

ARTICLE VII.

THE RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY OF PASCAL.

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PASCAL, one of the last great representatives of the mediaeval idealism, is marked by an elevation and purity all his own. As writer, mathematician, and physicist, the author of the "Pensées" and the "Lettres Provinciales" takes rank with Descartes. His thought was influenced by Cartesianism, by the Pyrrhonism of Montaigne, by the system of Epictetus, by Port Royal, and by Augustinianism. As a scientific thinker, he was mainly indebted to Descartes. From him Pascal learnt to make mathematics the training-ground of the spirit, and to regard thought as the specific worth or value of man. Philosophical speculation Pascal did not cultivate as an end in itself: he valued it as it could prove an aid in bringing men to religious belief. With no philosophical system of his own, Pascal's influence on French thought was yet such as to render his name significant for the history of philosophy. His religious genius—his capacity for faith—led him to leave geometrical and physical researches, that he might pursue religious thought and inquiry. He made the psychological study of man the basis of the knowledge of God, more after the fashion of Augustine, than by the rationalistic mode of Descartes. He did not even pursue moral science in any technical philosophic sense.

The idea of the Infinite plays an important part in Pascal's philosophy. He speaks, in express terms, of the universe as

an infinite sphere, whose center is everywhere, and whose circumference nowhere. He dwells not only on the immeasurable vastness of its dimensions, but on the innumerableness of its parts. The incomprehensibility of the infinite universe to man is, in his view, due to man's place in Nature, which renders him incapable of comprehending things in the infinity of their beginning and their ending. Pascal thought we know that the Infinite exists, but do not know its nature. Man, as finite, has, in his view, no standard for the idea of the Infinite: mystery and incomprehensibility are therefore, he thinks, the end for man; in other words, he declares we are a mean between everything and nothing. All this, however, would make an easier entrance to agnosticism than he thought. It is not correct, however, to say that Pascal denies the legitimacy of the metaphysical proofs of God: what he emphasizes is their difficulty and their inutility in certain forms of presentation. He says that "the metaphysical proofs of God are so remote from human reasoning, and so complicated, that they strike us but little," and "this sort of proofs can only guide to a speculative knowledge of God." The knowledge of God must not, in Pascal's view, rest upon the mind alone, but also upon the soul, else we "make an idol of truth itself." Pascal thinks God is perceptible to the heart naturally; but the soul has, for all that, to apply itself and its volitional power, else it will not rise to the idea of God. This divine feeling, unlike slow reasoning, "acts in an instant, and yet is always ready to act." He is like much modern thinking in this. Pascal is very different from Descartes in his treatment of the concept of God. Descartes had given it only metaphysical value, making it the necessary presupposition of the existence of thought. But Pascal, by a new insight, gave the God-concept its place in re-

ligion and in ethics. It was through religion Pascal reached this discernment. "Labour to convince yourself," he says, "not by increase of the proofs of God, but by the diminution of your passions." He recognized the validity of human reason in its own realm, but he would make it conscious of its own weakness and limitations: he would have it known that its knowledge is but relative: he would have it acknowledge that it is necessary to believe. Reason was, in the seventeenth century, viewed as in some sort arbiter or king in all things, only reason was regarded as itself belonging to Nature. The orthodox method of viewing life was that of supernaturalism or super-rational insight. But the foundations of religion were laid by Pascal deep in the needs of human nature and in our spiritual intuitions. The practical aspect of the rational search for God has Pascal's emphasis: we must know our imperfection, as well as the fact of our existence. Pascal even thought it the crowning act of reason to acknowledge that a multitude of things lie beyond its reach. But there was, I think, for all that, no more fundamental fact for Pascal than the fact of intellectual life. The analysis of the heart, and of the working of the passions, yet formed Pascal's great aim. He held that there is a moral condition required of the reasoning that would rise to God. For "it is incomprehensible that there should be a God, and incomprehensible that there should not be; that there should be a soul in the body, and that we should have no soul; that the world should have been created, and that it should not." Hence deeper digging than merely intellectual is needed to gain certainty. It is not enough to say that Pascal makes everything hinge upon the heart without considering what he means by the heart. When he says that "the heart has reasons of which the reason knows nothing," he evidently

means the spiritual intuitions. But he did not subordinate the understanding to sentiment. This setting of the heart over against the reason thus meant, in his case, less the emotions and the desires than the power by which we intuitively apprehend the eternal and the infinite. The intuitional power or faculty was in Pascal not free from the rule of revelational authority.

