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Academic Scepticism in the Development of Early Modern Philosophy

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Chapter 14

Disagreement and Academic Scepticism in Bayle

Michael W. Hickson

Abstract In this paper I first sketch José R. Maia Neto’s case that Bayle was an Academic sceptic and Thomas Lennox’s case that this reading helps to explain the Bayle enigma. Then I raise several problems for the Academic interpretation of Bayle as it has thus far been presented by these two authors. I will then expand and defend the Academic sceptical interpretation of Bayle by applying it to the particular case of Bayle’s most controversial philosophical work, the Continuation des pensées diverses sur la comète (CPD), of 1705. It is on this basis of this work that Gianluca Morì rested the bulk of his atheistic interpretation of Bayle, which has been in turn the starting point of much of the Bayle scholarship of the past decade. My thesis is that the CPD is a work of Academic scepticism, that Bayle himself invites this interpretation early in the CPD, and that this interpretation both undermines Morì’s atheistic reading of the work, while also explaining that reading’s plausibility.

Keywords Atheism • Disagreement • Existence of God • Freedom • Integrity • Judgment • Pyrrhonian Scepticism

14.1 Introduction

There has been no shortage of attempts to classify the philosophy of Pierre Bayle, as Thomas Lennox points out in Reading Bayle: “To take just the twentieth-century literature, the suggestions are that Bayle was fundamentally a positivist, an atheist, a deist, a skeptic, a fideist, a Socinian, a liberal Calvinist, a conservative Calvinist, a libertine, a Judaizing Christian, a Judaeo-Christian, or even a secret Jew, a Manichaean, an existentialist...to the point that it is tempting to conclude that these commentators cannot have been talking about the same author, or at least that they have not used the same texts... Implausible as it may seem, moreover, all of these...”

M.W. Hickson (ED)
Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada
E-mail: michaelhickson@trentu.ca

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suggestions have at least some plausibility. More than ever Bayle is referred to by his commentators as an "enigma," and the seeming impossibility of classifying Bayle's works, or the "Bayle enigma," is slowly becoming an unquestioned, if not unquestionable axiom of Bayle scholarship.

Just as Lennon was completing his survey of twentieth-century classifications of Bayle, a novel interpretation of Bayle's philosophy emerged in two essays by José R. Maia Neto: "Academic Skepticism in Early Modern Philosophy," and "Bayle's Academic Skepticism." The argument offered by Maia Neto is that Bayle was not only a skeptic in some general sense, which is one of the oldest interpretations of Bayle, but that he was also a particular kind of skeptic: not a Pyrrhonian skeptic as detractors in his day alleged, but an Academic skeptic, following in the line of Cicero in antiquity and Simon Foucher in early modernity.

The question of this paper is whether this novel interpretation of Bayle - that he was an Academic skeptic - can help explain any of Bayle's works better than the myriad other interpretations of Bayle, or whether we simply ought to dismiss the Academic hypothesis as yet another of the dozens of failed efforts to label the works of the Philosopher of Rotterdam.

One might have expected Lennon to be the first to dismiss Maia Neto's suggestion, since Lennon's Reading Bayle calls for an end to categorizing Bayle's works, and instead seeks to explain why so many categories seem to apply. But in fact, Lennon endorses Maia Neto's reading in an article published just after Reading Bayle, "What Kind of Skeptic was Bayle?" In accepting the Academic interpretation of Bayle, however, Lennon does not intend to offer a single correct label for the whole of Bayle's oeuvre; instead, he endorses the Academic interpretation on account of its power to explain the plausibility of all other interpretations of Bayle. So in other words, Lennon continues in his earlier project of explaining rather than solving the Bayle enigma.

In what follows I first sketch Maia Neto's case that Bayle was an Academic skeptic and Lennon's case that this reading helps to explain the Bayle enigma. Then I raise several problems for the Academic interpretation of Bayle as it has thus far been presented by these two authors. I will then expand and defend the Academic sceptical interpretation of Bayle by applying it to the particular case of Bayle's most controversial philosophical work, the Continuation des pensées diverses sur la comète (CPD), of 1705. It is on the basis of this work that Gianluca Morl restated the bulk of his atheistic interpretation of Bayle in Bayle philosophe, which has been in

1 Thomas M. Lennon, Reading Bayle (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 15.

14 Disagreement and Academic Scepticism in Bayle

The fullest case for the claim that Bayle was an Academic sceptic has been made by Maia Neto in his article, "Bayle's Academic Skepticism." The case rests on four brief arguments, each grounded on one or two texts from Bayle's writings. The first argument is based in remark G of the Article "Chrysippe" of the Dictionnaire. There Bayle writes, "Note that antiquity had two sorts of philosophers: the first resembled lawyers, and the other sort resembled trial reporters. The former, in proving their opinions, hid as much as they could the weaknesses of their case and the strengths of their adversary's case. The latter, the sceptics or Academics, presented faithfully and impartially the strengths and weaknesses of the opposing parties." According to this passage, Bayle views Academic scepticism as a form of unbiased reporting of disputes. So if Bayle himself intentionally adopted this method, then we might count him as an Academic sceptic. And Maia Neto notes that Bayle indeed adopts such a methodology in the Dictionnaire, and announces that he does so in his Projet et fragments d'un dictionnaire critique (1692): "For the most part it will not be I who discover the faults of others; I will merely report what others have said."

