

## Pascal's Serious Call to the Careless Worldling.

(Continued.)

### MAN'S GREATNESS.

JUDGED by the multitude of men, man is indeed vile. But judged by the end to which he is destined, incomparably great (415). This appears already in the fact that he is a thinking creature. Unlike the animals, he is aware that to be like the beasts (as he now is) is miserable (341ff). For this means that he is fallen from his proper condition (409). His misery is that of a discrowned king (398). His ineradicable though vain desires for truth and happiness point in the same direction (437). The pursuit of glory, which is his greatest baseness, is at the same time the greatest indication of his excellence, for so high does he rate men's *reason* that no advantage satisfies him unless he has their esteem (400, 401, 404). Human justice, again, shows his greatness, in that he has extracted from his concupiscence an admirable form of government (402), *i.e.* people who have repudiated all laws of God and nature have made themselves laws, which they strictly obey (393). The ideal would be a union of rights and force, but being unable to make right mighty, they have made might right. Justice is in fact what is established (312). The established order, including different social ranks, is the safeguard against revolution (332). But people obey it because they believe it to be right. They must not be told the real state of the case. Canny folk will speak as the common people, and keep their own thoughts at the back of their heads (336).

This may be a convenient point at which to take account of Pascal's doctrine of original sin. He represents the Divine Wisdom as saying "I created man holy, innocent, perfect, filled him with light and understanding, imparted to him My glory and My wonders. But he could not sustain so much glory without falling into presumption. He would make himself his own centre, and independent of My help. I left him to himself, with the result that to-day man has become like the beasts, so remote from Me that he has left to him scarcely an equivocal light of his Maker. The senses, unchecked by reason, have swept him on to the search for pleasures. He is dominated by the force or the attraction of created things. There remains but an impotent kind of intuition

of the happiness of men's original nature, and they are plunged in the wretchedness of their blindness and concupiscence, which has become their second nature" (430). Fallen man is incapable of truth or goodness (436). The natural evil of his state is the cause of all his evils (139). His sin is punished by error. His knowledge is clouded by passion (423). His heart is hollow and full of filthiness (143). His reason, corrupted, has corrupted everything, yet he prides himself precisely on his wisdom (460). Man is now contrary to God (438), and this implies that we are born in sin; otherwise God would be unjust (489).

Pascal, of course, takes literally the Bible story of the Fall. But that is not to say that his general position is invalidated by the modern critical treatment of that story. It rests primarily on the firm ground of present-day observable fact. Man's state is thus wretched: and in order to explain it, alongside of the traces in him of a better nature, we must posit some sort of moral catastrophe, in which the whole race is involved. Pascal himself is by no means blind to the difficulties. "We can conceive neither Adam's glorious state, nor the nature of his sin, nor its transmission to us. All it concerns us to know is that we are wretched, corrupt, separate from God, but redeemed by Christ" (560). Nothing could be more opposed to our "miserable" notions of justice than the eternal damnation of an infant, incapable of choice, for a sin committed 6,000 years before he was born; and yet, without this mystery, man is more incomprehensible to himself than is the mystery itself. Clearly it is God's purpose that we should only truly know ourselves by a simple submission of our reason (434). Original sin is folly to men, but Christianity admits it as such (1 Cor. i. 25). Elsewhere Pascal recognises the influence of inheritance in predisposing to sin and of social environment in infecting us with it.

Seeing that man is thus doomed to ignorance (327) and self-contrariety (412, 413), the safest course is to keep the middle line, avoiding extremes, whether in thought or conduct (378, 379, etc.). It is dangerous to stress too much either men's meanness or their greatness (418). Man is neither angel nor beast, and if you try to make him an angel, you make only a brute (358). "If he is boastful (says Pascal), I shall abase him; if he abases himself, I exalt him"—always contradicting him till he understands that he is an incomprehensible monster (420). He must both hate and love himself (423). "I should like then to bring a man to want to find truth, to be ready to follow it where he shall find it, disengaged from passions, as knowing how much they obscure his knowledge, and to hate the concupiscence which determines him of itself. I can only approve those who seek with tears" (423, 421).

