

HUMAN LIMITATIONS IN PASCAL'S PENSEES

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E. E. W.

PREFACE

During the last few years of his life, Blaise Pascal was engaged in the writing of an apology for Christianity, a work which he undertook in order to convince the freethinkers and atheists of his time of the truths of the Christian religion. Death prevented him from completing this work, but the notes which Pascal had written in planning his apology survive. These notes--some short essays, a number of which are quite polished; some well-developed paragraphs; some brief notes of only a sentence or two; and some mere phrases describing a fleeting thought--were partially published by Port-Royal shortly after Pascal's death under the title of the Pensées, of which the complete title was Pensées de M. Pascal sur la religion et sur quelques autres sujets. Modern editions of the Pensées contain nearly one thousand notes, a small number of which are related to minor writings.

A number of the Pensées are concerned with the problem of human limitations. Broome, in a chapter entitled "The Pensées: The Human Predicament" in his book Pascal, states that Pascal had intended to expose man's limitations so as to create in his reader a feeling of frustration and helplessness in order to lead him to a consideration

of the Christian religion.¹ The purpose of this thesis is to examine in depth Pascal's ideas concerning human limitations and to show that Pascal's answer to man's limitations is a reliance upon the truths which Christianity teaches.

The organization of this thesis will include a chapter describing Pascal's life, with special emphasis on factors which influenced his ideas in the Pensées. The chapters following the biographical material will deal with (1) man's limitations in his search for knowledge and truth, (2) man's incapability of establishing absolute laws and justice, (3) man's inability to achieve happiness by his own efforts. The concluding chapter will show that for Pascal man's only hope for certainty and happiness is reliance on Christianity.

Whenever reference is made to a specific Pensée, the number of the Pensée and the page or pages on which it is located will be given in the body of the thesis immediately following the reference. The numbers will refer to the Chevalier edition.²

¹Jack Howard Broome, Pascal (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1965), pp. 134-68.

²Oeuvres complètes, ed. Jacques Chevalier (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1954). The Pensées are found on pages 1089-1345.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE	iv
CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE LIFE OF BLAISE PASCAL.	1
II. MAN'S LIMITATIONS CONCERNING KNOWLEDGE	20
III. MAN'S LIMITATIONS CONCERNING JUSTICE	42
IV. MAN'S LIMITATIONS CONCERNING HAPPINESS	47
V. CONCLUSIONS.	57
BIBLIOGRAPHY	65

states that early in his life, Blaise suffered from intestinal troubles, a bone disease, and an abnormally formed head.⁵ These early illnesses were a portent of things to come; for, throughout most of his life, he was in poor health. As his sister Gilberte reports in her biography of Pascal, Blaise once confessed that "depuis l'âge de dix-huit ans il n'avait pas passé un jour sans douleur."⁶ A more favorable omen from Blaise's childhood was early evidence of his mental precocity and curiosity--"des marques d'un esprit tout extraordinaire."⁷ The young boy's mentality was marked by his constant questioning as to the nature of things.

When Blaise was three years old, Madame Pascal died. The father then undertook the task of rearing and educating his children--later with the help of a governess, Louise Delfault, who remained with the family for many years.

In 1631, when Blaise was eight, the family moved to Paris, a move which made it possible for the father to give himself more completely to the education of his children.

⁵Didier Anzieu, "Vie de Pascal," ed. Blaise Pascal: Pensées (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1960), I, p. XI.

⁶Gilberte Périer, p. 577.

⁷Ibid., p. 571.

The education provided the Pascal children was classical, scientific, and religious. Gilberte states that the children received sound training in the Christian religion. Although Etienne Pascal was well-versed in science, he taught his children that faith is not subject to reason--an idea that was to remain basic to Blaise's concept of Christianity.⁸ Blaise's questioning and curious mind naturally led to an interest in the sciences and mathematics. The father's educational methods included the concept that any phenomenon in the children's everyday world was subject to scientific examination. In line with this concept, at age eleven, Blaise wrote a treatise on acoustics after noticing the sounds made when tapping a plate with a knife.⁹ The classical aspect of the children's training seems to have been limited to the learning of Latin and Greek, subjects which Etienne Pascal planned to have his son master before introducing him to mathematics. Consequently, the father hid all mathematics books from Blaise and did not allow the subject to be discussed in his presence. However, when Blaise was twelve, Etienne learned that his son had been working independently on geometry and on his own had discovered

⁸Ibid., p. 578.

⁹Ibid., p. 573.

the thirty-second proof of Euclid's first book.¹⁰ From that time, Blaise took up the study of mathematics with his father's approval and was henceforth allowed to accompany him to scientific and mathematical discussions at the home of the Père Mersenne, where he also came in contact with other men of science. At the age of sixteen, Pascal wrote his Traité des Coniques, a mathematical treatise which developed concepts that are still referred to as Pascal's Theorem.¹¹

Blaise Pascal thus grew up to be questioning and curious in matters concerning science and mathematics; at the same time, because of his father's religious teachings, he was submissive in matters concerning religion.

Etienne Pascal was forced to return to Clermont in 1638, after being involved in a rebellion against Richelieu's fiscal policies, policies which directly concerned the Pascals' financial security. Later, thanks to a direct appeal to Richelieu by Jacqueline, who had become known to members of the Court because of her poetry and acting, Etienne was appointed to Normandy as a special commissioner for raising taxes.¹² As a result, the family moved to Rouen in 1639.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Anzieu, p. XIV.

¹²Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, Pascal (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1962), pp. 29-33.

The Pascals arrived in Rouen amidst an uprising against the heavy taxation which had been levied for the purpose of waging the war against Austria. This rebellion had to be suppressed militarily before Etienne could carry on his work. Perhaps Blaise Pascal's observation of these riots has some effect on the political views expressed in the Pensées.¹³

While at Rouen, after watching his father labor--often late into the night--over the difficult computations involved in his tax work, Blaise was motivated to invent a calculating machine. He completed a working model in 1642, although he continued working on his invention until 1652, when he settled on a final model.

In 1646 Etienne and Blaise Pascal were introduced to the Torricelli experiments. Blaise Pascal then carried out numerous experiments with various-sized tubes in order to discover why, when a glass tube filled with mercury is reversed into a vessel containing mercury, the mercury in the glass tube falls only a certain distance and no more. Pascal concluded from his experiments that the described effect is caused by atmospheric pressure and that the area in the tube above the mercury is a vacuum, a conclusion contradictory to the laws of nature

¹³Broome, p. 24.

according to the more conservative scientists and philosophers of the day. These conclusions were verified by Pascal's brother-in-law, Florin Périer, on September 19, 1648, when he performed the experiment on various levels of the Puy-de-Dôme in Auvergne. Pascal later described his findings in two treatises: Pesanteur de la masse de l'air and L'équilibre des liqueurs.¹⁴ In his Traité sur le vide, also the result of his experimentation, Pascal distinguished between religious truth, which is accepted on authority, and scientific truth, which is discerned through reason and experimentation.¹⁵

Another important series of events in Pascal's life at Rouen began in January, 1646, when Etienne Pascal slipped on the ice and injured his hip. The father was cared for by two friends, who converted the Pascals to Jansenism. Gilberte says that Blaise was converted first, and he subsequently converted his father and then Jacqueline. Later, during a visit to Rouen, Gilberte and her husband were also converted.¹⁶

¹⁴Jacques Chevalier, Pascal, trans. by Lilian A. Clare (London: Sheed and Ward, 1933), pp. 60-61.

¹⁵André Lagarde and Laurent Michard, Les Grands Auteurs français du programme, XVII^e Siècle (Paris: Bordas, 1961), p. 129.

¹⁶Gilberte Périer, p. 580.

The many hours Pascal spent working to perfect his calculating machine and the demanding air pressure experiments took their toll. In May 1647, because of the deterioration of his health, Blaise, accompanied by his sister, returned to Paris from Rouen for medical treatment. There Jacqueline was encouraged by Blaise to enter the religious life at Port-Royal. However, when the father returned to Paris, he opposed Jacqueline's wishes. She then decided to practice at home the strict, austere religious life prescribed by Port-Royal.

In August and September of 1648, Blaise witnessed the incidents of the Fronde in Paris. From May until November of 1649, Etienne and his two children lived in Auvergne--perhaps in an attempt to improve Blaise's poor health.¹⁷ However, the move may have been made to avoid the violence of the Fronde.¹⁸

The death of Etienne Pascal on September 24, 1651, had a profound effect on Blaise. His first reaction seems to have been an extremely religious one, as he was led to meditations on death and its significance. A letter to Gilberte and her husband, written shortly after the father's death, reveals resignation to God's will

¹⁷Jean Mesnard, Pascal (Paris: Hatier, 1951), p. 46.

