Four Serious Problems with Le Clerc’s Objection
That was Based on Several Inferences He Drew from
Bayle’s Opinion

Themistius: Here is a completely defective argument that Le Clerc gives. He cites a passage where Bayle remarks that “once we dare to teach that God is the author of sin, we will necessarily lead men to atheism.” He adds that Bayle “openly maintains that no theological system can exonerate God from the charge of being an evildoer who takes no notice either of holiness or vice ... The only remedy he finds is to confess unreservedly that we can understand very little of this matter, which is to grant victory to the atheists, for if that were the case, then we could not prove to them that according to our theology God is good and holy ... If we suppose [Bayle] is coherent in his reasoning and thinking, then we must say that he [leads us necessarily to atheism] according to his own judgment, since we all teach in our systems that God is an evildoer and the author of evil; for he offers us no better system.”

Maximus: You are exactly right to say that this objection is completely defective. I counted four major blunders while you were relating it.

First, Le Clerc continues to build upon a false maxim, or as they say in the Schools, his proton-pseudos, which is the source of his aberrations. He assumes that the moment we cannot respond to various objections, we lack every means of maintaining the doctrine under attack; from which he concludes that if Christians cannot resolve the difficulties surrounding the origin of evil, they are incapable of exculpating God. Is he ignorant of the conduct of the Calvinists? There is perhaps nothing of which he is more persuaded than this Arminian thesis—that according to the System of Dordrecht, God is the author of sin. He undoubtedly believes that the Arminian objections are demonstrative on the subject and that the responses of the Reformed are but ridiculous and pitiful gibberish. Nevertheless, we know that they do not lack resources for exculpating God; for, conceiving Him to be supremely perfect in the way reason and Scripture represent Him, they conclude demonstratively that no sort of imperfection can be found in Him, let alone a fault as enormous as that of

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1 For this and the next quotation: Le Clerc, BC X, 372–373.
being the author of sin. They add that by the secrets of His infinite wisdom, which are impenetrable to the human mind, God has an influence on the sins of humankind in such a way that nothing is taken away either from His holiness or His other attributes, and they oblige their reason to submit humbly to this great mystery with all the insoluble difficulties that are easy to bring against it.

Le Clerc’s second blunder is that, while he knew very well that Bayle made use of the same denouement as the Reformed, he nevertheless charged him with odious consequences that in fact fall on the whole body of the Reformed Churches. This stands in contrast to the care found in other parts of his writing, care which perhaps derives only from his attempt to win over the idle journalists, whom we are told Le Clerc catechizes in the bookstores by discouraging them from reading Bayle’s Dictionary if they wish to conserve the purity of their faith. Once won over, people of this sort can disperse the sweet scent of Le Clerc’s orthodoxy from home to home, and thereby gain partisans for him. But he would be the first to mock them in petto: these good people, he would tell himself, are foolish enough to think that I attack Bayle from a sense of religious zeal, that I am going to become a good Calvinist, that I am sincerely striving for Jurieu’s friendship, and that I have forgotten, like a good Christian, the harsh blows that I have recently received, and that I have only feebly avenged.2

His third blunder consists in his failure to distinguish the two meanings of “to teach that God is the author of sin.” The phrase means either that we teach something which, according to our adversaries, makes God the author of sin, or that we confess that we ourselves make God the author of sin. No Christian sect teaches that God is the author of sin in the second sense; but if we believed the Roman Catholics, the Lutherans, the Arminians, etc., then we would think that it was Calvinist doctrine that God is the author of sin. The Calvinists defend themselves from that charge as from the darkest calumny, and declare at every opportunity that God influences human sin in an ineffable manner that in no way compromises His perfect, sovereign goodness. If they cannot resolve every difficulty, they blame the limitations of their knowledge, and they retort against their adversaries all the same difficulties.

Among Christians, there is no single system that in the judgment of all the others exculpates God when His providence is judged by our ordinary methods. But on the other hand, it is admitted by every sect that no other sect establishes that God is the author of sin in the second sense. It is clear that in the passage of Bayle in question these words, “to teach that God is the author of sin,” ought to be understood in the second sense. It is therefore not

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2 Le Clerc, bc vi, 428.