## THE APPEAL.

How can man be got to face his tragic position, and to "seek with tears"? We cannot convince the careless, any more than they can us (795).—"All I know is that I must die soon, though what I know least is death itself. I only know that on leaving this world I fall for ever either into nonentity or into the hands of an offended God."<sup>1</sup> And from all this I conclude that I ought then to spend all my days without a thought of enquiry as to what should befall me (194). As though I could blot out eternity by refusing to think of it (195)! Why, it concerns the conduct of our whole life to know whether the soul is immortal or not (218, 194). Even in this life there is no good without the hope of another. One who does not seek is altogether unhappy and wrong. Such carelessness is to Pascal a monstrosity (194). These people must lack heart (196). Nay, nothing argues a *bad* disposition of heart more than *not* to wish the truth of the eternal promises. But indeed the majority of them are people who have heard say that it is "good manners" (194).

Here we have the proper background on which to view the famous and much discussed argument of the "Wager". In reviewing it we must bear in mind (1) Pascal's urgent sense of the careless man's awful danger, and his apathy in face of it: (2) the need of an argument that will shake such a man. Those whom he had in view were keen and habitual gamblers. He chooses a figure drawn from their master passion. When by its means he has shaken them out of their indifference into a spirit of anxious, humble enquiry, he will lift the whole discussion on to a higher plane.

Man's soul being yoked to a body, he thinks in terms of space, time and number, and cannot but regard these as matters of nature and necessity. Take, then, number and count—you cannot stop short of infinity. So infinity exists in number. All finite numbers are even or uneven: infinity can't be either. Hence we cannot know its nature. Similarly, while we may well think there is a God, yet since He has neither limits nor extension in space, we must be ignorant, not only of his nature, but even of his existence. God is infinitely incomprehensible. Christians therefore merely show their sense in confessing that they cannot prove their religion.<sup>2</sup>—"Ah! but that's no excuse for a non-Christian to accept it."—"God either is, or is not: what will you wager?"—"Since reason cannot decide, the right course is to decline to wager."—

<sup>1</sup> And "we shall die alone" (211).

<sup>2</sup> In p. 227 Pascal proposes procedure by dialogue—a form of the "order of the heart" (283). Of this we have an example, in what follows above.

"But you must: you are embarked, Suppose you say there is a God. If right, you have everything to gain; if wrong, nothing to lose."—"Quite true: but perhaps I am staking too much."—"Since the chances of winning and losing are equal, it would be worth while, if there were but two or three lives to gain, against one. But in this case there is an infinity of life, and that infinitely happy, to gain, a chance of infinite gain against a finite number of chances of loss; and your stake too is finite."—"The risk is certain, while the gain is uncertain, and the infinite distance between the certainty that you take a risk, and the uncertainty that you win, makes the finite good which you certainly risk equal to the uncertain infinite (gain)."—"Again, no! every gamester risks certainly to win an uncertainty. And it is false to say that there is an infinite distance between the certainty of risk and the uncertainty of gain. In point of fact, the infinity lies between certainty of winning and certainty of losing. If there are as many chances one way as the other, the course is to play equal against equal: then the certainty that you risk is equal to the uncertainty of winning."—"Admitted: but is there no means of seeing what lies beneath the game<sup>3</sup>?"—"Yes: Scripture etc."—"Well, but I am not free: I am forced to wager, but I am so made that I cannot believe."—"True: but this inability springs from your passions. Labour then to convince yourself, not by additional proofs of God, but by the subduing of your passions. Be willing to begin as did those who were once in your case, and have made the venture: they acted in every way as though they believed. Just that will naturally lead you to believe, and stultify you (i.e. your corrupt reason)."—"But that is what I am afraid of."—"Why? you have nothing to lose, and it will subdue the passions, your main hindrance. In short, you will gain, even in this life, by becoming honest, humble, beneficent, true . . . If this discourse pleases and convinces you, know that it is made by a man who was on his knees before and after, to pray this Infinite Being, to whom he submits his all, to submit to himself also your all, for your good and his glory" (233).

On this argument I add a few comments which may serve to bring out certain leading conceptions of Pascal.

(1) Proofs of God. "The philosophical proofs of God are too remote from human reasonings, and so involved that they impress most people but little: and those who are impressed at the moment, an hour after fear they have been taken in" (543). In nature Pascal sees too much for denial of God, and too little for certainty (229). We discern in it a Being necessary and infinite (469). Now to reason it is equally incomprehensible that

<sup>3</sup> Trotter translates "the faces of the cards".

God is, and that he is not (230). We may indeed argue from so many true things that we see to One who is the Truth indeed (233, *init.*). And no miracle is needed to make us see that we should *love* an only God (837). But just here comes the crux. What a distance there is between knowing God and loving God! (280). Knowledge of God from natural reasons is profitless and barren (556). A man may believe thus in God, and yet live an evil life (495). It is profitless as well as impossible to know God—or ourselves for that matter (548), apart from Jesus (549).

(2) Subdual of passions. This brings into view a peculiar and very important idea of Pascal's—his doctrine of the machine (246). He supposes a friend objecting "To what purpose search? Nothing happens." His answer is "Work the machine." In virtue of having bodies we are as much automata as minds. Proofs convince only the mind. But habit gives a bias to the automaton, which in turn draws the mind without its thinking. When once the mind has seen where truth lies, we must make use of habit to fix our belief, which otherwise escapes us constantly. We need a belief that is habitual, and inclining all our powers to obey this belief. Intellectual conviction will be inadequate, if the automaton is disposed to the contrary belief. He who accustoms himself to the faith believes it (89). *Act in all things as if you believed.* The will is a principal factor in belief (99). You would soon have faith if you gave up your pleasures. It rests with you to make a start, and test the truth of this programme (240). External penances dispose to internal penitence, as humiliations do to humility (698). In prayer, unite the outward forms with the inward element: it is only pride that keeps you back (250). And of course obey the precepts of morality: be at least "*honnêtes gens*" if you cannot yet be Christians (194).

(3) The heart. The best known of all Pascal's utterances is "The heart has its reasons, of which the reason itself knows nothing" (277). But there is more of it. "I say that the heart naturally loves the Universal Being and itself, and yields itself to one or the other, of choice, not by reason." Here heart is distinguished from reason. Reason is the organ of logical thinking about the natural world on the basis of data afforded by the senses. The heart covers (we may say) the parts of our mental processes which are instinctive, intuitive, immediate, *e.g.* the feelings, but also the fundamental conceptions which reason cannot prove, but has to assume as basic principles of all its reasonings, *e.g.* space, time, movement number. Knowledge of these is as sound as any of that which our reasonings supply. But especially it is the heart that perceives God. Faith is just "God sensible to the heart" (278). This perception of Himself God gives: we can only give men by reasoning a faith that is human

and not saving (282). Hence we need not be surprised to see simple folk believe without any reasoning. God implants the love of Himself and hatred of themselves (284). Again, men can believe without having read the Bible, because they have an entirely holy inward disposition, with which agrees what they hear of religion. They want to love God, but feel that they themselves have not the power, and they welcome the Christian message that God became man to make possible our union with Him (286). Such persons judge of the proofs by their heart as well as others do by the mind (287).—We can now pass to

THE PROOFS, which can be dealt with more summarily. Pascal is here much less original, a devoted Catholic layman, not consciously at least departing from the teaching and precepts of his church. He had made no considerable study of theology or philosophy, and his remarks on other religions are mostly superficial and unsympathetic. "They have neither morality that can please us, nor proofs that can give us pause" (619). That will be the true religion which knows our nature in its greatness and littleness, and the reason for both (433). It will teach worship of one God as source of all, and love of him alone as the object of all things (487). But beyond that it will constrain us to love God (491). Christianity alone meets these requirements. It is founded on a religion which itself has all the marks of true religion, miracles, prophecies, pure morality (737), except the love of God (675, 663). The Jews have a unique history. The oldest of peoples, yet they still persist, and all this is matter of prediction. They have faithfully preserved a book which records their disobedience to the law it embodies, and serves by its Messianic prophecies to condemn their rejection of Jesus. Thereby they furnish an incontestable witness to the truth of Christianity. The ceremonies of the Jewish religion are figurative of spiritual truth; as are the material benefits promised to the chosen people. Scripture has in fact two senses. Where God's word is false literally, it is true spiritually (687). Indeed everything in it that does not issue in love is figurative (670). Its obscurities are part of God's plan of "hiding" himself (Isaiah 45, 15). Perfect clearness would merely convey truth to the mind without moving the will or abasing our pride of intellect, which makes an idol of truth without love (581 f.) Were there no obscurity men would not perceive their corruption; but were there no light, they would have no hope of cure (586). There is enough clearness to enlighten the elect, and enough obscurity to humble them (578). In Jesus Christ all the seeming contradictions of Scripture are reconciled (684).