¹⁸Anzieu, p. XXVI.

in the Pensées. Mitton, who has been described as a misanthrope and a pessimist, may have reintroduced Pascal to Montaigne, whose scepticism was also an extremely important influence on Pascal's thought.²³

Pascal's experiences in the world had a tremendous impact on the writing of the Pensées. Because of his worldly contacts, Pascal studied man and his heart--perhaps as devotedly as he had previously studied science.²⁴ From this study undoubtedly is due his gift for moral and psychological analysis so evident in many of the Pensées. The large section of "divertissements" is a result of his experiences with the amusements of the social world. Finally, the Pensées were written expressly for such men as Méré and Mitton, men who were indifferent to religion and who were attempting to discover happiness outside of Christianity.²⁵ In fact, a number of the Pensées were addressed directly to Mitton.

After spending the winter of 1652-53 in Auvergne at the château de Bien-Assis, recently purchased by his brother-in-law, Florin Périer, Pascal returned to Paris to settle Jacqueline's dowry for Port-Royal. During the summer of 1653, Pascal returned to his scientific

²³Anzieu, p. XXVIII.

²⁴Chevalier, p. 86.

²⁵Lagarde and Michard, p. 130.

work. He rewrote the Traité de l'équilibre des liqueurs; he also wrote two chapters of his Traité du vide, a work, like the Pensées, destined to remain unfinished.²⁶ Late in 1653, Pascal made important mathematical discoveries: one was a step in the direction of the integral calculus; another was a gambling problem posed by Méré which resulted in the invention of mathematical probabilities.²⁷

At this same time Pascal began experiencing a religious crisis. He knew that Christianity demanded that he give himself completely to God, and yet he was painfully aware that he did not love God since he was so strongly attached to the world and drawn to its pleasures. In short, he was experiencing despair resulting from the tension caused by the difference between what he was and what he wanted to be.²⁸ The world became contemptible to him, but he was unable to withdraw from it.²⁹ A letter to Jacqueline in September 1654 expresses the profundity of his despair. There he states his aversion for the world; still he feels completely abandoned by God. Feeling that God had not given him grace and that he was incapable of finding God on his own, Pascal decided to act as if

²⁶Anzieu, pp. XXVIII-XXIX.

²⁷Chevalier, p. 89.

²⁸Ibid., p. 82.

²⁹Ibid., pp. 88-89.

he did believe by performing the rites of Christianity and thus prepare himself for God's grace when it should come.³⁰ Also in September of that year Pascal began visiting Jacqueline at Port-Royal, where he again revealed his disgust for the world and for science as well as his anguish for not being able to detach himself from them.³¹

Pascal was released from his despair on the night of November 24, 1654, when alone in his room he experienced the presence of God: "In one moment, with an unutterable sense of His presence, He granted Pascal certainty and bliss."³² Pascal's heart was won, and he completely submitted himself to God. Pascal recorded an account of this mystic experience on a paper, which he sewed into the lining of his coat and which he kept with him until the end of his life.

The impact which the various stages of Pascal's final conversion had on his Pensées is obvious. First of all, the misery of man without God is something that Pascal experienced personally. Pascal's suggestion in the Pensées that one can prepare himself for God's grace

³⁰Frank T. H. Fletcher, Pascal and the Mystical Tradition (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954), p. 6.

³¹Anzieu, p. XXX.

³²Chevalier, p. 94.

by observing Christian ritual is also a result of personal experience. In addition, his own unsuccessful attempts to discover God undoubtedly influenced his conclusion that salvation depends more on God's will than on man's. His final conversion also sheds considerable light on his fervent insistence on the primacy of the heart, as opposed to reason, in discovering religious truths.³³

It appears that Pascal did not change his way of life immediately after his religious experience on the night of November 23. It was not until the early part of January 1655 that Pascal retreated for two weeks to Vaumurier at the home of the duc de Luynes, a friend of Port-Royal. This retreat was apparently made to escape from the influences of the world and from his friend, the duc de Roannez.³⁴ Shortly after this retreat, Pascal went to Port-Royal des Champs. Pascal was assigned to Le Maistre de Saci, who served as his religious confidant and his confessor. It was probably during this time that the Entretien avec M. de Saci, recorded by Fontaine, Saci's secretary, took place. During that conversation Pascal took the philosophies of Epictetus and Montaigne as examples of two differing conceptions of human nature-- its grandeur and its weakness; its nobility and its

³³Ibid.

³⁴Anzieu, p. XXXI.

corruption. Pascal argued that the nature of man is not satisfactorily explained by either thinker; for man, according to Pascal, is both noble and corrupt. The dual nature of man, concluded Pascal, is explained by Christianity. This is a major concept of the Pensées.³⁵ Another idea that might have had its germ in Pascal's first experiences at Port-Royal is his idea of the ennui that comes about when a man is placed alone in a room with only his thoughts to occupy him, for Pascal had this very experience when he was assigned to his "cell."³⁶

Toward the end of January, Pascal returned to Paris, where he lived in a room at Port-Royal de Paris under the assumed name of "M. de Mons," apparently not wanting to re-enter the world until his friends could accept the idea that he had been converted.³⁷ When Pascal did return to the world, he attempted to convert Méré, Mitton, and Roannez to his view of Christianity; he succeeded only with the latter.³⁸ It can be conjectured that Pascal's failure to win over Méré and Mitton was one of his motivations for writing the Pensées.

³⁵Ibid., pp. XXXI-XXXII.

³⁶P.-L. Couchoud, ed. Discours de la condition de l'homme (Paris: Albin Michel, 1948), p. 17.

³⁷Anzieu, p. XXXII.

³⁸Broome, p. 37.

For the remainder of 1655, Pascal's exact movements are not known. Apparently he kept a room at Port-Royal both in Paris and in Port-Royal des Champs, while still keeping his freedom of movement; for he often went to his home in Paris, where he retained his servants. Thus in Paris he generally continued to live the life of a person of quality.³⁹ While at Port-Royal des Champs, Pascal often gave lectures. To what extent Pascal became a member of Port-Royal is an interesting problem. In his biography of Pascal, Steinmann states that evidence from letters of the Jansenist leader Arnauld suggests that "at Port-Royal itself Pascal was regarded as an outside sympathizer, a visitor, a friend--a rather more intimate friend than other people--but one who had never sold his goods in order to take up residence at the Granges and who remained free to leave whenever he chose."⁴⁰ At the same time one must note that, during his retreats to Port-Royal, in spite of his poor health, Pascal submitted completely to the rigorous life of poverty and austerity that Jansenism demanded and that toward the end of his life he did give up many of his worldly possessions.⁴¹

³⁹Jean Steinmann, Pascal, trans. by Martin Turnell (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965), p. 89.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 148.

⁴¹Chevalier, p. 97.

By the end of 1655, Pascal became involved in the dispute between the followers of Jansenism and its opponents--a united front which included the Sorbonne, the Jesuits, the King, and the Pope. Pascal's contributions to the defense of Jansenism were his ironic, satirical, passionate, and yet eloquent Lettres provinciales, the first of which was published on January 23, 1656. By March 24, 1657, Pascal had written eighteen Lettres. At first the solitaires of Port-Royal must have felt they were fighting a losing battle. By March 1656, Port-Royal had been condemned for heresy; the solitaires had been removed from Port-Royal des Champs; their boys' school had been broken up. The convent in Paris was also about to be broken up, when in March, Marguerite Périer, Pascal's niece, was cured of a medically incurable eye ulcer by touching a thorn from the Crown of Christ, a religious relic kept at Port-Royal de Paris.⁴² One result of this event was that the persecution of Port-Royal was temporarily relaxed, for the cure was proclaimed a miracle by diocesan authorities. However, the bitter controversy between the Jansenists and their opponents continued. The event was of tantamount importance for Pascal, as it motivated him to undertake a work to refute

⁴²Broome, p. 38.

the principles and reasonings of atheists. Hence came about his uncompleted apology for Christianity, the fragments of which were to become the Pensées.⁴³

The year 1658 was a fruitful one in diverse fields. Besides again being actively involved in continuing religious quarrels, Pascal returned to the study of mathematics and resolved the cycloid problem, on which a number of mathematicians were working at the time. He also continued another work that remained unfinished at the end of his life, the Eléments de géométrie, from which "De l'esprit géométrique" and "De l'art de persuader" survived. Perhaps during this period of intense activity Pascal wrote the Ecrits sur la grâce, a rational analysis of the problems of free will and grace. Pascal also found time to give numerous lectures at Port-Royal. In addition he continued to work on his proposed apology for Christianity; a major part of the notes were probably written during this year.⁴⁴

In February of 1659, Pascal became seriously ill and consequently retreated to Vaumurier near Paris. Because of the deterioration of his condition, in May of 1660, Pascal traveled to Bien-Assis to stay with his sister. He was much too ill at both Vaumurier and Bien-Assis

⁴³Gilberte Férier, p. 584.

