

Pierre Bayle's Fideist Account of Evil

Pierre Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary* was a very popular work in its day. His articles "Manicheans" and "Paulicians" included comments on the problem of evil that many found impious. Bayle responded finding that some are scandalized not because Bayle said the problem of evil is hard, but because he claimed that "the objections of the Manicheans are unanswerable so long as they are examined only before the tribunal of reason." (409)

What are these objections?

1. God cannot maintain his goodness and create a genuinely free agent (one capable of sin), the existence of which is a necessary condition for divine permission.

"It is inconceivable that the first man could have received the faculty for doing wrong from a good principle. This faculty is vicious; and everything that can produce bad is bad, since evil can only arise from a bad cause; and thus the free will of Adam is the result of the action of two contrary principles; insofar as it was able to move in the right way, it depended upon the good principle; but insofar as it was able to embrace evil, it depended upon the bad principle."

2. Regardless of God's maintaining his goodness, creatures are simply not able to be independent sources of their own actions, and so something more is required from God than permission in order for sin to exist. The problem is that for God to permit x , there must be another source by which x can come into being. Without this other source, no sense can be made of divine permission.

"Besides, according to the ideas we have of a created being, we cannot comprehend at all that it can be an originating source of action; that it can move itself; and that, while receiving its existence and that of its faculties every moment of its duration, while receiving it, I say, entirely from another cause, it should create in itself any modalities by virtue of something that belongs exclusively to itself. These modalities must be either indistinct from the substance of the soul, as the new philosophers claim, or distinct from the soul's substance, as the Peripatetics assert. If they are indistinct, then they can only be produced by the cause that is able to produce the substance of the soul itself. Now it is obvious that man is not this cause and that he cannot be it. If they are distinct, they are created beings, beings produced from nothing, since they are not composed of the soul, or of any other pre-existent nature. They can then only be produced by a cause that can create. Now all the sects of philosophy agree that man is not such a cause and that he cannot be one."

3. God has perfect foreknowledge. Perfect foreknowledge must be grounded on something determinate, and such determination requires more than simple permission.

"[O]ne cannot comprehend that a simple permission would bring contingent events out of the class of things that are just possible, or that this would put the divinity in a position of

being completely sure that the creature will sin. A simple permission cannot be the basis for divine foreknowledge. It is this fact that has led most theologians to suppose that God has made a decree that declares that the creature will sin. This, according to them, is the foundation of foreknowledge. Others claim that the decree declares that the creature will be placed in the circumstances in which God has foreseen that it would sin. Thus some contend that God foresaw the sin by reason of his decree, and others contend that he made the decree because he had foreseen the sin. No matter how it is explained, it obviously follows that God wished that man sin, and that he preferred this to the perpetual duration of innocence, which was so easy for him to bring about and ordain.”

4. Having sufficient knowledge and power to stop a bad effect and permitting it makes one complicit in the bad effect even if that knowledge is only of the possibility of the bad effect.

“Neither his goodness, nor his holiness, nor his wisdom could allow that he risked these events; for our reason convinces us in a most evident manner that a mother, who would allow her daughters to go to a ball when she knew with certainty that they ran a great risk of losing their honor there, would show that she loved neither her daughters nor chastity. And if one supposes that she possesses an infallible preservative against all temptations and that she does not give it to her daughters when she sends them to the dance, one then knows with complete assurance that she is guilty and that she hardly cares whether her daughters keep their virginity.”

Should they be examined only before the tribunal of reason?

- For Bayle, the Christian mysteries (including God’s permission of evil) are above reason. By this he means that reason really can present unanswerable objections.
- Faith, though, tells us that the mysteries are true. “God speaks, and that does not completely convince you? You want more security, you wish that his testimony be ratified by human reason? ... Do you fear the objections of the Manicheans when you accept revealed authority?” (418)
- But why should we believe then?
 - Bayle doesn’t think reason can tell us anything anyway.
 - Problem of the Criterion ; Proof of the existence of matter?
 - Bayle points out that the Apostles argued *from Scripture* anyway.
- Conclusion: “According to Scripture there is only one principle, a good one, and yet moral and physical evil have been introduced into the human race. Therefore it is not contrary to the nature of the good principle to permit the introduction of moral evil and to punish crimes; for it is no more evident that four and four make eight than it is evident that if a thing has happened, it is possible.”
- Ultimately, Bayle thinks God is the author of sin, but for mysterious reasons, God is still holy.