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BEYOND
THE
WAGER

THE
CHRISTIAN
BRILLIANCE
OF BLAISE
PASCAL



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BLAISE PASCAL: KNOWN AND UNKNOWN

SCIENTIST, INVENTOR, PHILOSOPHER, MYSTIC, and theologian, Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) is more often quoted (or misquoted) than understood. Strangely, he is both well-known and largely unknown. Although he may appear in books of famous quotations more frequently than other philosophers, histories of philosophy often omit any reference to him,¹ and anthologies typically feature only his famous wager fragment, in which he recommends betting on God’s existence in view of the costs and benefits involved. Consequently, some of the most invigorating and vexing of his ideas are hidden.

Many know that the computer language “Pascal” is named after the man who invented the first calculator, but few know of his revolutionary philosophy of science, his other scientific achievements, his probing reflections on ethics, his apologetic for Christianity, or his piercing reflections on the enigmas of human nature. He has been rejected as a misanthrope (Voltaire) and hailed as a universal genius by many, myself included. Few philosophers, outside Augustine and Kierkegaard, have had their

¹For example, there is no section on Pascal in the popular introduction-to-philosophy textbook by David Merchant and David Morrow, *The Great Conversation: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, 8th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

writings mined for Christian devotional reading, but one can read *Daily Readings with Blaise Pascal*.²

Despite his notability and ongoing influence, some have taken Pascal to be an irrationalist who pitted faith against reason, a misanthrope who deemed humans to be vile and worthless, and one who in later life abandoned and condemned the scientific pursuits in which he once excelled. The truth, however, is much more complex—and much more interesting and rewarding. I hope this volume will stimulate many readers to join the ongoing conversation with this French polymath as he muses over God, the uniqueness of Christianity, the paradoxes of the human condition, and the powers and limits of science, morality, the meaning of life, and spirituality.

Whatever we make of Pascal, few who know anything about him will doubt his brilliance as a mathematician, scientist, and prose stylist. I will argue he was a brilliant philosopher as well. His intellectual excellence was not vagabond, as was Nietzsche's. Nor was it rooted in the ego that craves a philosophy worthy of one's own name, as was Rousseau's. No, Pascal's brilliance was a *Christian* brilliance.

THE HEART OF PASCAL

Pascal's most enduring work, *Pensées*, is a collection of posthumously published fragments that Pascal had intended to become part of a book defending the Christian religion. It was proposed to be a thorough apologetic. These fragments have been assembled in several arrangements, none of which provides a clearly linear or systematic development of his viewpoints. Therefore, some approach Pascal with a smorgasbord sensibility. Various memorable and arresting aphorisms and epigrams are snatched up, pondered, and even savored, but often at the expense of knowing what they mean or how they fit into the larger puzzle of Pascal's philosophy. Consider this curiously luminous sentence: "The heart has its reasons of which

²Robert Van de Weyer, ed., *Daily Readings with Blaise Pascal* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1995). This is part of a series of daily reading devotions that includes the wrings of Martin Luther, John Wesley, Saint Francis of Assisi, and others.

reason knows nothing: we know this in countless ways” (423/277).³ Scores have been entranced by the poetic and paradoxical ring of this sentence. But what did Pascal mean by it?

Some have taken “reasons of the heart” to refer to an irrational, emotional, or otherwise arbitrary preference or orientation. If so, so much the worse for Pascal. If “reasons of the heart” are bereft of rational justification, then they cannot be subject to logical evaluation. They would be either nonrational (such as a sneeze or wheeze) or irrational (such as believing in unicorns or centaurs). This is no position for a *philosopher* to take. Or did Pascal have something very different in mind—something more subtle, profound, and complex? Could the same man who amazed all of Europe with his mathematical and scientific abilities disengage the head entirely for “reasons of the heart”? We will explore this later in the book.

Many think that Pascal was a fideist: one who divorces faith and reason and finds no rational support for religious belief. One might claim that in matters of mathematical calculation and scientific experimentation Pascal employed reason and observation, but in the realm of religion, he took another course. Some of his statements—taken by themselves and out of context—can indeed be read in this way. “It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason. That is what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by reason” (424/278).⁴

For Pascal, belief in God, the church, and the Christian Scriptures meant far more than assenting to the conclusion of a complex argument; faith involved submitting the core of one’s being to a supernatural being who calls one into a transformational encounter and an ongoing engagement. On the other hand, Pascal, in the last few years of his life, proposed to write a reasoned defense of the Christian religion (*Apology for the Christian Religion*), which would win over the skeptics and unbelievers of his day to Christian commitment. One of the fragments from that intended work was so bold as to claim, “One of the ways in which

³Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin, 1995), 127.

