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Bayle

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Clarifications: On Atheists *and* On Obscenities

[Shortly after publication in 1697 formal charges were laid against the Dictionary at the instigation of Pierre Jurieu. Its references to Epicureans and atheists, and its obscenities, the theologian alleged, were offensive to religion. After deliberating for a year, the Consistory of the Calvinist Church in Rotterdam cleared Bayle but on condition that he made changes. (See Dic, vol. xvi, pp. 287–300.) In the second edition of 1702 Bayle accordingly amended the articles 'David' and 'Xenophanes', and included four vindictory essays. The latter were entitled: i. On the praises bestowed on certain persons who have denied either the providence of God, or the existence of God. ii. On the objections to the Manicheans. iii. On the objections to the Pyrrhonians. iv. On obscenities. Of these Clarifications the First and the Fourth are included here.]

Bayle denied the charge that he had defended atheism, explaining that he had sought to examine a more testable proposition that had a bearing on the persecution of the religiously unorthodox: namely, whether human conduct was motivated solely by the individual's love or fear of God, or whether by a combination of natural factors such as love of praise and fear of disgrace. A political reading of the defence indicates that Bayle's target was not religion's truth, but religion's supposed utility, and the fallacy of the age, believed by politiquers to be true, that a public religion was an indispensable instrument of government. The persecution of sects, in Bayle's view, had been reinforced by this fallacy and the error continued to block the way to true toleration and freedom.

Bayle's First and Fourth Clarifications insisted therefore that a 'utilitarian' case, not just a 'humane', or 'charitable' case, should be made

for religious and intellectual diversity. The well-governed republic had everything to gain from examining all ideas, and by ensuring the freedom of the printed word.]

First Clarification: On Atheists

The comments that have been made in respect of the good morals of certain persons who had no religion at all cannot in any way prejudice the true faith, and are no affront to it.

Those who have been offended at my saying that there have been atheists and Epicureans whose propriety in moral matters has surpassed that of most idolaters are entreated to reflect carefully upon all the considerations which I am going to propose. If they do, their indignation will evaporate and entirely disappear.

i. The fear and love of God are not the sole basis of human action. There are other principles that motivate a man: the love of praise, the fear of disgrace, qualities of the temperament, the punishments and rewards available to the magistrates, all have immense influence upon the human heart. Were anyone to doubt it, he would have to be unaware of what takes place within himself and what the common occurrences of daily living regularly reveal to him. But does it appear that anyone is so artless as to be unaware of such things? What I have established concerning these other springs of human action may, therefore, be placed among the number of common notions.

ii. Fear and love of the Divinity are not always a more active principle than all the others. Love of glory, fear of disgrace or death or suffering, or the hope of preferment, all act with greater effect upon some men than the desire of pleasing God and the fear of breaking his commandments. Were anyone to doubt it they would be unconscious of a part of their own motives and they would know nothing of what takes place daily among humankind. The world abounds with people who would rather sin than offend a prince who can promote or ruin their prospects. Men daily subscribe to confessions of faith against their conscience either to save their possessions, or to avoid imprisonment, exile, death and so on. A soldier who has given up everything for his religion, but finding himself obliged either to offend God if he avenges himself for a trifle, or to

be thought a coward if he does not, gives himself no rest until he has received satisfaction for the affront, notwithstanding that he is in peril of killing or being killed, and thereby of being in a state that must be followed with eternal damnation. It is not likely that anyone is so ingenuous as to be ignorant of such facts. Therefore, let us place among agreed ideas about morals the following aphorism: *that the fear and the love of the Divinity are not always the most active principles motivating the actions of men.*

iii. That being so, it ought not to be reckoned as a scandalous paradox, but rather as a very likely possibility, that some men without religion are more motivated to lead a decent, moral life by their constitution, in conjunction with the love of praise and the fear of disgrace, than are some others by the instincts of conscience.

iv. There ought to be a greater outrage that so many people are seen to be convinced of the truth of religion while at the same time being steeped in crime.

v. Indeed, it is stranger that pagan idolaters should have performed good actions than it is strange that atheistical philosophers should have lived like virtuous men, since those idolaters must have been encouraged to commit crimes by their very religion. For if they were to emulate their gods, which is the essence of religion, they must have believed that they were required to be envious and deceitful and to engage in fornication, adultery and pederasty, etc.

vi. From which it may be concluded that the idolaters who lived virtuously were guided simply by ideas of reason and decency, or by the desire for praise, or by their natural constitution, or by such other principles as may be found in the absence of religion. Why then should we expect to find more true virtue under a regime of pagan idolatry than under a regime of irreligion?

vii. Observe, I entreat you, that in speaking of the decent morals of certain atheists, I have not ascribed to them any true virtues. Their sobriety, chastity, probity, contempt of wealth, zeal for the public well-being, their desire to be of service to their neighbour, did not proceed from their love of God, and did not tend to honour and glorify him. They themselves were the origin and the object of their behaviour: *l'amour-propre* [love of self] was its foundation and the term is self-explanatory. Their actions were merely *splendida peccata*, glorious sins, as St. Augustine says of all the magnificent actions of the pagans. To say what I have said is thus in no manner to disparage

the prerogatives of true religion. It is still the case that truly good works are produced only from spiritual motives. And what is it to the true religion if the worshippers of Jupiter and Saturn are no better in their actions than those who have no religion?

