

Bayle and the Genealogy of the Cult of Nothingness

Note: *Nothingness as First Principle/ Monism/ Quietism/ Buddha's Two Doctrines*

Bayle (1702)	Moreri (1725)	Bernard (1728)	Du Halde (1735)
<p>“<u>The interior doctrine</u> [...] <u>consists in laying down as the principle and end of all things, a certain vacuum and real nothingness. They say that our first parents came from that vacuum, and returned into it when they died; and that it is so with all men who are resolved into that principle by death; that men, all the elements, and all creatures, are part of that vacuum; and that therefore there is only one substance, which is different in all particular beings, only by figures and qualities, or an internal configuration much like water, which is always essential water whether it has the form of snow, hail, rain, or ice. If it is a monstrous thing to assert that plants, brutes, and men are really the same thing, and to base such an opinion on the idea that all particular beings are not distinct from their principle, it is even more monstrous to say that this principle has no thought, no power, no virtue; and yet this is the doctrine of these philosophers.</u>”¹</p>	<p>“[Buddha told his disciples] <i>that there is nothing to seek, nor on what the we can put hope, nothingness and emptiness, which is the first principle of all things. His method caused his disciples to divide his doctrine into two parts.</i> (...) [The interior doctrine] <i>consists in establishing as a principle and an end of all things, a certain void and a real nothingness. They say that our first parents came out of this void, and they return to it after death, that it is the same for all men, who dissolve back into this principle through death; that we and all elements and all creatures are part of this void, that there is thus only a single same substance that is in all individual beings through shapes alone, and through qualities, or exterior configurations, somewhat like water that is always essentially water, whether it has the form of snow, or rain, or ice.</i> (...) Moreover, they very much resemble the Quietists: for they want <u>to be absorbed in deep meditations</u> (...).”²</p>	<p>“<u>In an act of supreme impiety, seeing that he was close to death, he [Buddha] wanted to inspire atheism in his followers. He declared that until that time he had spoken to them in enigmas: but do not be mistaken, he told them, by seeking the first principle of things outside of nothingness. Everything has come from nothingness and everything must return to it. It is the abyss of our hopes... by this retraction, he divided his followers into two branches: one followed what Fo had taught during his life to the letter, that is to say Idolatry, the others received the last words of their master as an article of faith and declared themselves for Atheism.</u> (...) To possess, according to them, perfect holiness, one must not only be free from all passions; it is not even permissible to have the slightest desire.”³</p>	<p>“<i>They teach that the principle and end of all things is a certain vacuum or nothingness; that our first parents came from this nothingness and returned to nothingness after their death; that our being and our substance are made of this vacuum; (...) that all beings only differ from one another in their shapes and qualities, in much the same way only diverse qualities distinguish snow from ice, and hail; or in much the same way the same metal can be used to fashion a man, a lion, or any other animal, so that after all these beings are melted, they immediately lose their shapes and qualities and form only one substance.</i> (...) <u>the nearer we approach the nature of the stone or a tree trunk, the more perfect we become.</u>”⁴</p>

¹ Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, 4: 254-255. “La Doctrine intérieure [...] consiste à établir, pour principe et pour fin de toutes choses, un certain *vide* et un *néant réel*. Ils disent que nos premiers parents sont issus de ce *vide*, et qu’ils y retournèrent après la mort, qu’il en est de même de tous les hommes, qui se résolvent en ce principe par la mort ; que nous, tous les éléments, et toutes les créatures, faisons partie de ce *vide*, qu’ainsi il n’y a qu’une seule et même substance, qui est différente dans les êtres particulier, par le seules figure et par les qualités ou la configuration intérieure ; à peu près comme l’eau, soit qu’elle ait la forme de neige, de grêle, de pluie ou de glace. S’il est monstrueux de soutenir que les plantes, les bêtes, les hommes sont réellement la même chose, et de se fonder sur la prétention de ce que tous les êtres particuliers sont indistincts de leur principe, il est encore plus monstrueux de débiter que ce principe n’a nulle pensée, nulle puissance, nulle vertu. C’est néanmoins ce que disent ces Philosophes, ils font consister dans l’inaction, et dans un repos absolu, la perfection souveraine de ce principe.”

² Louis Moreri, « Fé, ou Fo, ou Foé, idole de la Chine », in *Grand dictionnaire historique ou Mélange curieux de l’histoire sacrée et profane* (Paris, 1725), V: 68. Trans. Droit, *The Cult of Nothingness*, 63-64.

³ J. F. Bernard, B. Picart, *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde, op. cit.*, 1728, t. 7, p. 193-195 ; 202. “Alors, pour comble d’impiété, se voyant près de la mort, il voulut inspirer l’athéisme à ses sectateurs. Il leur déclara que jusqu’à ce moment il leur avait parlé par énigmes : *mais ne vous abusez pas*, leur dit-il, *en cherchant hors du néant le premier principe des choses. Tout est sorti de ce néant et tout doit y retourner. C’est l’abîme de nos espérances.* (...) par cette rétractation, il divisa ses sectateurs en deux branches, dont l’une suivit à la lettre ce que le Fo avait enseigné pendant sa vie, c’est-à-dire l’idolâtrie ; les autres reçurent pour articles de foi les dernières paroles de leur maître et se

