

Pensées

"Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is."

"The only thing that consoles us for our miseries is diversion, and yet this is the greatest of our miseries. For it is mainly what prevents us from thinking about ourselves ... diversion amuses us and guides us imperceptibly towards death."

"For after all what is man in nature? A nothing in relation to infinity, all in relation to nothing, a central point between nothing and all and infinitely far from understanding either ... He is equally incapable of seeing the nothingness out of which he was drawn and the infinite in which he is engulfed."

In a nutshell

As we have little to lose by a belief in a higher power, and plenty to gain if it is true, it is rational that we believe.

In a similar vein

René Descartes *Meditations on First Philosophy* (p 86)

Søren Kierkegaard *Fear and Trembling* (p 162)

Gottfried Leibniz *Theodicy* (p 178)

Michel de Montaigne *Essays* (p 208)

Blaise Pascal

Blaise Pascal possessed a great scientific mind. After building 50 prototypes he invented the mechanical calculator, the Pascaline, which inspired Leibniz to build his own. Through correspondence with Fermat Pascal developed probability, and he had brilliant insights in the philosophy of mathematics. He invented the hydraulic press and the syringe, and showed clearly how mercury barometers work. Pascal's law relates to a unit of pressure, and his famous wager is appreciated as a seminal contribution to game theory, probability, and decision theory. The Pascal computer programming language is named after him.

How did this staunch defender of the scientific method come to be so intense a defender of spiritual faith?

When Pascal died, a note was found sewn into his coat. It recorded a mystical experience on November 23, 1654, after which he gave up his work in mathematics and science and devoted himself to matters of spirit and philosophy. In a short but busy life, Pascal had already in his twenties converted to a more intense form of Christianity (Jansenism, under the influence of his sister Jacqueline), but ill health in his thirties prompted him further to questions of human beings' place in the universe.

In private, he wrote reams of notes that he aimed to work into an apology for Christianity, and after his death these *Pensées* (thoughts) were put into some order by his family. In a time of growing skepticism toward established religion, Pascal felt it his mission to address the nonchalant, irreverent worldview of Montaigne, on the one hand, and the overly rational stance of figures like Descartes, who had died only ten years before the *Pensées* was compiled. He wished to show the reader that both skepticism and the resignation to fate that Stoic philosophy offered lead to directionless misery. His answer to both was simple faith. However, because people in his time increasingly sought a rational basis for their beliefs, he hatched the idea of a wager that would put the benefits of religion beyond doubt.

Pascal's Wager

"If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is."

Pascal drew on his mastery of probability and mathematics to create his wager. He starts with the question of whether God exists. This is something for which reason can never provide an answer; indeed, something it cannot confirm either way. Yet he asks us to wager that it is true. Surely, he reasons, we would be mad not to take a chance in a game in which there was potentially so much to gain ("an eternity of life and happiness") and so little to lose (a belief proved wrong). Noting that wagering for the existence of God is likely to make you act in accordance with your belief – that is, to be a better person who is convinced of God's love – Pascal goes on to ask:

"Now, what harm will befall you in taking this side? You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, generous, a sincere friend, truthful. Certainly you will not have those poisonous pleasures, glory and luxury; but will you not have others? I will tell you that 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 recognise that you have wagered for something certain and infinite, for which you have given nothing."

This may sound attractive, the nonbeliever may say, but still there is nothing certain in it. That is right, Pascal says, we cannot be absolutely certain, but then the outcomes of battles and sea voyages are never certain either, and we cannot know whether we will still be alive tomorrow. However, is it not wise to make a small bet on something with shortish odds, which if it is true will deliver huge benefits? For himself, he says,

"I would have far more fear of being mistaken, and of finding that the Christian religion was true, than of not being mistaken in believing it true."

We can apply Pascal's wager without believing that there is a God as such. Rather, we can bet that there exists some form of absolute or universal truth, and that this truth is positive. If we see its effects in our life and community, it is quite rational to make it central to our existence.

The downside of doubt

Pascal foresaw that in a secular age, the default position for most people would not be "I have no reason to believe, so I don't." He understood doubt, because he had seen enough things to suggest that there was no God. But he also came to the view that life could not be explained satisfactorily on a purely physical

plane. In a section titled "The misery of man without God," Pascal asserts that only by giving ourselves up totally to a higher power can we find peace, truth and happiness. Not doing so brings despair, darkness, confusion, and error. Answering those who ask why, if God is real, he is not more evident, Pascal retorts, "Instead of complaining that God has hidden himself, you will thank him for revealing so much of himself."

He notes that there are only three kinds of people:

"Those who serve God, having found Him; others who are occupied in seeking Him, not having found Him; while the remainder live without seeking Him, and without having found Him. The first are reasonable and happy, the last are foolish and unhappy; those between are unhappy and reasonable."

