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Collecting to the Core — Pierre Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary*

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Column Editor's Note: The "Collecting to the Core" column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the *Resources for College Libraries* bibliography (online at <http://www.rclweb.net>). In each essay, subject specialists introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — AD

The field of philosophy benefits from a rich body of reference works, both online and in print. While in graduate school studying philosophy, the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, then available only in print, was an invaluable resource for me, providing critical details of a philosopher's positions or a brief overview of an unfamiliar theory.¹ Newer, online reference works such as the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* and the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* are excellent sources of philosophical information and heralded as leading examples of authoritative information on the internet.²⁻³ Yet their acclaim and reach pales in comparison to a much older philosophical reference work. **Pierre Bayle's** *Historical and Critical Dictionary* was one of the most popular works of the 1700s, and was found in "more private libraries than any other single work in the century."⁴ While today it is rarely known outside of specialists in early modern philosophy, i.e., European philosophy of the 17th century, it was read by contemporaries such as **Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz** and **John Locke**, it influenced later philosophers like **Bishop George Berkeley** and **David Hume**, and it was well regarded outside of philosophical circles by the likes of **Thomas Jefferson**, **Herman Melville**, and **Voltaire**. This essay asserts that **Bayle's** *Historical and Critical Dictionary* is a philosophical reference work with continuing relevance not only because it brings readers into contact with many of the major figures and theories of the time, but also because it is an exemplar of philosophical inquiry.

To fully understand his *Dictionary*, it is worthwhile briefly considering **Bayle's** biography, since the details of his life strongly influenced the direction of his thought. **Pierre Bayle** was born in 1647 in Southern France. Born a Huguenot (French Protestant), his family was subject to persecution by the Catholic majority. He fled France as a young man and eventually settled in Rotterdam, where he spent the remainder of his life in the relative tolerance of Holland. In the 1680s, **Bayle** edited

a journal of book reviews called the *News of the Republic of Letters*, which brought him into contact with many of the most important thinkers of the period. During this time, he was also writing short works largely arguing for religious tolerance, which led to condemnation by French religious authorities and may have resulted in the imprisonment and eventual death of his brother **Jacob** — an event that profoundly affected **Bayle**. Drawing on an extensive knowledge of the thought and writings of many of his European contemporaries, **Bayle** began publishing his *Historical and Critical Dictionary* in 1697. The work was an immediate success, and it established his reputation across Europe. Upon its completion, he began work on a second edition, and he continued to work on the *Dictionary* and to engage in written debates with contemporaries until his death in 1706.

To say that the *Historical and Critical Dictionary* is a unique reference work is an understatement. Ostensibly, the work provides information on individuals of significance. The entries range from Old Testament figures (**David**) to Greek gods (**Jupiter**), and from major philosophers (**Spinoza**) to minor thinkers who are completely unknown today (**Giacomo Bonfadius**). However, the choice of entries is seemingly haphazard and there are some surprising omissions; for example, there is no entry on **Plato**, but, here again, a historical analysis is helpful. A quarter century before the *Dictionary*, a Catholic priest from Lyon named **Moréri** had published a *Historical Dictionary*. **Bayle** considered his *Critical Dictionary* an extension of this work, thus there was no need for entries on topics that **Bayle** thought had been sufficiently covered by **Moréri**.⁵ While the entries in **Bayle's** work are relatively succinct, each one includes extensive footnotes and in some cases footnotes to the footnotes that often wander broadly from the original subject matter. In fact, as much as 95 percent of the more than 6-million word text may be found in these footnotes.⁶ The work was originally presented in a folio format, which allowed the entry and notes to be displayed on one page. The writing is surprisingly conversational, often verbose, and is, at times, quite humorous. For example, in his entry on "**Takiddin**" (**Ibn Taymiyyah**, a medieval Muslim theologian), "a Mohammedan author," in the note he explains that while a lot could be said about the topic of introducing "philosophical studies" into religion, he will be

brief because "I already have more copy than one is required to complete this volume."⁷ His brief note then goes on for several pages and hundreds of words. **Bayle's** writing can also be somewhat risqué. At numerous points, he discusses prostitutes, sex, excessive drinking, etc. These bawdy descriptions and stories got him into some trouble with the local religious authorities, and in the second edition of the work he issued four "Clarifications," one of which addresses the work's obscenities (the others address more philosophical and theological topics such as his position on atheists, the problem of evil, and skepticism).