Maia Neto's second argument, also his strongest, is based in the following passage where Bayle seems to self-identify with the Academics even more explicitly. In response to Pierre Jureau's accusation that Bayle was a Pyrrhonian, Bayle partly accepts the charge, but modifies it by aligning himself with the Academic sceptics:

1 Pierre Bayle, Dictionnaire historique et critique (DHC), fifth edition (Amsterdam, Leyde, La Haye, Utrecht, 1740), "Chrysippe," rem. G, 1696. All citations of the Dictionnaire below will follow the standard format: DHC followed by volume (Ⅰ-Ⅳ), article and remark (if applicable), page number, column (a or b, if applicable). All French-to-English translations in this paper are mine.

2 DHC Ⅳ, 610.
14 Disagreement and Academic Scepticism in Bayle problematic as it stands, and does not show in much detail how the Academic interpretation of Bayle helps us to understand better the arguments of any particular work by Bayle. In this section I will elaborate some shortcomings of Maia Neto’s interpretation, and then in the next sections I will begin to expand that interpretation and put it to use in an analysis of Bayle’s CPD.

Maia Neto’s case for Bayle’s Academic scepticism offers Bayle scholars three novel hypotheses corresponding to three fundamental questions about Bayle: (1) What was Bayle’s philosophical method? (Answer: that of the Academic sceptics, namely reporting the views of others); (2) What was Bayle’s principal philosophical aim? (Answer: that of the Academic sceptics, namely intellectual integrity); (3) Who influenced Bayle to adopt these methods and aims? (Answer: the Academic sceptics, particularly Cicero and Foucher). There are problems with each of these hypotheses.

First, concerning the methodological hypothesis, even if we grant Maia Neto’s interpretation of the ancient and modern Academic sceptics as reporters – which is controversial – there are problems with reading Bayle as a mere reporter in any of his works, including the Dictionnaire. In the Pensées diverses (1683), for example, Bayle rarely reports the views of others at any length; instead, he argues first in a very original and methodical way against interpreting comets (or any natural events) as divine signs, and then later in a very original way against equating atheism with moral vice and political ruin. In the Commentaire philosophique (1686), another highly original and cleverly structured work, Bayle is hardly a reporter of the views of others, let alone a commentator on the Gospel; he is instead a careful theorist about toleration and its moral superiority over religious persecution. Even in most of the Dictionnaire Bayle is doing far more than reporting the views of others, whatever he may have promised in the Preface. In passages like “Synergists,” remarks B and C, where Bayle seems on a certain level to be a mere reporter of the conflicting views of Calvin and Melancthon on free will, a closer reading reveals that Bayle is

14.3 Problems with the Academic Interpretation

Maia Neto has brought fresh air into the debate about Bayle’s philosophical aims and methods by suggesting that he was a close follower of the Academic sceptics. He has focused our attention on several key texts, nearly confessions of Academic scepticism on Bayle’s part, which give his interpretation enough support that it must be taken seriously. However, the case advanced by Maia Neto is somewhat

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*Pierre Bayle, La cabale chimérique, chapter XI, in Pierre Bayle, Œuvres diverses (La Haye, 1737), tome II, 656a.


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carefully crafting through his presentation of this dispute an elaborate defence of his theory of toleration against the criticism it received from Elie Saarín.15

Second, concerning the aim of intellectual integrity, Maia Neto’s and Lennon’s focus on this aspect of Academic scepticism is going to play a part in my own reading of Bayle to come, so I will have more to say about it later, but for the moment, let me remain agnostic to this aspect of the Academic interpretation. It is difficult to use integrity as a means of classifying an author without falling into the trap of judging the author’s intentions and character, neither of which is obviously revealed by the author’s writings. Intellectual integrity is an authorial virtue that will have to be translated into a concrete, identifiable feature of texts if it is going to be a convincing means of classifying Bayle’s writing.

Finally, with respect to the transmission of Academic ideas, Maia Neto suggests that both his predecessors Foucher and Foucher were exposed to Bayle’s Academic scepticism. However, Maia Neto cites very few passages in defence of each of these sources. What is needed to cement this case is a work in which Bayle frequently cites either Cicero’s or Foucher’s Academic sceptical ideas, or at least cites these ideas at a crucial point in the text. In this paper I will focus my attention on developing the Ciceronian sources of Bayle’s Academic scepticism.

In addition to these three criticisms, there is a more serious problem facing Maia Neto and Lennon, and indeed anybody who interprets Bayle as an Academic sceptic as opposed to a Pyrrhonian sceptic. That problem is that Bayle himself was never very clear about what he took the difference between the two sceptical schools to be, if he thought there was any difference at all. Recall the quotation above from “Chrysippe,” remark G, where Bayle mentions “the sceptics or Academicians,” as if “Academic” were just another name for “sceptic.” In the Dictionnaire, article “Pyrrhon,” remark A, moreover, Bayle reports and seems to affirm the view of Aulus Gelius that the Pyrrho and Arcesilas thought that the nature of things is incomprehensible, but that only Arcesilas positively affirmed this: “thence...lies the difference between the Pyrrhonians and Academicians: in everything else they were perfectly alike, and they gave one another these respective names.”16 Moreover, at the outset of “Pyrrhon,” remark B, Bayle claims that all but a few contemporary natural scientists would agree that nature is an impenetrable abyss, from which he concludes that “...all these philosophers are in that respect Academicians and Pyrrhonians.”17 In the article “Carnéade,” Bayle does little more than report the views of others about the similarities and differences between Carneades and Arcesilaus and Pyrrho, but then he speaks on his own behalf and says this: “It seems to me, therefore, that we can believe that Carneades retained the whole foundation of Arcesilaus’ doctrine...”18 It seems that Bayle saw little difference between Pyrrho, Arcesilaus, and Carneades, the founders of the Pyrrhonian and Academic sceptical traditions. In that case, how can we argue, or why would we argue, that Bayle was an Academic rather than a Pyrrhonian sceptic, considering that the founders of the schools seemed so similar to him?