⁴Pascal, *Pensées*, 127.

the damned will be confounded is that they will see themselves condemned by their own reason, by which they claimed to condemn the Christian religion” (175/563).⁵

When Pascal laid out the strategy for this defense of Christianity, he did not dispense with reason as a tool for commending faith; he did not lay aside his prodigious intellectual skills by abandoning rational argumentation. Consider his program for his proposed apology.

Order. Men despise religion. They hate it and are afraid it may be true. The cure for this is to show that religion is not contrary to reason, but worthy of reverence and respect. Next make it attractive, make good men wish it were true, and then show that it is. Worthy of reverence because it really understands human nature. Attractive because it promises true good. (12/187)⁶

Some of Pascal’s most memorable and oft-repeated sayings concern the strangeness and wonder of the human condition. But these were never offered as snippets of wisdom without purpose. They fit integrally into Pascal’s claim that Christianity is “worthy of reverence because it really understands human nature.” Pascal applied his considerable philosophical and rhetorical skills to that end, relying on the biblical account of human nature as his guide.

WAS PASCAL A PHILOSOPHER?

Pascal’s essentially religious or theological outlook has led some commentators to exclude his work from that of philosophy proper or to judge his work as poor philosophy. Some have argued that the title “philosopher” should be used to designate only those who speculate widely and systematically, and who appeal only to human reason apart from any consideration of divine revelation or awareness of a religious mission. But this prejudices the case against the entire stream of influential religious thinkers who have pondered reality deeply and logically in light of their spiritual

⁵Pascal, *Pensées*, 54.

⁶Pascal, *Pensées*, 4.

convictions. It also prejudices the case against less systematic and nonreligious thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). Any definition of philosophy that excludes in principle Augustine, Anselm, Kierkegaard, or Martin Buber—passionate religious believers as well as earnest, vigilant thinkers—is surely defective and should be discarded.

Nevertheless, Pascal did not approach philosophy as a vocation. His renown in his day came from his genius as mathematician, physicist, and inventor. His religious writings concerned theological disputes (with the Jesuits over morality) and apologetics (the defense of the Christian faith as objectively true and rationally credible). Nevertheless, there was no little philosophizing in Pascal's writings, especially throughout *Pensées*. Although he did not develop a systematic philosophy (as did Descartes, for example), it is unfair to rank him as merely a minor philosopher. In Pascal, one finds a developed philosophy of religion and philosophy of science. His thoughts are too large and penetrating for dismissing him as a non-philosopher or as a minor one.⁷

Since Pascal did not leave us with a final systematic statement of his philosophy, we must reconstruct his views from a set of published polemical letters on theology (*The Provincial Letters*), personal correspondence, several works on science, some scattered essays, and *Pensées*. Although many have wondered what sort of finished work of philosophy Pascal would have left us, the lack of a well-organized, detailed philosophy affords the earnest reader some advantages.

As they stand, the many absorbing and arresting fragments of the *Pensées* furnish us with raw materials for an intellectual adventure concerning our uneasy place in an often-perplexing cosmos, self, and culture. Unlike the more methodical philosophers, such as Descartes, Pascal in many cases does not finish a line of thought for us. Instead, he initiates an intellectual pursuit that we are left to follow up on—or ignore. Some of the fragments of *Pensées* are not arguments at all but evocative parables meant to trigger a new kind of awareness.

⁷One antidote to the claim that Pascal was not a philosopher is Graeme Hunter, *Pascal, the Philosopher: An Introduction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).

Imagine a number of men in chains, all under sentence of death, some of whom are each day butchered in the sight of the others; those remaining see their own condition in that of their fellows, and looking at each other with grief and despair await their turn. This is an image of the human condition. (434/199)⁸

Discerning the meaning of passages such as this in light of Pascal's other writings requires an active and imaginative engagement of one's philosophical prowess. This fragment was meant to spark a fear of death that would be conducive to truth seeking and would be a strike against indifference. A pattern can be found by thoughtfully assembling the varied fragments; although the search is not simple, it is, however, supremely rewarding.

Pascal entered deeply into human experience and left little that is distinctly human unobserved or unexamined. That is one reason we often find ourselves in his ruminations. He did not paint the human condition in lifeless, predictable, or untroubled hues. His portrait was disturbingly lifelike and vividly articulated across the full spectrum of humanity. There is a poetic and authentic quality to much of his writing; it is not detached, speculative, or pedantic.

WAS PASCAL AN EXISTENTIALIST?

