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

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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 and a brief overview of an unfamiliar theory.1 Critical Dictionary of Philosophy, then available only in print, 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.”2 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 Morégi 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 Morégi.3 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.4 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 “Tākiddin” (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.” 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.5,6 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.”7 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, continued on page 36

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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 whomever 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

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.