

# **Pensees and Other Writings Study Guide**

## **Pensees and Other Writings by Blaise Pascal**

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# Plot Summary

The *Pensees* (or 'Thoughts') is a collection of writings by Blaise Pascal, one of the great philosophers and mathematicians of the seventeenth century. Pascal was an ardent believer in the Christian religion. The *Pensees* was intended as a defense of Christianity, but Pascal died before the book could be fully edited and published. Thus, the *Pensees* is a series of fragments. Pascal was notoriously ascetic, often taking extreme positions on how Christianity required Christians to wholly repudiate the world. Pascal was not a professionally trained theologian or a systematic philosopher; despite his genius, the book, even if arranged correctly, was not intended as a grand treatise.

Pascal emphasizes a number of themes in the *Pensees*. He is focused on the natural depravity of human beings. He argues, among other things, that humans are inordinately concerned with themselves, that the self if left unchecked will destroy the individual and that no one can be redeemed from the self without aid from God. Only God's grace is sufficient to bring about salvation. Pascal also argues that despite man's wretchedness, because he is made in God's image he possesses greatness and something to really be proud of. He sees man's sinfulness as a reason to hate mankind but he sees man's likeness to God as a reason to love mankind. And he argues consistently throughout the *Pensees* that only when one accepts the dual nature of humanity, the dark and the light, can one truly make sense of the world.

Pascal also discusses some social, political and moral matters. He makes some passing criticisms of the behavior of the leadership of the Catholic Church despite maintaining the truth of their theology. He claims that all of morality is conventional and based in human power to maintain the social order. Pascal claims that custom motivates most of our actions. He expresses disdain for a general culture of being uninterested in ultimate matters and in ignoring the gravity of one's eternal fate.

Pascal is consistently concerned with the relationship between faith and reason. Pascal thinks that the two must be used together, but reason alone can bring no one to faith. In fact, when it comes to belief in the supernatural, all reason can do is argue against counterarguments—it cannot bring a soul to salvation. Only God can do that.

However, there is a partial exception. The most famous part of the *Pensees* is Pascal's Wager. In short, Pascal's Wager is a probabilistic argument for God's existence. Supposing that belief in God gets one to heaven and disbelief sends one to hell, it is rational to "wager" by believing in God. If God does not exist, then belief or unbelief has no cost. But if God does exist, belief has great benefits and disbelief great costs. Thus on balance it is more rational to believe in God. Pascal thinks that making the wager is unavoidable and that while belief cannot come to a man by will alone, if he is convinced by the wager, he can begin to engage in Christian practice until his belief begins to bend around his practices.

The *Pensees* is often published with several of Pascal's brief, but better organized essays, such as *Discussion with Monsieur de Sacy* (which discusses the relationship

between understanding reality and the relationship between faith and reason), *The Art of Persuasion* (which discusses how to reason effectively) and *Writings on Grace* (which carves out an Augustinian middle ground between Calvinism/Lutheranism and Molinism with respect to free will, sin and predestination).



# **Pensees, Table of Liasse Titles, Order, Vanity, Wretchedness, Boredom, Causes and Effects, Greatness, Contradictions, Diversion, Philosophers, The Sovereign Good**

## **Pensees, Table of Liasse Titles, Order, Vanity, Wretchedness, Boredom, Causes and Effects, Greatness, Contradictions, Diversion, Philosophers, The Sovereign Good Summary and Analysis**

The Pensees is a set of fragmented writings that Blaise Pascal never intended for publication. Instead, those who came after him grouped the fragments together and heavily edited them. They are here grouped according to subject. What follows is that first ten groups of fragments. Many of the fragments left unmentioned are incoherent or uninterpretable.

In the first set of titles, Pascal argues that we should avoid passion by acting as though we were only going to live a week more. He notes that he would be much more afraid of being wrong and finding out that Christianity is true than the other way around (foreshadowing his famous wager). Among other things, Pascal thinks that the Jews did not believe in Jesus because God made it too obvious for them to accept in order to fulfill prophecy. Pascal notes that two sorts of people know God: those who are humble and those who have enough reason to see the truth. He maintains his belief in original sin. He also expresses his central belief that while man is naturally unhappy, he seeks happiness everywhere that nothing on earth can fulfill. This, he thinks, is a proof of God's existence. He denies, for instance, the Stoic view that you can find peace through introspection.

In "Order", Pascal issues a set of imperatives, which are in effect words of wisdom; they include instructions to show that religion is not contrary to reason in order to remove man's natural hatred of religion. In "Vanity", Pascal argues that man's vanity is a constant feature of his life and that it exists partly to avoid the natural inconstancy, boredom and the anxiety of life. The might of kings is based on their reason and the people follow it. Pascal thinks that those who do not see the world's vanity are themselves vain. He is also worried about the power of imagination undermining reason because it leads us to think false things with the same certainty as true things. However, imagination can make people happy for a short time. We are also often fooled by our imaginations about others, such as through long-term false impressions.



"Wretchedness" explains Pascal's view that man is so wretched that we are inconsistent, that we only take pleasure in something if we can be angry when it goes wrong and that we submit to the tyranny of others. He also thinks that our sense of justice is in fact rooted in custom and that justice is dictated by fashion. We are wretched ultimately because we lack God and yet we desire him, and so try to fill our lives with other things. In "Boredom", Pascal remarks that curiosity is often merely vanity.

"Causes and effects" explores some thoughts about science, such as that science can lead to wise self-ignorance when one has learned something along with how much more one does not know. Pascal repeats his view that justice is customary and that in effect many states are ruled by majority will. True right is given by the sword, however. All political authority is mere force and nothing more. "Greatness" attributes greatness to man for several reasons, including our ability to construct a moral order out of concupiscence and our ability to recognize their wretchedness.

"Contradictions" argues, among other things, that men should have self-esteem because we can do good but humility because of the bad we can do. We should both hate and love ourselves. Pascal notes that humans are both great and wretched and that many have gone astray arguing that we are one or the other. In this section, Pascal revisits an issue he has brought up before briefly and will bring up again: the Pyrrhonists, the ancient Greek skeptics. Pascal is challenged by skepticism and is keen on arguing that it is mistaken. Ultimately reason alone will lead to skepticism; faith will lead to truth. However, faith alone produces mere dogmatism. Thus, another contradiction within man is that between skepticism and dogmatism. Skeptics have to stifle their nature to believe and dogmatists their nature to reason. Men are both sinners and saints.

"Diversion" argues that men seek diversion to avoid their wretchedness, which in turn they can only avoid through submission to God. Men cannot be happy enough to "stay quietly in one room". If we imagine someone with all the riches in the world, we can still imagine him being unhappy. Boredom is something humans wish to avoid and can do so easily just by taking small risks each day. We are all distracted and diverted by our projects. Our hearts are "hollow" and "full of filth".

Pascal argues in "Philosophers" that philosophers do not know their own corruption, that they often think well of themselves, seeking mental perfection, but this is unattainable. The Stoics, in Pascal's view, propose the difficult and worthless. In "The Sovereign Good", Pascal makes one of his most famous sustained arguments. All men seek happiness, Pascal observes, but none achieve it on their own. Everyone has been tested and everyone fails. This demonstrates that men once had true happiness but now face an infinite abyss that can only be filled with an infinite God. He is our only true good, though we forsake him.



# **Pensees, Table of Liasse Titles, A.P.R., Beginning, Submission and the Use of Reason, Excellence, Transition, Nature is Corrupt, Falseness of Other Religions, To Make Religion Attractive, Foundation, Figurative Law, Rabbinism, Perpetuity, Proofs of Moses,**

## **Pensees, Table of Liasse Titles, A.P.R., Beginning, Submission and the Use of Reason, Excellence, Transition, Nature is Corrupt, Falseness of Other Religions, To Make Religion Attractive, Foundation, Figurative Law, Rabbinism, Perpetuity, Proofs of Moses, Proofs of Jesus Christ, Prophecies, Figures, Christian Morality, Conclusion Summary and Analysis**

"A.P.R." argues from the fact that man's great and wretched aspects are so obvious that humanity must contain a principle of greatness and a principle of wretchedness that explains these qualities. It shows that there is a God we are obliged to love and that will make us happy, but that we are also full of darkness that will prevent us from loving God. Humans cannot expect consolation from others nor can they expect to eliminate their wretchedness. Only God knows their true good and can teach it to them.

Only grace, not nature, can unite us to God and we are not naturally in a state of grace. And yet God will unite Himself to us. God wishes to redeem men.

"Beginning" claims that unbelievers who swear that they follow reason have to be strongly devoted. They must throw everything into question. Pascal pities them that they have strength of mind only up to a point. Here Pascal makes his wager: the atheist must realize that if she dies without worshipping God, she is lost. If the atheist replies that God has left no sign, then they should search. It is worth at least a week of one's life if not a hundred years. Three people exist in the world: those who serve God and have found Him, those who seek Him and have yet to find Him, and those who live without seeking Him. The first are happy, the second lunatic and unhappy and the middle are unhappy and reasonable.



In "Submission and Use of Reason", Pascal discusses the "stupidities" of Christianity, like the miracles. Those reasonable people who disagree with Christianity disagree about these matters. We cannot submit everything to reason itself; instead, reason has reason to submit. Those who do not love the truth find their excuse in arguments but they will have no excuse in the afterlife. There are, in fact, few true Christians. Some believe through superstition; nonbelievers often disbelieve through licentiousness.

Pascal distinguishes between piety and superstition. He argues that it is reasonable to deny the complete power of reason. We can neither exclude reason nor allow it only. Faith states what the senses do not, but not the opposite of what the sense perceive.

"Excellence of This Way of Proving God" argues that our knowledge of and contact with God is always mediated through Jesus Christ. The metaphysical proofs of God's existence are far from the ordinary man's reasoning and are complex. Pride is produced by knowing God without Jesus. One can only truly know God when one knows one's wretchedness.

"Transition from Knowledge of Man to Knowledge of God" shows Pascal frightened by his observation of human blindness and wretchedness. He sees many religions that each claim authority for themselves. The Christian religion has prophecies, however; this the other religions lack. Pascal also thinks that the sheer vastness of the universe and its order speaks to God's existence as does the complexity of the smallest insect. Humanity seems to be at no special level in nature, nothing but a small piece in an infinitely vast sea of complexities. Humans are something but not everything. The extremes of the universe, large and small, meet only in God.

Further, our true state is one of uncertain knowledge and ignorance. We burn to find a foundation upon which we can reach out into the heavens. But everything is connected and dependent on other things. We are radically dependent upon nature as well, even as spiritual beings. The human is easily crushed in body; his dignity lies in his thought.

The next section, "Nature is Corrupt and Falseness of Other Religions", argues against the authority of other religions, such as on the grounds that they lack witnesses and cannot produce signs. True religion must be monotheistic and must teach us to love God. The Koran, on Pascal's view, is a fake and cannot solve the problem of helping human beings out of their incurable corruption. Muhammad is a false prophet because he killed; Jesus Christ did the opposite. True religion teaches duty, weakness, pride and mortification. Muhammad's visions are absurd as result.

Section 18, "To Make Religion Attractive" explains that the pagans have no redeemer and neither do the Jews. Section 19, "Foundations of Religion and Answers to Objections", continues to defend the Christian religion. Pascal argues that the prophets spoke of Jesus and that the world's great wisdom has been affirmed by Christianity. One reason to believe Christianity is because it speaks to all men and humbles the rich and powerful. Jesus' lineage was genuine and shows God making men worthy of Him. Again, the pagan religion lacks foundation and Muhammad's prophecy cannot be true.





Section 22, "Perpetuity" argues that while states must bend their own rules to survive, religion does not do this. It is inflexible, which shows that it is divine. The religions of past peoples were mistaken and transformed too much, like those of the Jews, Greeks and Romans. The Christian religion always survives attack. The Old Testament Jews always believed in the Messiah. Christianity is the only religion against nature and common sense.

Section 24, "Proofs of Jesus Christ" argues that Scripture has an order and mind of its own. Christ and Paul have the order of charity rather than intellect as they needed to edify. The greatness of intellectuals is invisible to all others, but God cannot be invisible. Saints have no need for greatness. Christ has his own order of holiness.

Section 27, "Christian Morality" argues that Christianity is odd as it requires that human beings both recognize their abominable condition but also want to be like God. Man can both gain and lose grace. No one is happier than the true Christian. The Christian believes he is united to God without pride. The pagans have no such examples. God created thinking beings that they might recognize their union with Him. Devotion and goodness are often different; thus God cuts through mere superstition and ritual. The apostles were not ritualists or formalists. Christ's body is full of thinking members. Pascal then meditates on the analogy between Christ's body and the individual body.

Section 28, "Conclusion", holds that we cannot know God and not love Him. Seeing miracles are not always enough to believe, but seeing them is enough to be condemned. Simple people often believe without argument but God inclines them to believe. Yet it is the same with the thoughtful. Christians without proofs can still be great judges of Christian love in their hearts. Those Christians will only lack the ability to argue with those unbelievers concerned with proofs.



# Pensees, Series, Sections 31-36

## Pensees, Series, Sections 31-36 Summary and Analysis

The Series are fragments found after the Table in which all the other fragments fit. In Section 31, Pascal argues that miracles can be divided into true and false by good doctrine and that miracles must be tied to monotheism. Men do not believe in true miracles only due to lack of charity. The foundation of religion is miracle. The true God will produce faith on earth. The prophecies of the Christian religion are not always convincing, but it is not unreasonable to believe in them. False miracles are needed for certainty. The proofs of Jesus and the Apostles that are drawn from Scripture are inconclusive and Jesus does not show how his claim that the Scriptures bear witness to Him is true. The Christian religion is both wise and foolish; it is based on miracles but foolish because the miracles are not enough to believe. Only the cross leads people to believe.

Those who preach false doctrine cannot perform miracles. Jesus always proved his divinity through miracles. He proves that he can forgive sins through miracle. Prophecy is not a miracle. Miracles and reason are necessary because the human being must be convinced body and soul.

In Section 32, Pascal argues that those who love God cannot fail but to recognize the Church. Atheists do not have good reason to say that people cannot rise from the dead, nor that virgins cannot bear children. Later, Pascal argues that miracles are effects that exceed the natural power used and that true religion has three signs: perpetuity, a holy life and miracles. Heretics often deny these things. Miracles distinguish between things in which there is doubt. But they are useless to heretics because they lack true faith.

The next fragments do not clearly tie together, and seem to include attacks on those who attack the Jansenists. Many of the fragments are incomplete sentences and repeat the claims about miracles made heretofore.

In Section 33, Pascal argues against Montaigne on the grounds that custom need only be followed because it is custom, not because it is reasonable or just. The people only need to think it is just.

Good is unique but evil has many forms. Pascal argues that people should not play as if they are bashful by saying things like "I'm sorry to bother you" as it makes their requests seem unimportant. He then analyzes Pyrrhonism, the great Greek skeptical philosophy. Pascal thinks that Plato and Aristotle's political philosophy is lighthearted.

Pascal then transitions into wholly distinct matters, such as claiming that wickedness with reason on its side becomes proud. Austerity often fails to achieve good and when it does so many go back to following nature and become proud. For Pascal, the will is one



of the main organs of belief though not because it creases belief. The will instead turns the mind away from contemplating what it wishes to exist. Inequality must exist between men; it is natural to us.

Again Pascal attacks the imagination for producing inaccuracies. Power runs the world not opinion though opinion exploits power. Pascal claims that we must live lives without always being certain; otherwise we would do nothing for religion, as it is not certain. Pascal ends the section by making some remarks on poetic beauty. His last remark, though, argues that faith is a gift of God but not as a gift of reasoning. Reason need not lead in any particular direction.

In Section 34, Pascal begins noting that the self is to be hated because it makes itself the center of everything and a nuisance to others. He then argues that due to reason's corruption, truth is hard to grasp; the Truth had to appear to men to help them. Among other remarks, Pascal points out that the Church Fathers had different attitudes with respect to the centrality of the Pope to Christianity. He argues that whether the soul is eternal is important for ethics.

Those who do not hate their self-love (which brings one to God) are blind. We must avoid excessive attachments to creatures that separate us from God. Pascal claims that men are created to think, as this is their dignity and merit, and so their duty. He notes the contradiction between reason and passion, the intolerability of boredom, the danger of pride, and the importance of career choice.

In Section 35, Pascal opens with some remarks about having hope during times of illness; it helps to not be destroyed by bad fortune. He argues that one should keep one's fine deeds secret, but that it is best to want to keep them secret. Again Pascal maintains that justice is established, not eternal. He claims that speeches about humility are matters of pride, his forgetfulness makes him humble, and men who want to act like angels often become beasts. Pascal claims that we only love others for their borrowed qualities. Pyrrhonism is raised again, and this time Pascal argues that without Jesus it is true. Pascal briefly raises the questions of original sin, reprimand, and faith by grace alone. He claims that the best man leaves the confessional feeling both relieved and joyful and afraid of sinning again.

Section 36 opens with more reflections on the corruption of reason. We tend, for instance, to believe our own explanations for things just because they are our own. Lies are easy to believe; only really loving the truth can combat it. Yet, when we do not know the truth about some matter, it is good for men to believe a common error to avoid disorder. Again man's dignity is contained in his ability to think. Principal forms of entertainment are decried for being incompatible with Christianity.



# **Pensees, Series, Sections 37-40, Mathematics/Intuition**

## **Pensees, Series, Sections 37-40, Mathematics/Intuition Summary and Analysis**

Pascal in Section 37: Human beings enjoy the fight much more than the victory. People are not taught virtue but only everything else. Pascal next reviews some notes on what to discuss in the prefaces to the book he was working on when he died. The second preface note makes clear that the book is intended as a defense of Christianity. Human beings are hostile to perfection. And the semi-Pelagians and Calvinists make common errors in their debates.

Section 38: if everyone knew all of what others said about them, almost no one would have friends. Christianity is justified to Pascal in accord with its already divine morality. Both Muslims and logicians make up laws for themselves in place of God's laws. Sex does not make man weak, but the desire will. Men must resist giving into pleasure.

Section 39 is particularly fragmented, and contains a subsection about the Eucharist, or the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. It is good that we do not have the same dreams each night. People are not satisfied with their lives but want to lead imaginary lives in the minds of others. There are three ways to believe: reason, custom, and inspiration. Only the Christian religion uses reason in addition to the others and yet it wants people to believe based on inspiration. It is impossible that God should exist or that He should not exist, that the soul exists in the body and that we have no soul.

Section 40: Pascal argues that few things can be known through the demonstration of reason and that most of our decisions are dictated by custom, not reason. The two sides war against one another and reason works slowly, whereas feeling works quickly. Faith in feeling is required to keep it from wavering.

In Section 42, "Mathematics/Intuition", Pascal argues that, as our intelligence increases, we more easily recognize personality in others. There are two ways to think well—drawing conclusions from a few principles and drawing conclusions from many principles. Some minds penetrate quickly into the conclusions of principles; others grasp principles clearly without clearly and immediately grasping their conclusions.

Section 43, "Mathematics/Intuition", concerns the distinction between the mathematical and intuitive mind. Principles are obvious to the mathematical mind but abstract, distinct from practice. The intuitive mind is the opposite. It often draws false conclusions but can navigate the world. Many unsound minds are neither intuitive nor mathematical. Those with talent and ability rarely have time to focus on that talent and ability.



# **Pensees, Discourse Concerning the Machine, A Letter to Further the Search for God, Discourse Concerning Corruption, Section 53, Figurative Law, Fragments from Other Sources, The Memorial**

## **Pensees, Discourse Concerning the Machine, A Letter to Further the Search for God, Discourse Concerning Corruption, Section 53, Figurative Law, Fragments from Other Sources, The Memorial Summary and Analysis**

Section 44, "Discourse Concerning the Machine" begins with Pascal's observation that the soul is placed in the body and thereby comes into contact with number, time and dimension. Its beliefs are bound by it. Pascal then discusses the infinity of God before our minds, which is unfathomable. There is an infinite but we do not know its nature. We know there is a God without knowing His nature. And we know the nature of the finite from knowing the infinite. We know God's existence through faith and in glory his nature. Christians should not be blamed for not being able to provide a rational basis for belief. Reason cannot decide one way or another.

Pascal then introduces his famous wager: we cannot know whether God exists or not and reason cannot tell us. So what can probability tell us? There are four options: if we believe in God and God exists, we will receive bliss; if we believe in God and He does not exist, then we lose nothing; if we do not believe in God and He exists, we suffer damnation, and if we do not believe in God and He does not exist, we lose nothing. On balance, believing in God gives us a fifty percent chance of bliss and not believing gives us a fifty percent chance of damnation. The rational man bets on God.

One might respond that it is rational not to wager, but Pascal thinks we have to wager. We are already committed one way or another. We cannot say that we are uncertain because we are certain of the risk. We gamble knowing the probabilities. We cannot see underneath the cards either, unless of course we already think there is a God and that there is revelation.

What about one who denies that she is capable of belief? Pascal replies that it is only passion that prevents belief if reason impels one forward. Thus we should focus on



diminishing our passions. We come to belief through practicing religion as believers do. Act as if we believe. Again, it costs us nothing.

Pascal then emphasizes that we should honor those who correct us and that custom can bring belief. He then discusses whether God can be infinite and indivisible; for Pascal, God is a point moving everywhere at infinite speed. We want to be loved by others, but we are not worthy of it. The will is depraved and Christianity is true for recognizing this. Christianity makes men both lovable and happy. Faith is God felt by the heart, not reason. The heart has its reasons.

Section 46, "A Letter to Further the Search for God", explains that those who attack religion should learn its nature first. Man is separated from God and that God has created visible signs in the Church to lead seekers to Him. Those who attack Christianity should look into the signs and understand them. Pascal then argues that the immortality of the soul is a real possibility that cannot be ignored. He pities those who regret their doubt, but not those who refuse to think about their ultimate purpose. No greatness of soul is required to engage in such an inquiry. It is better to face doubt head-on. Man's condition must be faced and eternity must be feared. Humans cannot really enjoy ignoring wondering about their purpose.

Pascal then points out that men are condemned for not wondering about their ultimate end. They are irrational. Eternity exists and death always threatens. Tranquility in the face of ignorance is monstrous. He then argues that Jesus comes to destroy such tranquility.

In "Discourse Concerning Corruption", Pascal discusses the ancient Jews and how impressed he is that they wrote the Old Testament. The book was not so much created by a people but instead created that people. The book is as old as the people. Pascal jumps to discuss the relationship between the truth of religion and its obscurity. The universe teaches that man is corrupt or redeemed, blessed or wretched. We should follow truth, not individuals. The Jews gave up trying to convert others, leaving that to God. Today they blaspheme but do not know it, though God gave them signs.

Christianity teaches that God exists and we can know Him but that we have corruption that makes us unworthy of Him. We must combine the two truths or face danger. Those who go astray do so either because they know God and not their sin or know their sin without knowing God. Accepting Jesus means accepting both. The Christian God is not just the God of math but the God of Abraham. God is present and concrete but hidden. Pascal refuses to leave those who disbelieve alone. The true religion must teach us to love and hate ourselves.

In Section 53, Pascal expands on the theme of the dual nature of individuals. God uses the blindness of people to it for the benefit of the elect. The worst of human characteristics is the search for glory, though it is also the great sign of human excellence. When you acknowledge corruption, you can see new truths.



Section 54, "Figurative Law", argues that the Old Testament is dishonored by attempts to interpret it figuratively and in terms of promises of spiritual benefits. And figurative readings render obvious contradictions. But figures are often important and can be used properly to inspire faith in a carnal people like the ancient Jews. Prophecies often have hidden, spiritual meanings because they can be demonstrated powerfully after no one figures them out in advance. Meaning hidden is later revealed. The carnal Jews misunderstood figurative prophesy. The promises in the Scripture promise some temporal benefits but many spiritual benefits.

"Fragments from Other Sources" is a set of disparate observations. For instance, a memorial is recorded, written in the year 1654 on Monday, the 23rd of November. Again, Pascal discusses the nature of humans as that of loving the self, despite its absurdity. We are full of imperfections. Christianity bars us from keeping our sins secret to God but He is always willing to forgive. Mankind avoids this anyway because they cannot face the truth. It is a great misfortune and leads to living in illusion. Mankind is nothing but disguise, lies and hypocrisy.





# Discussion with Monsieur de Sacy

## Discussion with Monsieur de Sacy Summary and Analysis

The Discussion is a brief dialogue that contains some of Pascal's less fragmented thought. It shows his attitudes towards Epictetus and Montaigne and features his view that while moral sloth leads to damnation, moral effort is insufficient for salvation and often generates pride that only appears to be charity. Real virtue must be based on grace.

Pascal opens arguing that Epictetus is one of history's great philosophers because he understood the duties of man. He believed that seeing God is one's principal aim and that God justly governs the world. In this world, Epictetus believed, you own nothing but are merely a steward of God's gifts. He can give and take away. Epictetus wants men to be humble, to hide good resolutions and not show them off. But Epictetus failed to grasp man's powerlessness; instead, he thought that God gave men the power to live up to morality. But this error leads to others.

Montaigne, however, wanted to understand morality through reason alone without faith and so deprived humanity of revelation. He puts everything into doubt that carries itself away. His thinking reduces to a foundation in skepticism which destroys ordinary knowledge. He scoffs at guarantees and instead randomly forms opinion based on mere inclination. Montaigne thus attacks the heretics and atheists of his day, but on unstable ground. Pascal reviews the many doctrines about which Montaigne was skeptical.

Pascal sees Montaigne's skepticism on analogy with paganism which holds that without faith all is uncertain and that most people cannot find truth. Instead, we should trust others and take things at face value. Montaigne follows custom because his habit demands it, to give one example.

Montaigne and Epictetus were the two great apologists for the two most famous sects of philosophy—reasonable faith, and inescapable skepticism. Pascal sees something in common between the two thinkers. These two groups err because they do not recognize that man's present state is not his original state. One sees original human greatness, the other present human weakness. They are both true in their own way. Epictetus is too confident, Montaigne too despairing and lazy.

Epictetus wisely recognized the folly of seeking happiness in external things which in fact produces mental slavery. And Montaigne wisely saw how silly the people who lack faith but lay claim to justice are in their pride. Epictetus can lead to pride and Montaigne can lead to despair and unrestrained vice.





# The Art of Persuasion

## The Art of Persuasion Summary and Analysis

The Art of Persuasion is significant because it demonstrates Pascal's distinction between a proof of pure reason and persuasion that requires a person to submit her entire self. Pascal thus adapts a division of disciples into those based on authority and those based on rational investigation. For Pascal, both are needed: reason and grace. He also wants to show, in contrast to some previous philosophers, that one can act from both. The rules for persuasion in Pascal's view cannot lead to salvation.

Pascal argues that opinions become affirmed in two ways: through understanding and will. The first is more natural. The latter is alien and many refuse to acknowledge it. Pascal is not speaking of divine truths which only God can place in the soul. In doing so, He humbles reason. We cannot consent to Christian theology without help.

Those truths of mind are known to all or knowable to all, but the beliefs formed from will arise from natural desires. But all truths are not equally persuasive. Deduction can infallibly persuade. Those propositions we desire to be true are easily believed. These truths, if they are truths, are often hard to demonstrate.

If we wish to persuade, we must consider what principles others affirm and the things they love. We must both please and convince. Pascal will focus on the rules of convincing, as the latter way is much harder and more admirable. Pascal is incapable of doing so. But the convincing is unstable.

The art of persuasion is the way to conduct perfect methodical proofs. It involves three steps: defining one's terms clearly, proposing obvious principles to prove the point and then substituting in the demonstration the relevant terms. Pascal then outlines rules for definitions, like not trying to define terms that cannot be explained in simpler terms. A rule for an axiom is to not ask it to demonstrate anything not self-evident. We should not try to demonstrate that which is totally obvious. It is important to avoid using ambiguous, undefined terms and using only well-known terms in the definition.

Three objections are then addressed: that Pascal says nothing new, that the method is easily learned and that it is futile, only being useful in mathematics. Pascal responds that it is important to define terms, and while it is well-known, it is rarely practiced. Similar words often contain important complexities. We often fail to understand our own terms, as well. We know not to err but again, this is hard to achieve. And false reasoning outside of mathematics can still be harmful; thus good reasoning will be important in many areas. The mind must be clarified.



# Writings on Grace and Treatise Concerning Predestination

## Writings on Grace and Treatise Concerning Predestination Summary and Analysis

In the Writings on Grace, Pascal attempts to present his theology as orthodox Christianity, in line with St. Augustine and as a view that finds a middle ground between the heresies of Molinism and Calvinism. For Pascal, each human being appears to be unable by himself to do anything to move himself towards salvation, and so Pascal seems to hold that each person deserves eternal torment.

Pascal opens the Writings by assessing the statement of the Council of Trent that, "The commandments are not impossible for the justified". The first meaning of this term on Pascal's read is that the justified person always has the ability to follow the commandments, which is a Pelagian heresy always repudiated. The second holds that the justified individual acting with charity can obey the commandments in his action. This may seem obvious but it seemed necessary to maintain against the Lutherans.

The Council must war against both errors. But it maintains that the justified can only persevere with help from God and that they do not even have the power to persevere without help. Jesus seems to hold the view that the Council maintains. Pascal thinks the Council is clear. There is no real equivocation in the statement; it just requires a careful read. St. Augustine agrees. God always gives the justified the power not to sin.

God never abandons a justified person unless the person abandons him first. He never refuses his grace to those who ask.

In the Treatise Concerning Predestination, Pascal discusses whether some men are saved and others damned by God's decree. He thinks it is true that some are predestined to be damned but that they wanted to commit the sins that earned them damnation. God's will and man's concur. The question is which will is superior; is it God's will upon which man's will depends, or the converse? Pascal then backs up these statements with Scriptural references. Is God's will to damn and save absolute, or is it conditional on the choices of others? There are three views: the Calvinists, the Molinists and the Augustinians.

The Calvinists hold that God's will is absolutely sovereign. God even caused the Fall; in God there is no distinction between doing and allowing. This opinion is appalling and injurious to God. The Molinists hold that God will conditionally save all humans; Jesus died to save all. This view flatters common sense and makes men the masters of their salvation.



The Augustinian looks to the two aspects of man's nature, that man was created sound and faultless but that he was reduced to sin. In innocence, God cannot justly damn anyone or refuse them grace, but in corruption, God can justly damn everyone. In the beginning, God's general and conditional will was to save all men if they desired it. But Adam's sin became part of humanity itself. Those elect are those God absolutely willed to salvation but those who are damned are damned only conditionally. Thus, the Calvinists are right about the saved and the Molinists about the damned. Jesus did not die for those who never approach the faith, nor did he redeem them. Jesus redeemed some and died for them, but not for their salvation. And for others Christ died for their salvation.

To Pascal, Augustine's view is based on the Scripture, the Fathers, the Popes, the Councils and tradition. And the Church is distressed to remove these errors.

Pascal then explains the Augustinian view in more detail, juxtaposing the distinctions made in the previous section to show that there is a middle ground between Calvinism and Molinism. He ends the treatise by reviewing the arguments of other Pelagians like the Molinists and John Calvin's view.



# Characters

## Blaise Pascal

Blaise Pascal was born in 1623 in Clermont-Ferrand in France. He was one of the great mathematicians, physicists and Catholic philosophers of his time and grew up a child prodigy. He first studied the natural sciences and helped to invent the calculator. He studied liquids and helped to make sense of the ideas of vacuums and pressures. He was an ardent early advocate of the scientific method. Pascal penned a crucially important book on projective geometry when he was only sixteen and helped to develop probability theory in correspondence with Pierre de Fermat. He also helped to create modern economics.

Pascal was known for his religious and theological interests as well, including his advocacy of Jansenism, a movement within Catholicism that sought to integrate some of the theological insights of Calvinism. After his "second conversion" in 1654, he stopped doing math and science and focused on theology and philosophy; he wrote the *Pensees* in this time. He lived with a physical ailment that caused him great pain and that led to his death just after he turned thirty-nine.

Pascal's *Pensees* was written to defend the Christian faith against its growing number of skeptical detractors. He argued in response that while reason could not prove that Christianity was true, it was still reasonable. But faith was required to go beyond reason. Pascal defends his views on faith and reason at length in the *Pensees* and also famously advocates his Wager.

## God

Perhaps the central character in the *Pensees* is God, the major deity of the three major monotheistic religions. Pascal was a Christian and a Catholic, so his conception of God is heavily influenced by the Christian and Catholic traditions. For Pascal, God plays a central role in the story of humanity and the life of the individual believer and non-believer. God created human beings with free will, but due to Adam's fall, human beings became utterly depraved. Without the aid of God, therefore, no human being can come to believe and no human being alone can make any steps towards their salvation.

To satisfy God's justice, a sacrifice must be made on behalf of human sin. Thus, once Jesus dies on the cross and is resurrected, God's justice is satisfied and he makes his grace freely available to all human beings. Since human beings are depraved, God must provide grace to individuals in order for them to come to believe. The Holy Spirit must move first in the hearts of believers. However, some controversy arises when the inevitable question arises concerning whether the human being is free to accept or reject God's grace.



Some have held, following John Calvin, that human beings have no power to resist God and that God's power is absolute. Others, particularly the Molinists, hold that human beings have absolute freedom to accept or reject God's grace. Pascal tries to work out a middle ground that he believes was affirmed by St. Augustine, that both retain a role for human responsibility thus avoiding charging God with the damnation of all the unelect and with the creation of human sin in the first place while maintaining God's sovereignty over human beings.

## **Jesus Christ**

In Christianity, Jesus Christ is the son of God who atoned for the sins of the world who is also, in another sense, identical with God Himself. For Pascal, only belief in Jesus Christ makes it possible to reconcile man's greatness and his wretchedness.

## **Philosophers**

Philosophers all too often exalt man's reason without incorporating his wretchedness; they see only one half of the human being.

## **Epictetus**

The Greek Stoic philosopher who Pascal praised for his great exaltation of human reason but who Pascal sees as having failed to recognize human wretchedness.

## **Montaigne**

An influential writer in the French Renaissance whose radical skepticism affirms the fallenness of human reason but who fails to recognize human greatness.

## **The Catholic Church**

The Church headed by the Bishop of Rome (or the Pope) of which Pascal was a member, though he was a member of the Jansenist movement within Catholicism that was later condemned as heretical.

## **John Calvin**

The French Reformation theologian who emphasized the total depravity of man and the view that God predestines all human beings to heaven and to hell from the beginning of time. While Pascal was sympathetic to some aspects of Calvinism, he thought the theological system as a whole was abominable.



## **The Jansenists**

Those Catholics who tried to integrate Calvinist insights concerning the depravity of man into Catholic theology.

## **The Molinists**

Often associated with the Jesuits, the Molinists hold that human beings are free to accept or reject God's grace.

## **The Believer**

The Christian believer can only come to faith through God's election.



## Objects/Places

### Paris, France

The city where Pascal wrote and ultimately died.

### Pascal's Wager

Pascal's argument for the rationality of belief in God.

### Jansenism

A movement within Catholicism that emphasized the Calvinist idea of man's total depravity.

### Calvinism

The theological movement founded by John Calvin that was influential in France in Pascal's time and that he was partly influenced by, though he stridently rejected Calvinist theology as a whole.

### Molinism

A philosopher developed out of the work of the sixteenth century Jesuit philosopher Luis de Molina, Molinists holds that humans are free to accept or reject God's grace and that God not only knows everything that has, does and will happen but everything that would have happened given different human and divine choices.

### Catholicism

The branch of Christianity of which Pascal was a member.

### Augustinianism

The theology of the followers of St. Augustine that arguably stands on the boundary between Roman Catholicism on the one hand and Lutheranism and Calvinism on the other.



## **Skepticism**

Pascal thinks that without God, fallen human reason will deny us knowledge and leave us with skepticism.

## **Dogmatism**

Faith alone will only produce dogmatism. Reason must be used in conjunction with it.

## **Original Sin**

The Christian doctrine that human beings are born with an irresistible disposition to commit sins.

## **Grace**

The relation between God and man where God declares human beings righteous despite their depravity. This understanding of grace is close to Pascal's but also to the understanding of the Reformation.

## **Faith**

Trust in God and God's promises of redemption, salvation and eternal life; for Pascal, only God can inspire faith in the believer.

## **Predestination**

God's actions to ensure that some go to heaven (and perhaps that others go to hell). Predestination as a philosophical and theological matter has always been controversial within Christianity and Pascal is interested in the topic.



# Themes

## The Dual Nature of Man

Pascal consistently emphasizes, in the *Pensees* and the other writings in the book, that humans have a dual nature and that only by grasping this dual nature can humans and their purpose in life be understood. The first nature is that of beings made in God's image. As such, we are fundamentally good creatures worthy of glory and honor for being made in the image of God. Further, we are worthy of great things and have extraordinary abilities and the capacity for great virtue. Our ability to reason is the most divine thing in us.

The second nature is that of the sinner. After Adam's Fall, all human beings were polluted with original sin which disposes them to act immorally and to commit sins. In fact, human beings are so depraved that they cannot help but sin without the initiation and further help of God. It is only through grace that we are enabled not to sin. Overall, then, human beings are 'wretched' and 'hypocrites' and do little for anything but selfish reasons. They refuse to exercise their reason and resist asking the big questions that might lead them back to God.

Philosophers and theologians all too often emphasize one nature of man to the detriment of the other. In doing so, they make serious errors. For instance, Epictetus, the Greek Stoic philosopher, emphasized the fundamental goodness of man and exalted his reason. In contrast, Montaigne emphasized man's inability to know much of anything. The first, in Pascal's view, cannot grasp why humans are bad and the second cannot see what is good in humanity.

## Faith and Reason

Another important duality in the *Pensees* and the other writings is the contrast between faith and reason. On the one hand, reason made by God is perfect and can know truth. But fallen reason is defective in many ways. For instance, it cannot grasp the truths of the supernatural without God's direct invention and the aid of God's grace. Further, it is often overwhelmed by the will to believe in things contrary to reason. It is unable to establish the existence of God and cannot bring an individual to believe, again, without God's direct aid. As a result, reason has become impotent since the fall. However, reason can still do many extraordinary things. People can be convinced by rational argument and reason can uncover mathematical and scientific truths.

Faith is the trust in God's existence, in His goodness and in His promise to redeem humanity. Faith must be given to fallen humans by God through the Holy Spirit. And He can only do so because He died to save humanity, satisfying the demands of justice in response to sin. Faith grasps what reason cannot. It makes possible the understanding of true doctrine, of belief in miracles and truths about God's existence and His love for



humanity. It also helps aid reason in the search for truth by orienting it in the right way and aiding in its redemption. However, reason also aids faith by helping to make sense of doctrine and to defend the reasonableness of faith against attacks by skeptics and dogmatists.

## Pascal's Wager

Pascal's Wager is a very brief part of the *Pensees*, though it is mentioned briefly outside of the one chapter that discusses it, *Discourse Concerning the Machine*. But it is so famous, so widely known, that it must be characterized as a theme of the *Pensees* as a whole.

Briefly, the Wager concerns the reasonableness of belief in God. It asks one to compare the probabilities and expected benefits and costs of belief in God and disbelief. The believer is either right or wrong. If she is right, then she will spend eternity with God: an infinite benefit. But if she is wrong, then she will die and know nothing. She will pay no cost. The non-believer is either right or wrong as well. If she is right, then she will die and know nothing. She will pay no cost. But if she is wrong, she will suffer an eternity of torment: an infinite cost. If the odds of both being wrong or right are 50-50, then the believer has a 50% chance of infinite benefit and the non-believer has a 50% of infinite cost. Thus, it must be rational to believe in God.

The challenge to the Wager is that Pascal has ruled out the possibility of coming to believe in God through reason alone. But Pascal argues that one can bring one's self to believe by choosing to search for God and engaging in religious practices that will help to orient one's heart towards Him. If the nonbeliever does so, God will respond with His grace, grace He was already working in the nonbelievers' heart. Pascal also rejects the view that the Wager should not be played on the grounds that everyone implicitly plays it whether they like it or not.

# Style

## Perspective

Blaise Pascal's perspective is as complex as the man himself. Pascal was a perpetually ill child prodigy, a probability theorist of great historical import, a talented scientist in his own right, a well-known apologist for the Christian religion and a philosopher. More specifically, he was a Roman Catholic Jansenist, the perspective most relevant to the *Pensees*. The view focuses on original sin and the depravity of human beings. It holds that divine grace is crucial to saving belief and that in an important respect God predestines the elect. The movement existed within the Catholic Church between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries and counted Pascal as one of its most important movements. Jansenists saw themselves as followers of Augustine.

The Jansenists focused on an interpretation of Augustine's concept of "efficacious graces" which holds that only part of humanity is predestined by salvation, though it held that God's love was fundamental and contrition was key to salvation. The Jansenists believed in justification by faith though they did not reject prayer to saints and confessions. They were hated by the Jesuits, who were often Molinists. There are important similarities between Jansenism and Calvinism, but Jansenists held that one could lose her salvation through sin. Jansenists saw themselves as carving a middle ground between Molinists and Calvinists, emphasizing that Molinists were right prior to the fall and Calvinists after the fall.

In effect, the entire *Pensees* is an apology for Christianity generally and Jansenist theology specifically. Even the additional documents point in this direction. Pascal constantly emphasizes Jansenist themes of the depravity of man and reason, the inability of man to come to faith on his own and the like.

## Tone

Pascal's tone is tied to his Jansenist theology, which emphasizes the dual nature of humanity. On the one hand, man is deeply depraved, but on the other, he is a child of God and a possessor of great dignity. Thus, Pascal is often quite dark and brooding, focusing on the wickedness of human beings and exposing it wherever he can and as often as he can. He argues in a dramatic and biting way that men are so corrupt that only God can save them. This is emphasized forcefully. However, Pascal also expresses an excitement and hope for the use of man's reason and the promise of redemption from God.

Pascal's tone also reflects an intense interest in philosophical issues and displays a certain wit and proclivity for aphorisms. Pascal constantly mentions important philosophers in the fragments and seems intent on finding true doctrines. In fact, this

seems to be the main point of the *Pensees*. He is very concerned with the truth and this comes out in a rigorous and honest tone.

Pascal's wit is on full display as well. The tone is illustrated in his witticism, quips and sayings. The *Pensees* was only ever a series of fragments in the first place, which accounts for its aphoristic feel. That said, many of the fragments seem to have been composed and intended as clever, concise methods of making his point.

## Structure

*Pensees and Other Writings* has a very complex and unusual structure. First, most versions of the compilation have an extended introduction by the editor. These introductions not only introduce Pascal, his setting, biography and concerns, but engage in an extended defense of their particular compilation. The *Pensees* was only a series of fragments and they were not organized in any particular way. Consequently, each editor must develop a theory about how to render the fragments consistently as a single text and how to group them by subject matter. Unfortunately, any division seems to have something to say for it and something to say against it, and therefore controversy rages.

The *Pensees* itself is very convoluted and complicated. Honor Levi, one of the important editors, divides the *Pensees* into a chapter system, some of which Pascal titles and others of which he did not. Each fragment is numbered. In many cases, there is no obvious connection between fragments; often fragments must simply be reproduced and have no obvious place. As a result, the structure is often disjointed and major discussions always seem out of place. In fact, as a result of the *Pensees*' fragmented nature, there are few extended discussions at all, but rather loose connections between different themes.

The remaining essays all have relatively straightforward structures and read like well-constructed argumentative essays. However, these works were in much more advanced stages at the time of Pascal's death.



## Quotes

"I should be much more frightened of being wrong and finding out that the Christian religion was true than of not being wrong in believing it to be true."

Pensees, Table, p. 5

"Tyranny consists in the universal desire to dominate, beyond one's station."

Pensees, Wretchedness, p. 23

"All men are in search of happiness. ... However no one without faith, over so many years, has yet achieve that target which everyone constantly aims for. What does this greed and helplessness proclaim, except that there was once within us true happiness of which all that now remains is the outline and empty trace? Man tries unsuccessfully to fill this void with everything that surrounds him ... but all are incapable of it. The infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite, immutable objection, that is to say, God himself."

Pensees, The Sovereign Good, pp. 51-52

"According to the odds, you must take the trouble to seek the truth, because if you die without worshipping the true principle you are lost."

Pensees, Beginning, p. 58

"Faith states clearly what the senses do not, but not the opposite of what they see. It is above them, not against."

Pensees, Submission and Use of Reason, p. 62

"Christianity is strange: it requires human beings to recognize that they are vile and even abominable, and requires them to want to be like God."

Pensees, Christian Morality, p. 87

"We must love only God and hate only ourselves."

Pensees, Christian Morality, p. 91

"Faith is a gift of God. Do not think that we said it was a gift of reasoning."

Pensees, Series, XXXIII, p. 118

"Man is neither angel nor beast, and unhappily whoever wants to act the angel, acts the beast."

Pensees, Series, XXXV, p. 128

"Thought constitutes the greatness of mankind."

Pensees, Series, XXXVI, p. 137

"God is, or is not. But towards which side will we lean? Reason cannot decide anything. There is an infinite chaos separating us. At the far end of this infinite distance a game is being played and the coin will come down heads or tails. How will you wager? Reason cannot make you choose one way or the other, reason cannot make you defend either



of the two choices."

Pensees, Discourse Concerning the Machine, p. 153

"Yes, but you have to wager. It is not up to you, you are already committed."

Pensees, Discourse Concerning the Machine, p. 154

"You want to find faith and you do not know the way? You want to cure yourself of unbelief and you ask for the remedies? Learn from those who have been bound like you, and who now wager all they have. They are people who know the road you want to follow and have been cured of the affliction of which you want to be cured. Follow the way by which they began: by behaving just as if they believed .... That will make you believe quite naturally, and according to your animal reactions."

Pensees, Discourse Concerning the Machine, pp. 155-56

"The heart has its reasons which reason itself does not know."

Pensees, Discourse Concerning the Machine, p. 158

"The God of Christians does not consist of a God who is simply the author of mathematical truths ... He does not consist simply of a God who exerts his providence over the lives and property of people in order to grant a happy span of years to those who worship him ... But the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac."

Pensees, Discourse Concerning Corruption, p. 172

"Mankind is ... nothing but disguise, lies and hypocrisy, both as individuals and with regard to others."

Pensees, Fragments from Other Sources, p. 181

"The origin of these two sects' errors lies in not knowing that man's present state is different from the one in which he was created."

Discussion with Monsieur de Sacy, p. 189

"This is what the art of persuasion consists in, encapsulated in these two rules: define the names we prescribe; prove everything, substituting mentally the definitions for the things defined."

The Art of Persuasion, p. 199

"These are the shameless blasphemies by which [the Calvinists] establish in God an absolute will without foreseen merit or sin to damn or save his creatures."

Treatise on Predestination, p. 216

# Topics for Discussion

What is Pascal's Wager? Do you find it convincing? Why or why not?

What is Pascal's doctrine of original sin? Why does Pascal think it is true? What does believing in original sin enable one to see?

Why does Pascal think Christianity is true? Give at least two prominent reasons.

What is the dual nature of man that Pascal discusses? Why does Pascal think it is important to understand?

What is Pascal's view about the relationship between faith and reason?

Why is Pascal an ascetic? How is it tied to his understanding of Christianity?

What is God's grace necessary for, on Pascal's view?