. This ought not to hinder our crying out loudly against their false Maxims, and endeavoring to enlighten their Understandings." *Philosophical Commentary*, 242.

means will merely create hypocrisy. (One is reminded of the Stalinist dictum that a bullet is the best way to change someone's mind.) What's more, execution does not run into the contradictions of lesser forms of persecution. We recall that the use of force gives people a strong incentive to disobey their conscience, hence to disobey God. Since God cannot have wanted to lead people into impious hypocrisy, the only reasonable thing to do with the command to persecute error is to execute the erroneous (2: 3,403-406). And, indeed, in attempting to reconcile Moses's rather harsh intolerance with the claim that God does not countenance persecution, Bayle notes that Moses did not countenances, but merely executed heretics:

On ne les forçoit pas d'abjurer ce qu'ils croioient, on ne les tentoit pas par l'espérance de la vie à faire les comédiens; en un mot ils mouraient en liberté dans tous les sentimens de leur conscience, s'ils en avoient une, et on ne les expositoit pas à vivre dans ses tortures et dans ses remors, par la promesse de leur donner la vie, s'ils vouloient suivre le culte public. Il falloit mourir sans alternative de la mort, ou de la renonciation à tel ou tel dogme (2: 4,409).⁴⁵

Bayle, accepting for the sake of this argument the truth of scripture, maintained that this law was particular to the ancient Israelites and their special relationship with God. And the implications of this are striking: Louis XIV should abandon his pretence of humanity. If he wants to create complete doctrinal unity without forcing consciences, he must execute all Huguenots without quarter.

The point is, the Mosaic law was not contradictory here: it showed no contempt for conscience. What it did show

⁴⁵ "This Law did not force Men to abjure what they believ'd true, it did not tempt 'em by the hopes of Life to act a part; in a word, they dy'd in the full Enjoyment of all the Principles of their Conscience, if they had any, and were never constrain'd to live in Anxiety and Remorse, by Promises of Life if they comply'd with the publick Worship. Death was their certain Lot, without the Alternative of Death or Renunciation." *Philosophical Commentary*, 182.

was contempt for basic humanity. Bayle clearly thought that the absurdity of these extreme conclusions would push people to accept his argument that God cannot have commanded persecution. But it is a disturbing fact that not everyone is appalled by the notion of executing entire populations. There are some for whom the reduction is not absurd.

IV. The Essential Conscience

Bayle's argument, then, entails the intertwining of universal and particular: individuals have a universal duty and right to follow their particular consciences. Now, if people have the right of conscience, they have equally responsibilities: we are required to make the effort of rational inquiry. And Bayle's treatise itself is like a torch lighting the error, revealing Martin Guerre to be an impostor. Yet consulting the light of reason, just like consulting Bayle's complex argument, is a strenuous task. Bayle's lifelong quest for erudition can be read as an attempt to fulfill one's duty to consult reason.⁴⁶ For the most part, Bayle was aware of conscience's tendency to follow its education. Bayle's lifelong quest to attain sufficient competence to judge perfectly was a quest so immense that he thought most people must, in all practical matters, end in a kind of fideism, if only for the purposes of action. Ultimately, subjective conscience, so susceptible to innocent error, so influenced by the world of becoming and the vicissitudes of politics and education, is to be taken as an *essential* part of ourselves, the divine touchstone, that which we treat as sacred. The radical Enlightenment cries, 'what is this but a supreme elevation of prejudice?' The mores of our parents and our confessional community are, *de facto*, rendered a nearly essential part of ourselves. Escaping these confines is not impossible, but is a rare and difficult achievement.

⁴⁶ In this sense, reading Bayle makes one sympathetic to T. H. Huxley's reaction to Pope: "if a little knowledge is dangerous, where is the man who has so much as to be out of danger?" *Selected Works of Thomas H. Huxley* (New York: J. P. Alden, 1886), 217.

Gianluca Mori, who celebrates the rationalist Bayle, argues that the relativist implications of appeals to conscience were ultimately inescapable, and that Bayle's later writing contains an abandonment of the argument about the rights and duties of the erring conscience. On Mori's view, Bayle eventually came to see religious zeal as essentially intolerant, and he set out to counter the rights of irrational superstition, indicating a great disappointment with the theory of tolerance itself.⁴⁷ Tolerance ultimately can only have a political justification, and Mori reduces the late Bayle's thesis to a standard liberal conception of tolerance, conceiving of comprehensive faith claims as inherently dangerous and championing the supremacy of state over church. There is much to say about this argument—Mori is certainly correct to draw our attention to the pessimistic nature of Bayle's later claims about religion's moral effects. I remain unconvinced that Bayle abandoned entirely his defense of conscience—in the same text Mori cites, Bayle defends his earlier insistence that one is duty bound to follow one's conscience even if it errs.⁴⁸ But if one concedes that Bayle later thought that he had given

⁴⁷ Mori, *Bayle philosophe*, ch. 6.4.