My answer, to be developed in the rest of this paper, is that it can be meaningful to classify Bayle’s scepticism as Academic rather than Pyrrhonian, and it is useful to do so in order to understand some of his most controversial writings. In particular, I will show that Bayle aimed to follow an important element of the Academic method of philosophizing in order to achieve the most important and distinctive Academic aims of philosophizing. The method that Bayle employed in the CDP, which is in fact common to the Pyrrhonians and Academicians, is the extensive and rigorous presentation of both sides of a disagreement. The Academic aims of this method of philosophizing are not the same as the Pyrrhonian aims, however. While the Pyrrhonians presented and created disagreements in order to induce suspension of belief, the Academicians presented disagreements in order (1) to combat prejudices, (2) to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of competing arguments and beliefs, and ultimately (3) to render the reader’s judgment suitable for forming probable opinions about disputes with integrity.

My thesis is that Bayle employs the presentation of both sides of philosophical disagreements in his CDP, which is a sceptical strategy common to both Pyrrhonians and Academicians, but he does so in a way that demonstrates his alignment with the Academicians rather than with the Pyrrhonians. The value of noting Bayle’s particular sceptical affiliation is more than taxonomical. I will conclude the paper by showing how the Academic interpretation can resolve a disagreement in the literature over how best to interpret Bayle’s discussion of atheism in the CDP. Before getting to this, however, I must first show how the Pyrrhonians and Academicians can be distinguished by their use of the presentation of philosophical disagreements.

14.4 The Use of Disagreement in Pyrrhonian and Academic Skepticism

Although it has been a popular topic in the Anglophone epistemology literature for less than a decade,19 disagreement and its epistemological consequences were already central themes in ancient scepticism. Ancient sceptics realized the psychological force of a careful presentation of disagreement, especially disagreement among experts, and sought to use that force to achieve their sceptical aims.


Not only did ancient sceptics frequently employ the presentation of disagreements, but at least in the case of the Pyrrhonians, they defined their sceptical school in terms of such presentations. Here is Sextus Empiricus defining Pyrrhonian scepticism: “Skepticism is an ability to set out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way at all, an ability by which, because of the equipollence in the opposed objects and accounts, we come first to suspension of judgment and afterwards to tranquility.” An essential element of being a Pyrrhonian is the ability in particular to oppose a rational account with a rival rational account; that is, to be able to recount convincingly a disagreement over some question, or to give rise to a new equipollent disagreement, whichever is most appropriate.

It is not surprising that Sextus defines scepticism in terms of the ability to present disagreements for, again according to Sextus, the Pyrrhonian school of thought was discovered in the accidental encounter with insubstute disagreement: “Skepticism began to do philosophy in order to decide among apparent contradictions which were true and which false, so as to become tranquil; but they came upon equipollent dispute, and being unable to decide this they suspended judgment. And when they suspended judgment, tranquility in matters of opinion followed fortuitously.” What began accidentally was soon transformed into a sceptical method, which has come to be known as the first mode of Agrippa: “According to the mode deriving from dispute, we find that undecided disension about the matter proposed has come about both in ordinary life and among philosophers. Because of this we are not able either to choose or to rule out anything, and we end up with suspension of judgment.”

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35 Sextus Empiricus, Outlines of Scepticism (Outline), edited by Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Liv, 4. I am claiming that Sextus defines Pyrrhonism in terms of the presentation of disagreements, but it is more accurate to say that he defines it in terms of the presentation of oppositions among things; in particular, oppositions among appearances, of appearances to judgments and of judgments to judgments. Only the last of these is properly speaking a rational disagreement. But the former oppositions can easily be conceived as disagreements by imagining a human advocate taking up the case of, say, each of the opposing appearances, and arguing that it is true to reality. In this way the opposition, for example, of the appearance of the world to fish, and the appearance of the world to humans, can be converted into a rational disagreement over the true appearance of the world. Oppositions are the material of possible disagreements, and these latter have an important, and well-documented role in Pyrrhonian scepticism (see Diego Machuca, “The Pyrrhonian Argument from Possible Disagreement,” in Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie 93: 148-161). For a detailed case that the Pyrrhonian scepticism is principally concerned with the presentation of disagreements, see Markus Lennestam, “The Pyrrhonian Problematic,” in John Greco (ed.), The Oxford Handbook of Scepticism (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 89-93. Another author who defends Pyrrhonian scepticism in terms of disagreements is Benjamin Morison: “So, a Skeptic is someone who has the ability to find, for any given argument in favour of a proposition P, a conflicting argument (i.e., one whose conclusion is a proposition which cannot be true together with P—call it P’), which is equally convincing.” See “Sextus Empiricus,” in The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/sextus-empiricus/last accessed March, 2014).