Pascal is distinguished by his fine sense of the superiority of man to the blind and monstrous forces of nature, as we see in his great saying about man being a "reed," but a "thinking reed," and greater than the universe, in virtue of his consciousness. This consciousness of limit, over against the unlimited, is a striking feature, here and elsewhere, in Pascal. Voltaire only revealed himself when he declared, as touching this, how thought made the whole dignity of man. Too often, however, Pascal means by the term reason simply ratiocination, or something too near of kin to a syllogism. Pascal had absorbed the spirit of geometry and the spirit of acuteness too thoroughly to be anything but clear and precise, and largely free from the vagueness and obscurity of the mystic. His so-called skepticism does not really belong to the order of genuine skepticism: his mind had, I think, too much insight for such a skepticism; when he seems to apply methodical doubt, it was only to bring the religious life to independent validity. But there was, of course, a certain skepticism involved in his Christian pessimism, as it has been termed, which led him to confidence in God by way of distrust of humanity. Pascal thinks there are two excesses — to exclude reason, and to admit nothing but reason. We must "doubt" or "assume" or "submit" where "requisite." The last step of reason is, in Pascal's view, a surrender to faith; and his eager mind, scorning all intermediary stages

or issues, hastens to this end. He thinks "it is the heart that feels God, not the reason," but this "heart" of his implicates basal intelligence and will, and is the seat of all the soul's faculties or powers. Not all the world can satisfy it: the misery which in consequence he feels is proof of man's greatness: as to this world-weariness, he says it is "because he has the idea of a happiness which he has lost, and which, finding it not in himself, he vainly seeks in external things, without ever being able to content himself; for it is to be found neither in us, nor in the creature, but in God alone." For, thinks Pascal, "he who finds it miserable not to be a king must be a king dethroned." To Pascal, "principles are felt, propositions are inferred," and this "with equal certitude, though by different ways." It has been said by an able American writer that Pascal's "every thought seems to breathe nostalgia for the true"; he places "his affair upon truth as one would place a wager." One may be allowed to hope that Pascal does not wish, as has sometimes been said, to humiliate intrinsic reason—though he does sometimes scourge it—but only reason as mutilated or isolated from its true source in God. Pascal thought man is evidently made to think: "that is all his dignity and all his merit." Through thought we embrace the World-All, and raise ourselves above it. Thought alone serves man as basis of his personality. Without the consciousness of his reason-value, man cannot comprehend his moral call.

Pascal is prone to minimize the light of natural reason. He does not deny that there is a natural knowledge of God—the "lumen naturale"—but denies that it is such as to yield "true satisfaction or genuine fruit." He also inclines to accord too little liberty to the will. To him, the only healthy reason is that which rests on emotion or affective

experience. He says "we know truth, not only by the reason, but also by the heart, and it is from this last that we learn first principles; and reason, which has nothing to do with it, tries in vain to combat them." Religion remains, in Pascal's view, always an insecure value for thought. Pascal is not free of the tendency to make the will — as equivalent, to him, for heart and feeling — take precedence of reason. In so far as this is the case, we might claim him as a precursor of a philosophy of value, just as Blondel has spoken of the teaching of Malebranche as an indirect and paradoxical prelude to a philosophy of value.¹ Practical life-values Pascal is inclined to rate more highly than the knowledge that comes by the understanding. For to him it is upon the will, rather than upon the understanding, that religion works. His great saying, "Thou wouldst not seek Me, hadst thou not already found Me," certainly belongs to the faith-order, for its truth and value. Sabatier has told us what an illumination the saying proved for him, and the paradox is one which has held up many others also. Its value for religious sentiment consists, of course, in this, that it assures us the search for God is not vain, since in seeking for God we are seeking with Him. It already points to our spiritual participation in the Divine nature. The man who longs for faith learns, Pascal thinks, to subordinate the judgment of the understanding. Yet, though all this points to a philosophy of values, Pascal will not carry the danger to faith to an extreme. He merely says that those accustomed to judge by sentiment do not understand the things of reason: and those who are wont to reason from principles, do not understand the things of sentiment. His emphasis on the danger of reason to faith doubtless sprang from the particular needs of

¹ *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 1916.

his time. He has no thought of any exclusion of reason from religion. He even declares that one subdues all to reason, so that our religion has nothing secret or supernatural about it. If we take offense at the principle of reason, he avers that we make religion contrary to sense and ridiculous. Reason is for him the defense against superstition. No doubt, a working together of reason and faith was Pascal's aim, but yet he could say that true Christianity consisted in the submission and use of reason.