⁴⁴Mesnard, p. 105.

to make any progress on his planned apology for Christianity.⁴⁵ In fact, according to Gilberte, Pascal did not do any work on the apology during the last four years of his life.⁴⁶

In spite of his illness, from this time Pascal lived his life according to his concept of Christianity. He completely denied himself the pleasures of the world, forbidding himself even to enjoy food. As a defense against pride and vanity Pascal devised a spiked belt with which he inflicted pain on himself whenever he felt pricked by pride. The need to devote himself entirely to God was so great that he disdained affectionate relations with others, including members of his own family. He did, however, perform numerous acts of charity, including accepting a poor family into his home.

In September of 1660, Pascal returned to Paris to discover that the quarrel between the Jansenists and their opponents had been revived by Louis XIV for political reasons. It seems likely that this quarrel, which ended in defeat for Port-Royal, was in part at least responsible for Jacqueline's death on October 4. Another result of

⁴⁵Anzieu, pp. XXXV-XXXVI.

⁴⁶Gilberte Périer, p. 585.

this controversy was that, to a certain extent, Pascal broke away from Port-Royal.⁴⁷

Pascal's health became critical again in June 1662, and as a result he moved to the home of Gilberte, who had come to Paris to look after her brother. Pascal's health became progressively worse. On July 4, he had the parish priest of Saint-Etienne-du-Mont brought to him. On August 3, he signed his will. Although Pascal knew his condition was grave, his friends, his sister, and the priest did not believe this. As a result, Pascal was not given communion until he entered his last moments of agony, a condition that lasted for two days. Following is Gilberte's account of Pascal's last days:⁴⁸

Il reçut le Saint Viatique et l'Extrême-Onction avec des sentiments si tendres qu'il en versait des larmes. Il répondit à tout et remercia même à la fin M. le Curé, et, lorsqu'il le bénit avec le Saint Sacrement, il dit: "Que Dieu ne m'abandonne jamais!" qui furent comme des dernières paroles. Car après avoir fait son action de grâces, un moment après les convulsions le reprirent, qui ne le quittèrent plus, et ne lui laissèrent plus un instant de liberté d'esprit. Elles durèrent jusques à sa mort, qui fut vingt-quatre heures après, savoir le dix-neuvième d'août mil six cent soixante-deux à une heure du matin, âgé de trente-neuf ans et deux mois.

⁴⁷Anzieu, p. XXXVIII.

⁴⁸Gilberte Périer, pp. 641-42.

The apology which Pascal had been writing was unfinished, but the notes which he left behind were to become the Pensées, often considered one of the finest works of French literature.

CHAPTER II

MAN'S LIMITATIONS CONCERNING KNOWLEDGE

According to Pascal, man through his own efforts can never discover ultimate truths about his world nor about himself. Scientists and philosophers can gain partial and tentative knowledge of the physical world, but they can never discover the fundamental laws which govern the universe. Concerning knowledge about himself, man can go only so far as to discover that men, both as individuals and in society, are governed by deception and vanity. As Broome says,⁴⁹

The vanity of individuals causes more or less deliberate distortions of truth; and even if this were not universal, the more involuntary effects of imagination and custom would suffice to defeat any attempt to arrive at true values or principles. Our values are based on illusion or imagination, and our "natural" principles are purely and simply a matter of custom.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine Pascal's ideas concerning man's limitations in his search for ultimate truths. The chapter is roughly divided into two sections: the first section will examine man's limitations which result from his position in the universe; the second will present the various aspects of man's nature which impede him in his search for truths.

⁴⁹Broome, p. 151.

The inability of man to gain any final knowledge of the physical universe results to some degree from the fact that man is a finite being existing in an infinite universe. Man can know the existence of and, to a certain extent, the nature of the finite world because he too is finite and has extension, that is, he occupies space. Man knows that the infinite exists, but he can never know its nature because, although it has extension like us, it does not have limits (451, pp. 1212-13). Pascal develops his ideas concerning infinity in the Pensée entitled "Disproportion de l'homme," which is often referred to as "Les deux infinis" (84, pp. 1105-12). In this Pensée, Pascal asks his reader to contemplate the universe beyond him, and he will become aware that the universe extends indefinitely and that the earth is but an imperceptible speck compared with all creation. In fact, man's intellect is completely unable to imagine the limitless space that exists beyond the world we know; what we can imagine are mere atoms in comparison to the reality that exists (84, p. 1105).

Having shown that the universe of the planets and stars extends beyond human comprehension, Pascal then turns his reader's attention to the world smaller than himself:

. . . qu'il recherche dans ce qu'il connaît les choses les plus délicates. Qu'un ciron lui offre, dans la petitesse de son corps, des parties incomparablement plus petites . . . (84, p. 1106).

Within this mite, the tiniest insect visible to the human eye, Pascal concludes that a second infinity exists. We can, Pascal holds, visualize the make-up of the mite: legs which contain veins, blood in the veins, humors in the blood, drops in the humors, and vapors in these drops (84, p. 1106). However, in contrast to the tiniest element of the mite that the human mind can conceive, Pascal suggests that there exists another universe, each having its stars, planets, and an earth existing in the same proportions as the earth that we know. On this earth exist perhaps living creatures, the tiniest of which may be a mite which can be broken down into parts. Thus, the cycle begins again, a process that can be repeated endlessly (84, p. 1166).

Man exists between these two infinities: an infinity of magnitude and an infinity of parvitude, both of which extend beyond human conception. As a result, man is rendered incapable of knowing the world. He can neither grasp the end of things--the great infinity--nor their beginning--the small infinity.

All areas of knowledge inherit this two-fold infinity. For example, all sciences are infinite in their range

of research. Just as man cannot comprehend the infinite nature of the universe, he will never solve the infinite problems that nature poses in any science. As an example, Pascal points out that one of his own specialities, geometry, has an infinity of infinities to solve (84, p. 1107). Since each new premise in geometry leads to new premises and to new conclusions, the number of possible premises and conclusions is infinite. Therefore no final conclusions in geometry can ever be reached. However, one could argue, geometry does have first principles, the principles which are obviously true to the mathematician and on which all other premises and conclusions are based. Pascal replies to this objection by saying that what are accepted as first principles in geometry may not necessarily be true; just as the forementioned mite is capable of infinite division, even though the intellect is incapable of making them, so perhaps the first principles of geometry are capable of further division. The limits of reason prevent further divisions.

The inability of the intellect to comprehend the opposite infinities of the universe is further constrained by a similar weakness of the senses; for the senses, like the intellect, cannot perceive extremes of experience:

. . . trop de bruit nous assourdit, trop de lumière éblouit, trop de distance et trop de proximité empêche la vue, . . . (84, p. 1108).

As an example, Pascal points out that we obviously see plants on the earth; from the moon we would not see them. We can perceive that our plants on earth have little hairs; on these tiny hairs are minute animals. It would be presumptuous to conclude that this is the end simply because we can see no further (460, p. 1218). How then can we be certain of conclusions based on observation when the means of observing are limited and therefore not certain?

Because of the two-fold infinite nature of the universe and the finite capabilities of both man's intellect and his senses, all knowledge is but vanity, for no matter how much man knows, he is still an infinite distance from knowing all (84, pp. 1109-10).

Man's knowledge of the physical universe is further limited, according to Pascal, by the fact that man is a part of the universe and a part cannot know the whole. Can man even completely understand the finite world which is within his experience? No, this too is impossible because all parts of the universe are so related that man cannot know one aspect of reality without relating it to others and eventually to the whole (84, p. 1110).

How man functions physically, for example, can never be completely understood, for man is related to his universe and he is dependent on it for his existence:

Il a besoin de lieu pour le contenir, de temps pour durer, de mouvement pour vivre, d'éléments pour le composer, de chaleur et d'aliments pour (le) nourrir, d'air pour respirer; . . . (84, p. 1110).

