Fideism, Scepticism, or Free-Thought? The Dispute Between Lamy and Saint-Laurens over Metaphysical Knowledge

Syliane Malinowski-Charles

From the autumn of 1708 until the first of September 1710, the Benedictine Father François Lamy, one of the last representatives of seventeenth-century Cartesianism, would exchange a series of letters with a young reader about whether the immortality of the soul could be proven, and indeed whether any metaphysical truth could be known at all. Lamy would never know just how young his reader was – when he sent the first letter, Jean-François de Saint-Laurens (1690–1759) was barely 18.[1] A future

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[1] In her introduction to François Lamy, *La Relligion défenduë par la Raison sur l'Immortalité de l'ame et sur quelques autres importantes verités. En plusieurs lettres reciproques*, Florence, Leo Olschki, 2003, which is her edition collecting this correspondence and other unpublished writings, Maria Grazia Zaccone Sina quotes a tribute to Mr. Saint-Laurens by one of his friends, Mr. Guillaume de Ponsan: "this philosopher [i.e., Lamy] could not have been surprised to discover such wisdom in a young man: he knew not whether the person who had written to him was young or old. Mr. de Saint-Laurens expressed his doubts to him without revealing his identity; he had given him a false address and only after the argument did Dom Lami learn the identity of the person with whom he had had an exchange of metaphysical letters," in *Examen de l'Éloge de Mr. De Saintlaurens, Conseiller au Parlement*, inserted in *Recueil de l'Académie des Jeux Floraux de l'année 1760*, N.p., n.d., p. 38. Nevertheless, Father Lamy might have guessed the age-difference between himself and his correspondent after the latter had mentioned that his father was helping him with his writing, a remark (in a lost letter) that did not fail to surprise Lamy: "I am astonished, however, to learn from you that I was dealing at once with you and your honourable father" (Letter VIII, p. 135). Maria Gracia Zaccone Sina specifies that the words "M. votre Père" are crossed out but remain legible (*ibid*., n. 36).

S. Malinowski-Charles (✉)
Département de philosophie et des arts, Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières,
Trois-Rivières, QC, Canada
e-mail: syliane.charles@uqtr.ca

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magistrate of Toulouse, Saint-Laurens would know no career in philosophy, nor would his philosophical writing even extend beyond these letters. Yet he was an avid reader not only of Lamy, but also of Descartes, Malebranche, Pascal,[2] and Arnauld,[3] probably also of Fénelon and Régis, and no doubt, at least from the nature of his arguments, of Bayle, Spinoza, and certain erudite libertines. His ostensible purpose for contacting the Benedictine of St-Maur was to impart his "doubts concerning the metaphysical certainty we claim to have about the immortality of the soul."[4] Their conversation would soon alight upon such ideologically contentious questions as the scrutability of God and his attributes, the applicability of reason to matters of faith, and even the relativity of all knowledge. Lamy, in turn, keen to dismantle these doubts, would draw upon all of his talent and the full powers of his pen (a pen counted among the century's finest[5]), for he viewed such doubts as paving the way to Pyrrhonism, to Free-thought, and to Spinozism – which is to say, to the worst forms of atheism.[6] Moreover, so well did he grasp what was at stake in this exchange that, when it ended, Lamy would propose to St-Laurens that their letters be collected and published; the title Lamy chose was *La Relligion défendüe par la raison sur l'immortalité de l'âme et sur quelques autres importantes verités. En plusieurs lettres reciproques* (*Religion Defended by Reason: About the Immortality of the Soul and a Few Other Important Truths, in Several Reciprocal Letters*). But although he sensed his life drawing to a close, and so tried to publish this selection of letters very quickly, he still ran out of time, for upon his death in April 1711 the work had remained unpublished – a state of affairs not remedied until the recent appearance of Maria Gracia Zaccone Sina's edition. Yet his desire to publish is in some ways puzzling, for it is not really him who appears the victor in these exchanges, notwithstanding the courteous concession granted to him in the final letter from Saint-Laurens. Throughout the correspondence, not only is Lamy's Cartesian rationalism pressed to defend itself against sceptic, fideist, and free-thinking attacks, but it might even be said that the seventeenth century itself is on trial before the nascent Enlightenment. As we now retrace their main arguments, what should emerge is the value of these letters as a capsule from a period of transition, a period

[2] He quotes Pascal in Letter XIII, p. 188.

