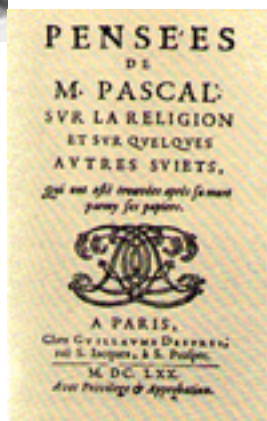


Pascal on Faith and Reason: Thoughts beyond the Wager

Luca Arcangeli, People IT Specialist



Very often in works about the relationship between science and faith there are quotations from Blaise Pascal's "Pensees" (*Thoughts*). This profound book offers an interesting but not simple view about this theme, so along the centuries are born several controversial misunderstandings: was Pascal a rationalist scientist? Or was a faithful Christian who repudiated his former scientific knowledge?

Here you can read a selections of the most meaningful Pascal's texts (in original French language and with English translation) about the relationship between science and faith and between nature and Grace. We hope with this presentation to help think and create a new strong interest in this important author, scientist and mystic, mathematician and apologist, witness to reason and Christian faith.

Nature in Pascal's thought is not a neutral concept, but she is a place in which dark and light, obscurity and understanding clash together without end. On the one hand the nature can be explored and enlightened by our reason. Pascal is one of the fathers of the new modern science, which shows the impressive power to translate events of the world in mathematical-geometrical formulas.

But on the other hand nature is deeply dark. The human condition, which has the conscience as his essential characteristic, transcends the world. So several questions about the sense of the life rise from the human mind, but nature cannot give us any answer: why does the being exist? Why is the being

intelligible and not simply chaotic? Why have we got an irrepressible desire of happiness?

The nature is intelligible, the mind is intelligent, but neither with the first nor with the second we can obtain an acceptable answer to the question about the meaning of the life. Therefore human condition is an unpleasant condition: mankind is at the top of Creation but at the same time it is not able, only with its power, to grasp the real meaning of life. So the need to search God rises in our minds.

Two conflicting philosophical visions try to resolve the problem of God: Rationalism and Scepticism. However both philosophies fail in their attempt. Rationalism doesn't persuade human critical spirit of its truth, Scepticism instead leads us to a self-destructive nihilism. So, the only real rational answer to the question about God is to insist on searching and to open human heart to the possibility of the Transcendence.

At this point the Pascal's Wager that God exists is perfectly intelligible. It is an ingenious rhetorical argument with the purpose of persuading the libertine to open his heart to the possibility of the existence of God. Only in this case could come the answer: the meeting with the Christian God. The Gospel shows to man who really is: this is the essence of the Pascal's Christian Apology. The Christian Faith is reasonable because it explains the human nature without any censure, keeping together in harmony the greatness and the misery of the human condition.

Therefore Jesus Christ is the model in which man can discover his real nature. But you can understand the truth of the Christian faith only loving it. The power of love leads to understand the Christian truth and this knowledge deepens more and more the former love. This faith's dynamism is not irrational, on the contrary it is the finest wisdom. The human thought transcends the world but the God's Charity transcends every human thought.

The human being is not able to create the Charity by itself, because the Love of God comes from Heavens, orientating all human life towards the transcendence. However human being is able to receive and know the God's Charity. Therefore the scientific and philosophical reason, in the personal experience of Christian God, is included inside the faith's act. In this union between Faith and Reason man can finally know transcendence and the meaning of the life.

S = Fragments numbered as edited by Sellier

L = as edited by Lafuma

B = as edited by Brunschvicg

French text of *Pensées* is here taken from the volume edited by L. Brunschvicg (Paris, 1897)

French text of *Papers* is taken by the Collected Works Oeuvre de Pascal, edited by Chevalier (Paris: 1950, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade)

English text is from the volume edited and translated by W.F. Trotte, (New York: Collier & Sons, 1909)

Nature has some perfections to show that she is the image of God, and some defects to show that she is only His image.	<i>La nature a des perfections pour montrer qu'elle est l'image de Dieu, et des défauts pour montrer qu'elle n'en est que l'image.</i>
[S 762, L 934, B 580]	