Man sees because of the existence of light; he feels but he has need of objects outside of himself in order to feel. Man thus has a relation to everything, and to understand any of these things, he would have to comprehend an infinite chain of cause and effect. To understand man's physical make-up, for example, he must understand why man needs air. To do this, he must know what makes up air and what happens to it in the body. Fire also cannot exist without air. What are the common denominators in man and in fire so that both need air in order to exist? Pascal believes that man is incapable of answering this question because it involves comprehending an infinite chain of events of which man himself is a part. Thus man is really unable to know completely even the parts because, in order to do so, he must comprehend the whole; and this is impossible.

Pascal's point here is not that man can know nothing. Science, obviously, can discover some things about the world and man's physical make-up. Pascal's point is that man will never come to understand the ultimate nature of reality, nor will he ever completely understand even

a part of that reality. Perhaps the best he can hope for is to understand a part of the part.

Not only does the nature of the universe prevent complete knowledge, but man's own nature is also a limiting factor. As evidence, Pascal points out that the dual nature of man prevents him from acquiring knowledge of either matter or of the mind or soul. The war between man's reason and his senses also creates barriers. In addition, reason is often tricked by what Pascal calls the puissances trompeuses: imagination, self-love, and custom (92, p. 1113).

According to Pascal, man's capacity to discover the nature of his world is hindered by the fact that matter is simple, whereas man is composed of two natures, body and soul:

Car il est impossible que la partie qui raisonne en nous soit autre que spirituelle; et quand on prétendrait que nous serions simplement corporels, cela nous exclurait bien davantage de la connaissance des choses, n'y ayant rien de si inconcevable que de dire que la matière se connaît soi-même; il ne nous est pas possible de connaître comment elle se connaîtrait (84, pp. 1110-11).

If we are simply material, we can know nothing; if we are composed of spirit and matter, we cannot know perfectly even simple things, whether spiritual or corporeal.

One consequence of man's dual nature is that he erroneously attributes spiritual qualities to matter:

Car ils disent hardiment que les corps tendent en bas, qu'ils aspirent à leur centre, qu'ils fuient leur destruction, qu'ils craignent le vide, qu'(ils ont) des inclinations, des sympathies, des antipathies, . . . (84, p. 1111).

All of these are qualities which belong to the mind or soul. A second result is that, in speaking of the soul, man describes it as having locality and movement. These are qualities of a body only. We then can know neither matter nor spirit because "au lieu de recevoir les idées de ces choses pures, nous les teignons de nos qualités, et empreignons (de) notre être composé toutes les choses simples (que) nous contemplons" (84, p. 1111).

The war between reason and the senses is another factor in man's nature that stands in the way of knowledge. Reason and the senses are two of man's instruments used to discover truths about the physical universe, for both are used as the basis of experimentation. However, these two instruments are involved in a constant state of war in which deception is one of the major weapons used by both sides. The senses deceive reason by creating false appearances. As has been previously noted,⁵⁰ the senses are limited in what they can perceive, and what is perceived is determined by the point of view of the perceiver. Yet reason accepts these perceptions as true without

⁵⁰See p. 23.

questioning. Pascal gives an example in his "Préface pour le traité du vide."⁵¹ Before the invention of the telescope, man had thought that the Milky Way was a solid mass, because this is what the senses perceived. The telescope, however, revealed that the Milky Way is an infinity of stars. The senses thus deceive reason, but at the same time reason gets its revenge: "les passions de l'âme troublent les sens, et leur font des impressions fausses" (92, p. 1113).

The examination of Pascal's ideas concerning man's limitations has, up to this point, emphasized man and his knowledge of the physical universe. In explaining the limitations placed on man by the puissances trompeuses, Pascal continues to be concerned with knowledge of the physical universe, but he also considers moral and psychological truths and the formation of value-judgments. Imagination, Pascal points out, is responsible in part for the development of values, what man respects or disrespects. Custom is responsible for sustaining beliefs, both moral and political. Self-love influences man's knowledge of his psychological make-up.

⁵¹Blaise Pascal, "Préface pour le traité du vide" in OEuvres complètes, ed. Jacques Chevalier (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1954), p. 534.

Man's imagination is one of the puissances trompeuses which stand as a barrier to the search for truths. Imagination makes reason believe, doubt, or deny. It also controls the senses by deadening them or sharpening them. Thus not only perceptions, but also the judgments made on perceptions are subject to the domination of imagination. The domination of this "maîtresse d'erreur et de fausseté" is universal, for it influences not only the ignorant and the foolish, but also the wisest of men (104, p. 1116). As an example of the power of the imagination, Pascal points to a magistrate and asks if the respect given this man is not due to the fact that he, governed by reason, makes objective judgments while ignoring the unimportant details that would influence the imagination of the common man. Yet if this objective magistrate were to attend a church service and the preacher appeared badly shaven, his face grotesque, his clothing disheveled, and his voice hoarse, the magistrate would not take the preacher seriously no matter how great the truths he pronounced (104, pp. 1116-17). The wisest philosopher in the world can be deceived by his imagination. Put such a man on a wide plank over a precipice and, although his reason will tell him he is perfectly safe, his imagination will deceive him into believing otherwise (104, p. 1117).

Imagination with its universal persuasive power is one source of reputation and respect. Respect for achievements, for laws, and for the great is often due to the imagination. Magistrates are well aware of this power of imagination to reign over reason. They know that their red robes and ermine earn them the respect of the people, but, if the magistrate really possessed absolute justice, he would have no need for such trappings. But, since his justice is often merely imaginary, he needs these embellishments to convince the world of his justice and to inspire respect by appealing to the imagination (104, p. 1118).

Pascal draws from his personal experience to show how imagination influences what one feels as well as what he thinks, when he states that his fantaisie makes him hate a man who makes noises as he eats. Pascal admits that such a dislike is not reasonable, and he recognizes that his feeling is not just; yet he is unable to prevent himself from succumbing to the power of imagination (110, p. 1120).

Pascal does not give an example of the influence of the power of imagination on the study of the physical world in the Pensées; however, he does give an example

in a letter (October 29, 1647) to Père Noël,⁵² one of the men who contested Pascal's conclusion that a vacuum is possible, in the Expériences nouvelles touchant le vide.⁵³ In both sources Pascal states that because the existence of a vacuum was incomprehensible to man's intellect, men of science had invented substances which must be contained in the space above the mercury in the test tube as described by the Torricelli experiments. Some had imagined that the space above the mercury was filled with spirits of mercury. Other scientists had imagined that it was filled with rarified air.⁵⁴ The most outrageous to Pascal seems to be the conclusion that the space contained a material, subtle matter, which is unknowable to the senses. Led only by their imagination, some scientists, in fact, had concluded that this unknowable matter fills all of outer space.⁵⁵ Such is the power of imagination.

Since perceptions, feelings, and judgments are all dominated and deceived by imagination, one might argue

⁵²"Réponse de Blaise Pascal au Très Bon Révérend Père Noël," ibid., pp. 370-77.

⁵³Expériences nouvelles touchant le vide, ibid., pp. 362-70.

⁵⁴"Réponse de Blaise Pascal au Très Bon Révérend Père Noël," ibid., p. 373.

⁵⁵Expériences nouvelles touchant le vide, ibid., p. 363.

that imagination could then serve as a touchstone for establishing truth, for one need only choose the opposite of what imagination concludes as being true. However, the imagination is not always wrong, but it places the same value upon what is true and what is false. In short, the imagination influences judgment, but it has no means of judgment of its own (104, p. 1116). This, in fact, is perhaps the greatest danger of imagination, for it can lead us to believe what is completely worthless to be of highest importance (108, p. 1120). As a result we become insensible to the extent that we despise what should be of greatest interest, and we become insensible to those things that should be of greatest concern:

"Les choses qui nous tiennent le plus, comme de cacher son peu de bien, ce n'est souvent presque rien. C'est un néant que notre imagination grossit en montagne" (109, p. 1120). Thus this mistress of error and falsehood, this quality of man which makes what is appear as what is not and what is not to appear as reality, our imagination determines our judgment on all that is important to man:

"Elle fait la beauté, la justice, et le bonheur. . ."
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Self-love is a further source of deception to the senses and to judgment and is thus another aspect of the

nature of man that places limitations on his search for certainty. According to Pascal, the nature of the human ego is to love only the self and to be concerned only with the self. As a result, the ego will do everything possible to create an image of the self which is worthy of its own love:

. . . il veut être grand, et il se voit petit;
il veut être heureux, et il se voit misérable; il
veut être parfait, et il se voit plein d'imperfections;
il veut être l'objet de l'amour et de l'estime des
hommes, et il voit que ses défauts ne méritent que
leur aversion et leur mépris (130, p. 1123).

