

Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (1669)

6 (60).¹ First part: Wretchedness of man without God. Second part: Happiness of man with God.

otherwise

First part: Nature is corrupt, proved by nature itself. Second part: There is a Redeemer, proved by Scripture.

45 (83). Man is nothing but a subject full of natural error that cannot be eradicated except through grace. Nothing shows him the truth, everything deceives him. The two principles of truth, reason and senses, are not only both not genuine, but are engaged in mutual deception. The senses deceive reason through false appearances, and, just as they trick the soul, they are tricked by it in their turn: it takes its revenge. The senses are disturbed by passions, which produce false impressions. They both compete in lies and deception.

But, apart from such accidents, error arising from the failure of these heterogeneous faculties to reach understanding . . .

(This is where the chapter on powers of deception must start.)

110 (282). We know the truth not only through our reason but also through our heart. It is through the latter that we know first principles, and reason, which has nothing to do with it, tries in vain to refute them. The sceptics have no other object than that, and they work at it to no purpose. We know that we are not dreaming, but, however unable we may be to prove it rationally, our inability proves nothing but the weakness of our reason, and not the uncertainty of

¹ Pascal scholars differ on how Pascal's various notes ought to be ordered. I have marked each excerpt with two numbers: the first number reflects the order and designation in the Penguin edition used here; the parenthetical number reflects the designation in most other editions.

all our knowledge, as they maintain.² For knowledge of first principles, like space, time, motion, number, is as solid as any derived through reason, and it is on such knowledge, coming from the heart and instinct, that reason has to depend and base all its argument. The heart feels that there are three spatial dimensions and that demonstrate that there are no two square numbers of which one is double the other. Principles are felt, propositions proved, and both with certainty though by different means. It is just as pointless and absurd for reason to demand proof of first principles from the heart to demand an intuition of all the propositions demonstrated by reason before agreeing to accept them. . . .

183 (253). Two excesses: to exclude reason, to admit nothing but reason.

232 (566). We can understand nothing of God's works unless we accept the principle that he wished to blind some and enlighten others.

234 (581). God wishes to move the will rather than the mind. Perfect clarity would help the mind and harm the will.

Humble their pride.

235 (771). Jesus came to blind those who have clear sight and to give sight to the blind; to heal the sick and let the healthy die; to call sinners to repentance and justify them, and to leave the righteous to their sins; to fill the hungry with good things and to send the rich empty away.

236 (578). . . . There is enough light to enlighten the elect and enough obscurity to humiliate them. There is enough obscurity to blind the reprobate and enough light to condemn them and deprive them of excuse. . . .

414 (171). *Wretchedness*. The only thing that consoles us for our miseries is diversion. And yet it is the greatest of our miseries. For it is that above all which prevents us thinking about

² Descartes also addressed the possibility that life is merely a dream, but Pascal is not so disturbed about the inability to prove the contrary (see Selection 62).

ourselves and leads us imperceptibly to destruction. But for that we should be bored, and boredom would drive us to seek some more solid means of escape, but diversion passes our time and brings us imperceptibly to our death.

418 (233). . . . We know that the infinite exists without knowing its nature, just as we know that it is untrue that numbers are finite. Thus it is true that there is an infinite number, but we do not know what it is. It is untrue that it is even, untrue that it is odd, for by adding a unit it does not change its nature. Yet it is a number, and every number is even or odd. (It is true that this applies to every finite number).

Therefore we may well know that God exists without knowing what he is. . . .

Thus we know the existence and nature of the finite, because we too are finite and extended in space.

We know the existence of the infinite without knowing its nature, because it too has extension, but unlike us no limits.

But we do not know either the existence or the nature of God, because he has neither extension nor limits.

But by faith we know his existence, through glory we shall know his nature.

Now I have already proved that it is quite possible to know that something exists without knowing its nature.

Let us now speak according to natural lights.³

If there is a God, he is infinitely beyond our comprehension, since, being indivisible and without limits, he bears no relation to us. We are therefore incapable of knowing either what he

³ This sentence, often excluded from excerpts of the wager that follows, lends important context to the wager. As presented by Pascal, it is not necessarily the ideal thought process of a regenerate Christian.

is or whether he is. This being so, who would dare to attempt an answer to the question?

Certainly not we, who bear no relation to Him.

Who then will condemn Christians for not being able to give rational grounds for their belief, professing as they do a religion for which they cannot give rational grounds? They declare that it is a folly, *stultitiam*, in expounding it to the world, and then you complain that they do not prove it. If they did prove it they would not be keeping their word. It is by being without proof that they show they are not without sense. “Yes, but although this excuses those who offer their religion as such, and absolves them from the criticism of producing it without rational grounds, it does not absolve those who accept it.” Let us then examine this point, and let us say: “Either God is or he is not.” But to which view shall we be inclined? Reason cannot decide this question. Infinite chaos separates us. At the far end of this infinite distance a coin is being spun which will come down heads or tails. How will you wager? Reason cannot make you choose either, reason cannot prove either wrong.