The grace given to us of God first makes us capable, in Pascal's view, of the morally good life which Christianity asks of us, and this grace is given to us of God's pure mercy, not of any merit of our own. Life's purpose consists, for Pascal's saintly and straightforward mind, in faith which is in God. Everything is by Him, and everything is for Him, in Pascal's view. He "makes the soul feel that He is its only good," that it has "self-love deeply grounded in it, and that He alone can cure it." God is always more the end and purpose of Pascal's action; from Him he derives all the strength for its accomplishment. An absolute dependence on the help of God is what Pascal feels. I do not think there can be any doubt that it was in this way the life of Pascal derived its superb moral and spiritual strength. In grace in the mercy of God, culminates, for him, the moral-religious significance of Christianity. Jesus, Who creates in us the new life, is bearer or mediator of this grace. Jesus, Who first brings God near to our human conception, is thus, for him, the true God of man, and in freeing us from misery, brings to us a new morality. "The knowledge of Jesus Christ," he says, "is the middle way, because in Him we find both God and our own wretchedness." In Him "all contradictions are reconciled." In Him we find virtue and happi-

ness. The most personal religious experience always signifies, for Pascal, a purification of the moral life. "The first effect of love," he says, "is to inspire a great respect." Faith, as viewed by Pascal, is a gift of God of too arbitrary character: he runs to an unethical extreme when he thinks that God blinds some, and enlightens others. He allows man far too little coöperation in the work of grace. It was the idea of Pascal that, though the inventions of men might increase from age to age, the goodness and badness of the world remain, in general, the same. "All men are seeking to be happy," he says. "However different the means they employ, they all tend to this end." "The will never takes the least step but towards this object. This is the motive of all the actions of all men, even of those who go and hang themselves." He thus viewed the desire for happiness as indestructible, and for him the essence of sin lay in a wrong will. But so long as we remain in this region of individual desire, of which Pascal speaks, we are not in the sphere of the ethical: the ethical is not reached till we have transcended the merely individual desire of happiness—the eudæmonistic ideal—and reached the categorical imperative. It may be granted, however, that there has been much unwise and needless repression and depreciation of the desire for happiness. But attempts to connect the eudæmonistic ideal with the categorical imperative have been unsatisfactory, because they have sacrificed somehow or somewhat the absolute character of morality. Happiness must not be made the end: ethics is not a technique of eudæmonism; and happiness is no direct quest, but the resultant of duty. Pascal, however, passes to the highest. For him, it is God Who lifts man out of his misery, and draws him to Himself. For Pascal, the weakness of man is to be found in nature; his greatness

has its source in the grace of God. He declares that "non-satisfaction with the world is the last bond which binds the non-pious man to God." A man without self-knowledge cannot find God, he says, but a man, with a full consciousness of his own weakness, is on the way to God. Man desires only something which he knows and must do without. Pascal practiced criticism on the systems of Epictetus and Montaigne, in a way that was weighty for his spiritual development, but saw no way of harmonizing them. He rejected Montaigne's humiliation of reason, and the pride engendered by Epictetus: his criticism of them was theological in its point of departure. Pascal, however, skillfully connected the modern naturalistic temper with the naturalism of classical antiquity, by pointing out, in a striking generalization, that the former, in its lack of inner faith, falls, like ancient naturalism, into the extreme of Stoic pride or of Epicurean relaxation. On the difference between Stoicism — which greatly influenced Pascal — and Epicureanism he bases his apologetic, to which I shall presently refer, and founds his religious mysticism, which was not without a pathological element. Pascal on occasion spoke profoundly of the soul in its relation to the body, where, he says, it finds number, time, dimension; and he made deep suggestion of the idea of the relativity of knowledge. Pascal held true passion to be great: "in a great soul everything is great." Passion had a great significance for his moral personality, which had a very complex psychological development. He keenly felt the contradictions found in our consciousness, hence he could say, "Let a man love himself because he has a nature capable of good, but let him not therefore despise the vileness that exists in that nature. Let him despise himself, because this capacity is void, but let him not therefore despise his natural capacity. Let him hate