36 Sextus Empiricus, Outlines, Liv, 10. (cf Annas/Barnes.)

37 Sextus Empiricus, Outlines, Liv, 41. (cf Annas/Barnes.)
tailed, and are bound by no compulsion to support all the dogmas laid down for us almost as edicts by certain masters. The idea seems to be that Academics are those philosophers who are able to hear opposing positions and then make probable judgments freely. Based on this passage, the freedom of the Academics’ power of judgment is both a freedom from the compulsions of party affiliation and prejudice, as was Cicero’s freedom to judge the strength or evidence of opposing arguments on their own terms by means of one’s own faculties. This dual freedom is what I will mean by “Academic integrity” or simply “integrity” in the rest of this paper.

Disagreement is clearly an element of Academic sceptical philosophy, but what is its connection to the other elements of probability and integrity? The best way to discern this connection is by considering the disagreements, and the conclusion that Cicero draws from them, in De natura drorum (ND), which was, moreover, clearly an inspiration for Bayle’s CPD. As is well known, Cicero’s ND involves a discussion between the Epicurean Velleius, the Stoic Balbus, and the Academic sceptic Cotta, concerning the nature of the gods and divine providence. The work is, unsurprisingly, a lengthy presentation of disagreements.

In the opening book Cotta makes short work of Velleius’ position. In the second book Balbus details at length the Stoic doctrines concerning the gods and their care for human beings. And finally in the closing book Cotta once again opposes the arguments of his interlocutor, this time Balbus. Most readers will find Cotta victorious through much of this work, which is why it is very surprising to read the conclusion of Cicero, who appears at the beginning as our narrator, and again at the very end of the dialogue to share his judgment. One would expect Cicero, who declares himself openly at the outset of ND to be of the Academic persuasion, to decide matters in favour of Cotta, his fellow Academic, but here is the perplexing conclusion we read instead: “Here the conversations ended, and we parted, Velleius thinking Cicero was the truer, whereas, while I felt that that of Balbus approximated more nearly to a semblance of the truth.”

Numerous interpretations of this puzzling conclusion have been offered, but nearly all commentators agree that Cicero’s cautious decision in favour of the Stoic Balbus over the Academic Cotta, while surprising, is nevertheless consistent with his espousal of Academicism. In other words, it is possible for an Academic to think that another Academic lost a debate. I do not want to touch the question of why exactly, in this case, Cicero sided with Balbus; instead, I want to reflect on the lessons that we can take from this concerning the role of disagreement in Academic scepticism.

The first thing to note is that Cicero reserves all judgment until he has finished hearing all sides of the disagreement; he is otherwise silent through the rest of the debate. The careful consideration of all the arguments of the debate is therefore understood as a prerequisite for making a judgment. The second point is that Cicero makes a judgment only about the comparative probability of Stoicism vis-a-vis Academicism. Cicero does not declare anyone the outright winner, let alone make a judgment about the truth of one or more of the opinions; he merely reports the relative subjective probabilities of the discourses after he has weighed these in his mind. A “positive judgment” is therefore avoided by Cicero, in keeping with his duty as an Academic, but notice, however, that some kind of judgment is made; the reader is not left with the suggestion that suspension of judgment is the only rational act at the end of the debates.

The third and most important point is that Cicero’s comparative judgment in favour of Balbus demonstrates the freedom of his judgment from party prejudice, which is an important element of Cicero’s integrity. While Cicero, in the ND, employs the methods of Academic philosophizing, which involves the careful presentation of competing views, he does not thereby commit himself to siding with any particular Academic conclusions or arguments that are part of that presentation. Listening to the competing views has led to this freedom of judgment in Cicero, this intellectual integrity, which is more clearly manifested to the reader by Cicero’s siding with Balbus than it would have been had he sided with Cotta (which he could have done with an integrity that Cicero would have known himself, but which we his readers might have doubted).

We can conclude that Academics present disagreements not in order to induce submission of belief or judgment, as Pythagoreans do, but in order to combat prejudices and to free the minds of readers so that they can make probable judgments with integrity. The perspective of Simon Foucher, a modern Academic, confirms and refines these conclusions.

Foucher, in his history of the Academics, emphasizes as Cicero earlier did the centrality of the freedom of judgment in Academic philosophizing, and likewise identifies party prejudice as its main obstacle: “Socrates, having attempted to identify the cause of disagreement among men and even among philosophers, recognized that it was presumption... [so] he worked to destroy prejudices and the remove the veil that masked human ignorance.” Disagreement often arises because of conflicting prejudices, so the back and forth of debate is a good way of revealing and undermining these prejudices, as Foucher notes: “[Arcesilas] applied all his efforts to combat every sort of prejudice, defending the pre or the con depending on what was necessary to destroy all precipitous judgments...”
14 Disagreement and Academic Scepticism in Bayle

The Academicians, by contrast, are more selective in their opposing arguments, since their use of disagreement in debate has a very particular target, namely the poor epistemic bases upon which people rest their beliefs. The Academicians are not concerned as much with the truth or falsity of the thesis in question as they are with the reasons that their interlocutors advance in support of the thesis, with their interlocutors' false beliefs about the strength of those reasons, and with the method of prejudice and deference to authority in the interlocutor's reasons. The Academic can therefore be expected to expose and to attempt to undermine prejudice and deference to authority in their presentation of disagreements, rather than to attack any particular thesis. The Academicians will consider themselves successful not if their readers change particular beliefs or suspend belief altogether, but instead if their readers have been put into a better epistemic position to judge a dispute freely and fairly, and to form new beliefs or uphold old beliefs (or suspend all belief) with integrity, which are more general and fundamental criteria of success than the Pyrrhonians' criterion.