VIII. If those who are offended claim that, with respect to a virtuous life, one cannot praise the decent morals of Epicurus without supposing that it is the same thing to have *no* religion whatsoever as to profess *any* religion, they are defective in the art of consequential reasoning, and they have completely misunderstood the nature of the question. I have compared atheism only with paganism. Therefore true religion is not under comparison, and is excluded from our discussion. The issue is only about cults introduced and inspired by the devil; and about whether those who have professed such forms of worship, infamous in origin and content, have been more regular than atheists in the practice of decent behaviour. I presume, as a point indubitable and fully agreed, that in the true religion there is not only more true virtue than anywhere else, but that outside this religion there is no true virtue at all, nor any *fruits of righteousness*. What purpose does it serve then to claim that I injure true religion? Does it lessen the harm that may be alleged of the false religion? And should it not rather be feared that the display of such zeal will be offensive to moderate people, and over-nice to a cult supposed, by every doctor of theology, to be created by the devil and detested by God?

IX. I could not rightly have taken exception to these complaints had I written a romantic novel in which my characters were depicted as both atheistical and truly virtuous; for since I would have been master of their words and deeds, I would have had the option of describing them in a manner suited to the taste of the most scrupulous reader. But since my Dictionary is a historical work, I have no right whatsoever to represent people as others would like them to have been. I must represent them as they actually were; I can suppress neither their faults nor their virtues. Seeing then that I advance nothing concerning the conduct of certain atheists other than what the authors I cite relate of them, no one has cause to take offence. To encourage my critics to reflect further upon the truth of what I say, I need only ask them whether they believe the suppression of true facts to be the duty of a historian. I am sure that they would never subscribe to such a proposition.

x. Not that I doubt that there are people artful enough to admit that a factual truth [*une vérité de fait*] ought to be suppressed by a historian if it is likely to lessen the abhorrence of atheism, or the veneration of religion in general. But I most humbly entreat them not to take it amiss if I continue to believe that God has no need of the artifices of polemic, and though it might have a place in a poem or in a work of oratory, it does not follow that I ought to allow it in a historical dictionary. They must permit me to inform them that it is sufficient to work for the *right* religion, since all that would be done for religion in general would be as useful equally for paganism as for Christianity.

xi. I should have been much more deserving of censure had I suppressed the facts objected to; for besides contravening the fundamental rules of historical scholarship, I should have omitted matters which, in their essence, are highly advantageous to the true system of grace. I have shown in another place¹ that nothing can be more suitable for demonstrating the corruption of the human heart, a corruption naturally invincible and surmountable only by the Holy Spirit, than to show that those who have no spiritual assistance are as wicked under the practice of a religion as those who live under atheism. I add here that one could give no greater joy to the Pelagians than to say that the fear of false Gods was able to induce the pagans to renounce some vices. For if, out of fear of incurring the wrath of heaven, they had abstained from doing evil, then they could also have been led to virtue through the desire for spiritual rewards, and so procure for themselves the love of God. That is, they might have been able not only to fear but also to love the Divinity, and so act upon this proper principle. The two handles by which one motivates man are the fear of punishment and the desire of reward. If he can be moved by the former he may also by the latter; for one cannot rightly admit the one and reject the other.

xii. If certain persons more than ordinarily fair and enlightened cite, as their sole reason for being offended, the artifice which has been used, in their opinion, of raising the virtuous lives of atheists

¹ See *Pensées diverses sur les comètes*, pp. 437, 490, 599; and *Additions aux pensées diverses*, pp. 58, 110. [For these same works in Bayle's *Œuvres diverses*, see *PD*, *OD* III, pp. 1–160; and 'Additions aux *Pensées diverses sur les comètes* ou réponse à un libelle intitulé, "Courte Revue des maximes de morale et des principes de religion de l'auteur des *Pensées diverses sur les comètes*, etc.'"', *OD* III, pp. 161–86.]

with my readers, I would beg them to consider that, in the present case, subterfuge could be highly excusable and might even be looked upon as a subject of edification. To perceive this, one need only call to mind an episode of my treatise on *Comets*. The true purpose of that book was to confute with an argument from theology what is commonly said about comets as ill omens.²