[3] He mentions Arnauld's dispute with Malebranche over the nature of ideas and sides with Arnauld in his Letter XI of 21 January 1710, p. 143.

[4] Letter I, p. 47. It may be noted that exposing one's "Doubts about…" was a common practice among writers of clandestine literature.

[5] Bayle would describe Lamy as "a great philosopher, famous by several excellent works, and exhibiting a very particularly fine spirit" (*Œuvres diverses*, La Haye, 1737, vol. IV, p. 181), and moreover also as "one of the strongest Cartesians there are in France" (*ibid*., vol. III, p. 788); and L. Dubois, author of the *Histoire de l'Abbé de Rancé et de sa Réforme*, would describe him as "very well regarded, as much for his enlightened mind as for the goodness of his heart, for his personal candour and purity in moral conduct, in short, of all the Benedictines of Saint-Maur, the one who wrote French the best" (Paris, Poussielgue frères, 1969, vol. II, p. 327, cited in the introduction to *La Relligion défenduë par la Raison*, *op. cit.*, p. 25, n. 101).

[6] Cf. Letter VI, p. 79, explained below, where Lamy involves himself in refuting Saint-Laurens's position on the basis of "the strange and terrible repercussions that it can have".

in which the multiple currents of criticism are not always so distinct. In the process, we shall try especially to discern Saint-Laurens's own actual position, and to understand the role played by Scepticism in his thought.

1 (Letters I to IV) The First Question: How Can It Be Proven That God Does Not Annihilate Souls? Saint-Laurens the Christian Rationalist

When Saint-Laurens sends his first letter to Lamy, the only question he wants to have answered is whether it can be proven with certainty that one's soul is not destroyed by God upon the death of one's body. He points out that the available arguments seem satisfied merely to prove the soul's distinctiveness from the body, and then from this to deduce that the body's death is not necessarily the soul's death too. To Saint-Laurens, what casts doubt on treating this proposition as being equivalent to the idea that a soul cannot die at all, however, is the fact of divine omnipotence. What could ever guarantee that God does not annihilate us, and that the soul is truly immortal? In the first letters, Saint-Laurens receives the master's arguments for the most part without dispute – except for one of them. In response to the claim that God's non-annihilation of substances can be deduced from the fact that the goal of Creation is God's own glory, Saint-Laurens remarks that one would then need to be certain that such is indeed God's goal, and so to speak on God's behalf. And such an endeavour, he hints subtlely, is a bold and uncertain one – perhaps even *impossible*.

This is an insinuation that Lamy cannot let go unanswered:

> I confess that if, in order to do it, it was necessary, as you intimate, to know precisely God's plans for our souls (…), I confess, I say, that it would be ridiculous and even rash to undertake a discussion of these matters. But, Sir, it appears to me that one can do it, with some accuracy, and with far less effort. For that, one need only have some idea of truth, of justice, of order, of eternal wisdom. Not an idiosyncratic and *homespun* idea, but an idea that one finds ready-made and which presents itself spontaneously, when one wishes to distance oneself somewhat from sense impressions and recoil into oneself; in short, an idea similar to that which, according to Saint Augustine, is common to all who know how to think, and even to the impious.[7]

Over the rest of his second letter, the Benedictine reiterates the point that God is indeed knowable enough by reason for us to deduce those consequences that his reader suggests are inscrutable.

Yet it is on this very point that their correspondence takes a decisive turn: in his third letter (Letter V), Saint-Laurens rejects the validity of these arguments. Heretofore it had seemed to Lamy that Saint-Laurens was a good-faith Christian seeking *by rational means* to attain the truth and secure a strong enough proof to refute the free-thinkers. But suddenly, quite a contrary prospect emerges: namely, that Saint-Laurens

[7] Letter IV, pp. 66–67.

himself may be on the side of the free-thinkers and sceptics, perhaps even without knowing it, and that his own arguments are therefore the ones that Lamy should aim at defeating. To be more precise, Lamy now thinks that Saint-Laurens is a *fideist*.

2 (Letters V to X): The Debate Over the Relationship of Faith and Reason, and Over What One Can Know of the Attributes of God. Saint-Laurens the Fideist

In his third letter to the aging Benedictine, dated 8 September 1708, Jean-François de Saint-Laurens begins shedding some of the deference and reserve that had previously characterized his writing. The core of his argument is that "knowing imperfectly, is not knowing at all,"[8] for the reason that "what we don't know of it [divine wisdom] is as much necessary to know as that which we do know."[9] Furthermore, what we do know is finite, unlike what we do not know, which is infinite. From these statements, which are already scandalous enough, Saint-Laurens can then move to a conclusion that is even more so – or at least scandalous to a convinced Cartesian rationalist like François Lamy, whose entire life's work had been nothing less than to secure the rational proofs behind Christianity's greatest truths. He sees Saint-Laurens's conclusion as an outright profession of Fideism: reason is useless for any knowledge of God, for only revelation can provide it.

