

Above Reason Propositions and Contradiction in the Religious Thought of Robert Boyle

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ABSTRACT In this essay, I argue that Robert Boyle does not hold that true religion requires us to believe doctrines that are in violation of the law of noncontradiction or that it yields logical contradictions. Rather, due to the epistemological limitations of human reason, we are sometimes called to believe doctrines or propositions that are at first blush contradictory but, upon further inspection, not definitively so. This holds for doctrines considered singly or together and is an important qualifier to the traditional line of scholarship's flat claim that Boyle's limits of belief are logical contradictions. My conclusions here are at odds with Jan W. Wojcik's claim, in her important, revisionist work on the famous natural philosopher, that he teaches that sometimes we are required to believe religious doctrines that violate the law of noncontradiction.

KEYWORDS above reason; Boyle, Robert; law of noncontradiction; natural philosophy; propositions; reason; religious epistemology; Wojcik, Jan W.

Robert Boyle is consistently and rightly framed as one who was notably concerned with the proper use of reason in natural philosophy and theology and drew attention to its epistemological limitations.¹ He has various essays where he describes and delineates the different kinds of propositions and doctrines that can appropriately be labeled "above reason."² Interest in the precise nature of this relationship of reason, understanding, and revelation in the thought of Boyle has been renewed in recent generations. The general consensus has been that Boyle permits things that are beyond our natural reasoning capacities in religion, in a variety of ways, but that he never admits that we should accept logical contradictions. Such notable claimants are Louis Trenchard More, Mitchell Salem Fisher, James O'Higgins, John Redwood, and Lotte Mulligan, just to name

a few.³ More recently, Jan W. Wojcik, in *Robert Boyle and the Limits of Reason*, argues that Boyle maintains that there are logical contradictions, or rather, violations to the law of noncontradiction, that we find in theology with respect to the human understanding but not with respect to the divine understanding. While commending Fisher and Mulligan for their incisive observations and in depth treatments of Boyle's writings on things that are above reason, she points out that *An Appendix to the First Part of the Christian Virtuoso* (ACV), the definitive source for both Fisher's and Mulligan's claims regarding Boyle's thoughts on contradictions, is not to be trusted. She points out that the ACV was not prepared by Boyle for publication and that

[c]learly, passages from the *Appendix* [ACV] dealing with reason's limits or competence should be cited only when they agree with Boyle's views as expressed elsewhere, especially in light of the fact that he published a sustained discussion of his views on reason's limits [in *Reflections upon a Theological Distinction*] only a year before his death.⁴

In what follows, I will argue that Robert Boyle does not hold that true religion yields logical contradictions or impossibilities. Rather Scripture and theology help to correct our so-called logic and that one needs to be wary of dismissing any doctrines considered singly or together that appear, at first blush, to be logically impossible but are not, upon further inspection, definitively so. Sometimes we are called to believe such doctrines. This argument is, thus, in opposition to Wojcik's revisionist assessment of Boyle

1. Cf. e.g., Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 5 (New York: Image Books, 1994), 143–47; G. A. J. Rogers, "Boyle, Locke, and Reason," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27, no. 2 (1966): 205–16.

2. All of the writings of Robert Boyle referenced in this article will be parenthetically referenced in the main text using an abbreviation system that is indicated in the bibliography. Moreover, *RTD*, the piece of Boyle's writings primarily explored here, was published along with *CV* in 1690. Though published together, the pagination starts anew at the beginning of *RTD*. Also, I am following Jan W. Wojcik, referenced below, in her use of the Thomas Birch edition of Boyle's collected works (*WRB*). Each time a writing from *WRB* is referenced, I will provide the abbreviation for that particular work followed by the volume and page numbers. I will do this for writings other than *RTD*. Since *RTD* is abundantly quoted in the main text, I have decided to replicate the quotations from the 1690 *RTD* since some might enjoy the more artful style found in that edition, namely the abundant use of capitals and italics. Also, some prefer versions of writings published in the lifetime of the thinker in question. And, as time goes on, "non-Works" editions of thinkers' writings are becoming increasingly accessible. So, for *RTD*, I will reference the pagination of both the 1690 and *WRB* edition, putting that of the *WRB* in brackets.

and in the same vein of the traditional line of Boyle scholarship, but with an important qualifier: Boyle's limits of belief are logical contradictions, as they flatly say, but within those limits of acceptable beliefs are doctrines that initially appear contradictory but are not definitively so.