14.5 Disagreement and Academic Scepticism in Bayle's CPD

The preceding section has provided a test to determine whether Bayle's scepticism, or indeed the scepticism of any early modern philosopher who employed the presentation of disagreements, is better categorized as Academic rather than Pyrrhonian. The test involves identifying a sceptical work by the author in which the presentation of disagreements is central to the strategy of the work. In Bayle's case, the best example of such a work, other than the Dictionnaire, is the Continuation des pensées diverses, which resembles in many ways Cicero's De natura deorum; in both works the principal question concerns the nature of the gods, and the method employed by both authors is the presentation of opposing arguments.

Having chosen a text, the test involves an analysis of the presentations of disagreements in order to determine the underlying methodology and aim. A presentation of disagreement will be Academic rather than Pyrrhonian if it is concerned not with inducing the suspension of belief about the thesis in question, but above all with combating prejudice and removing prejudices in the arguments offered on behalf of the thesis, and with putting the reader in proper epistemic position to judge the dispute with integrity. With this test in mind, we turn finally to Bayle's CPD.

The CPD revisits the central themes of Bayle's 1683 Pensées diverses, one of Bayle's first philosophical works and the one that first established Bayle's reputation as a philosopher. For 10 years the Pensées diverses was well received, including in France, until Pierre Juriel used it as the basis of an attack against Bayle in the early 1600s, which ultimately led to Bayle's dismissal from his professorship at the École Illustre in Rotterdam. The source of Juriel's case against Bayle was the extensive comparison between atheism and idolatries and the Pensées diverses, in the context of which Bayle argued that atheists were less vicious than idolaters, and that some atheists were even virtuous. In response to Juriel Bayle wrote the Additions...
aux pensées diverses in 1694, and argued therein that the Pensées diverses is not subversive of religion, but in fact in conformity with Christian beliefs and, more importantly, with historical facts. From the time of the publication of the Additions, Bayle promised a longer treatment of his parallel between atheists and idolaters, but delayed over a decade until he finally composed the two-volume CPD.

The first volume of the CPD announces Bayle's method and aim in the work, and it is here that Bayle most closely identifies the work with the Academic school. Cicero's Academica or De natura deorum are cited or quoted extensively, but more importantly, they are quoted at key places in the CPD where Bayle identifies his goals and methods. In the CPD Bayle aims to investigate, as Cicero once did, the competing views of the nature of the gods. The method of the CPD will ultimately involve presenting and exploring competing opinions, not about whether any god exists (because Bayle thinks that all people have believed that some first principle of the universe, or god, exists \(99\)), but rather about whether there is a personal god, how many gods there are, whether the gods actively govern the world, whether the gods created the universe from something or nothing, and so forth. Those more specific questions give rise to divergent opinions, which Bayle aims to investigate.

Before delving into these theological matters, however, Bayle feels he must prepare his readers to become adequate judges of the disputes to come. It is this goal which occupies Bayle for most of the first volume of the CPD. More particularly, Bayle feels that he must remove important obstacles from his readers' judgment, the main obstacle being the reliance upon and deference to popular opinion concerning theological matters. Very early in CPD (part I, chapters v and vi), Bayle explores the arguments of Cicero's Cotta against the use of popular opinion in matters concerning the nature of the gods. Bayle then presents a number of more recent competing views on the reliability of the consensus of the majority.

Several chapters later Bayle quotes Cicero's Pro Prisco in order to denounce popular opinion as a basis for belief: "Deliberate verdicts are not invariably arrived at in popular elections, which are often guided by partiality and swayed by prayers; the people promotes those who court it most assiduously; and even if after all it does give a deliberate verdict, that verdict is determined, not by a discriminating wisdom, but frequently by impulse and a spirit of headstrong caprice. For the multitude is a stranger to deliberation, to reason, to discernment, and to patient scrutiny; and all great thinkers have held that acquiescence, but not always approval, should be accounted to the acts of the people.\(100\)

Not only should we be wary of popular opinion in general, according to Bayle, but we should be particularly careful not to rely on popular opinion about philo-

99Athens, without a single exception, would sincerely express this thesis along with the orthodoxy. There is a first cause that is universal, eternal, that exists necessarily, and that should be called God. Everything is fine up to that point; nobody would bother to quibble on these points. There are no philosophers who invoke the name of God in their system more often than do the Spinozistas" (CPD I, ch. XX: OD II, 214).

100CPD XI (OD III, 205a); English translation from Cicero, Pro Prisco, translated by N.H. Watts, Loeb Classical Library 158 (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1923), chapter iv, 417.
In what follows, therefore, I will apply the Academic reading to Bayle’s lengthy presentation of a debate between an atheist and various theologians in volume two of the CPD. In particular, I will focus on a portion of that presentation that has given rise recently to two very different interpretations by excellent Bayle scholars. As we will see, the Academic reading of the CPD will lead to the rejection of parts of these opposing interpretations, but it will also explain the plausibility of both interpretations.