> In order to refute the proofs, derived from God's actions, that our souls are immortal, I build on this principle: that of God's paths, we only know those which *he has explicitly revealed* to us, and consequently it is only in the certainty and obscurity of faith[10] that one must endeavour to discover them.[11]

Later in the same letter, Saint-Laurens insists: "I think I see clearly that God's wisdom cannot be the measure of our judgements, since that measure is not within our reach."[12]

Who, then, is this young man, and what are his immediate influences? One possibility that comes immediately to mind is Pierre Bayle; so too does Jansenism, which was particularly well established in Toulouse, the city where Saint-Laurens was born and educated. We know nothing of his masters, yet it is certain that he had at least digested some Pascal, whom he cites in a later letter in which he tilts toward Scepticism.[13] He thinks that reason and faith belong to separate realms, and that reason must here give way to faith, his brand of faith being an austere and demanding one. A Jansenist influence seems all the more likely when, still later, Saint-Laurens

[8] *Ibid*., p. 73.

[9] *Ibid*., p. 72.

[10] The paradoxical association of the terms "certainty" and "obscurity" with regard to faith, so typical of the fideist position, is especially remarkable here.

[11] Letter V, p. 73.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 74.

[13] Letter XIII, p. 188. Cf. *infra*.

reveals that he has followed the dispute between Arnauld and Malebranche over the nature of ideas.[14] As Lamy perceptively remarks in reply, Saint-Laurens seems inclined to take the side of Arnauld, which the convinced Malebranchian cannot condone.

As for the shocking statement that "we can only be daring [téméraires] when we hold the immortality of our souls on the basis of the knowledge that we claim to have of the Divinity's attributes," to this Lamy must reply:

> I am surprised that, with your extraordinary penetration of mind, you scarcely foresaw the strange and terrible repercussions that it can have, that you had no fear of attempting to prove it. Alas, Sir, where would we be if what you put forth were true? (…) That's it: we have fallen into the abyss of darkness and into the pernicious maze of Pyrrhonism.[15]

Such is what Lamy raises to frighten Saint-Laurens: the spectre of Pyrrhonism. In what verges on caricature, he uses a slippery slope argument to refute it and thus lays out, one by one, every dire consequence that inevitably follows from denying that one can know enough of God to understand his will and law. In short: "There are no more irrefutable principles; one can no longer find sure ground upon which to tread. Inevitably, we fall into the most extravagant skepticism, and consequently, into atheism."[16] This highly detailed letter, Lamy's longest one yet, is written in an effort to show his reader that without reason there can be no salvation – nor even, for that matter, any faith, for a faith without a rational basis is a faith without sense, and one which, easily shaken, exposes itself to the worst dangers. "Reason must assure you, with the uttermost certainty, that what God has revealed and witnessed cannot be wrong, for if you waver, even just slightly, on this point, your faith cannot be certain."[17]

For Lamy, faith absolutely must conform to reason, for otherwise it is weak, and then morality, religion, and society itself are weakened too. "I dare say, the contrary principle, which you do not hesitate to embrace, represents the overthrow of all morality and of all certain knowledge, in whatever form it may be, for it saps the ground of all rules."[18] What Saint-Laurens denies and Lamy defends is that, in order to secure all of these domains, it is not God that need be known completely, but merely what reason reveals to us and revelation confirms. Certainty is accessible on the basis of the ideas attainable by universal reason, for these, while perhaps not exhaustive and comprehensive, are perfectly *clear*.[19] Thus the immutable idea of divine law is discovered by reason, as is proven, says Lamy, by the fact that peoples and nations everywhere, even the Chinese, agree on numerous moral rules and principles, such as the golden rule, the pursuit of virtue, the importance of keeping one's word, and so on. It is in God that these precepts are seen, and anyone can see them clearly by the simple use of reason.

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[14] Cf. Letters XI and XII.

[15] Letter VI, pp. 78–79.

[16] *Ibid*., p. 79.

[17] *Ibid*., p. 80.