He must not see nothing at all, nor must he see sufficient for him to believe he possesses it; but he must see enough to know that he has lost it. For to know of his loss, he must see and not see; and that is exactly the state in which he naturally is.	<i>Il ne faut pas qu'il ne voie rien du tout; il ne faut pas aussi qu'il en voie assez pour croire qu'il le possède, mais qu'il en voie assez pour connaître qu'il l'a perdu; car, pour connaître qu'on a perdu, il faut voir et ne voir pas; et c'est précisément l'état où est la nature.</i>
[S 690, L 449, B 556]	

If I saw nothing there which revealed a Divinity, I would come to a negative conclusion; if I saw everywhere the signs of a Creator, I would remain peacefully in faith. But, seeing too much to deny and too little to be sure, I am in a state to be pitied, [...]Whereas in my present state, ignorant of what I am or of what I ought to do, I know neither my condition nor my duty. My heart inclines wholly to know where is the true good, in order to follow it; nothing would be too dear to me for eternity.	<i>Si je n'y voyais rien qui marquât une Divinité, je me déterminerais à la négative; si je voyais partout les marques d'un Créateur, je reposerais en paix dans la foi. Mais, voyant trop pour nier et trop peu pour m'assurer, je suis dans un état à plaindre, [...] au lieu qu'en l'état où je suis, ignorant ce que je suis et ce que je dois faire, je ne connais ni ma condition, ni mon devoir. Mon coeur tend tout entier à connaître où est le vrai bien, pour le suivre; rien ne me serait trop cher pour l'éternité.</i>
[S 682, L 429, B 229]	

All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and of others avoiding it, is the same desire in both, attended with different views. The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves.	<i>Tous les hommes recherchent d'être heureux. Cela est sans exception, quelques différents moyens qu'ils y emploient. Ils tendent tous à ce but. Ce qui fait que les uns vont à la guerre et que les autres n'y vont pas est ce même désir qui est dans tous les deux accompagné de différent vues. La volonté fait jamais la moindre démarche que vers cet objet. C'est le motif de toutes les action de tous le hommes, jusqu'à ceux qui vont se pendre.</i>
[S 181, L 148, B 425]	

There are two kinds of people one can call reasonable:	<i>Il n'y a que deux sortes de personnes qu'on puisse appeler raisonnables:</i>
--	---

those who serve God with all their heart because they know Him, and those who seek Him with all their heart because they do not know Him.	<i>ou ceux qui servent Dieu de tout leur coeur parce qu'ils le connaissent, ou ceux qui le cherchent de tout leur coeur parce qu'ils ne le connaissent pas.</i>
[S 681, L 427, B 194]	

The last proceeding of reason is to recognise that there is an infinity of things which are beyond it. It is but feeble if it does not see so far as to know this.	<i>La dernière démarche de la raison est de reconnaître qu'il y a une infinité de choses qui la surpassent; elle n'est que faible, si elle ne va jusqu'à connaître cela.</i>
[L 188, B 267]	

Two extremes: to exclude reason, to admit reason only.	<i>Deux excès: exclure la raison, n'admettre que la raison.</i>
[L 183, B 253]	

[...] The one establishing certainty, the other doubt, the one the greatness of man, the other his weakness, they would destroy the truths as well as the falsehoods of each other. So that they cannot subsist alone because of their defects, nor unite because of their opposition, and thus they break and destroy each other to give place to the truth of the Gospel.	<i>[.] L'un établissant la certitude, l'autre le doute, l'un la grandeur de l'homme, l'autre sa faiblesse, ils ruinent la vérité aussi bien que les faussetés l'un de l'autre. De sorte qu'ils ne peuvent subsister seuls à cause de leurs défauts, ni s'unir à cause de leurs oppositions et qu'ainsi ils se brisent et s'anéantissent pour faire place à la vérité de l'Évangile.</i>
Translation by O.W. WRIGHT [Pascal, Blaise. "Conversation of Pascal with M. de Saci on Epictetus and Montaigne" in: <i>Minor Works</i> , translated by O.W. Wright. Vol. XLVIII, Part 2. The Harvard Classics. New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909-14; Bartleby.com, 2001. www.bartleby.com/48/3/ [1]]	