Pascal's emphasis on the lived experience of Christian faith and its pertinence to the individual believer has inclined some to classify him as an early existentialist, even as a precursor to Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), the prolific Danish Christian writer and “father of existentialism.”⁹ Although we do find some existentialist themes in Pascal—the vexing nature of existence, anxiety, the follies of culture, distrust of impersonal and abstract systems of thought, and a rejection of traditional proofs for God's existence—he is better studied in his own right than pigeonholed

⁸Pascal, *Pensées*, 137.

⁹On Kierkegaard, see Douglas Groothuis, “Kierkegaard: The Greatest Hazard of All, Losing Oneself, Can Occur Very Quietly in the World, as if It Were Nothing at All,” in *Philosophy in Seven Sentences* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016).

by a term only coined in the mid-twentieth century to describe quite different kinds of thinkers. None of the existentialists, for example, were accomplished scientists (many pitted their philosophies against science), nor did any develop a philosophy of science that was theologically informed. Pascal regarded reason more highly than most existentialists, although he highlighted the effects of sin on human thought. In any event, we should let Pascal speak in his own genuine voice, whatever loose affinities he may have had with existentialism.¹⁰

THE WAGER ON GOD

Pascal's famed wager argument that has probably done the most to obscure and overshadow other crucial aspects of his reflections and provocations. Those who know little about Pascal have usually heard of his claim that one would be better off if one were to believe in God even if God does not exist than if one were to disbelieve in God if God does exist. Pascal's essential insight is found in a shorter fragment from *Pensées*: "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" (387/241).¹¹

This fascinating argument, closely connected to his investigation of probability theory, has perhaps received more philosophical attention in recent years than any other aspect of Pascal's writings. Yet these discussions are usually divorced from key elements of Pascal's overall approach to religious belief, thus giving a distorted picture of the role the wager plays in Pascal's thought. Until recently, most academic articles ridiculed the wager. However, contemporary philosophers have been finding more charitable and credible ways to defend it or a revised form of it. It is a puzzling, easily misunderstood, but intellectually fertile piece of philosophical reasoning, as we will see.¹²

¹⁰See Leszek Kolakowski, *God Owes Us Nothing: A Brief Remark on Pascal's Religion and on the Spirit of Jansenism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 187-90.

¹¹Pascal, *Pensées*, 115.

¹²For example, see Michael Rota, *Taking Pascal's Wager: Faith, Evidence, and the Abundant Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016).

CAUGHT BETWEEN TWO AGES

One fruitful way to disclose the meaning, significance, and ongoing importance of Pascal—and to move beyond ignorance and clichés—is to conceive of him as a thinker caught between two ages. He was one of the first modern Christian intellectuals who was neither medieval nor a figure of the Enlightenment.¹³ Despite his strong sympathies with Jansenism, an Augustinian reform movement within Catholicism, he was a loyal son of the Catholic Church and did not want to adjust its theology to the spirit of the times. Yet because he lived after the Reformation—an event that dislodged the papacy’s medieval hegemony over Europe and divided Christendom theologically and politically—he could not assume or address a unified body of Christians. Because of his bitter disputes with the Jesuits, recorded in his *Provincial Letters* (*Lettres Provinciales*), he was sometimes accused of having sympathies with Protestants, a claim he vehemently and rightly denied.

It was Pascal—the physicist, mathematician, inventor, and philosopher of science—who also helped instigate the scientific revolution, which would begin to challenge many of the received truths of Christian Europe. Descartes reconceptualized nature as a grand mechanism, thus driving a wedge between mind (or spirit) and body and bringing into question the traditional accounts of nature and its relationship to its creator. If the universe is a vast machine, could it run on its own? How could God relate to it? Pascal endorsed much of the new Cartesian picture, but unlike his fellow Frenchman, he was as passionate about his religious convictions as he was about his scientific pursuits. In later life, Pascal would warn of “those who probe science too deeply. Descartes” (553/76; see also 23/67).¹⁴

Besides charting a new, but theistic, conception of nature with respect to science, Pascal also broke from the medieval conception of natural

¹³See Edward T. Oakes, “Pascal: The First Modern Christian,” *First Things* (August/September 1999): 41-48.

¹⁴Pascal, *Pensées*, 192; see also 6.

theology, by which philosophers attempted to prove logically God's existence through logical premises and evidence derived from the natural world apart from biblical revelation. Pascal dispensed with these theistic arguments for several reasons, although he did advance another kind of philosophical apologetic in *Pensées*.

Before we outline the basic lineaments of Pascal's philosophy and move beyond the many stereotypes based on ignorance, we need to learn more about this remarkable man and his fascinating times, a man who, according to Hugh Davidson, has "influenced every generation of reader since his work first appeared, down to the present time."¹⁵

¹⁵Hugh Davidson, *Blaise Pascal* (Boston: Twayne, 1983), 120.

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