For Pascal, lack of faith was a kind of laziness, a view summed up by T.S. Eliot in his introduction to the *Pensées*:

"The majority of mankind is lazy-minded, incurious, absorbed in vanities, and tepid in emotion, and is therefore incapable of either much doubt or much faith; and when the ordinary man calls himself a sceptic or an unbeliever, that is ordinarily a simple pose, cloaking a disinclination to think anything out to a conclusion."

To go beyond doubt was in Pascal's mind a great human achievement. Humble people believe cheerfully, in contrast to others "who have sufficient understanding to see the truth, whatever they may have against it." This is his pointed challenge to the "smart" people of his time to think through their beliefs instead of falling into a lazy, ironic doubting of everything.

Overcoming our vanity

Despite his opposition to Montaigne, Pascal was nevertheless highly influenced by his fellow Frenchman's ironic, "I give up" view of human nature. We assume an air of certainty, reasonableness, and knowledge, but man's general condition, Pascal writes, is "Inconstancy, boredom, anxiety," and, above all, vanity. If you cannot see just how vain the world is, he said, then you must be very vain yourself.

He observes, "We have such a lofty view of man's soul that we cannot bear being despised and not esteemed by some soul. And all the happiness of men consists in this esteem." People do crazy things for love, or rather to be loved, and this action frequently "disturbs the whole earth, princes, armies, the

entire world." Pascal makes a famous remark about the face of an Egyptian ruler: "Cleopatra's nose: had it been shorter, the whole face of the earth would have been changed." Minor things (the beauty of one woman, for instance) can be the point on which history turns.

The scholarly Pascal observes the folly of people spending their precious days "chasing a ball or a hare." It is not the object that matters, but the chase itself, because people go to extraordinary lengths to avoid thinking properly about themselves. He offers an alternative recipe for happiness:

"To bid a man live quietly is to bid him live happily ... in which he can think at leisure without finding therein a cause of distress."

This thought is sometimes rendered as, "All man's miseries come from not being able to sit alone in a room." We are miserable unless we are diverted, but diversion, while it amuses us, is all the time guiding us "imperceptibly towards death." In truth, our best moments are those spent examining our motives and our purpose, since they correct wrong action and open us up to divine order, truth, and intention.

Yet Pascal notes that humans are potentially great because we can recognize our own wretchedness, something a dog or a tree cannot do. From our concupisence (our natural lust for people and things) we have somehow, nevertheless, managed to draw a moral order:

"Man must not think he is on a level with either beasts or angels, and he must not be ignorant of those levels, but should know both."

Believing that we are simply smart animals debases us, but neither can we say that we are purely spiritual beings. The goal of life is to accept the fact of the body and our natural inclinations, and still recognize our divine origins.

Final comments

The *Pensées* includes Pascal's well-known distinction between the mathematical and the intuitive mind, the *esprit de géométrie* and the *esprit de finesse*. The problem with someone of the mathematical mind is that, because they are used to knowing clear and unchallenged principles, they do not trust intuitive knowledge. They can only talk in terms of definitions and axioms, but as a result of this narrow and over-exacting mindset they miss out on other kinds of knowing. (For Pascal, Descartes was a good example of such a mind.) Intuitive principles – the laws of life, if you like – are "felt rather than seen,"

and "there is the greatest difficulty in making them felt by those who do not o themselves perceive them." Yet they are real nonetheless.

This, then, is how Pascal bridges the scientific and spiritual worldview: at the level of the person: we should nurture our intuition or metaphysical sense, which saves much time in making our way in the world, taking us to the heart of things, yet also be open to accepting abstract principles appreciated through reason.

Perhaps the most famous line in the *Pensées* is "*Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point*," usually translated as "The heart has its reasons, which reason knows nothing of." Though the phrase is often appropriated to explain the actions of those in love, Pascal's meaning was more general. We should not doubt when we can use our reasoning powers, and when we can use rational human judgment then we should do so. However, the highest kind of reasoning admits that there are matters where reason stops, submitting to a different order of reality.

Pascal, scientist and mathematician, wanted passionately to know all there was to know of the world, but was wise enough to admit that not everything could be known. God seems to want both from us: the highest use of our reason to act and create in the world, and acceptance that we are "spiritual beings having a human experience." On the biggest questions we need ultimately to submit to a greater intelligence, to which our "heart" provides a link.

Blaise Pascal

Pascal was born in 1623 in Clermont, France. His mother died when he was 3 and his father Etienne moved the family, including two sisters, to Paris. Pascal was precociously bright and attended meetings on mathematics and philosophical matters with his father. When he was 17 the family moved again to Rouen, where Etienne was made tax commissioner. To assist him in tax calculations, Pascal invented his mechanical calculators.

In his twenties Pascal and his saintly sister Jacqueline converted to Jansenism, a stricter form of Christianity, and became affiliated with the monastery of Port-Royal. Two years after his mystical experience he published his religious and political polemics the "Provincial Letters" to defend Jansenism against attack by the Jesuits. In the same year he saw his niece Marguerite miraculously healed of a lachrymal fistula at Port-Royal.

Pascal died in 1662, at only 39. The cause of his death is uncertain, but was probably tuberculosis or stomach cancer.