ROBERT BOYLE'S TAXONOMY OF ABOVE REASON PROPOSITIONS

As noted above, *Reflections upon a Theological Distinction* (RTD) is Boyle's final publication wherein he promulgates his views on doctrines that he nominates "above reason." He opens the work noting that some have attempted to defend particular mysteries of the Christian religion by claiming that they are above reason but not against it. Boyle suggests that the distinction has not been employed with sufficient clarity by Christian thinkers so as to keep heretics from using the same distinction in defense of their doctrines or from appearing that they are simply evading the real issue. He offers the following assessment of the situation: "there are *divers* that employ this Distinction, *few* that have attempted to explain it, (and that I fear, not sufficiently) and *none* that has taken care to justify it." His goal for the work is two-fold: 1) to explain in what sense the distinction—above but not contrary to reason—is to be understood; and 2) to prove that it is not an arbitrary or illusory distinction (RTD, 1–2 [5.541–42]).⁵

3. Louis Trenchard More, *The Life and Works of the Honourable Robert Boyle* (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), 168, 185; Mitchell Salem Fisher, *Robert Boyle, Devout Naturalist: A Study in Science and Religion in the Seventeenth Century* (Philadelphia: Oshiver Studio Press, 1945), 126–38; James O'Higgins, *Anthony Collins: The Man and His Works* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1970), 56–57; John Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule and Religion: The Age of Enlightenment in England, 1660–1750* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1996), 210. Redwood's treatment of Boyle is not lengthy, but he does seem to hold the traditional position by virtue of his claim that in Boyle's distinction of above reason things and those that are contrary to reason he was "denying value to contradiction, but bolstering faith through admitting that some things were truly above men's comprehension." Lotte Mulligan, "Robert Boyle, 'Right Reason,' and the Meaning of Metaphor," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 55, no. 2 (1994): 235–57. Mulligan's thesis is building upon the work of John Spurr. Spurr rightly makes the argument that we overlook the various senses of the term reason to our detriment in our attempts to understand the narrative of rational religion in restoration England. John Spurr, "'Rational Religion' in Restoration England," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 49, no. 4 (1988): 563–85.

4. Jan W. Wojcik, *Robert Boyle and the Limits of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 106. See also xi, 100, 102, 105–108, 213, cf. 34.

5. Note that in his theological discussions in RTD, doctrines, propositions, articles, truths, and notions can be interchangeable terms.

As one might expect from an incisive, methodological scholar like Boyle, he defines his terms up front:

By such things then in Theology, as may be said to be *above Reason*, I conceive such Notions and Propositions, as mere Reason, that is, Reason unassisted by supernatural Revelation, would never have discover'd to us: Whether those things be to our finite Capacities, clearly comprehensible or not. And by things *contrary to Reason*, I understand such Conceptions and Propositions, as are not only undiscoverable by mere Reason, but also, when we understand them, do evidently and truly appear to be repugnant to some Principle, or to some Conclusion, of Right Reason. (RTD, 3 [5.542])

In other words, things that are above reason are simply things that we would not have found out through our own thinking and investigations. Supernatural revelation was needed to assist our natural reason. What is more, these things may be difficult to comprehend. Contrary to reason things can also be ponderous but with the added qualification that they oppose a conclusion of our mere natural reason supplemented with supernatural revelation, or "Right Reason."⁶

Boyle's distinctions and corresponding descriptions do not end there. He posits two families of above reason propositions: "For it seems to me, that there are some Things, that Reason by its own Light cannot *Discover*; and others, that, when propos'd, it cannot *Comprehend*" (RTD, 5–6 [5.542]). This first division of above reason things depends mostly on the free will and ordination of God such as the six day creation, the virgin birth, the hypostatic union, and the resurrection and glorification of good men. Boyle likens such revealed theological truths to those astronomic truths in natural philosophy we would see and readily grasp if we had telescopes. In other words, these things are easily comprehended when shown, but they were just "too remote, and hidden, to be *Detected* by Human Reason" (RTD, 6–7 [5.543]).

