



Pensées

Blaise Pascal

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Pensées Blaise Pascal

An illuminating exploration of the nature of faith from one of history's greatest thinkers

Blaise Pascal was not a gambler, but he posited one of the most famous wagers of all time: Every man's life is a bet against God. It is a wager that any man can win, however. Sacrifice earthly pleasures—drink, lust, sin, etc.—and a lifetime of happiness awaits, in this world or the next. Live every day as if God exists, and you can't lose.

Pascal devised his wager in the seventeenth century, but the lessons written by this brilliant man ring true today. In this collection of fragments intended as a defense of Christianity, everything is up for debate. From the nature of love to the relationship between scientific inquiry and religious faith, Pascal shows that skepticism and devotion go hand in hand.

Pensées Details

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From Reader Review *Pensées* for online ebook

Szplug says

Men are so necessarily mad that it would be another twist of madness not to be mad.

And what completes our inability to understand things is that they are not so simple in themselves, and we are made up of two different kinds of opposing natures, body and soul...For this reason almost all philosophers confuse the ideas of things, and speak spiritually of corporeal things and corporeally of spiritual ones...Instead of accepting the idea of these things in their pure state, we tint them with our qualities, and imprint our composite nature on to all the simple things we see.

The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me.

David Huff says

Imagine keeping a journal of your private thoughts, opinions, and deep philosophical and theological musings --- collected snippets and notes never intended for publication in any way --- and then having them appear in book form for three and a half centuries after your death. That, basically, is how the *Pensees* ("thoughts expressed in literary form") of Blaise Pascal came to exist.

This was a fascinating read, filled with many short, sometimes cryptic aphorisms, a good number of which -- but not all -- concern theological topics. Pascal was a devout Christian, a Catholic much influenced by Augustine as well as the Jansenists (think deeply committed Catholic Calvinists) with whom he met for worship. His temperament also clearly seems to lean toward the melancholy side, but doesn't diminish his writing.

Occasionally, a passage in *Pensees* can seem a little obscure or confusing, and there are sections where he dwells on one particular subject or another at length. There are also moments of unexpected humor, and also prosaic sections that are suddenly deeply profound. I happened to read an article about the structure and background of *Pensees* before I tackled it, which was very helpful! This is the sort of volume that is as enjoyable to review later for all the quotes you inevitably underlined, as it is to read initially.

A couple of typical passages:

"Some seek their good in authority, some in intellectual inquiry and knowledge, some in pleasure."

"How is it that a lame man does not annoy us while a lame mind does? Because a lame man recognizes that we are walking straight, while a lame mind says that it is we who are limping"

A solid classic worthy of being acquainted with!

Jan-Maat says

This was a fantastic reading experience - in what I suspect maybe the most obscure and unhelpful comparison I may make on Goodreads - the literary version of Janacek's *On an Overgrown Path* in which as the cycle of pieces continues the music grows sparser and the silences speak ever louder until a few bare notes are richly poignant.

Now, how was the Pascal similar? In the edition I came across you effectively read them in reserve order starting from the most developed form of the idea and then working backwards towards Pascal's original thought. And when you get there suddenly a single, brief, elusive sentence is heavily pregnant, about to give birth to its own universe of thought (view spoiler).

I was led to Pascal's *Pensées* when studying Brothers Karamazov as a student. There was a brief reference that it had been one of the books that Dostoevsky had read as a young man and occasionally being prone to flights of fancy I had a notion it might have been an influence.

Reading the *Pensées* I was quickly and resolutely unsure if I had been right or wrong in my guess. True, one can find wagers and God in both but the dynamic between the two is not shared by the two authors. But then again, that's not to say that the later author didn't read one of those single, brief, sometimes gnomic sentences and himself become pregnant with its possibilities.

On the other hand I was more confused about Jansenism after reading the introduction and the notes than I had been beforehand. Before the introduction it had all seemed so simple and straightforward and I fear that I will never recover the innocent clarity of my original misconceptions. Alack.