The passages of the CPD in question concern the most important issue treated in that work, namely Bayle’s defence of his thesis first announced in the Pensées diverses that atheism is a lesser evil than idolatry. This thesis ran contrary to what was, in Bayle’s time, a deeply entrenched popular opinion, namely that belief in some personal god was required to support morality and organized, peaceful sociability. The thesis also ran contrary to the view, also popular in Bayle’s time, that atheism could be the result only of moral and intellectual vice; it could never be the fruit of sincere rational inquiry. Bayle turns his attention once again to these two prejudices in CPD in an effort to undermine them. Bayle combats these prejudices by imagining a dispute between a speculative atheist (who is a nominal, though not necessarily doctrinal) follower of the ancient philosopher Strato and a series of pagan and Christian theologians. Throughout the dispute, Bayle has the various theologians object to the Stratianism’s atheism in an effort to demonstrate its hopeless irrationality. But the Stratian is able to retort most, if not all, of the objections against the theologians and Christian philosophers.

First, it is helpful to begin with Bayle’s precise definition of Stratian atheism: “we can reduce atheism to this general doctrine, that nature alone is the cause of all things; that it exists eternally and of itself; and that it acts in accordance with all its power and in accordance with immutable laws that it does not know. It follows that nothing is possible except that which nature does; that it produces everything that is possible; that everything happens by a fatal and inevitable necessity; that nothing is more natural than anything else, nor more in conformity with the perfection of the universe; that regardless of the state in which the world finds itself, it is always exactly as it must be and can be.”

What distinguishes this kind of atheism from theirs, then, is not belief in a first, eternal, universal, necessary cause of the universe—both atheism and theism posit such a being, such a “god” you might say—

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47 Though limited space allows me to focus only on Mori’s and Solère’s readings, the reader is also encouraged to consider a third interpretation by Kristian Evin: “La philosophie comme méthode : la conception sceptico-réaliste de la raison chez Bayle,” in José R. Maia Neto and Hubert Bost (eds.), Kriterion : Revista de Filosofia, L. 120 (Julho a Dezembro 2009), special issue on Pierre Bayle, 363–376, and a fourth interpretation by Pål J. Smith, “Bayle e os impasses do malo,” in José R. Maia Neto and Hubert Bost (eds.), Kriterion : Revista de Filosofia 120, 377–390.

48 See Mori, Bayle philosophe, 218–19.

49 CPD CXLIX (OD III, 4006).
but the belief in an intelligent, free, personal God, which theism posits but Strattonian atheism denies.50

Mori identifies chapters 106 to 114 of the CPD as the key passages where Strattonian atheism clashes with various forms of theology. In Mori’s view, not only are these chapters the centerpiece of the CPD, but they also constitute the climax of Bayle’s career-long “examination of religion.”51 According to Mori, in these chapters Bayle invents a coherent system of atheism, drawing on both ancient and contemporary metaphysics, especially mechanism and rationalism in the case of the latter. Of all the back-and-forth exchanges contained in the nine chapters that are Mori’s focus, he identifies one objection to Strattonian atheism and one response by the Strattonians as the most important exchange.

Christian philosophers object to the Strattonian atheists that the latter cannot account for the order of the cosmos by means of their natural order, which lacks intelligence. The basis of the objection is the principle *quod nescis quod modo facis* – if one does not know how a thing is brought about, then one is not the cause of that thing. The atheist’s material nature is not conscious, so it cannot know, let alone how order is produced in the cosmos; therefore, that material nature cannot be the cause of that order. The Strattonian employs his most powerful weapon – the strategy of reversion – to neutralize the *quod nescis* objection. The Strattonian does indeed posit a first cause of all things that does not know what it has caused, is causal, or will cause, and this is puzzling. But the Christian also posits a first cause of all things that is ignorant of the ultimate cause of the order that it allegedly establishes. This is because, according to most Christians, God must conform his actions to the eternal truths and laws of order, which God does not choose, but to which he is subordinate. These eternal truths and laws are like the Strattonian atheist’s material principle: uncaused, lacking intelligence, and ultimately responsible for the way things are. The Christian is ultimately in no better position than the atheist to explain the order of the universe (unless the Christian is also a Cartesian, and believes that God is the cause of the eternal truths – Bayle notes several times the greater difficulty the Strattonian would have with a Cartesian).

According to Mori, once the *quod nescis* objection is neutralized, Bayle is able to demonstrate the superiority of Strattonian atheism over Christian theology on three separate levels. On the purely formal level, atheism is a simpler doctrine, positing fewer and simpler causes than theology posits. On the epistemological level, Strattonian atheists are not forced, as their Christian counterparts, to accept first principles of metaphysics, logic, and ethics, and are therefore in a better position to account for the universality and necessity of human knowledge.52 Finally, the atheist is also better able to account for the origin of evil, since he is not obliged to reconcile that evil with a perfectly good first cause.

50See CPD LXXV (OD III, 312b).
52Mori is referring to the article “Pythion,” rem. B, where Bayle shows the conflict between core theological doctrines, like the Trinity, and rational first principles, such as “three things equal to a fourth are all equal to one another.”
there is only one evident solution. Bayle was not the sort of philosopher who thought that he could say what a rational person devoid of prejudice would believe upon a careful examination of the arguments. Instead, Bayle constantly reminds us that evidence (évidence) is relative, person-dependent, which entails that two opposing epistemic peers may honestly report that their views are backed by evidence. Some find the arguments for infinite divisibility evident, others find the arguments against infinite divisibility and for atomism evident. To suggest that Gassendi, for example, was intellectually lazy or insincere because he did not give up his atomism upon bearing arguments for infinite divisibility is to commit the Fallacy of Unitary Evidence. What is important to note in the context of this essay is that Bayle reminds his reader at length of this lesson about the relativity of evidence in the very chapters of the CPD that Mori is analyzing.