6. Boyle's distinction between reason unassisted by divine revelation and "Right Reason" yields an equivocation in the label "above but not contrary to reason." That is, a doctrine labeled as such is above mere human reason but not contrary to reason assisted with divine revelation or Right Reason. Regarding this, a few things should be noted in Boyle's defense. First, these are terms already being employed in the era to describe propositions and doctrines. He is just doing his best to delineate how we should be employing them. Second, I will be pointing out that Boyle acknowledges that these labels are liable to misunderstanding. For instance, Boyle asserts that above reason things are not really completely above or beyond our reasoning faculties. Otherwise we could not notice or say anything about them.

While Boyle groups all revealed theological propositions or doctrines that do not offer us much of a conceptual problem, despite the fact we would not have discovered them without divine revelation, as above reason doctrines that are comprehensible or sufficiently conceivable, he delineates three types of above reason subcategories that are in some manner significantly incomprehensible or not fully conceivable. There are those things that are: (1) “not clearly *conceivable* by our Understanding, such as the Infiniteness and Perfections of the Divine Nature”; (2) “*inexplicable* by us, such as the Manner, how God can create a rational Soul,” or how the soul acts on the material body; and (3) “*asymmetrical*, or unsociable; that is, such, as we see not how to reconcile with other Things, which also manifestly are, or are by us acknowledged to be, true; such as the Divine Pre-science of future Contingents, and the Liberty that belongs to Man’s Will.” Furthermore, within each type of incomprehensible propositions there are varying degrees of abstruseness (*RTD*, 8–9 [5.543]).

What Boyle is envisioning and laboring to describe is rather helpful. The first type of somewhat incomprehensible or difficult to conceive doctrines or propositions is simply that which we have an idea or mental representation of, although it would be said to have hazy boundaries or aspects. To that effect, Boyle notes that when we say that something surpasses our reason that is not technically accurate: “Since we pretend to exercise an act of the Understanding, in embracing somewhat that we do not understand, nor have a Notion of” (*RTD*, 11 [5.544]). In other words, we would not have any idea of something that actually surpasses our reason in all of its respects. Rather these things that he calls incomprehensible and above reason are sufficiently understood or mentally envisioned because we can distinguish them from other things (*RTD*, 13 [5.544]).

For if there be so much as *one* Truth, which is acknowledg’d to be such, and yet not to be clearly and distinctly comprehensible, it cannot justly be pretended, that to make use of the Distinction [above reason but not contrary to it] we are treating of, is to say something, that is not intelligible, or is absurd. (*RTD*, 13–14 [5.544])⁷

And if the reasoning prevailed that we should dismiss any so-called incomprehensible notion because it is not fully graspable by the understanding,

7. Inserting a semicolon instead of a comma between “is to say something” and the clause “that is not intelligible” clarifies the sentence and makes it easier for the present-day English reader to understand.

we would have to rid ourselves of the notions of time and space, and other such familiar ideas, which, when contemplated, lead us into “Inextricable Difficulties, if not flat Repugnancies.”⁸

The second type of incomprehensible propositions is just as easily accounted for. Whereas the propositions within the first type are claims being made that invite the hearer to simply create a mental picture, which will inevitably be lacking in some way, the propositions and doctrines of the second do the same but turn one’s focus to the how or by what means question corresponding to their claims. For instance, I can imagine in my mind that God is creating the universe. Stars and worlds are popping out of nowhere into existence in my imagination. I can imagine that God is creating (the first type) but I cannot imagine or envision the mode or the manner. Likewise, I can imagine that a translucent ghost is moving a material substance but I do not know how that which is immaterial moves that which is material. Moreover, if anyone were to bring into question the legitimacy of envisioning immaterial bodies with mental representations that are rooted in our observations that come from the material realm, I have some guess as to what Boyle might say. He would likely argue that if the aforementioned representations were illegitimate, we would have no business discoursing over ideas like energy or picturing corpuscles which we cannot see, or, perhaps, even accepting someone’s account of an occurrence that we did not see, like Caesar crossing the Rubicon. In short, we are frequently thinking via analogy and representative substitution.