Do not then condemn as wrong those who have made a choice, for you know nothing about it. “No, but I will condemn them not for having made this particular choice, but any choice, for, although the one who calls heads and the other one [tails] are equally at fault, the fact is that they are both at fault: the right thing is not to wager at all.”

Yes; but you must wager. There is no choice, you are already committed. Which will you choose then? Let us see: since a choice must be made, let us see which offers you the least interest. You have two things to lose: the true and the good; and two things to stake: your reason and your will, your knowledge and your happiness; and your nature has two things to avoid: error and wretchedness. Since you must necessarily choose, your reason is no more affronted by choosing one rather than the other. That is one point cleared up. But your happiness? Let us

weigh up the gain and the loss in calling heads that God exists. Let us assess the two cases: if you win you win everything, if you lose you lose nothing. Do not hesitate then; wager that he does exist. “That is wonderful. Yes, I must wager; but perhaps I am wagering too much.” Let us see; since there is an equal chance of gain and loss, if you stood to win only two lives for one you could still wager, but supposing you stood to win three?

You would have to play (since must necessarily play) and it would be unwise of you, once you are obliged to play, not to risk your life in order to win three lives at a game in which there is an equal chance of losing and winning. But there is an eternity of life and happiness. . . .

Thus our argument carries infinite weight, when the stakes are finite in a game where there are even chances of winning and losing and an infinite prize to be won.

This is conclusive and if men are capable of any truth this is it.

“I confess it, I admit it, but is there really no way of seeing what the cards are?”—“Yes, Scripture and the rest, etc.” “Yes, but my hands are tied and my lips are sealed; I am being forced to wager and I am not free; I am being held fast and I am so made that I cannot believe. What do you want me to do then?” “That is true, but at least get it into your head that, if you are unable to believe, it is because of your passions, since reason impels you to believe and yet you cannot do so. Concentrate then not on convincing yourself by multiplying proofs of God’s existence but by diminishing your passions. You want to find faith and you do not know the road. You want to be cured of unbelief and you ask for the remedy: learn from those who were once bound like you and who now wager all they have. These are people who know the road you wish to follow, who have been cured of the affliction of which you wish to be cured: follow the way by which they began. They behaved just as if they did believe, taking holy water, having masses said, and so

on. That will make you believe quite naturally, and will make you more docile.”—“But that is what I am afraid of.”—“But why? What have you to lose?” . . .

423 (277). The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing: we know this in countless ways.

I say that it is natural for the heart to love the universal being or itself, according to its allegiance, and it hardens itself against either as it chooses. You have rejected one and kept the other. Is it reason that makes you love yourself?

424 (278). It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason. That is what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by the reason.

434 (199). Imagine a number of men in chains, all under sentence of death, some of whom are each day butchered in the sight of the others; those remaining see their own condition in that of their fellows, and looking at each other with grief and despair await their turn. This is an image of the human condition.

444 (557). It is true then that everything teaches man his condition, but there must be no misunderstanding, for it is not true that everything reveals God, and it is not true that everything conceals God. But it true at once that he hides from those who tempt him and that he reveals himself to those who seek him, because men are at once unworthy and capable of God: unworthy through their corruption, capable through their original nature.

446 (586). If there were no obscurity man would not feel his corruption: if there were no light man could not hope for a cure. Thus it is not only right but useful for us that God should be partly concealed and partly revealed, since it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness as to know his wretchedness without knowing God.

449 (556). . . . But let them conclude what they like against deism, their conclusions will not apply to Christianity, which properly consists in the mystery of the Redeemer, who, uniting in himself the two natures, human and divine, saved men from the corruption of sin in order to reconcile them with God in his divine person.

It teaches men then these two truths alike: that there is a God, of whom men are capable, and that there is a corruption in nature which makes them unworthy. It is of equal importance to men to know each of these points: and it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness as to know his own wretchedness without knowing the Redeemer who can cure him. Knowing only one of these points leads either to the arrogance of the philosophers, who have known God but not their own wretchedness, or to the despair of atheists, who know their own wretchedness without knowing their Redeemer. . . .

913.⁴ The year of grace 1654. Monday, 23 November...

From about half past ten in the evening until half past midnight.

Fire. "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,"⁵ not of philosophers and scholars.

Certainty, certainty, heartfelt, joy, peace.