Jesse says

Pascal has caused atheists to doubt their atheism more often than Nietzsche has theists their theism - why? Because those that let their hearts guide their thoughts are never in doubt, but those who unwisely look to results to guide them, as macho ubermensches perforce exclusively must, are always finding their conviction to be as slippery as the passing moment (no one result ever convinces the result-minded). Recognizing this, Pascal places a weighty emphasis on the heart and the nature of its law, which is ultimately inscrutable but much less so than the world around us; he hauntingly chastises our placing undue emphasis on rationality, saying "Contradiction is no more an indication of falsehood than lack of it an indication of truth." Yeah! Pascal - the master dialectician. Indeed, so masterful is Pascal, one truly cannot believe an atheist sincere if s/he has not read him; at least I cannot, for the thought contained here remains, for science has done nothing to weaken its impact, the epitome of profundity.

Edward says

Introduction, by Anthony Levi
Note on the Text
Select Bibliography

A Chronology of Blaise Pascal

--Pensées

--Discussion with Monsieur de Sacy

--The Art of Persuasion

Writings on Grace:

--Letter on the Possibility of the Commandments

--Treatise concerning Predestination

Explanatory Notes

Thematic Index

Alp Turgut says

İlk altı bölümüyle Montaigne'in "Denemeler"i gibi başucu kitabı niteliği taşıyan Pascal'ın

"**Düünceleri**"nin geriye kalan bölümleri için ne yazık ki aynı şeyi söylemek çok zor. Çünkü ke kitap ikiye bölünüp o şekilde okuyucuya sunulsaymı çünkü Hristiyan Dininin Savunması olan 350 sayfalık kısım Pascal'ın kendini nasıl Tanrı'ya adanmışlığının göstergesi olmakla beraber okuyucuya da yararlı hiçbir şey sunmuyor. Sadece Pascal'ın daha iyi tanımlanması için yardımcı olan bu kısım yüzünden kitabın ilk 150 sayfasını öneriyorum. Genç yaşta kansere yenilen ünlü Fransız matematikçinin insanları ne kadar sefil varlıklar olduğunu altını çizdiği eserde her ne kadar Montaigne'i eleştirse de onun izinden giderek hayata dair önemli vurgular yapmaktan kendini alamamış. Neredeyse her satırın altını çizebileceğiniz ilk altı bölümüyle Pascal'ın filozof kişiliğine hayran kalıyorsunuz; fakat yavaş yavaş din savunmasına dönen kitap bir yerden sonra kendini tekrar ederek yazara karşı ilginizin kaybolmasına neden oluyor.

24.07.2018

İstanbul, Türkiye

Alp Turgut

<http://www.filmdoktoru.com/kitap-labo...>

James says

It is difficult to decide what to say upon reading *The Pensees* of Blaise Pascal. The fragments, some resembling aphorisms with a few extending to several pages of prose, were left disorganized and unedited at Pascal's death. Readers have pondered over *The Pensees* (literally thoughts) ever since trying to interpret them and discern some semblance of a world view from them. In my reading I also tried to comprehend the fragmentary comments and found the views of Monsieur Pascal, to the extent that I understand them, to be foreign to my own views of life. For Pascal the human condition is wretched with man's reason a frail thing on which life ultimately cannot depend. The overwhelming importance of such concepts as immortality and original sin imbue his world view with a supernatural and other-worldly outlook that is difficult to reconcile with reality. Perhaps his personal physical ailments were the source of his view that man in general shared

his hatred of the human body. Of the many thinkers who have contemplated Pascal over the years since his *Pensees* were left to us in 1670, Voltaire expresses thoughts close to my own when he says, "Nature does not make us unhappy all the time. Pascal always speaks like a sick man who wants the entire world to suffer." (*Philosophical Letters*, "Twenty-fifth Letter, On Mr. Pascal's *Pensees*"). For Pascal unhappiness is our lot, the corruption of the body is complete and irredeemable, self esteem is to be abhorred, god's thoughts are impenetrable and yet, we would be better off if we accept the wager that he does exist. Well I, for one, neither accept Mr. Pascal's worldview nor his wager. I look forward to continued wonder at the mysteries of existence and I celebrate the continuing progress that, weak as we may be, we humans produce with our reason.