The need to strengthen this argument led me to draw a comparison between atheism and paganism. For without that, my demonstration would have been exposed to an objection which would have rendered it unfit to evince what I needed to prove. Therefore, it was necessary for me either to leave that objection unanswered, or to refute the arguments of those who say that pagan idolatry was not so great an evil as atheism. The complete success of the encounter depended largely upon the success of this line of argument, and therefore, according to the rules of debate and by virtue of the rights belonging to an author, I was obliged to avail myself of whatever logic and history could afford to answer the objection. It was not, therefore, out of frivolity or perversity that I related certain matters of fact tending to reveal that atheists are not necessarily more disorderly in their behaviour than idolaters. The rules of debate and the right everyone has to rebut the objections to which he sees his thesis exposed thus laid upon me the indispensable need to take such a course. Loud protests were made about this part of my work and some even tried to make it appear pernicious. I was therefore obliged to defend it as far as reason and fact would permit and, consequently, nobody ought to be surprised if, when occasion offers, I tell my readers that history informs us that this or that person, who denied either the existence or the providence of God, or the immortality of the soul, did nevertheless live like a virtuous man. This assertion, which would perhaps be a just cause of offence in another book, is none at all in mine. On the contrary it might edify my readers since it shows that I have not advanced a paradox out of a principle of vanity, but that I have made an observation which is fundamentally certain and which seems false only to those who have failed to examine it. Nothing is more offensive than a

² See *Préface* to the third edition. [For the full reference in the *Œuvres diverses*, see *PD*, *OD* III, pp. 161–8, 'Préface de la troisième et quatrième édition . . . 1699, 1704', pp. 7–8.]

man who, to give himself some distinction, brazenly affects to depart from the common path: but if there are authors who have opened themselves to the suspicion of having such an inclination, not through their own fault but because readers were not thoroughly acquainted with the matter, nothing can be more edifying than to see them justify themselves.

XIII. In order to remove any suspicions of a perverse affectation completely, I have taken care to remark as often as possible on the improper conduct of atheists.³ If I have not done so more often it was only because the material was lacking. The public was aware that I called for examples to be pointed out to me.⁴ Nobody has taken the trouble and I have not as yet been able to discover them by my own inquiries. I do not pretend to deny that in all countries in all ages there have existed persons who, through their debaucheries and their long-standing criminal habits, have smothered explicit faith in the existence of God. However, since history has not conserved their names it is not possible to speak of them. It is conceivable that amongst those criminals, ruffians and celebrated assassins who commit crimes of that sort there are some who have no religion, but the contrary is still more probable given that among the many malefactors who pass through the hangman's hands, there are none that are found to be atheists.⁵

The ministers who prepare them for death always find them ready enough to desire the joys of paradise. As for those profane hearts steeped in excess who, in the judgement of Father Garasse and many other writers, are avowed atheists, I have not brought them into the discussion; the question here being not about people who are called practical atheists – people who live without fear of God though not without belief in his existence – but about those understood as theoretical atheists – as for example Diagoras, Vanini, Spinoza, etc. I mean people whose atheism is attested either by historians or by their own writings. The question turns uniquely upon the moral conduct [*les mœurs*] of this category of atheist. It is

³ As in [*Dic.*] articles 'Bion Borysthénite', vol. III, pp. 445, 448 and 'Critias', vol. V, p. 331.

⁴ See *Additions aux Pensées diverses sur les comètes*, p. 86; see also p. 75. [See n. 1 above.]

⁵ I speak thus because I do not recall having read any account of the final atheism of this sort of people, nor heard of any.

with regard to them that I wished to be given examples of a disordered life. If I had found any I would have made full use of them. There is nothing more ordinary in history than to encounter reprobates whose repulsive acts elicit disgust but whose very impieties and blasphemies indicate that they believed in the Divinity. Observe that as a natural consequence of the constant teaching of theologians, the devil, who is the most evil of all creatures but incapable of atheism, is the instigator of all the sins of humankind; further, that it follows that the most outrageous malignity of man must have the same character as the malignity of the devil; that is to say that it must be accompanied by the belief in the existence of God. A maxim of the ancient philosophers confirms this reasoning.⁶

xiv. If what I have previously said is capable of edifying sensitive consciences by making them see that the principle which alarms them agrees with the most orthodox principles, they will find no less edification in what I am about to propose. That the greatest reprobates are not atheists, and that since most of the atheists whose names have come down to us have been persons of virtue as the world goes, it is a mark of the infinite wisdom of God, and a reason for admiring his providence. For it has sought to set limits to the corruption of man so that there might be societies upon earth; and if it has favoured only a few with sanctifying grace, it has everywhere dispersed a *restraining* grace,⁷ which, like a strong floodgate, holds back the waters of sin to prevent a general inundation which would destroy every state, whether monarchical, aristocratic or democratic, and so on. It is commonly said that the means used by God to achieve this end have been to preserve in the mind of man the idea of virtue, vice and a sense of a Providence which takes care of creation, and which punishes the bad and rewards the good. You will find this idea in the common notions of divinity and in an abundance of other orthodox works. Now what is the logical outcome of this proposition? Is it not to conclude that if there are people whom God does not permit to fall into the systems of Epic-