The third type of incomprehensible thing is often the most perplexing. The example he uses, again, is the fact that God knows all future contingents and that humans have freedom of choice. In short, this is an example of two assertions that Christians (often) conclude to be true but do not know how both can be true. And while he makes a tripartite distinction regarding incomprehensible above reason things, as just outlined, there is no reason that these three subcategories are mutually exclusive:

[W]e may speak of some Things that we acknowledge to be on some account or other above our Reason; since the Notions we may have of those Things, however dim and imperfect, may yet be of use, and may be in some measure intelligible, tho the Things they relate to, may, in another respect, be said to transcend our Understanding. (*RTD*, 13 [5.544])

Again, if we are to scruple, these things that we call above reason are actu-

8. *RTD*, 10 [5.543]; cf. 11, 12 [5.544].

ally not beyond the grasp of our reason in all their respects; if they were, we could not observe or notice anything about them, let alone make distinctions between them and other things.

Nearly half way through *RTD* he starts the second part of his argument, that above reason is not an arbitrary distinction, nor impertinent, “but grounded on the Nature of Things” (*RTD*, 14 [5.544]). Regarding those things that are sufficiently graspable to the point that we do not deem them incomprehensible, Boyle remarks

’twould be a great Unhappiness to Mankind, if we were obliged to reject, as repugnant to Reason, whatever we cannot discover by our own natural Light; and consequently, to deny our selves the great Benefits we may receive from the Communications of any higher and more discerning Intellect. (*RTD*, 15 [5.545])

He adds that to declare such a proposition or notion to be contrary to reason is arbitrary because its characteristic of not being discoverable by certain beings is accidental and external to the truth or falsity of the proposition (*RTD*, 16 [5.545], 24–25 [5.547]). Among his analogous examples from natural philosophy, he also points out that many so-called mysteries in the New Testament are not mysteries at all because they are now sufficiently revealed: calling of the Gentiles into the church, the resurrection, and human glorification (*RTD*, 17–19 [5.545–46]). In fact, calling these things contrary to reason is further off the mark because often times these revealed truths improve or complete a formerly imperfect notion or idea. In other words, revelation often illuminates previously held concepts by filling in their gaps or offering us new pieces of their conceptual puzzles that fit nicely into place (*RTD*, 17, 19–20 [5.545–46]).

In addition, just as some things’ characteristics of being not discoverable to humans is accidental and external to the falsity and truth of the proposition, so is the relative incomprehensibility of a doctrine. Since angels and God are of a higher order, they have a higher intellect.

This being supposed, it ought not to be denied, that a Superior Intellect may both comprehend several Things that we cannot; and discern such of them to be congruous to the fixt and eternal *Idea*’s [sic] of Truth, and consequently agreeable to one another, as dim-sighted Mortals are apt to suspect, or to think, to be separately False; or, when collated, Inconsistent with one another. (*RTD*, 25 [5.547])

So regarding things above reason in the incomprehensible sense, “it is no way impossible, that even such an one should be true, as is obnoxious to Objections not directly answerable” (*RTD*, 25 [5.547]). In other words, simply because one cannot answer all objections to a particular doctrine or proposition is no reason to discard it.

BOYLE AND THE LAW OF NONCONTRADICTION

The following passage, which comes directly after the last passage from *RTD* above, is an example of those excerpts from Boyle whose interpretations are now open to debate since the publishing of Wojcik’s work:

For I consider, that of Things *above Reason*, there may be some which are really *contradictory* to one another, and yet each of them is maintainable by such Arguments, as very Learned and Subtle Men do both Acquiesce in, and Enforce, by loading the Embracers of the opposite Opinion, with Objections they cannot directly answer. (*RTD*, 25–26 [5.547])

Boyle offers an analogous example from natural philosophy of such instances, namely the enduring discussion over the divisibility of quantity. Each side can weigh the other down with unanswerable objections. Even the natural theology that the Christian tradition affirms, Boyle remarks, is filled with such truths—such as immaterial substances, immaterial substances that give motion to bodies, and various attributes of God—which were “discovered by the mere Light of Nature” but are, nevertheless, “liable to such Objections from Physical Principles, and the settled [sic] order of Things corporeal” (*RTD*, 27–29 [5.548]).