God of Jesus Christ.

[*Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin, 1966), 33, 42–43, 58, 85, 101, 148–52, 154, 165, 167–68, 309]

Philipp Jakob Spener, *Pia Desideria* (1675)

Philipp Jakob Spener (1635–1705) was the leading figure of the German Lutheran Pietist movement. In the third section of Pia desideria (Pious Desires), he offers six proposals for the

⁴ Unlike Pascal's other excerpts presented here, this final excerpt was found not among his papers, but was found written on parchment that was sewn into his clothing. It is a reflection on a personal religious experience.

⁵ See Exod. 3:2, 6.

more thorough reformation of the church, four of which are excerpted here. These proposals continue to resonate in Protestant evangelicalism today.

PART III

PROPOSALS TO CORRECT CONDITIONS IN THE CHURCH

1. Thought should be given to a *more extensive use of the Word of God among us*. We know that by nature we have no good in us. If there is to be any good in us, it must be brought about by God. To this end the Word of God is the powerful means, since faith must be enkindled through the gospel, and the law provides the rules for good works and many wonderful impulses to attain them. The more at home the Word of God is among us, the more we shall bring about faith and its fruits. . . .

It should therefore be considered whether the church would not be well advised to introduce the people to Scripture in still other ways than through the customary sermons on the appointed lessons.

This might be done, first of all, by diligent reading of the Holy Scriptures, especially of the New Testament. It would not be difficult for every housefather to keep a Bible, or at least a New Testament, handy and read from it every day or, if he cannot read, to have somebody else read. . . .

Then a second thing would be desirable in order to encourage people to read privately, namely, that where the practice can be introduced the books of the Bible be read one after another, at specified times in the public service, without further comment (unless one wished to add brief summaries). This would be intended for the edification of all, but especially of those who cannot read at all, or cannot read easily or well, or of those who do not own a copy of the Bible.

For a third thing it would perhaps not be inexpedient (and I set this down for further and more mature reflection) to reintroduce the ancient and apostolic kind of church meetings. In addition to our customary services with preaching, other assemblies would also be held in the manner in which Paul describes them in I Corinthians 14:26-40.⁶ One person would not rise to preach (although this practice would be continued at other times), but others who have been blessed with gifts and knowledge would also speak and present their pious opinions on the proposed subject to the judgment of the rest, doing all this in such a way as to avoid disorder and strife. This might conveniently be done by having several ministers (in places where a number of them live in a town) meet together or by having several members of a congregation who have a fair knowledge of God or desire to increase their knowledge meet under the leadership of a minister, take up the Holy Scriptures, read aloud from them, and fraternally discuss each verse in order to discover its simple meaning and whatever may be useful for the edification of all. . . .

2. Our frequently mentioned Dr. Luther would suggest another means, which is altogether compatible with the first. This second proposal is *the establishment and diligent exercise of the spiritual priesthood*. Nobody can read Luther's writings with some care without observing how earnestly the sainted man advocated this spiritual priesthood, according to which not only ministers but all Christians are made priests by their Savior, are anointed by the Holy Spirit, and are dedicated to perform spiritual-priestly acts. Peter was not addressing preachers alone when he wrote, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." Whoever wishes to understand and read at greater length what our Reformer's opinion on this was, and what the spiritual functions are, should read his treatise, addressed to

⁶ Such meetings of *ecclesiola* (little churches) or *collegia pietatis* (societies of piety) were characteristic of the pietist and revivalist movements.

the Bohemians, on how ministers of the church should be chosen and installed, which treatise appears in Volume II of the Altenburg edition of Luther's works. There one will see how splendidly it is demonstrated that all spiritual functions are open to all Christians without exception. Although the regular and public performance of them is entrusted to ministers appointed for this purpose, the functions may be performed by others in case of emergency. Especially should those things which are unrelated to public acts be done continually by all at home and in everyday life. . . .

3. Connected with these two proposals is a third: the people must have impressed upon them and must accustom themselves to believing that *it is by no means enough to have knowledge of the Christian faith, for Christianity consists rather of practice*. Our dear Savior repeatedly enjoined love as the real mark of his disciples (John 13:34-35, 15:12; I John 3:10, 18, 4:7-8, 11-13, 21). In his old age dear John (according to the testimony of Jerome in his letter to the Galatians) was accustomed to say hardly anything more to his disciples than "Children, love one another!" His disciples and auditors finally became so annoyed at this endless repetition that they asked him why he was always saying the same thing to them. He replied, "Because it is the Lord's command, and it suffices if this be done." Indeed, love is the whole life of the man who has faith and who through his faith is saved, and his fulfillment of the laws of God consists of love.

