

Pascal's Serious Call to the Careless Worldling.

IT may be well to begin this article with some indication why it is worth our while to give serious attention to the thoughts on religion of a lay-writer of the seventeenth century—thoughts, too, which for the most part are merely rough jottings of miscellaneous notes, made in preparation for a work which this writer, seriously invalidated by overstrain almost before he was out of his 'teens, never lived to complete: he died, prematurely worn out, at thirty-nine. Our justification lies in the fact that Pascal was one of the greatest geniuses produced, not merely by the clever French nation, but by the whole human race: and that this genius was chiefly concentrated on the study and practice of the Christian religion, during the period in which these thoughts were penned.

THE GENIUS OF PASCAL.

Like many other geniuses, he manifested an astounding precocity. His education he owed entirely to his father, a government officer of finance, who was himself a distinguished mathematician, and in touch with the leading scientific men of his day. In particular, Pascal says that he had been "educated by a singular method, and with more than paternal cares" in the maxim, only to draw conclusions when they were sufficiently evidenced, and to deny, or suspend judgment on, them when they were not. Consequently, the son insisted on knowing the reason for everything, and if dissatisfied with those commonly given, he would not rest till he had found one that satisfied him. One day, in his eleventh year, he noticed that the sound produced by striking a plate with a knife ceased at once if a hand was laid on the plate. This started him on enquiries which issued in the composition of a little treatise on sound. It is further alleged, by his sister-biographer, that he discovered for himself geometry as far as Euclid 1. 32. Thereupon his father allowed him to read Euclid's *Elements* as a recreation: and he also frequented the discussions of the scientific circles in Paris. The outcome of these "recreations" was a treatise on Conic Sections, wherein he set forth a theorem "from which all the properties of conics can be deduced".¹ At the age of twenty he set about devising a calculating machine, to assist his father in the elaborate financial calculations which kept him at work till late in the night. It involved years of labour, with the making of no less than fifty

¹ *Chevalier, Pascal*, p. 55.

models. Again, with the object of disproving the then current notion that nature abhors a vacuum, he made exhaustive experiments that prepared the way for the barometer and the pneumatic pump. From these he advanced to a general investigation of the equilibrium of liquids, which similarly revealed the principle of the hydraulic press. He was further the inventor of the so-called arithmetical triangle, which serves, among other things, the calculation of arithmetical combinations, and is applicable to the theory of probabilities. He was also the founder of the various branches of the higher Calculus. I can mention here only one other scientific achievement. One night, when an excruciating neuralgia put sleep out of the question, he sought to divert himself by attacking the problem of the cycloid, i.e. the curve traced by a given point on the radius of a circle during one revolution of the circle on a horizontal line. When a friend called in the morning to enquire after him, he learned that the neuralgia was forgotten, and the properties of the curve fully made out!

Before going further, we may note some consequences significant for his subsequent thoughts on religion. But first it should be said that his father had drummed into him the maxim that his enquiries should be confined to the realm of nature—"nothing that is the object of faith can be the object of reason". Hence he remained uninfluenced by the talk of free-thinking companions, and in later life never applied himself to *speculations* in theology, but directed the whole strength of his mind to know and practise the Christian *life* in its perfection. Now for our consequences.

(1) He refused all before-hand theorising about matters in the region of science, and insisted on their ascertainment by investigation of the *facts*—where possible, by experiment. Thus he kept an open mind, and was prepared to admit the actualness of things seemingly incomprehensible, if only the available evidence pointed that way.

(2) He was led by his mathematical investigations to recognise the existence, though beyond the reach of our sense-perceptions, of both the infinitely great, and the infinitely little.

(3) He realised, also, the "discontinuity" of things in the universe: you cannot increase a magnitude of a certain order by adding to it magnitudes of an inferior order, *e.g.* points to lines, or surfaces to solids. This furnished an analogy for his doctrine of the three diverse orders in the human sphere, of body, mind and spirit. "The infinite distance between bodies and minds typifies the infinitely more infinite distance between minds and love, for this is supernatural. From all bodies together you could not elicit a tiny thought of them . . . from all bodies and minds

together you could not extract a movement of true love" (793.)²

Pascal was (finally) a supreme literary genius. More than any other single writer, he is the former of modern French prose, unique for its precision, lucidity, and grace. The best known example is his immortal *Letters to a Provincial*, in which his urbane but penetrating wit made an exposure of the foibles of the Jesuits which they have never effectually countered.