Trevor says

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/18269/...>

Perhaps half of this was basically wasted on me. As an atheist, books providing proofs for the existence of God are perhaps 40 years or so too late. The problem here isn't so much that he is trying to prove the existence of an entity that he himself admits particularly likes to hide – presumably you can see the problem here – but also that some of his proofs seemed utterly bizarre to me. One of my favourites was him saying that the Old Testament was the oldest book in the world. You see, it was written not terribly long after the world had been created. And, at that time there wasn't a hell of a lot to talk about – science hadn't really gotten going and that sort of thing – so people mostly sat around talking about their family tree. So, that is why you can pretty well rely on the fact that the first part of the Bible is – well – gospel. I know, you think I'm making this sound dafter than it actually is as one of those standard ploys atheist engage in. You are right to be cynical. So, here it is, quoted in full:

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The longevity of the patriarchs, instead of causing the loss of past history, conduced, on the contrary, to its preservation. For the reason why we are sometimes insufficiently instructed in the history of our ancestors, is that we have never lived long with them, and that they are often dead before we have attained the age of reason. Now, when men lived so long, children lived long with their parents. They conversed long with them. But what else could be the subject of their talk save the history of their ancestors, since to that all history was reduced, and men did not study science or art, which now form a large part of daily conversation? We see also that in these days tribes took particular care to preserve their genealogies.”

Other parts of this require a much closer knowledge of the Bible than I have to be able to follow. All the same, it didn't exactly inspire me to go rushing off to look up Deut. xxx.

So, my advice, unless you are interested in these more or less iffy proofs of the existence of God, is to stop about halfway though this. You'll know when – it will become quite clear.

The only thing I would point to in the last half of this book is something I had always thought was said by an atheist.

“894

Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.”

The reason why I read this was because Bourdieu calls himself a Pascallian and so I thought I had better see

why. And there are lots of reasons why this might be the case and I think they are all in the first half of the book.

The first is the bit that almost completely reminds me of a couple of books on happiness I read a few years ago: both *The Happiness Hypothesis* and *Stumbling on Happiness*. The main lesson to be drawn from both of these books is that we humans are pathetically bad at knowing what it is that will make us happy. Pascal makes the point that we do things happily where the prize itself really isn't what we are after. The example he gives is spending a day chasing a hare that you wouldn't buy in the market or accept as a gift. The modern version of this is 'it's about the journey, rather than the destination' – and I think this is really true. I think the worst thing that can happen to you is to have an achievable goal in life and to reach that goal. He makes the point repeatedly that if you were given whatever you were likely to win at the beginning of the day and then told to enjoy your leisure for the rest of the day that nothing would be more likely to make you miserable. That activity with some form of reward provides us with the greatest source of happiness.

The other thing he says is his most quoted line: The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know. This is one of the ideas that Bourdieu certainly borrows from Pascal, this whole notion of habit and embodied reasons that we justify afterwards with our mental reason. I kept thinking of Haidt's elephant and elephant driver (reason and habit) and his saying that habit wins in the end (the elephant) because eventually reason needs to sleep. Pascal would have had no trouble accepting this idea.

The first half of this book is just brimming over with lovely thoughts – the meaning of the title of the book, after all – and that is possibly also true of the second half of the book, but as I've said, a lot of that went over my head. A large part of this is designed to convince non-believers of the benefits of belief. But anyone who says things like - we laugh and cry about the same things – honestly, they can't be all bad.

David Sarkies says

Religious Thoughts of a Mathematician

29 August 2016 - Paris, France

When I was learning French I was rather thrown by the way their numbers work after about 60, as is demonstrated by this picture, which shows how English, German, and French construct the number 98:

My first thought was 'this is absolutely ridiculous, how on Earth could the French have produced any mathematicians?' Well, it turns out that they produced at least two – Rene Descartes (notable for Cartesian Geometry) and Blaise Pascal (who built his own calculator, most likely to assist him in deciphering the French numerical system). At least the Germans only switch their numbers around, it just seems like the French reached the number 60 and simply became too lazy to work out any beyond that (and if you look at the numbers 17, 18, and 19, you will see a similar pattern there). Anyway, I'm not writing this to bag the French (only the way they count), but to have another look at Pascal's *Pensees*.