himself, let him love himself; he has in himself the power of knowing the truth and being happy, and yet has found no truth either permanent or satisfactory." Pascal's being is swayed by religious feeling from the outset: his faith is too spontaneous and free to appear always as a fruit of reason: the relations of his faith and his thought present an interesting psychological study. His spiritual development was of an unified character, his spiritual advance showing itself in the conception of Christianity which he finally attained. Methodical scientific thought had its influence upon the development of his ethical nature; modern religious individualism bore a part; to these must, of course, be added the share of Augustinian Catholicism. He had thoroughly grasped the principles of the modern mathematico-mechanistic rationalism, and the Cartesian principle of the immanence of consciousness, however little he may have sought to apply these principles to religion and ethics, save in formal respects. He does occupy himself, however, with marking off the bounds of religion and ethics against scientific thought. His intuitive religiosity is keenly sensitive to the fact that our sense of the perfect and the infinite is developed by moral rectitude. Pascal's ethic was practical in character, and unscientific in its grounding. He is inclined to sum natural ethics in "the misery of man without God," and to condense revealed morality into "the felicity of man with God." In the highest Christian ethic, its rational element — or reason-character — becomes broadened out, in Pascal's psychology, into the wholeness of the thinking, willing, and feeling spirit. It is his distinctively Christian position that makes Pascal's attitude so important, for he relies on Christianity in operation and in experience, not on outside evidences, nor on Church testimony. It is in this vital way he seeks to overcome athe-

ism and deism: mere intellectual arguments did not for him suffice. "All the principles," he says, "of sceptics, stoics, atheists, etc., are true, but their conclusions are false, because the opposite principles are also true."

"We never seek things," says Pascal, "but the search for things," and although the saying is far from being above criticism, yet it brings out how well Pascal knew the charm of truth-seeking. His need of knowledge was not without the aim of universality. Religious individualism was a strong and independent principle in Pascal: his whole personality, indeed, was individualistically determined. The end of all world-culture was for him the formation of personality. It is not surprising that his strong personal religiosity came repeatedly into conflict with the churchly principle of authority: the mediating office of the Church between God and man was quite overlooked or discarded by his modern individualism. In this connection his associations with Jansenism must be noted. Jansenism, in its severe piety, stood over against the worldly spirit of Molinism. The nobility of Pascal did not keep him from sharing ascetic misapprehensions. It has been said that "his great maxim was to renounce all pleasure and superfluity," and that he "laboured without ceasing for mortification." Both the Port Royalists and the Jansenists strenuously upheld the doctrine of grace, as expounded by Saint Augustine, and held by Jansenius. In the controversy on grace, the Jesuits were arrayed against the Port Royalists, headed as the latter at first were by their director, St. Cyran, in their efforts at spiritual reform. The growing hold of Jansenism, and the power of the Port Royal press, led to firm, repressive measures being adopted against the Jansenist movement. Pascal, says Voltaire in characteristic fashion, "was intimately connected with these illustrious and

dangerous recluses.”¹ Consequently, when Arnauld was expelled, Pascal issued in 1657 his famous “Provincial Letters,” eighteen in number, with telling effect upon Europe. These dealt with the results to which, in the development in casuistry, the theory of Probabilism had led up. Voltaire declared they were as witty as Molière, as sublime as Bossuet, and epoch-making in the literature of France. D’Alembert spoke in like terms of praise. The prose of Pascal had, without doubt, a virile ring: his genius is seen in his classical style. Macaulay’s words were that Pascal’s “intellectual powers were such as have rarely been bestowed on any of the children of men”; that “his spirit was the spirit of Saint Bernard; but the delicacy of his wit, the purity, the energy, the simplicity of his rhetoric, had never been equalled, except by the great masters of Attic eloquence.” “All Europe read and admired, laughed and wept.” “It was universally acknowledged that, in the literary contest, the Jansenists were completely victorious.”² I have no call to traverse the History of the Jesuits in this connection, which, aside from the work of D’Alembert, has been presented in an accessible form by G. B. Nicolini.³ Rather I note that Pascal made the churchly supranaturalism the presupposition of all religion. He does not, like Deism and Rationalism later, base his apologetic on the universality and necessity of religious thought, but on the necessity and the comprehensibility of supernatural revelation. But it is his merit to do this in a new and psychologically interesting fashion, by linking his supranaturalism with postulates and presuppositions that were universal in character. But into these I cannot now go. Nor have I room to dwell on Pascal’s attitude to prophecies and miracles — as

¹ *Siècle de Louis XIV.*, chap. xxxvii.