All these stupendous powers of thought and expression were devoted to the defence and exposition of the Christian faith. To show how this came about, we will next trace in outline the chief stages of his religious pilgrimage.

PASCAL'S RELIGIOUS GROWTH.

The religion of his family was at first the conventional Catholicism of their day and nation, which put no restraint on their sharing in the pursuits and diversions of society. But in 1646, his father was treated for an accidental injury to his leg by two local gentlemen who were adherents of the Jansenist party, a puritanic reform-movement within the Catholic Church, which sought to return to the simpler ideals of the church of the Fathers, more particularly to the theology of Augustine, and to a stricter manner of life. The whole Pascal family were speedily won to it. This is sometimes spoken of as Pascal's "first conversion." But it was clearly much more a matter of his intellect than his heart. It involved a mental assent to the dogmas of Jansenism,³ and an increased occupation with external observances of religion. But as yet there was no surrender of the whole man to the obedience of Christ. This sufficiently appears from its being followed some years later by his so-called "worldly" period.

By their father's death (1651), Pascal's sister Jacqueline was set free to fulfil a long cherished wish of becoming a nun at Port Royal. But Pascal, who had formerly encouraged, now opposed it, needing the help of his sister's dowry for his now expensive mode of life⁴. He was moving in a fashionable circle whose ideal was the *honnête homme*, the polished man of the world, who cultivated complaisant manners, genteel accomplishments, agreeable conversation, and grace and elegance even in his vices. This intercourse served to convince Pascal that the study of man was of greater practical importance for the ends of life than were the abstract sciences. He himself still avoided the graver vices,

² The numbers of the Fragments quoted are those of the now classical arrangement of L. Brunschwig (Hachette).

³ Much like Calvinism, though Jansenists were at pains to repudiate the accusation.

⁴ Ultimately he gave way to her.

and to the end of his life his ideals of conduct were largely influenced by those of *honnêteté*.

Before long, however, he became deeply disgusted with these unsatisfying vanities, withdrew from them, and devoted himself earnestly to religious exercises, but felt himself far from God. At length one night he had the intense experience which resulted in his second and definitive conversion. What took place on Nov. 23, 1654, between 10.30 and 12.30, we learn only from the rough jottings made by Pascal himself at the time, and worn on his person for the rest of his life—the so-called Memorial.⁵ I extract the more noteworthy features.

1. It is headed, "FEU" (fire). Whether this points to a visionary element in the experience cannot be determined. Was there something that recalled to his mind the Burning Bush, or the "tongues of fire" at Pentecost? Or was it no more than the Psalmist's "While I was musing, the fire burned"?

2. "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, not of the philosophers or savants"—words that proclaim the spiritual sterility of his scientific and worldly past.

3. "Certainty, feeling, joy, peace"—he has now immediate and rejoicing conviction of God, in contrast to the doubting and miserable isolation of his recent past.

4. "God of Jesus Christ . . . only found by the ways taught in the Gospel"⁶ . . . of cardinal importance. It is through Christ alone that we arrive at the true and saving knowledge of God, as our personal God and Saviour.

5. "Oblivion of the world and all else outside of God"—marks his final breach with worldly life.

6. "I had separated from Him. . . . My God, wilt Thou leave me? O that I be not separated from Him for ever!" Here is conviction of *sin* through Christ. He is clear that by participation in worldly life he had drawn a gulf between himself and God.

7. "Renunciation total and sweet". Pascal can and does now fully renounce the old life, and surrender his whole man entirely to God. We note the conviction that living faith is unattainable by any thought of our reason, or effort of our will, and must be the gift of divine grace. We shall find these convictions underlying all the teaching of his *Apology*, even if the conception of such a book did not take possession of his mind from that hour. In it he draws upon the *whole* of his previous experience, scientific and worldly, as well as religious.

⁵ Brunshwicg, p. 142.

⁶ Below, he quotes John xvii. 3.

THE APOLOGY.

Sooner or later, this work became his primary occupation. It was natural that he should feel a great desire to win his former companions, whether avowed atheists or polite sceptics; but especially the careless worldling, too indifferent to give a serious thought to religion at all: him Pascal recognised as the most difficult case.