This is the second time I have read this book, and I thought it was an appropriate book to read while travelling through France, and I have just managed to finish it off on my first day in Paris (while sitting out the front of a cafe drinking what was effectively an overpriced beer and an over priced bottle of Pine-apple

juice, which is another oddity – the English refer to them and Pineapples while those on the continent refer to them as Annanas – but that is another story). As I have done previously, I have left my previous review below, though that was written back when I was studying Church History at a Bible college and having realised that I had already written a review on it I was about to move on to another book when I felt that I should read him again, just to see if I end up viewing him differently.

Well, I'm going to have to agree with what Trevor said in his review in that the first part of the book, namely the section where Pascal managed to order his *Pensees*, is actually pretty good, but when you get to the section where the editor has then tried to put them into some sort of order, and failing that just thrown the rest of them into a miscellaneous chapter, it does sort of start to go down hill. For instance you will find some that are simply huge chunks of the Bible, and not really ethical thoughts, but rather ideas on prophecies and their fulfilments. Like a lot of fundamentalist preachers these days he does seem to spend an inordinate amount of time focusing on the book of Daniel.

The other thing is that Pascal spends a lot of time arguing that Christianity cannot be proved through reason, however he proceeds to use reason to try to prove Christianity. I remember my father telling me once that it is impossible to prove Christianity by using science namely because non-scientists generally don't understand the detailed scientific explanations, and non-Christian scientists have their own explanations as to why things happen. For instance, I asked my Dad why is it that the events at the Big Bang seems to go against the Law of Thermodynamics, that is the scientific law that says that everything moves from a state of order to a state of disorder. Well, just like gravity (what goes up, must come down), there are exceptions (unless you have a really big rocket underneath you). The other thing with the Big Bang is that nobody was around to measure it so we don't actually know what went on. Also the universe is also constantly expanding, which once again seems to go against the law of entropy, though I think I'll leave it at that is it is starting to make my brain hurt.

Anyway, reading through the *Pensees* it seems as if Pascal was one of those guys who started off as a scientist (or rather a mathematician), discovered God, and then started to try to use science to prove God. It reminded me a lot of those Creation Scientists, the ones who go around claiming that if you don't believe in a six-day creation you are denying Christ, and if you deny Christ then you are going to hell. Well, I guess that is it for me then, but that is beside the point. The thing is that while I believe that they have some valid ideas, I do try to leave my mind open for other possibilities. However, as I was reading Pascal this time I simply found how his arguments simply didn't seem to work all that well, and while it might have worked with the people of his time period, these days it simply seems that his writings would probably only appeal to the fundamentalist sects (and even then they would probably end up rejecting him as a heretic namely because he is a Catholic).

Despite all that, I do feel that he does have a lot to say and I will touch on a couple of things here, the first being distractions. There is a lot of criticism of distractions in the modern world – such as sport, movies, Keeping up with the Kardashians, et al – and that these distractions serve to keep the actions of the power elite from being known by the common people. Well, Pascal suggests that this is not necessarily the case, and I sort of agree with him. The thing is that the common people generally don't care what the power elite are doing, and as long as they have their goodies they will be happy. It is not a question of human rights, nor is it a question of freedom of speech – people will do what they are prone to do – no it is a question of boredom. It is not as if the common person, if the truth is revealed to them, are suddenly going to take to the streets with pitchforks – the Peasants in France knew what the Aristocracy and the Church was all about, they only revolted when their own situation became so dire that they had nothing left to lose (and were also prodded on by a pretty powerful bourgeoisie). Rather, it is to prevent boredom. The thing is that if a person is bored they get up to mischief, and if a lot of people get up to mischief together then anarchy reigns.

The other thing about distraction is how it is used in relation to the monarch. Pascal suggests that the monarch is fed distractions by his advisors to prevent the monarch from establishing his (or her) own agenda. Mind you, that depends on how strong the monarch actually is – a strong monarch is going to do their own thing no matter what. However, in most cases, as is suggested by Pascal, it is the advisors and the inner circle that actually dictates how the country is administered. The king is fed distractions so that he will in effect relinquish his (or her) power to them. It could be said that it is the same with politicians today, especially career politicians who probably have no skill set outside of doing what politicians actually do (which is a question to which I am struggling to find an answer). The reality is that most politicians (and cabinet ministers) have no idea how to actually do their job and thus rely on advisors to help them make the decision. In the end the politician, seeing that it is all too hard, arranges for another overseas junket and gets the advisors to make the final decisions and simply signs on the dotted line.

