

WORD ON FIRE

CLASSICS

Pensées

BLAISE PASCAL

FOREWORD *by* BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

TRANSLATED *by* A. J. KRAILSHEIMER

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Foreword

Bishop Robert Barron

Blaise Pascal was the first modern Christian. He understood only too well the implications of the methodological and philosophical revolution of his near contemporary René Descartes. The turn to the subject, the exaltation of the human, the inordinate trust in reason—all of it would, in the ensuing centuries, come to dominate the consciousness of Europe, culminating in the Enlightenment.

Pascal, almost immediately, saw through it. “Inutile et incertain,” he wrote of Descartes—“useless and uncertain.” His apologetic for the Christian religion is composed precisely for modern people—that is to say, for the postmedieval skeptics formed by the rationalism of Descartes. And this in turn makes him especially helpful in our time. We have been through modernity and are inescapably formed by it, but we are also postmodern, keenly aware of modernity’s limitations.

Pascal was born on June 19, 1623, the son of a scientist and government official in the administration of Louis XIII. Young Blaise exhibited his brilliance early and engaged in scientific and mathematical studies with his father. According to legend, he put together on his own the basic principles and demonstrations of Euclid. At the age of eighteen, he invented the first mechanical calculator, and he later did groundbreaking work on the physics of the vacuum and on probability theory. In his spare time, he took the first steps toward the development of differential calculus, later perfected by Newton and Leibniz.

Later in life, he became involved with the burgeoning and complex Jansenist movement centered at Port-Royal in Paris. On the night of November 23–24, 1654, he experienced his *nuit de feu* (night of fire), his second and definitive conversion. It is something like a “born again” experience, and it is famously recorded in the *Memorial*, which he wrote out and carried with him on his person until he died:

The year of grace 1654

Monday, 23 November, feast of Saint Clement, Pope and Martyr, and of others in the Martyrology.

Eve of Saint Chrysogonus, Martyr and others.

From about half past ten in the evening until half past midnight.

Fire

“God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,” not of philosophers and scholars.

Certainty, certainty, heartfelt, joy, peace.

God of Jesus Christ.

God of Jesus Christ.

In 1656, he began writing his *Provincial Letters*, a brilliant polemic against the laxist Jesuit casuistry that he saw as the principal enemy of Jansenism. And later in that year, he began writing and organizing various fragments for a definitive apologetic of the Christian religion. But Pascal died in 1662 at the age of just thirty-nine before he could arrange the apologetic work, and his fragments were gathered posthumously into the book you now hold in your hands: the *Pensées* (or “Thoughts”), the first edition of which appeared in 1670.

The *Pensées* are one of the great literary creations of that time—a work of both high literary quality and tremendous spiritual power. The aphorisms that have come down to us, which are a bit like Friedrich Nietzsche’s style of writing, are gems of philosophical insight. You can chew on each one and draw nourishment from it.

But how to characterize this rich and complex work? I would propose looking at it through four master themes. The first is the wretchedness and greatness of humanity. This starting point strikes us as odd, but that’s because, in the grand sweep of the Christian tradition, *we* are odd. We tend to place a great emphasis on the goodness and lovability of human beings, but no other classic Christian apologetic, from Saint Paul to C. S. Lewis, places a similar stress. Pascal thus begins his apologetic with, and rests its argument upon, one simple and undeniable fact: We are all unhappy. He writes, “We desire truth and find in ourselves nothing but uncertainty. We seek

happiness and find only wretchedness and death. We are incapable of not desiring truth and happiness and incapable of either certainty or happiness” (401). This is our wretchedness, the contradiction at the heart of our humanity. We want the fullness of truth, and we get truth in dribs and drabs; we want the fullness of joy, and we get bits and pieces.

But then the paradox: Our greatness is that we know our wretchedness. This is not simply a point of psychology or epistemology; it is of the spirit. We know our wretchedness only because we have been seized by a desire for God, a hunger and thirst for God. We know what we want (this is our greatness) and we know that we can’t get it (this is our wretchedness). “Man’s greatness comes from knowing he is wretched: a tree does not know it is wretched. Thus it is wretched to know that one is wretched, but there is greatness in knowing one is wretched” (114). From this duality of the human being, Pascal concludes something of great importance: that we are like dispossessed kings (116–117). We are unhappy in our present state because deep down we know that we are supposed to be happy; we are uneasy being peasants because once we were kings. The only right philosophy or religion is the one that adequately takes into account both of these facts (149).

A second major theme of the *Pensées* is two popular pseudosolutions to this tension. The first is the favorite strategy of avoidance through *divertissement*, diversion. We purposely busy ourselves with a thousand things in order to avoid the press of life’s great questions, which are just too challenging and too immense to face: Does God exist? Why am I here? Is there life after death? Despite all of our conveniences, we are always out of time, always pressed, preoccupied. Famously, he remarks that “the sole cause of man’s unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room” (136). We know this tendency all too well in the time of smartphones and social media. Pascal—both the genius behind modern computers and the great prophet of distraction—should be the patron saint of our digital age.

This leads us to the other great false solution to the human problem—namely, indifference. How many people go through their lives utterly indifferent to the ultimate questions of life and death? Dante said that at the lowest level of hell is not fire but ice—not so much terrible and

passionate rebellion as bland, cold indifference. The signs of spiritual *life* are passion, purpose, knowledge; but the signs of spiritual *decline* are boredom, jadedness, promiscuity—and ultimately, indifference: “With everything else they are quite different; they fear the most trifling things, foresee and feel them; and the same man who spends so many days and nights in fury and despair at losing some office or at some imaginary affront to his honour is the very one who knows that he is going to lose everything through death but feels neither anxiety nor emotion” (427). What a wonderful commentary on the contemporary frame of mind! Our total indifference to the important questions is proportionate to our passionate interest in trivialities—surely “marks of a strange disorder” (632).