[18] *Ibid*., p. 89.

[19] Here Lamy explicitly distinguishes clear ideas, which suffice for truthful judgement, from comprehensive ones, which are beyond our powers as finite beings: cf. *ibid.*, p. 87.

Above all, Lamy aims to show that the separation between reason and faith that his epistolary correspondent would cleave can only lead to a descending spiral ending up in an undermining of faith itself. To counter that separation, Lamy uses two arguments. The first argument is the infinite regression that this separation produces with respect to the beholding of revelation, for revelation would then require someone who could verify the testimony on which it relies, and so on *ad infinitum*.[20] The second argument is that, in the absence of reason, the very existence of God is put to doubt, for there is no difference between denying that one understands God's divine wisdom and denying that one grasps God's infinity. As the latter is the source of all true demonstrations of his existence, however, faith appears to be purely arbitrary.[21]

A final round of arguments is then offered in Lamy's letter, which is so long that it almost amounts to a full-blown treatise. They centre on the question of the goal of Creation, and here, Lamy's impatience and frustration begin to show. His closing rebuke to Saint-Laurens is that his erroneous principles have got him adrift in the direction of *Spinozism*. Not only does his rejection of God's glory as the purpose of Creation have a Spinozist ring to it, but so too does another of his propositions (and it was Lamy himself, we must remember, who wrote *Le nouvel athéisme renversé*, the first real refutation of Spinoza in French, appearing in 1696 but written 10 years earlier[22]):

> *Its substance*, you add, *contains all that is possible*. Again, I agree, Sir, if (by that) you understand that it contains them fully; but I deny it, if you claim that they contain them formally: for this is Spinoza's impiety and extravagance.[23]

Finishing the letter with a demonstration of the slippery slope from Fideism to Scepticism, from Scepticism to Free-thought (the disavowal of morality), and then finally to Spinozism and materialism,[24] Lamy is satisfied that he has definitively refuted his interlocutor's fideist bent.

His satisfaction is to prove misplaced. In Letter VII, Saint-Laurens writes back that he does not deserve to be called a sceptic, a Pyrrhonist, a Spinozist, or an atheist (all of which Lamy had done), and that he finds such labels "odious."[25] He accuses Lamy of refuting arguments which he had never submitted (p. 112), and then, upon vowing not to write "a book rather than a letter" as his response (p. 113), returns to

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[20] Cf. *ibid*., p. 96.

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] On this refutation, see Christiane Hubert, *Les premières réfutations de Spinoza : Aubert de versé, Wittich, Lamy*, Paris, Presses de l'Université de la Sorbonne, 1994; and my own "L'argument du dessein divin dans les premières réfutations de Spinoza", *Dialogue*, vol. 50, n. 3, 2011, pp. 423–442.

[23] Letter VI, pp. 104–105. It is worth noting that Lamy adopts the very same approach in *Le nouvel athéisme renversé* to refute Spinoza's monist fundamentals, before proving how, on the basis of new premises (namely, divine purpose and a distinction between the two kinds of substance), all of morality and the entire Christian religion can be reconstructed rationally.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 106: "Most of these gentlemen, who vaunt their belief that creation is inscrutable and impossible, are obliged to say that thinking being, to wit, the better part of these men themselves, derives from matter."

[25] Letter VII, p. 111.

faith and the source of revelation as the issue deserving of more discussion. He rejects the contention, so central to Lamy's views, that reason might be of any help in matters of revelation, which would be, he argues, to make faith dependent on reason:

> Revelation is a fact, you will not disagree. And yet, eternal wisdom does not represent contingent truths, facts […]. It is thus just as useless for me to enquire within eternal wisdom whether God has revealed to us the articles of our faith than to enquire whether there was an Alexander in the world, since surely I will find neither one nor the other there […]. So, God's decree that certain truths be revealed to us is distinct from eternal wisdom; so I cannot see in this wisdom God's design in revealing these truths to us, nor revelation itself.[26]

As far as Saint-Laurens is concerned, reason is useless in such matters, for revelation is a "fact" – a point that Lamy himself will effectively endorse in his reply (and indeed also in his *L'incrédule amené à la religion*, the work he was composing at the same time as these letters).[27] Interestingly, Saint-Laurens seems to deduce from the historical-factual aspect of revealed truths a contingent and non-eternal character to all divine action, and, *a fortiori*, to God's own will. The argument he puts forward entails, on the one hand, accepting the existence of an eternal wisdom that contains "immutable truths" accessible to anyone by reason – which allows him to accept the authority of Augustine, as well as Lamy's claim about a universal recognition of morality[28] – while, on the other hand, rejecting that such wisdom tells us anything of God's designs and decrees.

