

## *Book Reviews*



### **Pierre Bayle**

*Dialogues of Maximus and Themistius*. Translated, edited, and introduced by Michael W. Hickson. Leiden: Brill, 2016. Pp. xxvii + 418. ISBN: 978-90-04-32141-0.

Pierre Bayle's *Entretiens de Maxime et Thémiste* was first published posthumously in 1707. The present volume is an important event in Bayle studies since it is the first translation into English of a major Bayle text since the eighteenth century. Several of his major texts were first translated in the eighteenth century and some of them have been newly translated. One minor text has been translated for the first time recently. But several of Bayle's most interesting philosophical texts have never been translated. So it is about time that they be translated, and let us hope that this volume is the first of several first translations.

Granted, many scholars of skepticism can read French, and it is always better to read the original. But for those who struggle with French, this translation will make it easier to get to the heart of Bayle's thinking. And even for those who read French well, comparing the original with this translation may help in figuring out what Bayle was trying to say in his sometimes hasty and not always clear prose. The translation is smooth and accurate.

Why is Bayle important for the study of skepticism? Well, because he might be one of the most important skeptics. In the last version of his *History of Scepticism* (Oxford University Press, 2003), Richard Popkin called him a "supersceptic." On the other hand, Gianluca Mori, Jonathan Israel, Antony McKenna, and others consider him a philosophical atheist and/or a moral rationalist. There may or may not be equal arguments on both sides of this issue, but any newly translated text such as the present one is going to help English-speaking readers make up their minds about this debate.

One barrier to appreciation of Bayle's *Dialogues* has always been that it was written largely as a polemic with two rationalists of his day, Jean Le Clerc (translator of John Locke) and Isaac Jaquelot. It was part of long and complicated debates with which no later reader is familiar. Le Clerc and Bayle exchanged

18 published responses to each other, and Jaquelot and Bayle exchanged six. One service of the substantial introductory essay is to straighten out what Le Clerc and Jaquelot had said and what Bayle responded, and when. It is possible, of course, that Bayle is criticizing these rationalists from his own rationalist position. It is also possible that he is criticizing them as a skeptic.

The big issues here are questions of faith and reason. The first 39 pages of the introduction are an excellent discussion of Bayle's treatment of the problem of evil throughout his career. Bayle usually argued that the problem of evil cannot be solved by reason alone, and requires recourse to faith. In this volume, in Hickson's words, Bayle argues that "it is sometimes rational to continue to believe a proposition after one has acknowledged that the proposition is opposed by invincible objections" and that "it is possible to reject as false an evident proposition" (104). Is this a form of skepticism? Of irrationalism? A set of paradoxes? Should philosophers worry about this kind of claim? Leibniz did. His *Theodicy* comments in detail on the Bayle-Le Clerc debates.

Naturally, rationalist theologians could not stomach what Bayle was saying. They wanted to find a clean, rational justification for the presence of evil in the world despite the existence of a benevolent God. Over and over again, Bayle insisted that that could not be done. Is that a dogmatic position, or is it a kind of skepticism? This sort of question comes up over and over in reading Bayle on Le Clerc and Jaquelot.

Bayle's *Dialogues* also raise the question of what makes one a skeptic. Does one have to suspend judgment on every issue, or can one be a partial skeptic? And does taking a stand on something mean one is not a skeptic? Elisabeth Labrousse called Bayle a "moral rigorist" a long time ago, and that seems justified by the texts. He frequently refers to high moral standards. But does that make him a dogmatist and anti-skeptic? Or can one have high moral standards on the basis of gut feelings and impulses, and thus be a moral rigorist, but have no final dogmatic reasoning to justify it? And in that case, can one be a moral rigorist *and* a skeptic at the same time?

This volume is also important to the study of skepticism because it explores some of the paradoxes or enigmas of the self-refutations of skepticism. One of Bayle's most common strategies in this text is his custom of drawing out the implications of his adversaries' own arguments in order to undermine them. It turns out that Bayle's acidic arguments also undermine his own arguments. Hickson's introduction ends with a very pertinent question: "How could Bayle continue to insist to the end of his career that evidence was the criterion of truth, as he had always done in his early works, while destroying in the *Dialogues* the sufficiency of the appearance of evidence for declaring any proposition true?" (107). This is one of the enigmas of Bayle and of any skeptic: