



Pensées

Blaise Pascal (1623 - 1662) Translated by W. F. Trotter

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In 1654, at the age of 31, Blaise Pascal had a religious experience that motivated him to turn his prodigious intelligence to the subjects of philosophy and theology. He was already a follower of the Jansenist faction of the Catholic Church, which took its name from Dutch theologian Cornelius Jansen, emphasized the notions of predestination, human depravity, original sin, and the necessity of divine grace, and followed the teachings of Augustine of Hippo. He envisioned a comprehensive work in defense of Christianity often referred to the *Apology for the Christian Religion*. The work was incomplete at the time of his death, and the fragments of ideas and notes were gathered

together in a collection and published in 1670 under the title *Pensées*, or “thoughts”. Among the groundbreaking ideas put forth is that of “Pascal’s Wager”, which argues that people should live as if God exists, because if God does exist, one will experience only the small loss of some pleasure while achieving the bliss of heaven and avoiding the damnation of Hell. Although scholars believe that Pascal had planned the structure of the book and begun to cut and paste his notes accordingly, the initial editors and publishers had nothing to guide them, which has resulted in a continuing dispute over the proper order and repeated attempts to arrange the material in a systematic fashion. Nevertheless, the work has become a classic work of theology and philosophy that many regard as the finest work of prose in the French language.

Blaise Pascal (June 19, 1623 – August 19, 1662) was a French mathematician, scientist, inventor and Christian philosopher who made important contributions in a variety of disciplines in a comparatively short life. The son of a judge who lost his mother at age three, he was a child prodigy extraordinarily gifted in mathematics and science. At age 16 he produced a treatise on conic sections still known today as Pascal’s theorem. In his late teens he was pressed into service to assist his father, then tax collector in Rouen, and invented one of the first mechanical calculating machines to handle the heavy amounts of arithmetic. He went on to make important contributions to the understanding of hydraulic fluids, inventing the hydraulic press and syringe, and conducted experiments to prove the existence of vacuums, which had been considered a physical impossibility. His first serious engagement with theology was in 1646, when physicians treating his father introduced him to the rigorous Augustinism of the Jansenist branch of the Catholicism. He experienced an intense religious vision in November, 1654 which led to his two major literary works: *The Provincial Letters*, a satirical attack on casuistry that was both highly popular and controversial, shredded and burned by order of the Louis XIV, and *Pensées*, a defense of Christianity that was published after his death. Pascal, once described by T. S. Eliot as “a man of the world among ascetics, and an ascetic among men of the world” suffered from ill health for most of his adult life, and during his later years tried to avoid treatment, considering that “sickness is the natural state of Christians”. He died at age thirty-nine.