The result of a man's awareness of this discrepancy between what he actually is and what he would like to be is that he develops a hatred of the truth--the truth that reveals him to be small, miserable, and full of imperfections. Consequently, he would like to destroy the truth; but, being unable to annihilate it completely, he does as much as possible to blot out the truth about himself from his own awareness and from that of others (130, p. 1123).

The method used to achieve this purpose is rather complicated. Since we are not satisfied with our real self, we create an imaginary one which we try to impress upon the minds of others. We hide certain virtues and faults; or we create virtues and faults in order to make ourselves appear a certain way to the world. We work

so constantly to add to and to preserve the imaginary being that we neglect the real self. What then appears to the world as our real self is only a created, imaginary one. This process is so extensive that even if we possess virtues, they become a part of our imaginary self rather than our real self, and the end result is that we cannot truly distinguish which of our qualities are real and which qualities have been invented. Individual self-knowledge thus becomes impossible (145, pp. 1127-28).

Since self-love and the desire for the love and esteem of others are universal, all men take part in this kind of deception. No man wants to be told the truth and all men avoid telling it to others:

Ainsi la vie humaine n'est qu'une illusion perpétuelle; on ne fait que s'entre-tromper et s'entre-flatter (130, p. 1125).

Man is nothing but disguise, falsehood, and hypocrisy, both in regard to himself and in regard to others.

A second result of self-love and self-interest is that each individual sees the world from his special point of view. We see and judge things differently because our interests are different. We not only look at things with different eyes and different intellects, we also look at different sides of things according to the dictates of self-interest (114, p. 1121). An example of this might be the question of man's free will in the matter

of Christian salvation. A Jansenist of Pascal's time, for example, would look at the evidence available--the Scriptures and the writings of the saints--and conclude that free will is impossible. An orthodox Catholic, on the other hand, would look at the same evidence and find that the complete denial of free will is an impossible conclusion. A scientist might look at the problem not only with different eyes, but he might see a completely different side; for, overlooking the religious point of view, he might deny the existence of free will on the basis of his scientific belief in cause and effect. The common man of any age, unaware perhaps of the complex nature of the problem from both a scientific and religious point of view, might find the question meaningless and live his life, ignoring the problem.

Pascal underlines the difficulty and danger of the influence of self-interest when he compares a man physically crippled and a man with a crippled mind:

D'où vient qu'un boiteux ne nous irrite pas, et un esprit boiteux nous irrite? A cause qu'un boiteux reconnaît que nous allons droit, et qu'un esprit boiteux dit que c'est nous qui boitons; . . . (101, p. 1115).

Or, to put it another way, why are we not upset when we are told we have a headache, and yet we become angry when we are told that we think or decide wrongly?

Ce qui cause cela et que nous sommes bien certains que nous n'avons pas mal à la tête, et que nous ne

sommes pas boiteux; mais nous ne sommes pas si assurés que nous choisissons le vrai. De sorte que, n'en ayant d'assurance qu'à cause que nous le voyons de toute notre vue, quand un autre voit de toute sa vue le contraire, cela nous met en suspens et nous étonne, et encore plus quand mille autres se moquent de notre choix; car il faut préférer nos lumières à celles de tant d'autres. . . . Il n'y a jamais cette contradiction dans les sens touchant un boiteux (101, p. 1115).

In short, self-interest causes a man to view a problem a certain way and the more he is told that he is wrong, the more his self-love and pride wish to protect him by insisting that he is right. One must add here that Pascal overlooks the possibility that the man accusing the other of having the "esprit boiteux" might be the one who is wrong. In fact this was exactly the position in which Pascal found himself when he stubbornly persisted in advancing the theory of the existence of the vacuum; and, in spite of almost two thousand years of opinion to the contrary, Pascal did succeed in proving that a vacuum can exist.

Who then can decide who is right or who is wrong? How are we to discern which minds are healthy and which are crippled when all men are motivated by self-interest and self-love?

Custom is the third puissance trompeuse which places limitations on man's capacity to know the world as it really is, for this powerful force causes men to

see and accept things as his society has accepted them to be and as it thinks they should be. Scientific theories, moral values, and political systems--whether they be good or bad--are all sustained through the force of custom.

Man, according to Pascal, is a machine (automate) as well as a mind (470, p. 1219). The instrument by which belief is brought about is not demonstration only, for few things can be demonstrated. Custom, which is a result of this automatic nature of man, makes him believe without thinking:

Qui a démontré qu'il sera demain jour, et que nous mourrons? Et qu'y a-t-il de plus cru? (470, p. 1219)

It is the habit of seeing these things happen that persuades men to believe them.

The power of custom to enforce acceptance is also derived from the observation of nature:

La nature recommence toujours les mêmes choses, les ans, les jours, les heures; les espaces de même, et les nombres sont bout à bout à la suite l'un de l'autre (128, p. 1123).

La nature s'imite: une graine, jetée en bonne terre produit; . . . (31, p. 1096).

When we see such events come about always the same, we conclude that the events are a natural necessity, a law of nature, "comme qu'il sera demain jour" (118, p. 1121). We transfer our observation of nature to man's activities. In other words, a certain way of doing something repeated

often enough will become accepted as the only good way to do it. Thus a society will suppose that a type of government--a monarchy, for example--is necessary and therefore good because that type of political system has existed for a long time, yet

Qu'y a-t-il de moins raisonnable que de choisir, pour gouverner un État, le premier fils d'une reine? (296, p. 1163)

Pascal points out that it would be just as unreasonable to appoint the richest man aboard a ship as its captain as to make the eldest son heir to the throne.

Because custom is such a powerful force acting on man, even the supposed first principles accepted by philosophers, scientists, and mathematicians must be questioned:

La coutume est une seconde nature, qui détruit la première. Mais qu'est-ce que nature? Pourquoi la coutume n'est-elle pas naturelle? J'ai grand peur que cette nature ne soit elle-même qu'une première coutume, comme la coutume est une seconde nature (120, p. 1121).

Qu'est-ce que nos principes naturels, sinon nos principes accoutumés? . . . Une différente coutume nous donnera d'autres principes naturels . . . (119, p. 1121).

In other words, what we have believed to be fundamental laws of the universe could well be false beliefs re-enforced by long years of acceptance.

The history of science is filled with examples of theories that had been accepted as fundamental laws, but

which have later been repudiated. The belief in the impossibility of the existence of a vacuum, a belief accepted since Aristotle advanced his metaphysical proofs until disproved by Pascal's experiments, has already been cited.⁵⁶ The theory that the sun revolves around the earth is another such example. What could be more obviously true? The observations of the senses could not conclude otherwise. This idea was even backed by conclusions of religion: man is the center of creation and a special creature of God. The contrary hypothesis, advanced by Copernicus, even after being refined and proved mathematically by Kepler and finally shown to be true by Galileo's observations with the telescope, was not readily accepted because of the force of years of customary belief. Even mathematics is subject to the forces of custom. Euclid's geometry was accepted as based on obviously true principles for more than two thousand years; yet modern mathematics has discovered that Euclid's system is not necessarily all true. As an example, examine the theorem that Pascal was said to have worked out at the age of twelve: The sum of the angles of a triangle is equal to two right angles. This is true if the triangle is drawn on a flat surface,

⁵⁶See pp. 5 and 31.

but if the triangle is drawn on a sphere, it is not true. Many other "obviously true" conclusions of Euclid's geometry are not true in spherical geometry. As if the forces of imagination, self-love, and custom were not enough to weaken man's reasoning process, Pascal notes that the mind has other weaknesses. One of these is that it is so easily distracted:

L'esprit de ce souverain juge du monde n'est pas si indépendant, qu'il ne soit sujet à être troublé par le premier tintamare qui se fait autour de lui. Il ne faut pas le bruit d'un canon pour empêcher ses pensées: il ne faut que le bruit d'une girouette ou d'une poulie. Ne vous étonnez pas s'il ne raisonne pas bien à présent: une mouche bourdonne à ses oreilles; c'en est assez pour le rendre incapable de bon conseil (95, p. 1114).