If we can therefore awaken a fervent love among our Christians, first toward one another and then toward all men (for these two, brotherly affection and general love, must supplement each other according to II Peter 1:7), and put this love into practice, practically all that we desire will be accomplished. For all the commandments are summed up in love (Rom. 13:9). Accordingly the people are not only to be told this incessantly, and they are not only to have the

excellence of neighborly love and, on the other hand, the great danger and harm in the opposing self-love pictured impressively before their eyes (which is done well in the spiritually minded John Arndt's *True Christianity*,⁷ IV, ii, 22 *et seq.*), but they must also practice such love. They must become accustomed not to lose sight of any opportunity in which they can render their neighbor a service of love, and yet while performing it they must diligently search their hearts to discover whether they are acting in true love or out of other motives. If they are offended, they should especially be on their guard, not only that they refrain from all vengefulness but also that they give up some of their rights and insistence on them for fear that their hearts may betray them and feelings of hostility may become involved. In fact, they should diligently seek opportunities to do good to their enemies in order that such self-control may hurt the old Adam, who is otherwise inclined to vengeance, and at the same time in order that love may be more deeply implanted in their hearts. . . .

4. Related to this is a fourth proposal: *We must beware how we conduct ourselves in religious controversies* with unbelievers and heretics. We must first take pains to strengthen and confirm ourselves, our friends, and other fellow believers in the known truth and to protect them with great care from every kind of seduction. Then we must remind ourselves of our duty toward the erring.

We owe it to the erring, first of all, to pray earnestly that the good God may enlighten them with the same light with which he blessed us, may lead them to the truth, may prepare their hearts for it or, having counteracted their dangerous errors, may reinforce what true knowledge of salvation in Christ they still have left in order that they may be saved as a brand plucked from

⁷ Johann Arndt (1555–1621) was the forerunner of Lutheran Pietism, known especially for his *Four Books on True Christianity* (1606).

the fire.⁸ This is the meaning of the first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer, that God may hallow his name in them, bring his kingdom to them, and accomplish his gracious will in and for them.⁹

In the second place, we must give them a good example and take the greatest pains not to offend them in any way, for this would give them a bad impression of our true teaching and hence would make their conversion more difficult.

In the third place, if God has given us the gifts which are needful for it and we find the opportunity to hope to win the erring, we should be glad to do what we can to point out, with a modest but firm presentation of the truth we profess, how this is based on the simplicity of Christ's teaching. At the same time we should indicate decently but forcefully how their errors conflict with the Word of God and what dangers they carry in their wake. All of this should be done in such a way that those with whom we deal can see for themselves that everything is done out of heartfelt love toward them without carnal and unseemly feelings, and that if we ever indulge in excessive vehemence this occurs out of pure zeal for the glory of God. Especially should we beware of invectives and personal insinuations, which at once tear down all the good we have in mind to build. If we see that we have made something of a beginning in this fashion, we should be so much the more energetic in advancing what has been begun, perhaps with the assistance of others. On the other hand, if we see that they have been so captivated by their preconceived notions that, although we perceive in them a disposition to serve God gladly without being able for the present to comprehend what we have said, they are to be admonished at the very least not to slander or speak evil of the truth which they have heard from us, to reflect further on the matter in the fear of the Lord and with fervent prayer, and in the meantime to try

⁸ See Zech. 3:2.

⁹ See Matt. 6:9-10.

seriously to advance in the truth and to serve their God according to the practical principles and rules of conduct which most people who call themselves Christians have to some extent in common.

To this should be added, in the fourth place, a practice of heartfelt love toward all unbelievers and heretics. While we should indicate to them that we take no pleasure in their unbelief or false belief or the practice and propagation of these, but rather are vigorously opposed to them, yet in other things which pertain to human life we should demonstrate that we consider these people to be our neighbors (as the Samaritan was represented by Christ in Luke 10:29-37 as the Jew's neighbor), regard them as our brothers according to the right of common creation and the divine love that is extended to all (though not according to regeneration), and therefore are so disposed in our hearts toward them as the command to love all others as we love ourselves demands. To insult or wrong an unbeliever or heretic on account of his religion would be not only a carnal zeal but also a zeal that is calculated to hinder his conversion. A proper hatred of false religion should neither suspend nor weaken the love that is due the other person.

In the fifth place, if there is any prospect of a union of most of the confessions among Christians, the primary way of achieving it, and the one that God would bless most, would perhaps be this, that we do not stake everything on argumentation, for the present disposition of men's minds, which are filled by as much fleshly as spiritual zeal, makes disputations fruitless. .

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[*Pia desideria*, trans. Theodore G. Tappert, Seminar Editions (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), pp. 87–89, 92–93, 95–99]