He raises the stakes still higher by saying that if God's plans were really knowable, this would put us at a loss to explain the many theological disputes that have occurred throughout history, not only between different cultures, but within Christianity itself. In sum, we do indeed know by rational means that God exists, since we know that he is infinitely perfect, says Saint-Laurens in response to another of Lamy's rebuttals – here Saint-Laurens feigns to accept the ontological argument – yet such knowledge is hollow and merely formal, for we can say nothing about such "perfection" with any precision. True, this idea of the perfection of God does tell us that God is just and good, but he wonders, "In what does this justice, this goodness, consist? It is here that men divide into a thousand different sects, and it is here that the diversity of their opinions makes it impossible to believe that they have any true knowledge of these perfections."[29] Lamy, in his reply (Letter VIII), will be utterly horrified by this claim, reiterating that knowing less than everything about God is

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[26] *Ibid.*, pp. 113–115.

[27] Cf. *L'incrédule amené à la religion*, "Seventh dialogue," pp. 260 and 275 *sq.* It should also be noted that the status of revelation as a "fact" is found in the entry on "Pyrrhonism" in Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique*.

[28] Cf. *Ibid*., p. 115. In truth, Saint-Laurens may here be disguising his thought for the sake of maintaining a measure of agreement. On the one hand, soon thereafter he goes back to saying that men are not really in agreement on how to interpret divine law (p. 117, cf. the quotation given subsequently in the text). On the other hand, in one of his last letters, he offers quite a different theory on the origin of social morality, saying that all laws stem from self-interest and the human passions (Letter XIII, pp. 185–187), which is a common thesis in free-thought.

[29] *Ibid*.

not knowing *nothing* about him, and that the denial of this principle leads straight into Scepticism and Free-thought.[30]

In the end, the issue at the core of Saint-Laurens's letter concerns what it is that lets us believe in revelation – and this, he must concede, is "a vexed question that you put to me, and that I often put to myself."[31] He turns to the example of the Jewish people and their faith in the miracles performed by Moses as being a sufficient basis for their religion.[32] Once that is in place, once faith is established in *that* God, it becomes mere logical necessity that God's word should accord with the truth:

> If he has wished that certain truths be known to us, and if he has wished to reveal them to us, it is clear that he has revealed them to us, that we know them, and that we are not mistaken: if we do not wish to fall into an obvious contradiction, we cannot gainsay this.[33]

Faith, then, secures itself without requiring reason, and Fideism is a faith that is certain and true. And there is no need to know the attributes of God, nor to venture beyond the limits of the finite: Saint-Laurens closes his letter by concluding again that "It is even neither just nor correct to say anything about the infinite."[34] As we can see, their correspondence seems to be shifting from a discussion of faith to one of knowledge.

3 (Letters XI to XIV): The Debate Over the Value of Knowledge: Pyrrhonism at the Heart of the Debate

Letters IX and X are short and polite, as Saint-Laurens buys time with his counterpart and provides him an address to which to send his newly released *L'incrédule amené à la religion*, the last work that Lamy was to publish in his lifetime. Then, in a letter dated 21 January 1710, Saint-Laurens resumes their debate. He takes it beyond the question of faith and into that of knowledge and its limits, and he reiterates the impossibility of judging God or the infinite from the point of view of finitude. The two arguments he gives, and around which Lamy's response will crystallize, are the following:

> – "I judge one part of God's attributes, so I do not judge God's attributes, since one part of the thing is not the thing itself"[35]

> – "They [men passing judgment on anything whatsoever] do not examine the thing which is the object of their perception, for that thing is foreign to the mind, outside of it, and thus cannot fall under the mind's scrutiny, since the mind can only examine its own perceptions (…). I only know my perceptions."[36]

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[30] *Ibid*., p. 134.

[31] Letter VII, p. 118.

[32] *Ibid*., p. 119.

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 120.

[34] *Ibid*., p. 123

[35] Letter XI, p.141.

[36] *Ibid*., pp. 142–143.

