Examination of Jaquelot’s Reply to the Difficulties Concerning the Origin of Evil. He Abandons Common Notions

Themistius: First of all, I will remark that if something seems to have displeased many people, it is that Bayle admitted that all of our systems concerning the fall of Adam and its consequences are incapable of responding to the objections that show that the conduct of God is not conformable to the common notions we have of goodness and holiness, from which he concluded that it is necessary to reject these common notions as judges over God’s providence with respect to evil.

Maximus: Your remark is accurate, since Le Clerc based his case on that foundation when he set himself up as Bayle’s public accuser: he had no other pretext for imputing impieties to Bayle except the admission you have just mentioned and the rejection of common notions. People are saying, however, that Le Clerc greatly praises Jaquelot’s last book, the manuscript of which was given to him by the author as if to a good old friend and competent judge. But since Jaquelot rejects the common notions of goodness and holiness, and affirms that the damned will suffer eternally, he should consider himself targeted by Le Clerc’s denouncement, as an accomplice to Bayle’s alleged impieties. How did he not feel this sting? Or how could Le Clerc have been comfortable approving of a book wherein he found the same attacks on religion and the same methods for resisting them as in the Dictionary?

Themistius: Leave these two gentlemen alone; they will find a way to agree with each other and they will forgive everything of one another as long as they are united against a common enemy. Notice only the fullness of the victory that Bayle has won against them: the one [Le Clerc] was required to seek asylum in a place [Origenism] struck by lightning and situated in a desert that has been uninhabited for several centuries, and not finding any security there, he left it to escape to a grotto built of conjectures.

The other [Jaquelot] was so frightened by the plan laid out for him1 to reconcile seven theological propositions with nineteen philosophical propositions,

1 See RQP II, cxliv.
that he did not dare to approach it, and he was not able to do anything but say
that these nineteen propositions “are false maxims which we should not use in
any way in the question at hand.”

Bayle could not have wished for a greater triumph, since besides seeing that
one of his aggressors refutes the other, he obtained a declaration that shows
that he was right to uphold that we ought to reject the common notions of
goodness and the love of virtue when we judge divine providence with respect
to evil, and that if they were admitted as a rule for the conduct that our systems
ascribe to God, we would succumb to the Manichean objections. That is how
Jaquelot brings faith into agreement with common notions; he abandons them
just as his adversary had desired.

Maximus: Our hopes were dashed! Of all the chapters of the third volume of the
Response to a Provincial’s Questions there was not one for which a refutation
was desired more eagerly than the chapter that showed which philosophical
maxims Jaquelot had to bring into agreement with our theological systems.
There were many people who were surprised in reading this chapter: they had
read themselves, or had somebody read to them, a thousand times the story
of the fall of Eve and Adam, and they had never realized that it was contrary
to the ideas of goodness for God, who had formed Eve with his own hands, to
abandon her to the malice of a spirit a thousand times cleverer than she. It was
in reading the philosophical maxims reported by Bayle that they saw for the
first time that the ideas of goodness and the love of virtue openly collide with
this abandonment.

The adder by a natural instinct blocks its ears to the sound of the charmer.
Ulysses blocked his companions’ ears so that they would not hear the danger-
ous song of the Sirens. Should not Eve have been inspired to raise her hands
to her ears so as not to hear the pernicious suggestions of the devil? A hundred
similar thoughts have agitated many readers without their faith being troubled;
they wished only to learn how the ideas of goodness agree with the victory that
God allowed the devil to win over our first fathers and which was so disastrous
for humanity.

They set their minds at ease on this topic from the hope that Jaquelot,
more fortunate than the ancient and modern Theophrastus, would discover
characteristics of goodness and friendship unknown until now that would

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2 Jaquelot, ETB, 317.
3 [OD] From RQP II, cxxviii–clxxii.
4 See Psalm 58:5–6.
5 See Book 12 of the Odyssey.