The complete *Dictionary* was translated into English in the 1730s in a five-volume work by **Pierre Desmaizeaux**, but the best contemporary translation is **Richard Popkin's** *Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections*.⁸⁻⁹ **Popkin** does an admirable job using different font sizes and text placement, as well as ellipses and marks, to help guide the reader through **Bayle's** writing in a standard-sized volume. He also provides his own comments to clarify points for the reader or to explain references to entries that are not included in his selections. By **Popkin's** own admission, much was left out during the selection process, but he focuses on entries that are of particular philosophical importance or that were especially controversial. **Popkin's** translation also includes the four "Clarifications" and a useful index of names.

There are many famous, and in some cases infamous, entries in the *Dictionary* such as "Manicheans," "Pyrrho," and "Spinoza," but looking more closely at the "Rorarius" entry gives us a better sense of **Bayle's** style and approach. As he explains, **Hieronymus Rorarius** was a nuncio of **Pope Clement VII** who wrote a book on the rationality of animals that "deserves to be read."¹⁰ After a relatively short and straightforward entry on **Rorarius**, **Bayle** launches into several long footnotes discussing **René Descartes's** position that animals are machines devoid of souls and without the capacity to think. **Bayle** canvasses **Descartes's** position and then raises numerous objections, many of which involve stories of animals acting intelligently that he had read and heard. This subsequently leads to a discussion of the views of **Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz** and his theory of the pre-established harmony, or the idea that the mind and body do not interact,

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but have been set in perfect alignment by God. **Bayle** provides eight numbered objections to the theory, each of which is several paragraphs in length, yet he concludes with his typical good humor and says that he is convinced that **Leibniz** will “smooth out the rough places in his theory” because “no one is able to travel more usefully or more surely in the intelligible world than he.”¹¹

Bayle's arguments and criticisms in the *Dictionary* did not go unnoticed by those whom he discussed. For example, **Bayle's** comments in “**Rorarius**” as well as in other entries discussing the problem of evil, i.e., the question of how an omniscient and omnibenevolent God could allow for evil in the world, prompted a response from **Leibniz** in his *Theodicy*, the only philosophical work published during his lifetime.¹² **Bayle** also influenced future generations of philosophers. **David Hume** shared his skepticism about the limits of reason, and his depiction of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities was taken up by both **Hume** and **Bishop George Berkeley**.

One of the most fascinating things about **Bayle** as a philosopher is that even though he introduced a lot of himself in his *Dictionary*, discerning his actual philosophical and theological positions is notoriously difficult. At various points, he has been described as an atheist, a skeptic, a secret adherent to Judaism, and a fideist, i.e., one who thinks that faith is incompatible with reason. Enlightenment thinkers saw him as an early ally who provided an “arsenal” of arguments that they could use against theologians and other traditional thinkers. **Bayle** described himself as a historian comparing arguments “for and against something, with all the impartiality of a faithful reporter,” which perhaps indicates that he didn’t see himself as taking a position on these topics at all.¹³

For the reader looking to learn more about **Bayle** and his thought there are several options. **Elisabeth Labrousse** is a major figure in 20th-century **Bayle** scholarship, and while the serious scholar would be advised to consult her two-volume French work, her brief and accessible *Bayle* is highly recommended.¹⁴ **Labrousse** provides an overview of **Bayle's** life and argues that as a philosopher he was far more interested in understanding other theories than expounding his own. **Richard Popkin's** *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle* presents **Bayle** as a skeptic whose tactic was to “analyze and dissolve any theory on its own terms,” all with the ultimate goal of finding the limits of reason.¹⁵ **Thomas M. Lennon's** *Reading Bayle* is a wide-ranging investigation of **Bayle's** thought structured around concepts like “integrity,” “toleration,” and “providence.”¹⁶ **Todd Ryan's** *Pierre Bayle's Cartesian Metaphysics: Rediscovering Early Modern Philosophy* focuses on **Bayle's** views on metaphysics and looks at **Bayle** in relation to major philosophical thinkers (**Descartes**, **Locke**, **Leibniz**, and **Spinoza**)