The third overarching theme of the *Pensées* is the passionate seeking that leads to a real solution. “There are only three sorts of people,” Pascal observes: “those who have found God and serve him; those who are busy seeking him and have not found him; those who live without either seeking or finding him. The first are reasonable and happy, the last are foolish and unhappy, those in the middle are unhappy and reasonable” (160). This is a consistent Pascalian theme: Those who sincerely seek will find. The guarantee of this, of course, is in the Gospel promise (Matt. 7:7–8). The real divide, therefore, is not between atheists and believers but between seekers and non-seekers—those who love and those who are indifferent.

But where exactly do we seek? Pascal here outlines a basic anthropology: People seek either with their bodies, their minds, or their hearts. We can seek our fulfillment in one of these three dimensions: body (matter), mind (truth), or heart (goodness, charity). The heart is the highest power and charity is the greatest act: It surpasses the goods of the mind as much as they surpass the goods of the body. But what exactly does Pascal mean by “the heart”? He means the intuitive mind rather than the “geometrical” or calculating mind; it is the mind that is open to revelation—reason in ecstasy. He also seems to mean the ground of the will—that which makes a fundamental option, that which says “yes” or “no.” And thus, in the most famous of all the *pensées*, 423: “The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing.” This is neither sentimentalism nor irrationalism.

Pascal does not oppose the heart to reason and thereby demean reason. On the contrary, the heart *has its reasons*. It, too, is a way of seeing and knowing.

The fourth and final theme is the real (and only) solution to humanity's great problem: Christian revelation. Only Christianity properly understands human nature, and therefore only Christianity proposes the adequate solution. With its doctrines of original sin and the *imago Dei*, it is the very bad and very good news that correspond precisely to the bad and good in us: "Christianity is strange; it bids man to recognize that he is vile, and even abominable, and bids him want to be like God. Without such a counterweight his exaltation would make him horribly vain or his abasement horribly abject" (351). Both sides of human nature are clearly and unambiguously addressed, and both are held in a healthy tension: "Knowing Jesus Christ strikes the balance because he shows us both God and our own wretchedness" (192). Jesus is both judge and revealer of the true God, both the namer of sin and the bringer of salvation. Thus, neither pride nor despair (nor some bland compromise of the two) is called for (192). A lively both/and is at the heart of the one true religion.

About halfway through the book, Pascal spells out his famous thought experiment in defense of faith in God: the "Wager." We find a pithy summary of the Wager in 387: "I should be much more afraid of being mistaken and then finding out that Christianity is true than of being mistaken in believing it to be true." He then spells the argument out fully in 418: "You must wager. There is no choice, you are already committed. Which will you choose then? . . . Let us weigh up the gain and the loss involved in calling heads that God exists. Let us assess the two cases: if you win you win everything, if you lose you lose nothing. Do not hesitate then; wager that he does *exist*. . . . What have you to lose?" (418). At the heart of the Wager is a call to action: faith is a leap of the will and imagination and not just a move of the mind. Yet somehow, the more one opts for faith, the more reasonable it becomes.

We didn't read much of Pascal when I was coming of age as a young student and priest. When I lived in Paris, I would often walk by his tomb at the Saint-Étienne-du-Mont, and though I knew the name Pascal, I had not really studied him at all. I only discovered him later

in life—and perhaps one has to be a bit older really to appreciate him. A younger man might read the *Pensées* and find him mordant and pessimistic. But he is a real mystic and, like John of the Cross, combines mysticism with a highly disciplined mind. When we read him, we feel, in a good way, judged. He names something very real in our own lives—and especially in our own time.

Introduction

I

An author of two widely celebrated works on religion (and much else) who enjoys the reputation of being a brilliant mathematician, a scientist of proven ability, a technologist capable of designing and constructing a calculating machine and devising and seeing inaugurated the first public transport service in Paris, may well expect to be labelled dilettante. Yet Pascal gained the admiration and respect of his contemporaries by his outstanding gifts as mathematician, scientist, and technologist quite independently of the fame that accrued to him at the end of his life from his literary and religious work, which has never been more in honour than today. It is as a Frenchman of all-round distinction that Pascal's portrait was chosen for the 500-franc banknote issued by the Banque de France. The word "genius" is perhaps overworked, yet it can properly be applied to Pascal, whose work on probability, barometric pressure, the vacuum, and many other problems put him in the front rank of European intellectuals. Fermat and Descartes in France, and Christopher Wren and Christiaan Huygens abroad, were among those who recognized his gifts.

As a writer he compelled attention with the *Provincial Letters* (1656–7). Since these appeared clandestinely and anonymously, the success they at once achieved owed nothing to the unknown author's previous reputation. The *Letters* showed that readers with no special knowledge or qualifications in theology or casuistry could have such matters explained to them in such a way that they felt competent to pass judgement on the practices and abuses attributed to the Jesuits. The interview technique exploited with such devastating effect in the earlier letters has been likened to that of modern journalism, and in this as in so many other aspects of his work Pascal was ahead of his time. The sureness and lightness of touch revealed in the *Provincial Letters* would assure Pascal of an honourable mention in the literary history of a century of outstanding French prose writers. It should be