One of the things that seems to get up Pascal's nose are vain people – namely those who think of themselves over others. Mind you, he is probably right because it is our vanity that seems to be the cause of a lot of problems that we face in the world, and it is not just the question of the rich not paying their taxes because many of us in the Western World (me included) generally think of our own happiness above the welfare and security of others. In fact it is coming to the point where many of our countries are doing everything that we can to close our borders to refugees and immigrants and blaming the influx of foreigners for all of our woes. In a way one of the main reasons that the leave vote won out in Britain was because people believed that by voting leave they would get rid of all of the immigrants and return Britain to that of the Anglo-Saxons. In many cases we in the west are hoarders – sure, we might be generous to an extent, even the absurdly rich are pretty generous with their money – they give to charities and to cultural institutions – in fact on a proportionate basis they are probably more generous than many of us who can actually afford to be charitable (though I am not taking into account the reasons for their giving since many of us give for ulterior motives such as a tax deduction). However, when Pascal looked around he would see an awful lot of vanity in the world, and even when people appeared to be kind and generous he tended to see something beyond that. As Jesus pointed out at the temple one day it was the poor widow who gave the single coin who was the more generous because while the rich gave out of their wealth she gave out of her poverty.

Which leads me to the concept of the inversion – people who consider themselves good and righteous end up being anything but. Mind you, this isn't something that Pascal comes up with himself but rather something that is a constant theme throughout the Bible and can best be seen in the Sermon on the Mount, in particular the beatitudes – the poor become rich, the weak become strong, the sorrowful become joyful. In a way it is not a question of outward appearances but inward appearances. Isn't it interesting that when somebody gives out of their wealth an organisation will reward them for that, which means that such people continue to give knowing that their generosity will be rewarded and they will be viewed as a generous person. As Jesus suggests these people have received their reward in full, especially if that is the reason for them giving generously. However those who give a small amount tend to never to be recognised. Well, they might get a thankyou (or a *Merçi Beaucoup*) but a lot of organisations will tend to ignore them when they give and only say thankyou when tapping them for more money. This is another thing that I have noticed – when you start giving to these organisations they will continue to ask for money, and normally will ask for more and more – if I give them \$500.00 within a month I will receive a letter asking for \$750, \$1000, or even \$2000. In fact the only letters that I seem to get from them is 'can you make another donation and can you make it more this time'.

I should finish off with the idea of the wager, that is that life is a wager and the stakes are eternity, so you either have the choice to live a moral life or an immoral one. The results are that if you live a moral life but it turns out that God doesn't exist then you lose nothing because the moral life is always the better life, but if you live an immoral life and it turns out that God does exist then you lose out big time. Mind you, I have

simplified it somewhat, especially since it should actually be 'Christian life' instead of 'moral life' but I'm sure you understand what I mean. The thing is that people outwardly parade their goodness to receive praise from those around them tend not to actually be moral people – sure, they may live immaculate lives in front of everybody but their private life may hold a huge number of dirty secrets. As far as I am concerned it is always going to be a heart thing, you don't do things because you want people to say 'gee, what a good person' you do things because it is always better to live a moral life than an immoral life, especially since the immoral life always comes back and bites you.

A collection of Theological statements

11 May 2012 - Adelaide, Australia

Blaise Pascal is an enigma. He is a Catholic who in his book writes like an evangelical (or, more to the point, protestant as they were in those days). He is also a scientist/mathematician/engineer who writes what I must admit is an incredibly intense theological treatise. Well, not so much a treatise, but more a collection of sayings (some short, some quite long) exploring the nature of God, Jesus, the Bible, and our relationship with the Trinity. The book is not finished. He became too sick to continue the work and what we have now is a collection of the 'sayings' (if that is what you want to call them) in the order that he wanted them to be in, and a whole heap of others with no rhyme or reason (or at least they are not quite complete nor are they in any particular order). As such the later editors have done their best to attempt to put them where they think they best fit, but it is highly unlikely anybody would be able to know what Pascal's original intentions were.

This book does allow one to get into Pascal's mind and understand his theology and his response to it, though Pascal was one of those very rare individuals that appears to live in a world of his own, though through this book we do catch a glimpse of this world.

peiman-mir5 rezakhani says

[illegible]

[illegible]

Hadrian says

Ron says

“Do you wish people to believe good of you? Don’t speak.”