This latter assertion pertains to the debate between Arnauld and Malebranche over the nature of ideas, which debate Saint-Laurens explicitly discusses, and from which he takes the conclusion that "Idea and perception are thus as different as night and day."[37] He ostensibly sides with Arnauld, restricting our mental events to perceptions, rather than with Malebranche, as Lamy does, who takes them to be "ideas." Indeed, the Malebranchian "vision in God" hypothesis states that such ideas correspond directly to the real entities of the world (direct realism), and that it is on their basis that we can directly see truths within God. Saint-Laurens eschews this hypothesis, and instead takes the position that all we have access to are *perceptions* of such entities. From there, and now even departing from Arnauld, he arrives at a fully relativist viewpoint on knowledge. A new side to Saint-Laurens is thus revealed with this letter, and hardly any doubt remains that he adheres to some form of Scepticism, albeit a form yet to be defined.

Lamy's reply (Letter XII) proves to be another long one, for he is not about to let either of these two arguments stand. But this time his letter has recourse to humour, for he feels as though he is now refuting propositions that are contrary to the most manifest of facts. He deals with the first argument by way of a simple analogy:

> I judge, you say, on the basis of one part of God's attributes, so I do not judge God's attributes. What an inference, Sir! Is it possible that it comes from you? The latter is just as true: I take a portion of your money, so I do not take your money. Consider, Sir, whether, in your eyes, the actions of a man who picks pockets would be well justified through such reasoning.[38]

As for the second argument, not only does he criticize its usual lack of connecting logic between premise and conclusion, but he finds that it simply falls short of good sense.

> But again, Sir, by what logic do you then wish that we not judge the object, but only its perception? It is, you say, that *this thing is foreign to the mind, external to the mind.* Granted, I agree. So, you say, it cannot fall under the mind's scrutiny. What is the logical link, Sir, and into what other dreadful consequences does it not plunge us? […] Sir, you never tire of repeating the same Pyrrhonian sentiment. You elaborate on it extensively and from every angle, for fear that it will be misconstrued […] Pray do not ask me whether the wind can upset the bell towers; whether fire can burn buildings; whether frost can make trees die. To compel me to judge these things is to set pitfalls of error before me.[39]

Lamy has now brought to light the Pyrrhonism inherent to these arguments, and Saint-Laurens can no longer try to hide it. In addition, to refute the relativity and subjectivity of knowledge alleged by his epistolary adversary, Lamy does the same thing that everyone of his century did: he appeals to common sense, to the evidence of practical life – and in doing so, he implicitly accuses those who pretend to sincerely subscribe to sceptic principles of being nothing less than incoherent.

Saint-Laurens's response, dated 22 April 1710 (Letter XIII), is not only his longest, but certainly also his most revealing, for it includes some new and rather

[37] *Ibid*., p. 143.

[38] Letter XII, p. 152.

[39] *Ibid.*, pp. 164–165.

surprising aspects of his thought. In it, he gets caught up on Lamy's previous three letters (Letters VI, X, and XII), mentioning that the lattermost of these had arrived while he was responding to letters VI and X. What he takes issue with especially is Lamy's method of argumentation, his focusing on an idea's "fatal consequences," and rejects that a principle can be refuted on the mere basis of its consequences[40] (recall the slippery slope arguments used by Lamy from the onset of their correspondence). Having set down this criticism, he treats himself as absolved of having to defend his Scepticism any further against the charge of its being untenable; it is rather his *principles* that he invites Lamy to refute – and not just through mockery and flashes of humour[41]: "I ask you, in a second instance, are your inferences correct? Are they not? If they are not, why then do you advance them? If they are, they lead to Pyrrhonism; I will thus be Pyrrhonian until such time as you demonstrate the falsity of the principles that serve as their ground."[42] He then endorses a probabilist attitude as being the one best suited to practical life.[43] It is not because one does not "understand" something – Creation, for example – that one should not believe in it. Moreover, a reasoned belief is good enough for living and acting normally, for it is, in fact, all we can ever have. It is here that Saint-Laurens cites Pascal, who claims in fragment 72 of Brunschvicg that there is an infinite regression of causes in the universe, and that the intermingling of all causes makes it impossible for us to know anything exhaustively or completely.[44]

Finally, Letter XIII introduces two more previously unseen positions held by Saint-Laurens. In particular, he revisits the question of morality and how religion and morality are the bedrocks of social stability, and gives an unexpected opinion on it. Had Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* been published by then, we might suspect that it had influenced Saint-Laurens, but such was obviously not the case. So to find the roots of the ideas that Saint-Laurens develops over nearly two pages of Letter XIII, we might look either to clandestine manuscripts, or to Hobbes or Spinoza, who, as is well known, were also great sources of inspiration for the free-thinkers of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Indeed, both had insisted that the true grounds of morality are the human passions, and that religion is a device contrived by society to control such passions and ensure the greatest satisfaction for the greatest number.