By virtue of what comes after the now questioned passage, wherein Boyle calls some things “really contradictory,” one would most likely tend to read him as conveying that some things are really difficult to reconcile, such as God’s prescience of future contingents and human free choice, but that does not mean that we must dismiss one or both doctrines. He says as much in other places, such as the following:

[I]t is reasonable to suppose, that some things may be irreconcilable in our understanding, that are not so in God’s.

For I have more than once observed, that as there are some contradictions, that appear plainly to be such, by a clear and direct view of the rational faculty, so there are others (though not so many) whose contrariety, though it be thought manifest of itself, yet really, as it stands in our judgment, is

a work or effect of the rational faculty; not as it is barely apprehensive, but as it is discussive. For sometimes in framing a judgment, that certain things are contradictory, we make a supposition, or an inference, or perhaps both, though because we are wont to pass judgments in the like cases very easily, and without hesitancy, we are not usually aware, that we do so, but presume, that our judgment is grounded upon a clear view of a manifest repugnancy between the things collated. Now it is very possible, that the supposition or the illation, that we make use of in judging two things to be contradictory, may be erroneous, and that an intellect, that has far more light and penetration than ours, may discern the weakness in the grounds of our judgment, that we did not suspect. (*ACV*, 6.710–11)

This excerpt from *ACV* comports with the interpretation I offered above of the passage from *RTD*. That is, we ought to be cautious in dismissing doctrines that appear to be contradictory but are not definitively so in relationship to better assured and known doctrines or propositions. Wojcik dismisses *ACV* as suspect, thinking it either not from the hand of Boyle or not his mature thought on the matter. Wojcik remarks, “Clearly, passages from the *Appendix* [*ACV*] dealing with reason’s limits or competence should be cited only when they agree with Boyles’s views as expressed elsewhere, especially in light of the fact that he published a sustained discussion of his views on reason’s limits only a year before his death”—that sustained discussion being, again, *RTD*.⁹ The problem with Wojcik’s assertion is that Boyle’s final sustained discourse on the limits of reason, the primary focus of our discussion thus far, does comport with *ACV*.

This is not, however, the extent of Wojcik’s defense of her reading of Boyle. She often appears to be arguing for the reading, given above, that Boyle refuses to dismiss a doctrine that is not definitively contradictory or one or both of a couple of propositions that are not definitively contradictory. If this were the case, then she would have a valid complaint against those like More, Fisher, Redwood, and Mulligan who flatly state that Boyle’s limits of reason and revelation are contradictions.¹⁰ But, her most evident argument is that humans are permitted, or perhaps even obligated, to believe doctrines that are in violation of the law of noncontradiction when considered singly or otherwise. In one place, she writes, “In *ordinary* cases, in which neither of two contrary propositions is revealed, the law of noncontradiction holds for human understanding; in

9. Wojcik, *Robert Boyle*, 106.

10. *Ibid.*

such cases, it is 'the usefulest *criterion* to discriminate between falsehood and truth.'¹¹ One problem with this assertion is that the passage she is quoting never mentions the law of noncontradiction. The criterion in the passage is: "that in cases within the jurisdiction of ordinary reason, the repugnancy of a proposition to any manifest truth ought to sway our judgments." To deny so, would deprive us of our most useful criterion (*AJT*, 4.466). In other words, practically speaking, in mundane matters a general repugnancy will usually suffice for the dismissal of some claim. The repugnancy is not necessarily an offense to the law of noncontradiction; it might only seem to be so. Curtly stated, Wojcik has not discovered evidence here that Boyle reserves the law of noncontradiction for only adjudications of non-revealed propositions. Later, in commenting on the so-called unsociable truths—the third type of incomprehensible above reason propositions—she notes that for Boyle these things are "above logic." She immediately qualifies this with, "Strictly speaking, Boyle avoided violating the law of noncontradiction by arguing that God, in his infinite wisdom, perceives the harmony among all truths." One might think that she is simply saying that the supernatural is not beholden to the principles of the natural world. She acknowledges that, but adds, "But when he went on to argue that some revelations (as understood by finite beings) actually *are* exempt even from the law of noncontradiction, he had in mind the theological controversies of the day."¹²