In the first place, he says, we have to get rid of men's *aversion* to religion. Begin then, by showing that it (1) is not contrary to reason, (2) deserves respect for its understanding of human nature: then make men wish it true, and finally show them that it is true (187). Bear in mind, however, that in most men, the will has more to do with their opinions than the reason (99). Their will is inclined to happiness and things that promise it, and when it comes into collision with the reason, commonly has the best of it. We must, therefore, first study man, and not merely human nature in the abstract, but actual individuals. For these differ almost infinitely, not only one from another, but from themselves in different moods. This is a difficult task, in which the merely scientific intellect will be nonplussed. It can draw inferences correctly from comparatively few principles. Man's spirit, on the other hand, can only be inferred from its outward manifestations in speech or conduct: and the underlying principles of these are almost indefinitely numerous. Further, the same manifestation may go back to different principles in different people. Hence the investigator needs *finesse*—almost a divining sense.

We shall best make truth acceptable to people if we can make the reasons we give for it appear to be their own (10). There will be *some* element of truth in their own view of the subject. Begin by recognising this, and then show them the aspect of their view which is false (9). Remember, too, that you cannot use such arguments as have weight only with those who are already believers (authority of Scripture, Church, etc.). You must deal in the arguments of common-sense and natural feeling, e.g. the folly of carelessness where eternal interests are at stake (195).

By request of some Jansenist friends, Pascal gave a sketch of the plan of his proposed work. Of this we have two rather differing accounts, one, at least, from a hearer of the discourse. He gave it some years before his death, and probably the plan changed in his own mind as he developed his thoughts in detail. He himself says (61) that strictly systematic order cannot be kept in such matters. "The mind proceeds by demonstration from principle, but the heart has another order of its own, the order

of love" (283). This depends chiefly on digression wherever needed to make sure of carrying the hearer with you.

But there is a fragment from Pascal's own hand which runs thus:—Part I. Wretchedness of man without God. Part II. Happiness of man with God—Alternatively: Part I. That nature is corrupted: proved from nature itself. Part II. That there is a Restorer: proved by Scripture (60). Another fragment (527) confirms the supposition that these would be the main branches of the work, and also adds a third. "Knowledge of God without that of man's misery makes for pride. Knowledge of his misery without that of God makes for despair. Knowledge of Jesus Christ supplies the mediating principle, because therein we find both God and our misery".

MAN'S WRETCHEDNESS.

Nature, as a whole, presents to man the spectacle of a boundless universe, to which neither his senses nor thought can set a limit—the Infinitely Great. But in the tiniest insect there is also a whole universe, made up of ever minuter invisible parts the Infinitely Little—Man himself is a sort of middle term between the two—the Infinite and nothing. Yet of both extremes he is necessarily ignorant, and cannot learn either the source or the ultimate goal of things. It is true that by nature he is capable of knowledge (430). He is visibly made for thinking—therein lies all his worth and merit (146). A mere atom in the universe, he is yet greater than it, for while it can easily crush him (176), he knows that he dies, and the universe knows nothing of it (347). But though great by nature, man's thought is mean by its defects (365). We can't help desiring truth as well as happiness (437), but we are capable neither of happiness nor certainty. There is no truth in man, unless it be his knowledge of natural things. But our natural science has its obvious limitations, *e.g.* it has to assume the principles on which it reasons, such as the reality of space, time, number.⁷ Again, how can man, who is only a part, expect to comprehend the whole? or indeed, even a part—for every part is ultimately linked up with the whole (72). Besides, man is a compound, of body and soul, and therefore cannot know things that are simple, whether body or soul (72). Next, then, let him scrutinise himself (66). Pascal has indeed no systematic or scientific study of man's nature, but he deals at length, and in considerable detail with its frailties.

On *reason* he is severe. It misleads us, partly because it operates with so many principles that it is difficult to keep them all present to the mind at once (252). Its proper field is the realm

⁷ And cf. 21, 40.

of nature. The truths of religion it can introduce only to the mind. God's grace alone implants them in the heart (185). A friend having told Pascal that he disliked things instinctively, and the reasons came to him afterwards, Pascal comments, "I think we find the reasons only because we dislike a thing" (473) *i.e.* in present day phrase, we "rationalise" our desires. Reason, in fact, is pliable in any direction (274, 561). In short, "this corrupt reason has corrupted everything" (294)—"How I love to see this proud reason humiliated and suppliant!" (388). "The last move of reason is to recognise that there are an infinity of things that surpass it" (267). "There is nothing so conformable to reason as this disavowal of reason" (262).

