

**Francesco Maria Pirocchi (Sapienza Università di Roma)**  
*The Great Pan is Dead! Van Dale, Fontenelle and the Oracles*

The debate on the oracles reaches an important turning point with the interventions by Van Dale (*De oraculis ethnicorum*, 1683, second edition with major changes 1700) and Fontenelle (*Histoire des oracles*, 1686). They both show an interpretative attitude that is characterized by doubts towards what is commonly believed to be a miracle, which they instead explain through the imposture thesis or as natural phenomena.

Van Dale argues that the oracles are impostures and did not end at the coming of Christ; he shows that the positions of the Fathers of the Church are groundless, containing falsifications or plain gullibility; rejecting the supernatural origin of the oracles, he detracts a classic argument from the apologetic tradition, that can no longer claim that the silence of the oracles is a miracle; he draws a parallelism between the Christian and the pagan religion, focusing on what they have in common, and extending the procedures of the imposture of the pagan priests to the Christian cults. The debate on the oracles becomes then crucial for the question of the biblical prophecies and, in general terms, miracles. Fontenelle's *Histoire des oracles* is a philosophical rewriting of the *De oraculis*. The end result is a radical text, not erudite and against superstition like Van Dale's, but critical-philosophical and anti-religious. The anthropological analysis, that connects the origin of the religious belief to the credulous, fearful nature of men, is the distinguishing feature of the *Histoire des oracles*: Fontenelle completes the work of Van Dale with a philosophical interpretation of the genesis of religion.

The research submitted to your attention aims at presenting these texts by highlighting both the continuities and the differences between them: although the derivation of Fontenelle's work from Van Dale's is evident and acknowledged by the author himself, the *De oraculis* and the *Histoire des oracles* distinguish themselves for originality and independence. The main results of this research will be the following. First, an analytical reading of the *De oraculis* will set it free from the role of mere forerunner of the *Histoire de oracles*, as it has frequently been described, and will give back to it its philosophical worth. The few scholarly works on Van Dale, in fact, have often neglected his role in the debate on the oracles and the value of his work, and only recently Martin Mulso has brought back attention to Van Dale (*Antiquarianism, Libertinism, Religion: Antonius Van Dale*, in P.N. Miller (ed.), *Antiquarianism and Intellectual Life in Europe and China, 1500-1800*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press 2012, p. 381-412). Second, this research will produce new elements for an evaluation of the *Histoire des oracles* that will point out its theoretical specificity and measure its distance from the *De oraculis*.

The paper will be based on a systematic and critical reading of the texts and on the use of documentary sources. It will hopefully achieve a clear understanding of the *De oraculis* and of the *Histoire des oracles*, and shed a new light on these works, that had a great impact on the intellectual context of the time, and eventually became part of the culture of the Enlightenment.

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