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[40] Letter XIII, pp. 178–179 : "Allow me, Reverend Father, to show you now that one can never prove nor refute, in a metaphysical way, any proposition, by drawing on its consequences […], and what I will say will convince you perhaps that your proofs are not as decisive as you thought."

[41] *Ibid*., p. 184 : "For the rest, Reverend Father, the mockery and ridicule which you have levelled at my reasoning will not provoke indecent reactions in me. I know that a certain decorum behooves philosophers."

[42] *Ibid*., p. 179. As Plinío Junquiera Smith rightly pointed out to me, this quotation does not absolutely prove that Saint-Laurens considers himself a sceptic; it may merely be an exhortation to Lamy that he debate principles rather than consequences.

[43] In the seventeenth century, the term "Pyrrhonism" had come to replace "Scepticism" in its broad sense. If Saint-Laurens was indeed a sceptic, it must rather have been in the fashion of the Academic sceptics, who were effectively probabilists (as distinguished from the Pyrrhonists in the strict sense).

[44] Letter XIII, p. 188.

One of the more surprising statements to run from Saint-Laurens's pen is that "Religion [is] but the measure of our faith and of our moral conduct",[45] or again that:

> When one does not have the joy of knowing our holy religion, the best morality is one that enables, one that even counsels, ruthless adherence to the torrent of one's passions. Correct reasoning leads straight into libertinism; [but] the pagan sects that yielded most to pleasure were the most reasonable.[46]

The pursuit of pleasure, far from being wrong, is the source of all virtue; the passions, and self-love above all, bring men to find consensus on whatever fundamental principles will guarantee the integrity of the social fabric. Saint-Laurens continues in this vein:

> I deny that certain and obvious knowledge is necessary for preserving society. Society is only sustained by the means of self-love.[47] The beautiful order that we admire in civilized governments is its work; it is only because men love themselves that they make laws, that they obey, that they exchange mutual favours, that they subject themselves to endless exertions, that they risk their life and their liberty, etc. Self-love, which is thus the principle of everything, is ambition in some, interest in others, and love of pleasure, one might say, in all.[48]

Such theses were held by the free-thinkers, and are likewise to be found in Hobbes and Spinoza. So who, then, is Saint-Laurens? He has gone from being a fideist to a sceptic, and from a sceptic to something not far from a free-thinker. All three positions, in fact, are interwoven in his thought – just as, one may argue, they were in Bayle too:

> Passions may well be subject to other passions, but they will never be subject to reason, save through the grace of Jesus Christ [fideist position]. That there may then be certain and obvious knowledge, that there may be none, that is of no consequence to society, I mean to society construed concretely. Were the whole world to become Pyrrhonian, passions would persist as always, and the world would remain unchanged [sceptic and free-thinking positions].[49]

Thus it is self-love which is the basis for society, morality, religion, and all human laws. Saint-Laurens does leave room for revelation and holy grace to act upon the passions: only a passion, not reason, may speak to a passion. Moreover, the limits inherent to knowledge make it pointless to wonder if our human laws correspond to divine ones. He wraps up his point with a statement that is close to Free-thought or Radical Enlightenment: "Chance, which is nothing other than an unknown order, chance, I say, determines almost everything in the world, and uncertainty governs almost everything."[50] In a nutshell, Saint-Laurens refutes the rationality of morality, religion, and even the idea of divine providence: not only does this amount to saying that we *know* nothing of a divine plan, but he is not far from saying that there *is* no such thing at all.

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[45] *Ibid*., pp. 184–185.

[46] *Ibid*., p. 185.

[47] Such is how Saint-Laurens refutes the claim of universal moral consent made by Lamy as a proof that peoples everywhere access the rules of divine justice by way of their reason.

[48] Letter XIII, p. 186.

[49] *Ibid.*, pp. 186–187.

[50] *Ibid*., p. 187.