⁴⁸ Bayle, *Œuvres diverses*, 3: *Réponse aux questions d'un provincial*, 4: 2,1014-16. Mori emphasizes Bayle's late view that religious sectarianism is a cause of social strife and that the moral doctrine of tolerance is insufficient to mitigate this negative tendency. This is an important observation, but it does not really contradict Bayle's earlier claims, which always contained a pessimistic account of human behavior. Bayle's late argument is not that the moral doctrine of toleration is incorrect, but that it is ineffective because people generally do not follow it—sectarians are inclined to fanaticism, and thus are only tolerant when they are weak. Religious fanaticism tends towards intolerance. This does not undermine the importance of the moral arguments for tolerance—Bayle's point is merely that politics and passions usually take precedence over morality, and when people's pious inclinations get the upper hand it is usually in their nastier, intolerant variants. This empirical observation that tolerant princes act that way out of policy rather than religious principle is apiece with Bayle's important claim that most social cohesion is a result of temporal concerns rather than religious concerns. That does not alter the moral argument, it merely raises a troubling question about the utility of moral philosophy.

too much space to irrationality, this does not in the least diminish the strength of his earlier work.

It is commonplace to blame the Enlightenment for raising a shrine to an unrealistic universalism and for deriding as prejudice that which forms the horizon of our understanding.⁴⁹ In Bayle, however, we see a very keen awareness of the hermeneutic situation and, indeed, a great scepticism about our capacity to speak across confessional borders. Bayle's argument squares the circle with a defense of tolerance based on a positive respect for all piety—conscience is to be granted respect because it is the best part of ourselves. But given the intimate link between conscience and education, Bayle's argument tends towards the essentialization of culturally determined beliefs.

This is not to suggest that Bayle thought people's actions were determined by their consciences—and hence their religious views. Bayle's main argument in the *Pensées diverses sur la comète* is that social order is maintained much more by somewhat more pedestrian motivations of hope and fear, pride and shame. Thus atheists are more socially reliable than believers. The *Commentaire philosophique* does not deny this social psychology, but it does not attempt to found a political philosophy upon it as is the case of philosophers in the Hobbesian tradition. In the *Commentaire*, Bayle works out the implications of truly respecting piety and conscious adherence to divine command. In this sense, Bayle offered a politics of recognition, for his defense of the erring conscience required people to adopt the presumption of piety on the part of others much as multiculturalists such as Charles Taylor would have us afford the *presumption* of worth to different traditions and ways of life.⁵⁰ We respect others in that we respect their commitment to conscience. This does not require abandoning our own symbolic systems, nor does it require abandoning our negative judgments of competing

⁴⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), 274-78.

⁵⁰ Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25-73.

systems—the field is left wide open for serious theological and philosophical disputation. We absolutely must not, as Rawls would have it, apply “the principle of toleration to philosophy itself.”⁵¹ Rather, we must extend to presumption of *piety* or sincere commitment to an absolute good to those with whom we differ essentially.

Bayle thus gave a theory of tolerance grounded on the logical implications of a respect for conscience—tolerance is founded on a substantive view of the link between subjectivity and the transcendent. And this is a game of high stakes. His disquieting *reductio ad absurdum* points out that the only way to attain doctrinal uniformity without forcing people into sin (without forcing conscience) is to execute heretics outright. The stakes are raised for the *intolerant* either to relent, or to raise their intolerance to genocidal levels. For Baylean psychology transforms doctrine into an element of the believer’s identity, something that it is neither within the power of the will nor of the intellect to change. It is essential for the Enlightenment project that our symbolic systems not be straightjackets, but it is equally important for empirically sustainable social conditions our conscience. A moral philosophy that grants universal importance to our conscientious devotion to the good is one that respects our most profound commitments. But it is equally one that makes the very presence of heretics a danger: our difficulty in crossing hermeneutic barriers makes us—the heretical *people* as much as the heresy—the object of fear. Neither the respect nor the danger is found in doctrinal indifferentism.

And this leads to a conclusion that appears paradoxical to those who contrast Enlightenment rationalism with piety and particularity. It is Bayle’s respect for *piety* that ultimately raises in importance the project of popular enlightenment. For error to be innocent, it must have made after a serious attempt to exceed the limitations of our cultural

context. For the *Commentaire philosophique* tells us that we have a fundamental responsibility to consult our reason and to attempt to speak across confessional boundaries. It is only by maintaining a duty both to conscience and reason that we can avoid the pitfalls of paralyzing doubt, moral indifference, or irrationalist bigotry.

⁵¹. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 10.