

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Pensées (Thoughts) (1669)

Blaise Pascal

Background Blaise Pascal was the privileged son of a tax collector from the City of Rouen. Already as a young teen age he had shown prodigious gifts for mathematics, and by the age of twenty he had distinguished himself for his experiments in probability theory, projective geometry, and by the creating one of the first European calculating machines. Still at an early age, and not much later, he was, like Descartes, both a genius with numbers and figures, and a keen student of the moral and epistemological life. In both men the blend of cognitive ethic —*je pense donc je suis*, 'man is but a reed but he is a thinking reed'—with elevated and practical speculation on the properties of liquids and solids, the pressure of the air and the measurement of it, assures their lasting presence in the new era forming around them.

God as center: Descartes God figured centrally in the thinking of both Pascal and Descartes, and belonged to the inner structure of their thought. For Descartes the creator was the source and actuality of those meaningful miracles—the extensions and truths of geometry and algebra—which gave infinitely growing intelligibility to the phenomena of nature. (The truth was the immanence of God in nature, and for Descartes represented the standard for ethical value and human development.)

God as testimony: Pascal Pascal was immersed in religious experiences—existential and intense—which followed on his complex interactions with the religious community at Port Royal, the so called Jansenists, and what would then be his life-lasting testimony to the place of the Deity in his own life. On scraps of paper sewn into his clothing, and kept with him until the opening of the lining of his cloaks, after his death, Pascal gave scribbled testimony to his faith in 'Fire. The god of Abraham, god of Isaac....,' and concluded on the same scraps by addressing *Psalm 119:16* and assuring its author that 'I will not forget thy Word.' This evidentiary fragment, *The Memorial*, is noteworthy as a ticket of fidelity, but the finest writing of Pascal would be just ahead in his *Provincial Letters* (1656-7) in which he not only clarified his unique theology but slashed out at the orthodoxies of the Church, which he saw as an obstacle to belief. In 1669, after Pascal's death, appeared his religious masterpiece, *Les Pensées*, which the author intended as a comprehensive perspective of the nature of Christianity. As it turned out, this series of texts was far less systematic than intended, but in the end addresses itself to the major issues of Christian theology, as felt, seen, and understood. It will be noted, from the start, that Pascal's style here is original, interspersing one sentence assertions, often highly allusive and poetic, with longer paragraphs of discursive (but always intimate) thought. The ultimate effect is a widening of language perspective, and a poetic release of inspiration from what might seem passively received statements of tradition.

THE PENSEES

Thoughts on Mind and on Style This first section of the *Pensees* stuns us with its blend of personality analyses: distinctions between the 'esprit de geometrie' (the spirit of geometry) and the 'esprit de finesse' (the spirit of finesse). Some minds, Pascal explains, grasp the principles of mathematics instinctively, and thrive on the knowledge and use of those principles. For them the rules governing the development of understanding are immediately apparent. When those same people turn to the principles governing the thought development within a literary text or a painting they are baffled, for they find no starting points or dividing lines. They are baffled by the profusion of intricately overlapping sets of principles. They see a seamless whole of propositions that are not specifically interrelated. Fixed though we are as persons of individual character, we yet most admire those among us who are 'universal persons,' of whom we can say, not that he is a mathematician or a writer, but that he is a 'gentleman.' He is a skilled human being.

The misery of man without God. Pascal exceeds himself in portraying the minuteness of the human being in the vastness of the cosmos. 'For in fact what is man in nature? A nothing in comparison with the

infinite, an all in comparison with the nothing; a mean Between nothing and everything.' The misery of man without God lies In our Inability to fathom the depths of our being here—why we are here and where we are going? It is exactly at this point, says Pascal, that Descartes, who insists on knowing god, is most deeply frustrated, for the conditions of knowledge are here impossibly skewed against the knower, while the existential searcher, like Pascal who lives for the encounter with God, is at least able to bring home such testimonies as the lived awareness of his limitations. Many perspectives of later French existentialism—in Simone Weil, in Gabriel Marcel, in Jean-Paul Sartre—are anticipated here.

Self-love, need Miserable man, without God, hides away in a corner, where he can indulge the comfort of self-love. 'But what will man do? He cannot prevent this object that he loves from being full of faults and wants. Here begins the series of dissatisfactions inherent to mankind. Stability is nowhere, in time as we live it. 'He no longer loves the person whom he loved ten years ago. I quite believe it. She is no longer the same, nor is he. He was young, but so was she; she is quite different. He would perhaps love her yet, if she was as she was then.'

Diversion and Idleness It is part of the human tragedy that men cannot 'stay quietly in their own chamber.' The 'natural poverty of our feeble and mortal condition,' keeps us hopping ceaselessly from one activity to another...they do not know that it is the chase and not the quarry that they seek.' 'Faced with the futility of this needy condition, man turns to diversions which preoccupy him in his low times..' Is there a solution to this inherent weakness? Cannot God help? 'How hollow and full of ribaldry is the heart of man!' 'Diversion amuses us, and leads us unconsciously to death.' We are always preparing to be happy, and thus it is inevitable that we should never be so...'

Of the necessity of the wager With the multiple issues Pascal lodges under the above caption lie many harsh observations on the life that has befallen us, and it is in this region of thoughts that Pascal redirects his attack against Montaigne, whose brilliant but gentle skepticism seems to Pascal too mildly accepting of the essential brokenness of the human condition. The renowned wager, on which Pascal relies In the development of his perspective, inserts itself precisely where hope is required in the face of a hapless attitude like that of Montaigne, who has passed the stage of terror with which the human condition should by now have surrounded him. That God exists, is present to our very being, is the key wager we need to make, in confronting the actual desperation of our condition. To make that wager is to see your entire existence and its setting in a new light, and to open onto your hopelessness radiant paths of reinterpretation.

T S Eliot's introduction to Pascal's Pensées The British-American poet, publisher, and the author of *The Wasteland* (1922), wrote (published 1958) an Introduction to Pascal's *Pensees*, from which we can draw instructive lessons about the directions and genius of Pascal's thought in *The Pensees*. Eliot's epic poem dealt in fact with the desolate social and spiritual landscape of post WW 1 Europe, which devastated landscapes and persons. It was Eliot's obvious belief that a return to religious sensibility was the only path back into cultural survival. He did not mean, by this belief, to exclude from the healing path to recovery such skepticism as that of a Montaigne, who was no narrow skeptic, but a universally minded one, but he was eager to show the special existential relevance of a thinker like Pascal, who gave his listeners the very struggle of the way back to sanity, in a time of widespread uncertainty and pain. Pascal, for Eliot, had the 'mind to conceive, and the sensibility to feel, the disorder, the futility, the meaninglessness, the mystery of life and suffering; the mind of those who can only find peace through a satisfaction of the whole being.' The depth lag separating Montaigne from Pascal, in this discussion initiated by Eliot, bears on the entire motion of early seventeenth century French thought, to go beyond the Renaissance life-fascination of a figure like Montaigne. Both Descartes and the Pascal who carried reflection onto a newly passionate level, gave all they could to the reformulation of the human condition, and Pascal in particular went to the center of history's furthering, showing us new operational pathways into formulating ,and ideally solving, the unremitting dilemmas of 'being here as a person.'