In fact, in Letter XIII there is a complete turning of the tables, one with the effect of a true *coup de théâtre*. Saint-Laurens takes Lamy's accusation that he holds sceptic principles and throws it back at him:

> I do not know, Reverend Father, whether you see that your arguments cannot succeed as you expected, and that the only honour one can grant them is to say that their logic yields to Pyrrhonism.[51]

It is a charge he repeats at the very end of the letter: "It is time to close; I will not enter into the question of ideas, and in proving to you that your principles favour Pyrrhonism more than mine do – I will not engage in this riposte, however natural it may be."[52]

Lamy's recommendation in Letter XIV is now that they adjourn the debate, the truth seeming to him to have now fallen out of sight; thus Saint-Laurens will never pay him the further insult of expanding on his latest charge. But no doubt it was Lamy's belief in occasionalism and the vision-in-God thesis that Saint-Laurens had in mind, for by making God a necessary intermediary in all perception, Malebranche (and subsequently, Lamy) had set up the possibility that one's spirit and the spirit of God are all that exist. Elsewhere in his writings, notably in his *Preuve de l'existence des corps* (not published until the nineteenth century),[53] Lamy defended his philosophy against its leading to the same unfortunate problems as plagued Malebranche's philosophy. Nevertheless, they are evident in his own work too.

So the question remains: Who is Saint-Laurens? If he is a sceptic, what does he know of Scepticism, and is he a sceptic consciously, by choice? Who are his sources, his influences?

Here, as a conclusion, I wish to suggest that, being young, Saint-Laurens was still fluid in his convictions, but that his correspondence with Lamy hardened them. An evolution of style is indeed visible in his writing: behind the pen, a man was gradually affirming himself. He certainly began more or less as a fideist, but *over the course* of the correspondence, I would say that he turned into a self-conscious Sceptic. He was also quite well informed of the Spinoza-inspired writings of free-thinkers from the turn of the century, and his correspondence with Lamy must have allowed him to adopt their principles as his own, testing them against whatever rationalist scruples his own Christian conscience may still have held.

Having said this, there remains an ambiguity to Saint-Laurens's position right through to the end. In Letter XIII, i.e., his longest and surely his most daring dispatch (with its developments concerning morality and the accusation turned back against Lamy), he states in a somewhat surprising way that he does not consider himself a Pyrrhonist:

> Pyrrhonism excludes all certain and obvious knowledge; if I show in my principles that it is necessary to have an infinitude of certain and obvious knowledge, my principles do not establish Pyrrhonism. That, I believe, is irrefutable. You will find nothing in my principles that shakes the certainty we harbour of our mind's existence.[54]

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[51] *Ibid*., p. 179.

[52] *Ibid*., p. 193.

[53] It was published by Henry, and re-edited by Maria Grazia Zaccone Sina as an appendix to her edition of *La Relligion defenduë par la Raison*, *op. cit.*, pp. 261–266.

[54] Letter XIII, pp. 191–192.

Is it possible that Saint-Laurens understood Pyrrhonism radically and excessively as a negation of *all* certainty – even the certainty of thinking, even of existing? Well, very unlikely – my view on this would rather be that Saint-Laurens's defense here is strictly rhetorical, and that he thought it was *Lamy* who held this caricatural notion of Pyrrhonism. Yet, it remains the case that a certain ambiguity persists here, one that suggests that Lamy was indeed the one who taught Saint-Laurens that his true position went by the name of "Pyrrhonism." In my view, the young Saint-Laurens seemed truly eager to know the truth. Already convinced about the limits of reason in religious matters, he may have initially used Scepticism as a mere methodological tool for attaining faith, a faith thus purified of all rationalism (hence, he was probably already a fideist). Yet, his skepticism must have expanded itself in the course of his reflection. Furthermore, his positions are clearly similar to those of a free-thinker toward the end of his correspondence, particularly about the questions of morality and religion, so it makes no doubt that he had already read some of these writings before. I would personally tend to think that although he was probably initially scared about the attraction exerted on him by these writings, the correspondence he held with Lamy confirmed Saint-Laurens in his positions, and made him finally endorse fully a mixture of Scepticism and Free-thought.

Finally, beyond what it tells us about these two men, this correspondence serves as a unique document for exploring and understanding a moment of radical transition, and the suffocation of rationalism.[55] In the end, the true loser of this debate is not just Lamy, but the seventeenth century's mode of thinking as a whole. Not just Saint-Laurens would draw the consequences: the Enlightenment as a whole would follow suit.

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[55] A point highlighted as well by Richard Watson, for example, in *The Downfall of Cartesianism, 1673–1712. A Study of Epistemological Issues in Late 17th Century Cartesianism,* The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1966.