Chapter 8
Cudworth and Bayle: An Odd Couple?

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At the end of the seventeenth century, two of the most important authors dealing with the Achilles are Ralph Cudworth (1617–88) and Pierre Bayle (1647–1706). From our temporal perspective, the importance of Cudworth looks backward in time. Directly or through John Smith, he recovers and prominently deploys the ancient texts in which the Achilles was first expressed. Bayle’s importance is forward-looking. For his citation of the Achilles is another instance in which Bayle was the ‘arsenal of the Enlightenment.’ He was a source for it on which Hume almost certainly drew, but perhaps also Mendelssohn, and, more likely, Kant who probably even gets his designation of ‘Achilles’ from Bayle. Cudworth and Bayle are independently important, but there might also be a connection between them (even if, in the end, Bayle himself might not deploy even the narrow Achilles, while Cudworth favors the Broad Achilles). Bayle was no mean scholar of ancient texts, and he is usually very fastidious about citing his sources. In the case of the Achilles, however, his citations seem insufficient to account for the argument he deploys. It is interesting to speculate on Cudworth as his source, especially since in any case Cudworth’s texts illuminate Bayle’s.

On the face of it, Cudworth and Bayle seem an unlikely pairing. Certainly, they are polar opposites in outlook and style. The Cambridge Platonist is a dogmatic metaphysician, flamboyantly baroque in expressing the most speculative and idiosyncratic of views. By contrast, the Huguenot refugee is a positivist skeptic, a cynical pessimist, stylistically direct and brutal, yet delighting in the homeliest of anecdotes, even obscene ones, to make his philosophical points. Bayle once said that there are two kinds of philosopher, journalists, who tell it like it is, and lawyers, who relentlessly pursue a cause. Bayle himself is a journalist, especially but not only in the Dictionary, where his self-assigned reportorial role of faithfully conveying the views of others with their greatest cogency generally leaves his own position difficult to discern. On the other side, there is little...
doubt but that Cudworth is a lawyer. His cause is clear from beginning to end, and everything he says is part of the case for it. Nowhere is the dispassionate weighing of evidence **sic et non** that confounds and delights readers of Bayle. Instead, Cudworth advances his views as the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Even so, there are a striking number of remarkable convergences between them, beyond the appearance of the Achilles in their work. Initially striking is the bracketed appearance of the argument, limited to a highly contextualized harassment of atomism. It occurs in Cudworth’s great work, the *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678),\(^1\) where he prefaces his deployment of it with the following disclaimer: his aim is only to show how certain ancients were led to the unlikely view espousing unextended substance and how that view might be best used against materialism without necessarily embracing the view himself. He purports to show how they came ‘to assert and maintain a thing so repugnant to *Sense* and *Imagination*, and consequently to all *Vulgar Apprehension*, a substance in itself *Unextended* . . . Wherein we shall only represent the Sense of these *Ancient Incorporeals*, so far as we can, to the best advantage, in order to their Vindication, against *Atheists* and *Materialists*; ourselves in the Mean time, not asserting any thing; but leaving every one that can, to make his own Judgment; and so either to close with this, or that other Hypothesis, of Extended Incorporeals. (822)’ Now, despite Cudworth’s failure to commit himself on the extendedness of all things, he does embrace a clear conclusion: not everything is corporeal. As lawyers today put it, he argues in the alternative, drawing the same conclusion from what are incompatible premises.\(^2\) The soul is unextended, therefore it is immaterial; the soul is extended, therefore it is immaterial. The bracketing of interest occurs because the Achilles is primarily deployed only to support the first alternative. Of this, more below.

Bayle, too, inserts the argument into a hypothetical context. In his *Dictionary* entry on Leucippus, he wonders at the failure of this ancient author and his atomist followers to regard each atom as endowed with a vital principle, a supposition that ‘would have enabled them to solve some of the objections that have been made against their theory.’\(^3\) To begin with, he remarks, they would have been able to respond to the sort of worries expressed by Plutarch and Galen over life as (what

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1. Reprinted in a photo-offset edition, 2 vols., (New York: Garland Publishing, 1978). All citations are made from this work with great care, thus obviating the need for the *sic* device, whose perforce repeated use would have been annoying.

2. ‘My client did not borrow the lawnmower, therefore need not make restitution; my client borrowed the lawnmower but returned it, therefore . . .’

3. First edition, 1696; second edition, which alone contains this text, 1701. All citations are made from the translation of Pierre Desmaizeaux, 1734–37, carefully verified against the French text. Reprinted in a photo-offset edition, 5 vols., (New York: Garland Publishing, 1978). This translation is used because its language itself is important. Hume, for example, took his description of Spinoza’s monism from Bayle, but clearly in Desmaizeaux’s translation: ‘the hideous hypothesis.’ (Not incidentally, this phrase occurs in the text in which Hume discusses the Achilles argument. *The Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.4.5.) Cross-referencing editions of the *Dictionary* is in any case easy, by article and remark.