Speaking from experience, Pascal also remarks that illness can be a distracting influence, for illness weakens both the senses and judgment (104, p. 1119). The weakness of memory is also a hindrance to thought: "En écrivant ma pensée, elle m'échappe quelquefois" (100, p. 1115). Since memory is necessary for all operations of the reason (97, p. 1115), the weakness of memory is an important restriction on clear thought. Finally, Pascal also notes the fact that "hasard donne les pensées, et hasard les ôte" (98, p. 1115). Man has no control over the thoughts that come into his mind.

That man cannot understand the physical world because of the two-fold infinite nature of the universe;

that man cannot even know its parts because a part cannot know the whole and because the chain of causes leading to a given effect is too complex; that man's reason cannot be a certain means of discovering truths because it is too easily distracted by minor disturbances and deceived by imagination, self-love, and custom: these seem to be Pascal's conclusions concerning the futility of man's search for ultimate truths. The validity of all of man's knowledge must be questioned, and he can have no hope of alone reaching ultimate truths about himself or his physical universe.

CHAPTER III

MAN'S LIMITATIONS CONCERNING JUSTICE

The second limitation of man is his inability to establish justice. In Pensée 252, Pascal wrote the following about human justice:

J'ai passé longtemps de ma vie en croyant qu'il y avait une justice; et en cela je ne me trompais pas; car il y en a, selon que Dieu nous l'a voulu révéler. Mais je ne le prenais pas ainsi, et c'est en quoi je me trompais; car je croyais que notre justice était essentiellement juste, et que j'avais de quoi la connaître et en juger. Mais je me suis trouvé tant de fois en faute de jugement droit, qu'enfin je suis entré en défiance de moi et puis des autres (252, p. 1155).

Absolute justice does exist, but man does not have the capacity to discover it. Man can neither discover absolute laws which apply to all men at all times, nor can he create a political system which treats all men justly.

The proof that men have been unable to establish absolute laws is revealed in the diversity of laws in various countries and various times. If truly just laws were knowable, all men and all nations would follow them; their application would be universal (230, p. 1149). Instead of absolute justice, we have various views of justice that change with the change of climates:

Trois degrés d'élévation du pôle renversent toute la jurisprudence; un méridien décide de la vérité; . . . (230, p. 1149).

Such is the variation in men's conception of justice that it appears that there exists "vérité au deçà des Pyrénées, erreur au delà" (230, p. 1149). The plain fact is that those on neither side have a claim on true justice. That human views of justice are not absolute is also revealed by the fact that laws change with time:

Les lois fondamentales changent; le droit a ses époques (230, p. 1149).

Thus it happens that "le larcin, l'inceste, le meurtre des enfants et des pères" have in certain countries at various times found a place among virtuous actions (230, p. 1150). What is justice then is only a matter of the customs of time and place.

The injustice of human laws is also revealed by the variations which exist within a society. In most societies, murder is considered wrong. Yet in these same societies killing men by execution is deemed necessary to sustain order:

Mais que dira-t-on qui soit bon? . . . De ne point tuer? Non, car les désordres seraient horribles, et les méchants tueraient tous les bons (228, pp. 1148-49).

The absurdity of laws which make it wrong to kill the citizens of one's own country and yet not only right but heroic to kill members of another society during war is also cited by Pascal. The irony of such laws is described by Pascal in a dialogue between two enemy soldiers:

Pourquoi me tuez-vous? --Eh quoi! ne demeurez-vous de l'autre côté de l'eau? Mon ami, si vous demeuriez de ce côté, je serais un assassin, et cela serait injuste de vous tuer de la sorte; mais, puisque vous demeurez de l'autre côté, je suis un brave et cela est juste (233, p. 1151).

Wherein lay the justice of laws that say that it is both right and wrong to murder, depending on the circumstances?

Man's inability to establish just laws is also revealed by the fact that some laws are completely nonsensical. The law of primogeniture, for example, is absurd (232, p. 1151). There is nothing rational in the idea that the eldest son should inherit his father's estate, since being born first in a family does not insure having the ability to manage the inheritance. Pascal also points out the absurd basis of a monarchy, that is, choosing the king's eldest son to govern. That the king's son is the most virtuous and the most able to govern a state is ridiculous. Still, Pascal asks, has man ever found a more rational system of choosing its ruler (296, p. 1163)?

The basis of all such laws and all systems of government is custom and not justice; laws and governments seem good for the simple reason that they are accepted and people are accustomed to them.

But, one might object, natural laws do exist. Justice must lie in the laws of nature which would be

the same for all countries. Pascal's answer is "Il y a sans doute des lois naturelles; mais cette belle raison corrompue a tout corrompu" (230, p. 1150). The result is that "rien, suivant la seule raison, n'est juste de soi; . . ." (230, p. 1150). Pascal holds that those who try to take justice back to first principles, those who try to discover the laws of nature through reason, only bring about a complete destruction of law (230, p. 1150). Pascal notes that the source of revolution by the people is often an attempt to return to the "lois fondamentales et primitives de l'état, qu'une coutume injuste a abolies" (230, p. 1150). Such revolutions, according to Pascal, are futile and do not bring about justice because they only return power to the strong, who create their own laws which gradually become accepted as just through the passing of time. In short, the end result of revolution is the re-establishment of unjust laws (230, pp. 1150-51).

Pascal's final attitude is that, since men cannot establish absolute justice, they should accept and obey the customs of their country. People should obey laws because they are laws, "comme il faut obéir aux supérieurs, non pas parce qu'ils sont justes, mais parce qu'ils sont supérieurs" (288, p. 1161). They should follow the established political system because it is established. Only by doing this can sedition be avoided, for "le plus grand

des maux est les guerres civiles" (295, p. 1163). The ultimate aim of human society, according to Pascal, should be the establishment and maintainance of order, not justice (288, p. 1161). Man can hope for no more.

CHAPTER IV

MAN'S LIMITATIONS CONCERNING HAPPINESS

According to Pascal, the goal of all men is happiness, and the motivation for all men's actions is to achieve this end (370, p. 1184). Yet no man, according to Pascal, has the ability to reach this goal through his own efforts:

Tous se plaignent: princes, sujets; nobles, roturiers; vieux, jeunes; forts, faibles; savants, ignorants; sains, malades; de tous pays, de tous les temps, de tous âges et de toutes conditions (370, p. 1185).

Man's inability to attain happiness through his own efforts is the third of man's limitations described by the Pensées. The plan of this chapter is to examine Pascal's ideas concerning the source of man's unhappy condition; then to present the means by which men have attempted to achieve happiness and Pascal's objections to these means.

The source of man's unhappy condition is awareness of his own suffering. All animals suffer, but what is called nature in animals is called wretchedness in man (268, p. 1158). Things, even when they are destroyed, do not suffer:

On n'est pas misérable sans sentiment; une maison ruinée ne l'est pas. Il n'y que l'homme de misérable (256, p. 1156).

Man is also unhappy because of his awareness of the evil of human nature, which makes him so miserable that, once he is conscious of it, nothing can console him (205, p. 1139). The wretchedness resulting from the awareness of man's evil nature is intensified by the fact that he aspires to be good: "Il veut être parfait, et il se voit plein d'imperfections" (130, p. 1123). Man's awareness of the brevity of life and the eternity of death is another reason for man's misery:

Car il est indubitable que le temps de cette vie n'est qu'un instant, que l'état de la mort est éternel (334, p. 1171).

One result of man's awareness of death is fear and uncertainty, for the nature of the eternity which follows death is unknowable:

. . . la mort . . . qui menace (les hommes) à toute heure, les doit mettre infailliblement dans peu de temps dans l'horrible nécessité d'être éternellement ou anéantis ou malheureux, sans qu'ils sachent laquelle de ces éternités leur est à jamais préparée (334, p. 1171).

Nothing is more real nor more terrible than the threat of death. Pascal makes vivid the gloom and despair which results from man's awareness of death by asking his reader to picture men awaiting execution as every man awaits his own death:

Qu'on s'imagine un nombre d'hommes dans les chaînes, et tous condamnés à la mort, dont les uns étant chaque jour égorgés à la vue des autres, ceux qui restent voient leur propre condition dans celle de leurs

semblables, et, se regardant les uns et les autres avec douleur et sans espérance, attendent à leur tour (341, p. 1180).