and major issues in metaphysics (mind-body dualism, causation, and mechanism), with the hope of arriving at a “satisfying interpretation of **Bayle's** thought as a whole.”¹⁷ **Walter Rex's** *Essays on Pierre Bayle and Religious Controversy* focuses on **Bayle's** views on religion and examines three of his writings, including the controversial *Dictionary* entry on **David**.¹⁸ Finally, **Ruth Whelan** takes a historical approach in *The Anatomy of Superstition: A Study of the Historical Theory and Practice of Pierre Bayle*, and seeks to understand **Bayle** by situating him in the context of the theories and writers to whom he was responding.¹⁹

Ultimately, working to resolve the so-called “**Bayle** enigma” and discern **Bayle's** true philosophical positions (or if they even exist) is a noble pursuit for professional philosophers and

for those interested in the history of philosophy, but the *Dictionary's* value for students — especially undergraduate students — lies in the strength of **Bayle's** arguments, his wit, and the approachable style of his writing.²⁰ His method of taking arguments on their own terms and then examining them from within is a model of clear philosophical thinking. It was for this reason that **Voltaire** called him the “greatest dialectician who has ever written.”²¹ Those looking for a traditional reference work that provides concise entries on all the well-known thinkers of **Bayle's** time will perhaps leave disappointed, but readers wishing to observe a great mind in action will undoubtedly be impressed and will delight in exploring this truly unique historical reference work. 🌿

Endnotes

1. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edited by **Edward Craig**. London: Routledge, 1998.*
2. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edited by **Edward N. Zalta**. <https://plato.stanford.edu>.*
3. *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <http://www.iep.utm.edu>.*
4. **Rex, Walter**. *Essays on Pierre Bayle and Religious Controversy*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965, X.
5. **Labrousse, Elisabeth**. *Bayle*. Translated by **Denys Potts**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, 40.
6. **Lennon, Thomas M.**, and **Michael Hickson**. “Pierre Bayle.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Accessed January 26, 2017. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/bayle/>.
7. **Bayle, Pierre**. *Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections*. Translated and edited by **Richard Popkin**. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991, 339.*
8. **Bayle, Pierre**. *The Dictionary, Historical and Critical, of Mr. Peter Bayle*. 2nd ed. 5 vols. Translated and edited by **Pierre Desmaizeaux**. London: J.J. and P. Knapton, 1734-1738. Facsimile, London: Routledge, 1997.
9. **Bayle, Historical**.
10. *Ibid.*, 213.
11. *Ibid.*, 254.
12. **Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm**. *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*. Edited by **Austin Farrer**. Translated by **E.M. Huggard**. La Salle: Open Court, 1985.* Originally published: London: Routledge & Keagan Paul, 1951.
13. **Bayle, Historical**, 396.
14. **Labrousse, Bayle**.
15. **Popkin, Richard**. *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle*. Revised and expanded edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, 288-290.*
16. **Lennon, Thomas M**. *Reading Bayle*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999.
17. **Ryan, Todd**. *Pierre Bayle's Cartesian Metaphysics: Rediscovering Early Modern Philosophy*. New York: Routledge, 2009, 5.
18. **Rex, Essays**.
19. **Whelan, Ruth**. *The Anatomy of Superstition: A Study of the Historical Theory and Practice of Pierre Bayle*. Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1989.
20. **Lennon and Hickson**, “Pierre Bayle.”
21. **Gottlieb, Anthony**. *The Dream of Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Philosophy*. New York: Livelight Publishing Corporation, 2016, 156.

Editor's note: An asterisk () denotes a title selected for *Resources for College Libraries*.

Oregon Trails from page 33

- Don't buy impulsively;
- Learn many “rules” about book-collecting so that you can be confident when you choose to break them.

Poor **Larry**. I don't think that he ever got real pleasure out of his collecting. Instead, he

was content to assemble collections that he could show off to friends and other collectors. If that is your goal, then by all means go that way but remember that it is possible, and I think desirable, to do both and when you show your collection(s) to friends and other collectors, your passion will shine and your audience will bask in your light. 🌿