Christ is the expectation of the Old Testament, the pattern of the New, and the centre of both (740). He is a true interpreter

of the hidden things of prophecy (678). No one previously had taught anything like His way (733), nor can anyone do what He has done (600). Without Him we could truly know neither God nor ourselves (549). Without knowing our sins through Christ, we cannot truly know God, *i.e.* as Repairer of our misery (547). Knowledge of God that lacks this is mere Deism, and little better than atheism (556). Christ is indeed the true God of men (547). He is the universal Redeemer, who offered sacrifice on the cross for all men (774). He took on himself our unhappy condition that he might be able to be in all persons, and an example to all conditions (785). He is a God to be approached without pride, but under whom we can abase ourselves without despair (528). It is a condition of knowing Him truly to hate oneself (676).

The God that He reveals is not merely like the pagans' a source of geometrical truths or of an orderly cosmos, or like the Jews, a Deity that exercises his providence over the life and "goods" of men, so as to give a happy series of years to His worshippers. "The God of the Christians is a God of love and consolation: one who fills the soul and heart of those whom He possesses; who gives them an inward perception of their misery, and of his infinite mercy: who unites Himself to their inmost soul, and fills it with humility, joy, trust and love, and makes them incapable of having any end but Himself" (556). Thus the Christian faith aims at establishing hardly more than the corruption of our nature and its redemption by Jesus Christ (194). It consists properly in the mystery of the Redeemer, who by uniting in Himself the human and divine natures has drawn men out of the corruption of sin to reconcile them to God in His divine person (556). As we cannot love what is outside us, we must love a Being who is in us, yet is not us, *i.e.* God who is in us, *is* us, and yet not us (485 *cf.* 465). This union with God comes only by grace (430).—Christianity obliges us to think of the careless as capable of grace as long as they live, and of ourselves as capable of falling into their state of blindness (524). The true disciple is one set free by believing God's truth (519), and those are free children of God whose vocation it is to serve and be subject (671).

Finally, Christianity is the one religion adapted to all people, blending as it does the exterior element with the interior (251). The knowledge men had been able to attain by their greatest natural lights this religion taught to its children (444). The renunciation of pleasure to which Plato could not persuade some few chosen men, deeply indoctrinated therewith—to that a secret force persuades a hundred millions of ignorant men by means of a few words (724). Simple folk without strength resist all the great and wise of the earth, and lead them to submit to them

(783). Even gentle girls undergo martyrdom (772).—To sum up, no one is so happy, reasonable, virtuous and lovable as a Christian (541).

We will take leave of Pascal in adding his personal testimony to what the grace of God had done for him (550). "I love all men as my brethren, because they have been redeemed. I love poverty, because He loved it. I love (earthly) goods, because they furnish the means of assisting the wretched. I keep faith with everybody. I do not render evil to those who do it to me; but I wish them a state like mine, in which neither good nor evil is received from men. I try to be just, true, sincere and faithful toward all men: and I have a tender heart for those to whom God has united me more closely: and whether I am alone or before the eyes of men, in all my actions I keep in view the God who is to judge these actions, and to whom I have devoted them all . . . and every day I bless my Redeemer, who . . . from a man full of weakness, miseries, concupiscence, pride and ambition, has made a man free from all these evils by the power of his grace, to which is due all the glory."

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*Young, Strong and Free*, 52 Talks to Boys and Girls, edited by J. R. Edwards. (Kingsgate Press, 2s. 6d.)

Dr. Townley Lord and Miss Phyllis Morgan selected these talks from more than two hundred submitted for a recent *Baptist Times* competition. Many of them show great ingenuity and no doubt have been (and will be) most effective addresses. Not more than three or four deal with Biblical incidents or texts; very few find their inspiration in Christian history. One cannot but ask, if these talks may be accepted as a cross-section of those now being given in our churches, whether the right use is being made of the few minutes specially directed to the children.