The feelings of anguish and fear resulting from man's awareness of an infinite, unknowable, and silent universe and the feeling of loss because of his inability to know where he belongs in that universe are also reasons for man's misery. Pascal describes these feelings through an image:

En voyant l'aveuglement et la misère de l'homme, en regardant tout l'univers muet, et l'homme sans lumière, abandonné à lui-même, et comme égaré dans ce recoin de l'univers, sans savoir qui l'y a mis; ce qu'il y est venu faire, ce qu'il deviendra en mourant, incapable de tout connaissance, j'entre en effroi, comme un homme qu'on aurait porté endormi dans une île déserte et effroyable, et qui s'éveillerait sans connaître où il est, et sans moyen d'en sortir (393, p. 1191).

This then is Pascal's picture of the human condition: lost, fearful, and despairing, man lives in awareness of his misery and suffering, unable to find his way "dans des ténèbres impénétrables" (275, p. 1159).

In spite of his awareness of misery and death, man has a natural instinct for happiness. Man seems doomed to try to achieve happiness, although that search is futile:

Nous recherchons le bonheur, et ne trouvons que misère et mort (270, p. 1158).

The frustration of having the desire for happiness coupled with the awareness of misery leads only to further unhappiness and frustration.

One of the results of this contrast between man's awareness of his misery and his desire for happiness is that man is unable to exist in the present, and therefore he never really lives:

Nous anticipons l'avenir comme trop lent à venir, comme pour hâter son cours; ou nous rappelons le passé, pour l'arrêter comme trop prompt (168, p. 1131).

We constantly look to the future as a promise of happiness. Our desires imagine situations in which we shall be happy. However, if we attain those desired states, we are still not satisfied, for by then we have created new visions of pleasure which promise satisfaction (167, p. 1131). Hence we hardly ever think of the present; or, if we do, it is only to use it as a means to direct and plan the future:

Ainsi nous ne vivons jamais, mais nous espérons de vivre; et, nous disposant toujours à être heureux, il est inévitable que nous ne le soyons jamais (168, p. 1132).

Because man never lives in the present, he constantly hopes for happiness without ever really achieving it.

Men have attempted to fulfill their hopes for happiness in a number of ways. One method of which Pascal was keenly aware is the search for knowledge; if a man can satisfy his thirst for knowledge, he will perhaps achieve happiness. However, according to Pascal, attempting to gain happiness by seeking knowledge is futile because

the desire for knowledge leads only to frustration; for, although man wishes for truth, he finds only uncertainty; in his search for knowledge he discovers his complete ignorance. This frustration is especially acute because the nature of man is such that he cannot give up the search for knowledge and certainty. In short, man is incapable of finding certainty, but he is also dissatisfied to remain ignorant, and just as man cannot achieve any certainty, he cannot prevent himself from not wanting to know (367, p. 1184). Thus, instead of being a means to happiness, the desire for knowledge becomes "la maladie principale de l'homme" (147, p. 1128).

A second hope for happiness results from the egoistic nature of man, for man's ego makes him believe that the goal of happiness can be achieved by gaining the esteem of others (278, p. 1159). This desire for esteem and respect becomes one of the main motivating forces for men's actions:

. . . (ils) suent dans leur cabinet pour montrer aux savants qu'ils ont résolu une question d'algèbre qu'on n'aurait pu trouver jusqu'ici; et tant d'autres s'exposent aux derniers périls pour se vanter ensuite d'une place qu'ils auront prise; . . . et enfin les autres se tuent pour remarquer toutes ces choses, non pas pour devenir plus sages, mais seulement pour montrer qu'ils les savent (205, p. 1142).

Having the esteem of others, however, is not a satisfactory means of achieving happiness, for the nature of the ego

is such that it is not content no matter how much esteem it receives. In short, acquiring the esteem of others is futile, since the desire for esteem is insatiable. Furthermore, the ego finds it unbearable to be despised by even a single person (278, p. 1159). Since it is impossible to be esteemed by everybody, the esteem a man gets from some is balanced by the lack of esteem of others.

That the source of happiness is repose is a third illusionary hope. According to Pascal, such hope shows a lack of understanding of human nature, for man does not find serenity in repose. Instead, when repose is secured, a man is only made more keenly aware of his miserable condition:

Il sent alors son néant, son abandon, son insuffisance, sa dépendance, son impuissance, son vide. Incontinent, il sortira du fond de son âme l'ennui, la noirceur, la tristesse, le chagrin, le dépit, le désespoir (201, p. 1138).

Thus, instead of contributing to happiness, repose intensifies misery. Hence it is that "tout le malheur des hommes vient d'une seule chose, qui est de ne savoir pas demeurer en repos, dans une chambre" (205, pp. 1138-39).

Man, unable to find a remedy for death, misery, and ignorance and thus unable to find any true happiness, attempts to dismiss thoughts of his condition through continuous movement. Pascal notes:

On charge les hommes, dès l'enfance, du soin de leur honneur, de leur bien, de leurs amis, et encore du bien et de l'honneur de leurs amis. On les accable d'affaires, de l'apprentissage des langues et d'exercices (207, p. 1145).

People, even from childhood, are given duties and work to keep them moving. When the duties of the day are completed, they are kept on the move by what Pascal calls divertissements--dancing, hunting, gambling, sports:

Voilà tout ce que les hommes ont pu inventer pour se rendre heureux. Et ceux qui font sur cela les philosophes, et qui croient que le monde est bien peu raisonnable de passer tout le jour à courir après un lièvre qu'ils ne voudraient pas avoir acheté, ne connaissent guère notre nature. Ce lièvre ne nous garantirait pas de la vue de la mort et des misères, mais la chasse--qui nous en détourne--nous en garantit (205, p. 1140).

The result of such feverish activity is not happiness, but a state of forgetfulness--a state in which man is diverted from thoughts of death and misery.

The apparent happiness of kings is due neither to their wealth nor to their power, but to the fact that they never lack persons about them who make certain that divertissement prevents solitude. Pascal explains:

. . . c'est à dire qu'ils sont environnés de personnes qui ont un soin merveilleux de prendre garde que le roi ne soit seul et en état de penser à soi, sachant bien qu'il sera misérable, tout roi qu'il est, s'il y pense (206, p. 1145).

Similarly all positions of power and wealth are valuable for the divertissement they provide and not for any inherent value that exists in those positions:

Qu'est-ce autre chose d'être surintendant, chancelier, premier président, sinon d'être en une condition où l'on a dès le matin un grand nombre de gens qui viennent de tous côtés pour ne leur laisser pas une heure en la journée où ils puissent penser à eux-mêmes? (205, p. 111/4)

Not only do the pleasures which wealth and position provide serve as sources of divertissement, but the duties of men of position are also a form of diversion.

The attempts by philosophers to discover the means to attain happiness have also failed, for philosophers have arrived at differing and often contradictory answers:

L'un dit que le souverain bien est en la vertu, l'autre le met en la volupté; l'un à suivre la nature, l'autre en la vérité; . . . l'autre en l'ignorance totale, l'autre en l'indolence, d'autres à résister aux apparences, l'autre à n'admirer rien, . . . et les braves pyrroniens en leur ataraxie, doute et suspension perpétuelle; . . . (189, p. 1135).

As specific examples of the failure of philosophical systems, Pascal examines the conclusions of the Stoics and the Epicureans. According to the Stoics, happiness lies in a renunciation of the passions: reason and self-will must overcome the desires of the passions for self-indulgence. Then only will man find happiness. On the other hand, the Epicureans have tried to renounce reason and to make the satisfaction of the passions the basis of happiness (317, p. 1168; 388, p. 1190). Neither system can ever succeed because the reason and the passions are both aspects of the nature of man, and any effort to rid himself of one or the other is futile:

. . . la raison demeure toujours, qui accuse la bassesse et l'injustice des passions, et qui trouble le repos de ceux qui s'y abandonnent; et les passions sont toujours vivantes dans ceux qui y veulent renoncer (317, p. 1168).

According to Pascal's viewpoint, the Stoics, by attempting to renounce the passions, would put man on a level with God; whereas the Epicureans, by succumbing to the desires of the passions, would put man on a level with animals (317, p. 1168). The greatest fault of all pagan philosophical systems, however, is that none is concerned with the question of the mortality or immortality of the soul; this question must be confronted, since death is one of the main reasons for man's misery (347-348, p. 1181).