Pascal proposed to have a chapter on powers that deceive us. The most powerful cause of our errors is the war which exists between reason and the senses, which continually mislead each other. The senses abuse the reason by false appearances. The passions, again, disturb the senses and give them false impressions (82, 83). Our mind is distracted from efficient working by the slightest noise in its neighbourhood (366). And memory, which is involved in all the operations of reason, is at the mercy of chance (370).

IMAGINATION, "that mistress of error and falsity," can even suspend the action of the senses (82). It is the more deceptive because it does not always deceive, but presents true and false in the same character. This arrogant power delights in dominating our reason. It has established a second nature in man. It fills those who entertain it with a satisfaction far more complete than reason can give. Even a magistrate will not listen with his wonted respect to the preacher, if the latter appears in the pulpit unshaved and dishevelled.⁸ Imagination magnifies petty things, and the present moment, to the disparagement of great things—God and eternity (195, 84). It seems, indeed, given us expressly to lead into necessary error. And we never grow out of this weakness (88), however much we change with time (122f.)⁹

CUSTOM is another distorting agent. We are creatures of habit. What we call principles of our nature are really only principles of habit. Habit is indeed "second nature", replacing the first. Perhaps nature itself is only a *first* custom (93). There's nothing you can't render matter of nature, and nothing natural you can't undo again (94). We regard as correct what we are accustomed to hear praised, and even our calling in life is apt to be determined by local custom (97). We are also biased by *selflove*. It is the

⁸ Pascal gives numerous other illustrations, some of which we should refer primarily to other causes—mental association, taste, nerves or *suggestion* (cf. 536).

⁹ Other principles of error are ingrained prejudice, charm of novelty, sickness and self interest.

nature of our "me" to love only itself (100). It is hateful, being wrong in making itself the centre of all, and noxious to others in wanting to subject them to itself (455). Though full of faults and wretchedness, it covets to be the object of other's love and esteem. Hence we try to conceal our real self from ourselves as well as others (404, 400), and labour incessantly to adorn and preserve our imaginary self (147). One evidence of self-love is the fact that we have to be so "round about" in reproving other's faults, and that no one speaks to our face as he does behind our back (100). If all knew what they say one of another, there would not be four friends left in the world (101). Out of self-love, again, we contrive always to be proud of ourselves, and so provide a counterweight to all our woes (407, 405). Commonly we desire knowledge only to get ourselves talked about (152). Though it is only the acts done in secret that are truly estimable (159), yet all men, from cooks to philosophers, desire admirers; "even I who write this may have the same envy" (150). People are ready even to die for fame (156). DIVERSION is merely an escape from misery. Most intolerable to man is it to be in a state of inactivity: he broods on his troubles, present or future, and is plunged into *ennui* or even despair. (139). We are even so wretched that we are *ennui'd* by natural constitution, yet so vain that even a game of ball is sufficient to divert us. It is to be noted that the diversion consists not in the prize, but the excitement of the chase—the gamble, not the money won. At the same time, there survives in us a secret instinct that happiness is to be found only in repose; so we seek repose in agitation. But all our diversions have fatal defects; they come from without us, and hence are liable to be disturbed by a thousand chances (170). And finally, there awaits us death. "The last act is a scene of blood, however fair be the comedy in all the rest; a little earth is thrown at last on our head, and that's all of it for ever" (210).

All these foibles issue in many *contrarities*. Man is by turns credulous and incredulous, timid and rash (125), dependent, with a craving for independence, etc. Everyone has fancies of what is good that are contrary to his own good (106). The world is vain, but unconscious of its vanity (161); weak, but not amazed at its weakness (374). People take pride in their professions of humility (377). In health we worry through apprehension of deprivations that we don't feel when the sickness comes (109)¹⁰. Yet all these *contrarities*, says Pascal, are what have soonest brought me to the true religion (424). To be true, it must explain to us these astonishing *contrarities* (430). A. J. D. FARRER.

¹⁰ Other examples, 104, 136, 172, 109, *fin*.

To be continued.