The main subject of the dispute with the Stratonian atheist is, as Mori indicates, whether that atheism can account for the order of the universe. This subject is raised and debated in chapter 106. But then there is an interlude which contains the whole of chapter 107. This chapter is, in my view, essential for understanding the goal of Bayle’s presentation of the debate between the Stratonian and the theologians. The topic of the chapter is Isaac Papin’s view that reason is not strong enough to determine whether there is only one God, or several gods. Papin’s argument that reason alone is insufficient to prove God’s unity is outlined, and Bayle presents his own counterargument. The presentation of this disagreement takes up most of the chapter. Finally, Bayle concludes:

The use that I would like you to make of this chapter is to become hesitant in blaming errors on the malice of a person when these errors may simply arise from the weakness of reason in dealing with infinite objects. We should be more circumspect in our judgments about what is evident when we see able authors who find fault with the things that we believe to be manifest. You will claim that passions of the heart obscure their mind; they will make the same reproach against you. You will protest that no passion is blinding you; they will respond in kind. You will claim that if some identifiable passion is not deceiving them, then in the depths of their soul there is a hidden malice that perverts their reason. They will suggest that the same is true for you...

The topic of the whole of the CPD is an infinite object, God. It follows that we should not be surprised if different readers disagree over what is most evident in the debates presented. We should not thereby accuse some of them of malice, and praise others for their greater commitment to reason, just as readers of the ND should not accuse Cicero of failing to follow reason because he sided with Balbus. But if Mori’s reading of the CPD is correct, then Bayle does not wish that his readers heed Bayle’s advice, which must therefore be insincere. Instead, Bayle would like everyone to see the greater evidence of the Stratonian position which, on Mori’s reading, is the unique most evident response to the question of the origin of the universe. But the sincerity of Bayle’s commitment to the relativity of evidence when dealing with

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38 See Bayle, Entretiens de Maximce et de Thémiste, volume 1, chapter 5 (OD IV, 15).
37 CPD 107 (OD III, 337a-b).
39 Disagreement and Academic Skepticism in Bayle

infinite objects is assured by considering Bayle’s subsequent disputes and works. So Mori’s reading is very likely mistaken, and each reader of the CPD is instead free to decide for herself what is most evident.

Another author who has undertaken a careful analysis of Bayle’s treatment of Stratonian atheism in CPD is Jean-Luc Solère, whose analysis pays very careful attention to the presentation of the disagreement between the Stratonian atheist and the opposing theologians. Solère’s logical analysis of the many movements of this disagreement is admirably thorough and sensitive to detail. Solère’s thesis is that in these chapters “…Bayle’s strategy is something other [than what Mori has suggested]: it is not to argue between the lines that materialism is the most satisfying solution, but on the contrary to oppose doctrines systematically and thereby to undermine those doctrines in order to demonstrate that human reason is incapable of producing a satisfying global explanation.”

Solère’s strategy is to demonstrate that there are two main objections leveled against the Stratonian atheist: first, that “it is incomprehensible for faculties that are not directed by any knowledge to produce organized effects”; and second, that “it is incomprehensible that a being that is deprived of intelligence might exist by itself with precisely such-and-such faculties, neither more nor less.” The first objection is the quod necesse objection that Mori considered, while the second objection is that the atheist’s material nature, unlike the Christian God, is not the sort of thing that can be considered a first cause with any plausibility, since it is not the sort of substance that can exist by itself without an antecedent cause.

Solère establishes his sceptical interpretation of Bayle by showing that “the second objection is retorted [by the Stratonian atheist] without any reply [from the theists], but not the first [objection]…such that Stratonian atheism does not constitute any more than a skeleton, an inscrutable refuge.” Solère’s analysis proceeds by keeping score in the debate between the Stratonian atheist and his various interlocutors. A point is scored by any party that is able to pose an objection against his interlocutor without having that objection retorted. The basis for Solère’s strategy is Bayle’s well-known principle in the ethics of belief which states that if one’s belief is defeated by an objection, then one is rationally obliged to revise or renounce that defeated belief, only if one cannot retract the objection against one’s adversary and similarly defeat the adversary’s opposing belief (if one can successfully
M.W. Hickson

retort the objection, then one is not obligated to revise one’s belief). 36 If, as Mori has suggested, Bayle’s aim in CPD is to demonstrate the rational superiority of atheism over theism, then Bayle must show that atheists are capable of leveling objections against theists that the theist cannot retort, and that any objection leveled by theists against atheists can be retorted by the latter. Solère’s careful play-by-play analysis shows that Bayle shows no such thing.

According to Solère, “[t]he result of the discussions is a draw [match nul], wherein reason paralyzes itself. No basis for a decision is left besides faith: either Christian faith or faith in materialism, which we can undoubtedly adopt if we wish (since it permits us to live a good, virtuous and happy life), but which includes its own incomprehensible dimension.” 44 Solère’s conclusion is therefore twofold. First, Bayle’s presentation of the debate between the atheist and a variety of theists “paralyzes” reason, leaving us only with faith to decide the origin of the universe. Second, we are consequently left free to choose our side in the debate, since no side is preferable from the point of view of reason.