All attempts by man to achieve happiness through his own efforts end in failure. If he places his hopes for happiness on the search for knowledge, he is lost, for he only discovers uncertainty and his own ignorance; yet if he attempts to give up the search for certainty, he is still dissatisfied. Trying to find happiness by earning the love and respect of others is also futile, since the self is never satisfied. The dream of finding contentment in repose is also unsatisfactory, for complete repose leads only to an unbearable ennui. Diversions and amusements are only forms of escape and give nothing but temporary relief from man's awareness of his unhappy

condition. If man gives in to the urging of his passions in attempting to find happiness, he feels the constant admonishment of his reason. If he tries to follow the dictates of reason, the passions continue to press their desires on him.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

The total effect of Pascal's picture of the human condition is to reveal that man lives in a situation of limitations, frustrations, and contradictions. Man hungers for knowledge, but finds himself completely ignorant. He seeks for ultimate truths through reason only to find that reason is constantly deceived by imagination, self-love, and custom. He sees himself great, but finds he is nothing in face of the infinity of the universe. Man sees himself good, but also recognizes his essentially evil nature. He has a natural instinct for happiness, but finds that every attempt to attain happiness only intensifies his wretchedness. In following reason, he sees within himself the reflection of God; in his desire for pleasure, he sees a reflection of his bestial nature. He hopes for a just society, but finds that justice cannot be realized or even defined. Man then is a complete paradox; all his aspirations are contradicted by his limitations:

Quelle chimère est-ce donc que l'homme? Quelle nouveauté, quel monstre, quel chaos, quel sujet de contradiction, quel prodige! Juge de toutes choses, imbécile ver de terre; dépositaire du vrai, cloaque d'incertitude et d'erreur; gloire et rebut de l'univers.

. . . Connaissez donc, superbe, quel paradoxe vous êtes à vous-même. Humiliez-vous, raison impuissante; . . . apprenez que l'homme passe infiniment l'homme, et entendez de votre maître votre condition véritable que vous ignorez! Ecoutez Dieu (438, pp. 1206-7).

Thus Pascal looks at the human condition and concludes that man's only hope is reliance on the truths that Christianity teaches.

Pascal finds the evidence for this conclusion in the limitations and contradictory natures of man. Man's misery and the desire for happiness are, for Pascal, evidence of the truth of Christianity. Man aspires to be happy because he has an idea of the condition of man before the fall; man's misery is a sign that he has indeed fallen from a happier state. Man's aspiration to discover truths shows that man at one time knew these truths; that he cannot discover them is proof of the fall of men (438, p. 1207). Man's desire to escape from his evil nature and his incapacity to do so are further evidence of the fall of man. The contradictory philosophies of the Stoics and the Epicureans are also evidence of the truth of Christian teachings. Those who follow the epicurean philosophy reflect man's nature after the fall; the followers of Stoicism reflect man's nature before the fall of man (439, p. 1209). Each philosophy is both right and wrong. The Epicureans tell man to go outside

himself and find happiness in amusement and pleasure. The Stoics tell man to withdraw into himself to find repose. The answer, says Pascal, is neither outside, nor inside. It is in God and therefore both outside and within (391, p. 1190).

Thus, if a man honestly and sincerely analyzes the nature of man, he will discover that man can be certain only of the truths that Christianity teaches because only Christianity correctly describes man's nature (426, p. 1202). It accounts for his aspirations, and it accounts for his limitations. No other philosophy and no other religion does this (703, p. 1304). Christian truths do not explain the physical nature of the universe; they do not add to any human science, but they do explain man and define his goals. The main truths of Christianity are that man is corrupted because of the fall, that God exists, and that, although man's corruption makes him unworthy of Him, man can reach Him; for God, through the mystery of the Redeemer, has delivered man from the corruption of sin. These truths of Christianity are the only truths man needs to know (602, p. 1280).

Man's only goal in life is to seek and to find God, as revealed by the Christian religion. Any other means of seeking the truth about human existence are futile. This attitude toward scientific and philosophical

searches for truth is revealed by several Pensées and by a letter written to the mathematician Fermat near the end of Pascal's life.⁵⁷ In Pensée 196 Pascal compares the relative importance of physical science and the study of morals:

La science des choses extérieures ne me consolera pas de l'ignorance de la morale, au temps d'affliction; mais la science des moeurs me consolera toujours de l'ignorance des sciences extérieures (196, p. 1137).

A much stronger statement against science is made in a comment concerning the Copernican theory of the universe, which Pascal rejected:

Je trouve bon qu'on n'approfondisse pas l'opinion de Copernic: mais ceci. . . ! Il importe à toute la vie de savoir si l'âme est mortelle ou immortelle (346, p. 1181).

According to Pascal, Copernicus' theory was not satisfactorily proved and it mattered little whether it was proved or not. In his letter to Fermat, Pascal calls geometry "le plus haut exercice de l'esprit, mais en même temps je la connais si inutile, que je ne fais pas de différence entre un homme qui n'est que géomètre et un habile artisan." Further on in the letter, Pascal writes that he is engaged in a study so remote from geometry

⁵⁷"Lettre à Fermat," OEuvres complètes, ed. Jacques Chevalier (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1954), p. 522.

that he hardly ever remembers that geometry exists.⁵⁸ It is in the same spirit that Pascal writes of Descartes:

Il faut dire en gros: "Cela se fait par figure et mouvement"; car cela est vrai. Mais de dire quels, et composer la machine, cela est ridicule; car cela est inutile et incertain et pénible. Et quand cela serait vrai, nous n'estimons pas que toute la philosophie vaille une heure de peine (192, p. 1137).

Why is Descartes useless and uncertain? Why is geometry a useless craft? Why is it not good to delve into the mysteries of the physical universe? Pascal's final answer seems to be that the only goal of human conduct should be following the Christian religion. A man who makes this his goal knows all he needs to know; a man who makes Christ the center of all will understand the reason for all things (602, p. 1280). Even religious truths proved through reason are, according to Pascal, useless. Proving God's existence, the Trinity, or the immortality of the soul would not in any way help a man to attain salvation. After all these proofs are examined, Christ, as revealed in the Scriptures, still stands as the only means of salvation (602, p. 1281).

One can conjecture that Pascal's conclusion that scientific and mathematical searches for knowledge are futile must have been a source of torment for him. Most

⁵⁸Ibid.

of the contemporary biographers of Pascal wrote that he had given up the study of mathematics and science after his religious experience in 1654, yet some of his greatest discoveries in mathematics were made after that experience. One might also note that Pascal's final attitude was even more medieval than that of the thinkers of the Middle Ages, for they admitted the value of philosophical and scientific proofs which concurred with religious teachings.

Pascal does not provide any answer to the problem of man's inability to establish justice. His cynical attitude toward politics would lead one to believe that Pascal would take a stoic position toward any system of justice. The Christian can "render unto Caesar" and at the same time devote his life entirely to God. Men can be Christians under any political system, for the Christian life transcends political considerations. The Christian can only hope for complete justice after death.

Pascal's answer to man's inability to attain happiness is conclusive: the Christian religion is, for Pascal, man's only hope. Accepting Christian teachings means recognizing that all individual efforts for achieving happiness are futile. Seeking and finding God is the sole source of happiness for any man, for the Christian God is one of love and consolation; and even though a man who has been filled with God's presence is extremely

aware of human misery and of his own suffering, the knowledge of God's infinite mercy fills him with humility, joy, confidence, and love (602, p. 1281). A man so enlightened will give himself totally to God, and in this only lies his happiness:

Le Dieu des Chrétiens est un Dieu qui fait sentir à l'âme qu'il est son unique bien, que tout son repos est en lui, qu'elle n'aura de joi qu'à l'aimer; et qui lui fait en même temps abhorrer les obstacles qui la retiennent et l'empêchent d'aimer Dieu de toutes ses forces: l'amour-propre et la concupiscence, qui l'arrêtent, lui sont insupportables. Ce Dieu lui fait sentir qu'elle a ce fonds d'amour-propre qui la perd, et que lui seul la peut guérir (721, p. 1308).

Note here that Pascal gives the alternates to man's own efforts to achieve happiness. Man does not secure happiness by satisfying the self, but by renouncing it. Man does not attain happiness through pleasure, but, with God's aid, by renouncing any pleasures which prevent him from loving God. Note also that complete quiet is not an unbearable ennui, but true happiness. This is the profound sense of happiness which Pascal found when he was alone in his room on the evening of November 23, 1654. There, in God, he discovered "Certitude. Certitude. Sentiment, Joie, Paix." and "Joie, Joie, Joie, pleurs de joie."⁵⁹

⁵⁹"Mémorial," ibid., p. 554.

The choices that Pascal gives are clear: either to remain in a situation of limitation, frustration, and despair; or to submit to Christ and his teachings. To live without God is to live in uncertainty, anguish, and ignorance. To live with God is to find true satisfaction and enlightenment as to man's condition, his nature, and his final end.

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