The Christian religion alone has been able to cure these two vices, not by expelling the one through means of the other according to the wisdom of the world, but by expelling both according to the simplicity of the Gospel.	<i>La seule religion chrétienne a pu guérir ces deux vices, non pas en chassant l'un par l'autre, par la sagesse de la terre, mais en chassant l'un et l'autre, par la simplicité de l'Evangile.</i>
For it teaches the righteous that it raises them even to a participation in divinity itself; that in this lofty state they still carry the source of all corruption, which renders them during all their life subject to error, misery, death, and sin; and it proclaims to the most ungodly that they are capable of the grace of their Redeemer.	<i>Car elle apprend aux justes, qu'elle élève jusqu'à la participation de la divinité même, qu'en ce sublime état ils portent encore la source de toute la corruption, qui les rend durant toute la vie sujets à l'erreur, à la misère, à la mort, au péché; et elle crie aux plus impies qu'ils sont capables de la grâce de leur Rédempteur.</i>
So making those tremble whom it justifies, and consoling those whom it condemns, religion so justly tempers fear with hope through that double	<i>Ainsi, donnant à trembler à ceux qu'elle justifie, et consolant ceux qu'elle condamne, elle tempère avec tant de justesse la crainte avec l'espérance, par cette double capacité qui est commune à tous et de la</i>

capacity of grace and of sin, common to all.	<i>grâce et du péché.</i>
[S 339, L 308, B 793]	

We make an idol of truth itself; for truth apart from charity is not God, but His image and idol, which we must neither love nor worship; and still less must we love or worship its opposite, namely, falsehood.	<i>On se fait une idole de la vérité même; car la vérité hors de la charité n'est pas Dieu, et est son image et une idole, qu'il ne faut point aimer, ni adorer; et encore moins faut-il aimer ou adorer son contraire, qui est le mensonge.</i>
[S 806, L 986, B 582]	

The God of Christians is not a God who is simply the author of mathematical truths, or of the order of the elements ; [...]	<i>Le Dieu des chrétiens ne consiste pas en un Dieu simplement auteur des vérités géométriques et de l'ordre des éléments; [...]</i>
But the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of Christians, is a God of love and of comfort, a God who fills the soul and heart of those whom He possesses, a God who makes them conscious of their inward wretchedness, and His infinite mercy, who unites Himself to their inmost soul, who fills it with humility and joy, with confidence and love, who renders them incapable of any other end than Himself.	<i>Mais le Dieu d'Abraham, le Dieu d'Isaac, le Dieu de Jacob, le Dieu des chrétiens, est un Dieu d'amour et de consolation; c'est un Dieu qui remplit l'âme et le coeur de ceux qu'il possède; c'est un Dieu qui leur fait sentir intérieurement leur misère et sa miséricorde infinie; qui s'unit au fond de leur âme; qui la remplit d'humilité, de joie, de confiance, d'amour; qui les rend incapables d'autre fin que de lui-même.</i>
[S 690, L 449, B 556]	

The infinite distance between body and mind is a symbol of the infinitely more infinite distance between mind and charity; for charity is supernatural. [...]	<i>La distance infinie des corps aux esprits figure la distance infiniment plus infinie des esprits à la charité, car elle est surnaturelle. [...]</i>
All bodies, the firmament, the stars, the earth and its kingdoms, are not equal to the lowest mind; for mind knows all these and itself; and these bodies nothing. All bodies together, and all minds together, and all their products, are not equal to the least feeling of charity. This is of an order infinitely more exalted.	<i>Tous les corps, le firmament, les étoiles, la terre et ses royaumes, ne valent pas le moindre des esprits. Car il connaît tout cela, et soi, et les corps rien. Tous les corps ensemble, et tous les esprits ensemble, et toutes leurs productions, ne valent pas le moindre mouvement de charité. Cela est d'un ordre infiniment plus élevé.</i>
From all bodies together, we cannot obtain one little thought; this is impossible and of another order. From all bodies and minds, we cannot produce a feeling of true charity; this is impossible and of another and supernatural order.	<i>De tous les corps ensemble on ne saurait en faire réussir une petite pensée. Cela est impossible et d'un autre ordre. De tous les corps et esprits on n'en saurait tirer un mouvement de vraie charité, cela est impossible, et d'un autre ordre, surnaturel.</i>
[S 690, L 449, B 556]	

Source URL (modified on 2023-05-10 11:44):<https://inters.org/pascal-faith-reason-wager>

Links

[1] <http://www.bartleby.com/48/3/>