Perhaps the root of the difficulty in following Wojcik's reasoning lays in the looseness of the term "contradiction" from her point of view. She speaks of the law of noncontradiction that Aquinas adopted from Aristotle, even noting that for Aquinas, "he [God] is bound by the law of noncontradiction."¹³ She never articulates what she means by the law of noncontradiction but she likely has read *Considerations about the Reconcilability of Reason and Religion* (*CRR*), where Boyle repeats a version of the law of noncontradiction—"nihil potest simul esse et non esse" (nothing can simultaneously be and not be at the same time)—a general metaphysical axiom that Boyle claims "can never be other than true" (*CRR*, 4.182); and which, by the way, comports with *ACV*. Perhaps she is not intentionally contradicting herself but has been tripped up in an inadvertent and subtle equivocation of her own creation. That is, she is using the law of noncontradiction in two ways and does not realize it, such that in some places

11. *Ibid.*, 106–107.

12. *Ibid.*, 107–108.

13. *Ibid.*, 32.

she is positing a human logic whose pronouncements of “contradiction” are not deferential or subordinate to those pronouncements on the same score from the boundless and inerrant divine logic. In other words, what she is asserting is that in reality God is bound by the law of noncontradiction, objectively speaking—what I take various Boyle scholars to be asserting at times—but humans are not necessarily to be fettered to a law of noncontradiction wherein propositions or notions are contradictory if adjudicated to be such from a disparate human logic, specifically in matters of revelation and religion. In short, humans are permitted (perhaps even required) in some cases to believe in those things which are contradictions according to our human logic, since they may not be contradictions to God’s perfect logic. But, this is not what Boyle was saying above in *RTD* and elsewhere; again, he is heeding that the reader should be wary of dismissing any doctrine that appears, at first blush, to be logically impossible but not definitively so. If Wojcik’s reading of Boyle prevailed it would unravel his entire defense of the distinction of things above reason but not contrary to it, especially regarding unsociable things, that it is not an arbitrary or illusory distinction. Anything would go in Boyle’s theology since the discriminatory powers of human reason would be rendered useless.

Wojcik’s conclusions, although inaccurate and evidently based upon an equivocation, could make sense of some of what she says at other times in her treatment of Boyle. For instance, she claims that Boyle did not, like the Socinians, insist “that scripture must be interpreted in such a way that the *content* of revelation must be consonant with human reason.”¹⁴ In light of the above discussion, she could be saying that Boyle would allow readings of Scripture that are logically contradictory. This is not what Boyle says elsewhere, however. When discussing apparent contradictions between passages of Scripture he notes that perhaps only when we believe that Scripture is divinely inspired that we can actually start to approach passages as being reconcilable (*SCT*, 2.281–83). Only one with a mind and will committed to the divinity of Scripture will exposit it as if it were from God and not a book with definitive contradictions. Again, his point is not that he concedes that we are permitted to believe logical contradictions, or propositions that violate the law of noncontradiction in religion, but rather we are permitted, or even required, to believe propositions which are not definitively in violation of the law of noncontradiction. Wojcik is

14. *Ibid.*, 6–7. She also writes, “Of greater significance is the fact that this emphasis on the role of natural theology in Boyle’s thought has resulted in the neglect of Boyle’s emphatic denial that human reason is competent to judge the content of revelation” (*ibid.*, 7).

correct, though, in affirming that Boyle would not approve of distorting the text of Scripture so that all passages are nicely reconcilable.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that Boyle is not interested in dismissing the law of noncontradiction as a guide in our theological discourse and our interpretations of Scripture. Rather he cautions us in dismissing doctrines or interpretations that are not definitively logically contradictory but at first blush appear to be so. That being said, he is cautious of our human reasoning abilities—they are rather limited. Some things strike us as being internally contradictory or contradictory when juxtaposed with each other, but they are not always definitively such. Just because I cannot imagine or envision a reconciled notion that makes sense of God's omniscience and human free choice does not mean that I am to dismiss one or both. In short, Boyle does not advocate belief in doctrines that are in violation of the law of noncontradiction, but rather he allows for belief in those doctrines that appear to be contradictory but are not definitively so, considered singly or in relationship to another doctrine.

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