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Diderot (1751)	De Guignes (1756)	Grosier (1777)	Hegel (1837)
<p>“1. <i>Nothingness is the principle and the end of all things.</i> 2. <i>It is from there that all men have their origin, and that is where they will return after their death.</i> 3. All that exists comes from this principle, and returns to it after death: it is this principle which constitutes our soul and all the elements; consequently, all things that live, think, and feel, however different in use or figure, do not differ in themselves, nor are they distinguished from their principle. (...) 7. <u>He who wishes to lead an innocent and happy life, must make every effort to make himself like his principle, that is to say, that he must subdue, or rather extinguish, all his passions (...)</u> 9. <u>When we have come to know this sublime doctrine, we must leave the esoteric doctrine to the people, or at least lend themselves to it only externally.</u>”⁵</p>	<p>“<u>He [Fo] died at seventy-nine years of age, after having told his dearest disciples that everything he had taught them up to that point was only parables, that he had hidden the truth from them with figurative and metaphorical expressions; but that his real feeling was that there was no other principle than void and nothingness, that everything came back from it and everything eventually returned to it (...).</u> These last words of the Indian philosopher produced two different Sects in India; some retained the worship of Idols which he had taught, and formed a class of their own, which is called the class of Brahms or Brahmins who adore a great number of gods. (...) The other disciples of Foe attached themselves only to the principle of emptiness and nothingness, and they are called the disciples of the Inner Doctrine.”⁶</p>	<p>“<i>Nothingness, according to this doctrine, is the beginning and the end of all that exists; it is from nothingness that our first parents drew their origin, and it is from nothingness that they returned after their death.</i> All beings differ from one another only in their shapes and their qualities. From the same metal a sculptor can fashion a man, a lion, or any other animal: if one then melts these different pieces, they will immediately lose their shape and their respective qualities, and will form only one and the same substance. (...) This universal principle has no virtue, nor power, nor intelligence; much more, it essence consists in <u>being without action, without intelligence, without desire.</u>”⁷</p>	<p>“(…) <i>Nothingness is the principle of all things –all proceeded from and returns to Nothingness. The various forms found in the World are only modifications of procession [thence].</i> If an analysis of these various forms were attempted, they would lose their quality; for in themselves all things are one and the same inseparable essence, and this essence is Nothingness. (...) <u>To obtain happiness, therefore, man must seek to assimilate himself to this principle by continual victories over himself; and for the sake of this, do nothing, wish nothing, desire nothing. In this condition of happiness, therefore, Vice or Virtue is out of the question; for the true blessedness is Union with Nothingness.</u>”⁸</p>

déclarèrent pour l’athéisme. (...) Pour posséder une sainteté parfaite, il ne faut pas seulement être exempt de toute passion ; il n’est pas même permis d’avoir le moindre désir.”

⁴ Jean-Baptiste du Halde, *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique et physique de l’Empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie Chinoise* (Paris : Mercier, 1735), III: 27-28. “Ils enseignent que le principe et la fin de toutes choses, c’est le vuide, ou le néant; que c’est du néant que nos premiers parents ont tiré leur origine, et que c’est au néant qu’ils sont retournés après leur mort; que le vuide est ce qui constitue notre Être et notre substance; [...] que tous les êtres ne diffèrent les uns des autres, que par leurs figures et leurs qualités; de même, qu’il n’y a que les qualités diverses qui mettent de la différence entre la neige, la glace, et la grêle ; de même encore que du même métal on fait un homme, un lion, ou quelque autre animal, et qu’après avoir fait fonder tous ces Êtres, ils perdent aussitôt leurs figures et leurs qualités, et ne sont plus qu’une même substance. [...] plus on approche de la nature de la pierre ou d’un tronc d’arbre, plus on se perfectionne.”

⁵ Denis Diderot, “Philosophie des Asiatiques”, *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, ed. D. Diderot and J. Le Rond d’Alembert (Paris: Briasson, David, Le Breton, Durand, 1751), I: 754a. “1°. Le vuide est le principe & la fin de toutes choses. 2°. C’est de là que tous les hommes ont tiré leur origine, & c’est là qu’ils retourneront après leur mort. 3°. Tout ce qui existe vient de ce principe, & y retourne après la mort : c’est ce principe qui constitue notre âme & tous les éléments ; par conséquent toutes les choses qui vivent, pensent & sentent, quelques différentes qu’elles soient par l’usage ou par la figure, ne diffèrent pas en elles-mêmes & ne sont point distinguées de leur principe. [...] 7°. Celui qui souhaite de mener une vie innocente & heureuse, doit faire tous ses efforts pour se rendre semblable à son principe, c’est-à-dire, qu’il doit dompter, ou plutôt éteindre toutes ses passions. [...] 9°. Quand on est parvenu à la connaissance de cette doctrine sublime, il faut laisser au peuple la doctrine ésotérique, ou du moins ne s’y prêter qu’à l’extérieur.”

⁶ Guignes, *Histoire générale*, 1: 224-225. Trans. Droit, *The Cult of Nothingness*, 63.

⁷ Grosier, *Histoire générale de la Chine*, 2: 283. Trans. Droit, *The Cult of Nothingness*, 65.

⁸ Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* [1837], tran. John Sibree (New York: Colonial Press, 1900), 68-169.