The Academic interpretation of Bayle’s CPD is consistent with, and supportive of much of Solère’s conclusion, but leads to the correction of several aspects of it. First, Solère is exactly right to focus on the freedom of the reader of Bayle’s CPD to choose between atheism and theism. On the Academic interpretation, achievement of this freedom is the true goal of Bayle’s CPD. However, the Academic reading would not focus on the fact that the debate was a draw to explain why the reader is free to choose her side. Recall that in Cicero’s ND the debate appears to be free as match nul, yet Cicero demonstrates his freedom by choosing the Stoic side in the debate. Rather, the reader’s freedom to choose is based in the reader’s freedom from prejudice, which Bayle worked to achieve painstakingly in the first part of the CPD, and which the debate between the atheist and theists continued to secure. Free from the most pernicious prejudices and habits of mind affecting participants in debates about the first cause, the reader of Bayle’s CPD is free to weigh the merits of the opposing arguments on their own terms. The fact that the opposing sides are evenly balanced guarantees that the reader will have to think for herself before deciding which side to take.

Solère’s claim that reason is paralyzed by Bayle’s presentation of the dispute is a very Pyrrhonian interpretation of the debate; so too is Solère’s claim that no side is preferable from the point of view of reason. It is this aspect of the conclusion that I think should be corrected. The way to correct it is by noticing that Solère’s conclusion holds only if we interpret reason in a formal or structural or logical sense. The debate is a draw if we restrict ourselves to a logical analysis of the strengths of the forms of the arguments: which ones are answered by objections, which objections are retorted, which retortions are retorted in turn, and so on. This is the level on which Solère’s analysis mainly takes place, and it is right, it seems to me, to observe match nul on that level.

But there is another level on which we can make claims about rationality, and this is the material level, the level on which we judge the contents of claims, their plausibility, their coherence with our other beliefs, and so on. And on this level, as Solère notes, Bayle shows no such thing. On this level, Bayle’s book shows the reasonableness of either side of the debate from my perspective (i.e. from the perspective of an individual reader). The logical level will put us in a good position to guess what an individual reader (assuming he is committed to formal logic) will judge about a debate. But notice that a guess made on this level as to what Cicero would judge of the debate in ND would have failed. Sometimes logic and evidence do not walk hand-in-hand.

Some readers of Bayle’s CPD, free of all prejudice, may have their reason paralyzed by his presentation of the debates. Other readers, equally free of all prejudice, may find the content of the Stratonian arguments more evident than any of the responses to them (despite the fact that Bayle has made sure that, on a formal level, there is always a pertinent response to them). Other readers, equally free of all prejudice, may find the Stratonian position as presented by Bayle less evident than say, the content of Calvinist theology. If the Academic reading of the CPD is correct, then it does not matter what conclusion one draws from this debate, but it is the case that one draws that conclusion only after carefully considering the debate on its own terms, and not from a biased point of view. Much of the early CPD, as we have seen, aims to guarantee that this will be the case.

If Bayle was successful in freeing his readers’ minds of common prejudices, then each of the three readers described in the above paragraph, despite their differing states of mind at the end of the debate, would have this much in common in rendering their judgments about the debates: Academic integrity. That is because each will have made their respective judgments with a free mind after considering the arguments on their own terms. They will have based their judgments in the evidence that the arguments produced. The readers whose judgments favored either the Stratonian or Christian positions in the debate will have something further in common (that they will not share with the reader whose judgment was suspended). They will have arrived at a positive belief about the origin of the universe independently of faith, and entirely on the basis of rational evaluation. Solère’s conclusion that the CPD leaves readers only with faith is therefore overstated. Some, but not necessarily all, sincere and careful readers will need recourse to faith to judge the question of the origin of the universe; others will find reason satisfactory as a basis for a (perhaps strong) probable belief.

In this section I have employed the Academic interpretation of the CPD to correct several aspects of two dominant readings of that work. But the Academic interpretation can also explain why these opposing readings seemed so plausible to

36The principle appears numerous times in Bayle’s writings. See, for example, CPD 106 (OD III, 333b): “We cannot blame a person for not heeding to an objection that he is able to retort; for any objections that undermine the objector’s position as effectively as it undermines the upholder’s doctrine proves too much, and for that reason, proves nothing.”

37Piérou, J. Smith argues for much the same conclusion as the one I’ve drawn here. Bayle uses the method of “suscitomy” as Smith calls it in order to arrive at probable belief. See “Bayle and Pyrrhonism: Antiscinomy, Method, and History.” 25.
begin with. The atheistic reading of the work is plausible because Bayle gives
Stratton atheism very powerful and convincing support, and even shows its supe-
rior strength vis-à-vis theism on several points. He does this in order to combat the
two prejudices about atheism mentioned earlier (that it is destructive of society and
the result of character flaws). The Pyrrhonian reading of the work is also plausible
because Bayle likewise gives the opposing theistic arguments all imaginable force,
with the result that a very balanced, possibly equipollent, disagreement about the
origin of the universe has been presented in the CPD. However, the balance of the
dispute is not intended to suspend judgment, but to force the reader to avoid hasty
conclusions and to consider the arguments, weigh them carefully, and only then
render judgment—a judgment that the reader can claim to have made with the free-
edom constitutive of Academic integrity.

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