Pascal was the master of the one liner. *Pensées* is laced with aphorisms. It also overflows with serious considerations. Not to be read fast or superficially. (Unfortunately my first reading in the 1960s was both.) Therefore, this review will be in sections, as I read the major subdivisions of the text.

“The last thing one settles in a book is what one should put in first.”

Since *Pensées* was not published before Pascal died in 1662, textual inclusion and order are disputed. This 1958 English translation (available free on Project Gutenberg) includes an excellent Introduction by Nobel laureate T. S. Eliot.

Part Two.

“The last act is tragic, however happy all the rest of the play is; at the last a little earth is thrown upon our heads, and that is the end forever.”

The first two sections of Pascal’s *Pensées* is filled with disconnected thoughts and aphorisms generally pointing to man’s misery separate from God. Now Pascal turns to his infamous wager. Here his argument becomes dense and philosophic. The casual reader is tempted to think, “I can skim this. Everyone knows what Pascal’s Wager is.” No, you don’t. In simplifying Pascal’s argument, modern scholars miss his point, and mislead you as well. If you read only one section on *Pensées*, read Section Three. Here his avowed purpose was “to incite the search after God.”

In brief, Pascal reasons why you should make the wager, only secondarily how you should make it. He was surrounded by mature, intelligent people who spent their entire life diverting themselves from the most important issue of life. The following are key thoughts, in his own words:

“Men despise religion; they hate it; and fear it is true.”

“[God] will only be perceived by those who seek him with all their heart.”

“They believe they have made great efforts for their instruction, when they have spent a few hours in reading some book of scripture, and have questioned some priest on the truths of the faith. After that, they boast of having made vain search in books and among men. This negligence is insufferable.”

“They did not find within themselves the lights which convince them of it [and] neglect to seek them elsewhere.”

“It is a great evil thus to be in doubt. The doubter ... is altogether completely unhappy and completely wrong.”

“All I know is that I must soon die, but what I know least is this very death which I cannot escape.”

“It is not natural that there should be men indifferent to the loss of their existence.”

“Let them at least be honest men, if they cannot be Christians. There are two kinds of people one can call reasonable; those who serve God with all their heart because they know Him, and those who seek Him with all their heart because they do not know Him.”

“Let us imagine a number of men in chains, and all condemned to death, where some are killed each day in the sight of the others, and those who remain see their own fate in that of their fellows, and wait their turn, looking at each other sorrowfully and without hope. It is an image of the condition of men.”

“We seek the truth without hesitation.”

“Between us and heaven or hell there is only life, which is the frailest thing in the world.”

“Our soul is cast into a body, where it finds number, time, dimension. Thereupon it reasons, and calls nature, necessity, and can believe nothing else.”

“It is incomprehensible that God should exist, and it is incomprehensible that He should not exist.”

“You can defend neither of the propositions. Do not reprove then those who have made a choice. The true course is not to wager at all.”

“Yes, but you must wager. It is not optional.”

“If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing.”

“It is impossible to take one step with sense and judgment, unless we regulate our course by the truth of that point which ought to be our ultimate end.”

“Every play stakes a certainty to gain an uncertainty.”

“At least learn your inability to believe. Endeavor then to convince yourself, not by increase of proofs of God, but by the abatement of your passions. You would like to attain faith, and do not know the way; you would like to cure yourself of unbelief, and ask the remedy for it. Follow by acting as if [you] believed. What have you to lose?”

“You will thereby gain in this life, and that, at each step you take on this road, you will see so great certainty of gain, so much nothingness in what you risk, that you will at last recognize that you have wagered for something certain and infinite, for which you have given nothing.”

“If we must not act save on a certainty, we ought not to act on religion, for it is not certain. But ... there is more certainty in religion than there is as to whether we see tomorrow.”

“According to the doctrine of chance, you ought to put yourself to the trouble of searching for the truth; for if you die without worshipping the True Cause, you are lost--‘But,’ you say, ‘if He had wished me to worship Him, He would have left me sign of His will.’ He had done so, but you neglect them.”