² *History of England*, vol. II. pp. 46, 47.

³ London, 1893.

outward proofs of Christianity — in which he was too much the son of his own age to be satisfying to an age like our own, with its greater demands for inwardness in its spiritual emphasis. Nature was to him “an image of grace,” and “the visible miracles” but “images” of the “invisible” ones God would accomplish. But Pascal was not content to say, like Coleridge, that “reason and religion are their own evidence.”

But it may be well to look for a moment on the kind of estimates Pascal has evoked, and the kind of influence he has exerted. Chateaubriand dealt with Pascal's religious worth, and Villemain declared the manifold significance of Pascal's genius. Neander emphasized the religious personality of Pascal, and his historic significance for the philosophy of religion, while Jacobi found in him a religio-philosophical significance. Sainte-Beuve, who turned his great critical and luminous powers on Port Royal and Pascal, opined that Pascal's piety kept his skepticism from becoming very accentuated: he regarded Pascal as a religious personality of inward type, in whom faith was radiant and triumphant. Sainte-Beuve regarded Voltaire's attitude to Pascal as proof that the latter had got to the heart of Christianity. Vinet rejected the notion of skepticism in Pascal; Pascal turned from reason to find in feeling security for religion and ethics. Of Pascal's pessimism Vinet says that he was not personally pessimistic, but in the name of the universe. He says the monument erected by Pascal was a temple, not a citadel, and that is, no doubt, true. Pascal was a congenial theme for Vinet, who saw in him a precursor of Schopenhauer and of Schleiermacher. Dr. John Cairns, in his “Unbelief in the Eighteenth Century,” as, in some respects, foremost in apologetic significance. On the other hand, Professor Allen in his “Continuity of Christian Thought,” speaks of the “thoroughgoing Agnosticism”

of Pascal, his thoughts full of the deepest sadness, of an unutterable melancholy" (pp. 312, 314). Pascal's work does certainly afford some grounds for Professor Allen's strictures, but it needs no pointing out, after what has been advanced in previous pages, that such an estimate is one-sided and extreme, and takes no adequate account of factors or elements that conflict with it, and greatly modify and correct it. It misses the inward character of Pascal's appeal as compared with that of Grotius or of Bossuet. P. Natorp has allowed the value of philosophic idealism to Pascal's fundamental thought, in which the True and the Good are imperishable ideas. But he finds a certain disunion in Pascal's thought-world: he finds him a radical skeptic in respect of an unconditioned knowledge, but thinks he makes full concession to reason, when a conditioned and empirical knowledge is in question. E. Boutroux has dealt with the character and importance of Pascal's exposition of reason and faith. K. Bornhausen regards the ethical thought of Pascal as original, truly religious, and strikingly modern. Pascal's significance for the philosophy of religion he takes to consist in his separation of the knowledge of the understanding from the faith of feeling, and in claiming an independent territory for the human soul in religion, which he secures by means of his unique religious psychology. Morality is thus comprehended by Pascal as sentiment or feeling—the *Gesinnung* of the Germans—since piety is the inner feeling of the heart. This, to Bornhausen, is an anticipation of what he calls a fundamental principle of modern ethical thought. But with these insistences of Bornhausen we shall do well to remember that Pascal was one to whom faith is the last step of reason; so much does it depend on reason's warrant. It is reason which orders or authorizes faith. Pascal himself concludes that

God wants no faith from us without reasonable grounds. Many more have testified to Pascal's power and influence: of course, he has not gone without detractors, but with these, even though they include Cousin, we are not now to trouble ourselves. Others, like Gratry, are appreciative to a degree, but mingle admiration with the view that, in sectarian matters, "no one was more sincerely blind and hasty than Pascal." We are, however, content to leave secretarian matters severely alone. I am, however, tempted to add to what has been said the remarks of a writer in *Mind* (1917), that "to Pascal" we can recognize Rousseau's "debt in spite of the contrast in spirit. There is the same distrust of reason in matters of faith, the same sense of the necessity of practical choice in the absence of knowledge, the same reliance on the reasons of the heart—but here the likeness ends." I conclude by saying that, every defect and contradiction in his teaching notwithstanding, Pascal's genius remains splendid, his courage unblenching, his devotion to truth sublime, his enthusiasm great even in its somberness, his tenderness, on occasion, touching and complete.