Abstract for Pacific Meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Contemporary debates on religious toleration – where this includes mutual toleration of the religious and the secular, as well as toleration of the religious among themselves – often assume an Enlightenment conception of tolerance predicated on value-neutral autonomy. This differs in important respects, however, from earlier conceptions of toleration, according to which religious toleration is supported by multiple different lines of argument, both value-minimalist and value-maximalist. The seventeenth century, in particular, offers us paradigms for religious toleration that appeal both to “the light of reason” – available to all rational agents – and to more robust (usually religious) conceptions of the good.

The perfect case study in this regard is Pierre Bayle, a seventeenth-century philosopher who Enlightenment thinkers mined for his devastating skeptical arguments against religion. But Bayle was also a staunch defender of religious toleration. In his *Philosophical Commentary* (1686), Pierre Bayle offers three main arguments on toleration. First, Bayle argues that the “natural light” of reason reveals that intolerance is immoral; call this the natural light argument against intolerance. Since Bayle here understands intolerance as necessarily involving coercion, this argument supports a minimalist conception of religious toleration akin to that which underlies current debates on the nature and extent of religious toleration. Its implications are roughly coextensive with those of Mill’s harm principle.

Bayle also argues that we ought to renounce rights if others’ exercise of them in good conscience would lead to evil; call this the reciprocity argument against intolerance. This also yields a minimalist conception of religious toleration insofar as the argument is neutral with respect to the rights and conscience in question. It is also, I argue, the least helpful argument that Bayle offers, since nearly any right could be construed to lead to evil.

Finally, Bayle argues that we have a right to affirm beliefs of conscience for which we have no conclusive evidence, or which are in fact false; call this the erring conscience argument for toleration. This argument yields, I argue, the most robust conception of religious toleration of all Bayle’s arguments, since nearly all religious beliefs count as beliefs of conscience, even from the perspective of the secularist. In fact, this argument supports this kind of robust toleration even for nonreligious beliefs of conscience that are in fact false; it thus generates a kind of normative egalitarianism about beliefs with radically different truth values.

Interestingly, the relatively secular nature of these arguments is often taken to explain the inclusivity of Bayle’s conception of toleration. I show, however, that the grounding of these arguments on mostly secular claims is consistent with the religious grounds and motivations that Bayle also offers for similarly inclusive conclusions. Bayle’s analysis of the parable of the great banquet in Luke 14:15-24 shows that, unlike a purely secular conception of toleration, a specifically religious conception of toleration generates not only duties of non-harm, but also positive duties – in the case of the relevant parable, a duty of practicing inclusion of the marginalized. While the erring conscience argument for toleration grants toleration to both religious and nonreligious beliefs of conscience, the tolerance in question is robust only with respect to scope, not with respect to duties. It is only when Bayle appeals to the specifically religious grounds for toleration that we get not only robustness with respect to the scope of toleration, but also with respect to the type of toleration. The toleration entailed by the parable of the great banquet is not merely for all people, religious and secular; it is that of self-giving, other-honoring, inclusion for all.