Did you notice how current some of that was? Moderns don’t even go so far as to read a little Bible and talk to a clergy, they read someone like Richard Dawkins and think they understand the whole issue. Tell me, do you believe what politicians claim their opponent believes or intends? Of course not. Then why do you accept the hatchet job of an unbeliever as definitive?

His argument is flawed, but deserves better treatment than it’s gotten. One problem is with his comparing infinities. He was supposed to be the greatest mathematician of his age, but equating mathematical infinities with supernatural ones appears unreliable.

Quibble: All that untranslated Latin was acceptable in 1660, when all educated people read Latin. It is not acceptable in a 1958 translation, when few read Latin, to not render the Latin into English. (Yes, the language and punctuation is archaic; blame that on the translators, too, not Pascal.)

So you see, Pascal’s wager is not believing or not believing, but on making a serious inquiry into the truth claims of Christianity. His argument was with his contemporaries (and ours) who amused themselves to death trying to avoid the most critical decision of their lives. Because, as he says, “We [all] die alone.”

“It is far better to know something about everything, than to know all about one thing.”

Being an unfinished work, inconsistency of flow and expression are not surprising. What is unexpected is that he beat the Enlightenment by a century and even anticipated some modern thinking.

“Who doubts that our soul, being accustomed to see number, space, motion believes that and nothing else?”

One of the greatest mathematical and scientific theorists of his time, Pascal intended *Pensées* to be a defense of the Christian religion, but boldly admitted the case of the sceptic. Pascal’s other great work, *Provincial Letters*, addressed abuses of contemporary Catholicism even though Pascal remained a communicant his whole life. He died in Paris at age 39.

“What is a man in the infinite?”

(Part Three)

“True nature being lost, everything becomes its own nature; and the true good being lost, everything becomes its own true good.” ¶ 426

A significant effort on the part of a troubled Catholic in 17th century France. At odds with his church, especially the Society of Jesus, on one hand and the secular humanist, such as Voltaire and Montaigne, on the other. That he carried his manuscript sewed inside his coat is indicative of how heretical he knew his Jansenist thoughts to be. (The thoughts of the Jansenists were condemned by Pope Innocent IX in 1653.)

“Nature confutes the sceptics, and reason confutes the dogmatists.” ¶ 430

I have reviewed the opening sections of this tome in two previous review. This will try to review the rest of the book and summarize my thoughts. Without a doubt, Pascal was an original and creative thinker, one of the first mathematicians worthy of the term. He was also an orthodox Christian, whatever the Catholic hierarchy of the day thought of him.

“We must love a being who is in us, and is not ourselves.” ¶ 485

Therefore, much of his sections on Fundamentals, Perpetuity, Typology, Prophecies, Proofs of Jesus Christ, and Miracles will be only of interest to students of theology. His last section, however, Polemical Fragments is a Hodge-podge of thoughts on a variety of topics which strata yield the occasional gem of a quote, as follows (referenced by their paragraph within the larger work):

¶ 832. “As it is certain that these are exceptions to the rule, our judgment must though strict, be just.”

¶ 860. “The Church is in an excellent state, when it is sustained by God only.”

¶ 861. “Faith embraces many truths which seem to contradict each other. The source of all heresies is the exclusion of some of these truths.”

¶ 863. “Truth is so more obscure in these times, and falsehood so established, that unless be love the truth, we cannot know it.”

¶ 875. “God does not perform miracles in the ordinary conduct of the Church.”

¶ 894. “Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.”

Concerning this text, my primary criticism is that, even in the 1950s, few would have been fluent in Latin and Greek to read all the quotes as rendered. Fortunately, nearly half were Biblical citations, easy enough to obtain an English translation.

“There are only two kinds of men: the righteous who believe themselves sinners; the rest, sinners, who believe themselves righteous.” ¶ 533

As I said in my opening review, Pascal is worth reading in his own words if only because the great mass of humanity regularly misrepresent his famous “wager.” (I was among them.) He was not saying one should gamble on believing that God exists because you have nothing to lose and everything to gain, but that you should gamble on investigating whether God exists because you have nothing to lose and everything to gain. A difference in far more than semantics.