⁶ 'Propter quod unumquodque . . .' ['What causes an attribute to apply to a subject always possesses that attribute in an even greater degree.'] Aristotle, *Analyt. Poster.* [Posterior Analytics], 1.2. See also his *Metaphys.* [Metaphysics], 2.1.

⁷ I have been informed by a theologian that it is by virtue of this idea that one can speak of God's Providence in the sense that it never permits crime to get so out of hand that it reaches the point of destroying societies.

urus or the atheists, they are principally those brutish beings whose cruelty, presumptuousness, avarice, rage and ambition can swiftly bring about the ruin of a great country? Is it not to say that if he forsakes certain people to the point of permitting them to deny either his existence or his providence, they are principally persons whose temper, education, positive ideas of virtue, love of noble glory, and sensitivity to dishonour serve as sufficient restraint to enable them to do their duty? You see thereby two consequences that follow naturally from the principles of theology which I have mentioned above. Therefore by pointing out to my readers in various parts of this Dictionary that the greatest profligates have had some religion, and that other persons, who have had no religion at all, have lived according to the rules of decency, I have said nothing whatsoever that does not accord with these two consequences; and that it follows that no one can reasonably continue to take offence.

xv. It would be far more legitimate to see the hand of God in all these matters, as well as the admirable way of his providence which attains the same ends through different paths. Thus the *restraining principle* [*le principe réprimant*], so necessary, according to theologians, for preserving societies, exerts its effect by the brake of idolatry in some countries and persons, and by the constitution or strength of ideas and a taste for moral virtue in certain others. The Greeks, inventive and hedonistic, and thereby susceptible to a terrible succession of crimes, had need of a religion that would encumber them with an infinity of rituals. Had the diversity of ceremonies, sacrifices, and oracles not offered them many distractions and if superstitious terrors had not caused them fear, they would have had too great an opportunity to fall into harm. The Scythians, a rough people with neither currency, nor apparel, nor good food, merely despised sensual pleasures or knew nothing of them.⁸ This was enough to maintain their republic and to prevent them from injuring one another. They were so fashioned that each was content with

⁸ 'Aurum et argentum . . .' ['Gold and silver they reject just as the rest of the human race pursue them. This plain living has also produced in them an uprightness of character, since they covet nothing which belongs to others. For wherever riches have a use, people are greedy for them. I most certainly wish that the rest of the human race had the same self-restraint and absence of covetousness . . . In short, it seems strange that what gives them their nature is what the Greeks cannot attain for all their philosophers' precepts and their sages' extensive teachings.'] Justinian, *Institutiones*, 2.2.

what he had. There is no need at all for codes or digests among such people.⁹

Thus you see fifteen considerations which seem to me sufficient to remove the problems which according to some can be found in certain parts of my Dictionary. They might provide the basis for a substantial book, but here I have been content to present them briefly, given that I have discussed them elsewhere¹⁰ in somewhat greater detail, and that I intend to consider them more fully in a future work.¹¹

Fourth Clarification: On Obscenities

That if there are obscenities in this work, they are not of the sort that can reasonably be censured.

1. When it is said that there are obscenities in my work one needs to be aware that the following distinct meanings may be under consideration.

1. *Either* that the author, making use of vulgar words, gives a description of his own debaucheries, that he applauds himself, that he congratulates himself, that he exhorts his readers to abandon themselves to impurity, and that he commends it to them as the surest way of enjoying life, and that he asserts that ordinary conventions should be ridiculed and the maxims of the virtuous should be treated as old wives' tales.

2. *Or* that the author relates in a free and jovial style certain passionate adventures, fabricated as to the substance, or at least as to the detail and circumstance; and that he introduces into his narrative many amorous incidents, which he embellishes with every possible relish in order to make them entertaining, and thus more suitable for nurturing the yearning for romantic intrigue than for any other purpose.

3. *Or* that the author, contemplating revenge upon an unfaithful mistress, or to excuse the transports of his passion, or to cast invective upon a courtesan, or to celebrate the marriage of a friend, or

⁹ 'Justitia gentis ingeniis culta non legibus.' ['This people's sense of justice was cultivated through their natural disposition, not by law.'] *Ibid.*

¹⁰ In *Pensées diverses sur les comètes*.

¹¹ See the *Préface* to the third edition of these *Pensées* [see n. 2 above].