“We cannot know Jesus Christ without knowing at the same time both God and our own wretchedness.” ¶ 555

Luís C. says

THE MAN is, first of all, a fallen. He then blindly submissive to his desires. And finally, it is unable to be between the infinitely large and the infinitely small. It is in this fact lies the whole basis of Pascal's thought. According to Pascal, which is essential escapes him, the man is not able to grasp what is secondary knowledge (science)! Therefore, so the efforts of moralists and philosophers appear terribly ridiculous: reason can not, in any way, found a moral or metaphysical.

Only the heart is the inner being of man, he said, in Thoughts.

It is the seat of the immediate intimate knowledge and unprovable: that knowledge regulate the conduct of life and reveal the human being's destiny!

By extension, instead of developing its nature, in the love of God, man unfortunately folds over itself in its own worship.

It can avoid the finding of inadequacies which he tries in vain to escape the **ENTERTAINMENT** (this is what prevents man from thinking of nothingness and to his certain death).

Therefore, to assume its contradictions, he can not but turn to God solely able to explain the enigma he represents (the man has his greatness but also his misery. It is within these two ends he finds his equilibrium and consequently one that will lead, also, to God).

Written in a poetic style tinged with a light lyric sailing **Les Pensées** (and **his thoughts**) path at the discretion of units that punctuate and organize into verses.

David says

Pascal's classic thoughts on numerous topics related to Christianity. This book is at times difficult to read, since he died before he finished it thus leaving many sections only outlined in note form. But slogging through those portions is worthwhile when you get to the good, thought-provoking parts. In some ways Pascal reminds me of Kierkegaard since both were reasonable men who realized that it takes more than just reason alone to come to faith in Christ. Pascal's apologetic reflects this. He is most famous for his Wager, which is often castigated, probably because it is misunderstood. Pascal's Wager does not state, as some seem to think, that you should just believe in God because he might exist, even though such belief is unreasonable. Rather, Pascal's argument was that it is just as reasonable to believe as not to believe; reason cannot prove faith yet faith is not unreasonable. Since reason alone places us in the middle, it is better to take the step in faith and trust in God.

Dan says

Pascal's *Pensées* were never intended to be read, much like Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*. As such, they honestly reveal the private thoughts of great philosophers on the human condition, and lo, they speak of how miserable people are. Both were lonely men made so by their great intellect and great character. While Marcus continues to strive with Ragnarokian futility to fulfill all his duties in a life of perfect virtue, Pascal is a bit more pessimistic, yet in the end more hopeful when he looks to Christ for ultimate purpose.

Even those who don't believe in God will extract much wisdom from Pascal. His one-liners are some of the most devastating observations of human psychology. Even a cursory exercise in quote-mining will yield many seeds for extended thought. This book should be read carefully and digested fragment by fragment, line by line.

Some of my favorite one-liners:

- 'We search for happiness and find only wretchedness and death.'
 - 'I blame equally those who decide to praise man, those who blame him, and those who want to be diverted. I can only approve those who search in anguish.'
 - 'If you do not think about it enough, or if you think about it too much, you become obstinate and blinkered.'
 - 'Man's condition: Inconstancy, boredom, anxiety.'
 - 'What is based on reason alone is very ill-founded, like the appreciation of wisdom.'
 - 'Anyone who does not see the vanity of the world is very vain himself.'
 - 'But take away their distractions and you will see them wither from boredom.'
 - 'When we read too quickly or too slowly we understand nothing.'
 - 'More often than not curiosity is merely vanity. We only want to know something in order to talk about it.'
 - 'It is easier to put up with death without thinking about it, than with the idea of death when there is no danger of it.'
 - 'Our instinct leads us to believe we must seek our happiness outside ourselves.'
 - 'Humans, it is hopeless to look for the remedy for your wretchedness in yourselves. All your intelligence can only bring you to realize that it is not in yourselves that you will find either truth or good.'
 - 'We are fools to rely on the company of our equals as wretched and helpless as we are. We will die alone.'
 - 'Contradiction is not an indication of falsehood and the absence of contradiction is not a sign of truth.'
 - 'There are many who believe, but through superstition. There are many who do not believe, but through licentiousness.'
 - 'To uphold piety to the point of superstition is to destroy it.'
 - 'Knowing God without knowing our wretchedness leads to pride.'
 - 'Knowing wretchedness without knowing God leads to despair.'
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