



P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

BLAISE PASCAL

PENSÉES

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I. ORDER

- 1 The Psalms sung throughout the world.¹
Who bears witness to Mahomet? Himself.
Jesus wants his witness to be nothing.
The quality of witnesses is such that they must exist always,
everywhere and wretched.² He is alone. (596)
- 2 *Order by dialogues.* 'What must I do? I see nothing but obscurities
on every side.'
'Shall I believe I am nothing? Shall I believe I am God?' (227)
- 3 'There is change and succession in all things.'
'You are wrong, there is . . .'
'Why, do you not say yourself that the sky and the birds
prove God?' – 'No.' – 'Does your religion not say so?' – 'No.
For though it is true in a sense for some souls whom God
has enlightened in this way, yet it is untrue for the majority.'
(244)
- 4 *Letter to induce men to seek God.*³ Then make them look for him
among the philosophers, sceptics and dogmatists, who will worry
the man who seeks. (184)
- 5 *Order.* A letter of exhortation to a friend, to induce him to seek.⁴
He will reply: 'But what good will seeking do me? Nothing
comes of it.' Answer: 'Do not despair.' Then he in turn would
say that he would be happy to find some light, but according to
religion itself it would do him no good even if he did thus

1 Cf. Ps. xcvi. 4.

2 The Jews are the witnesses, by preserving their religion wherever they are and thus proclaiming a salvation which they failed to recognize.

3 Cf. 427.

4 Cf. 418.

believe, and so he would just as soon not look. The answer to that is 'the Machine'. (247)

6 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. (60)

7 *Letter showing the usefulness of proofs, by the Machine.* Faith is different from proof. One is human and the other a gift of God. *The just shall live by faith.*¹ This is the faith that God himself puts into our hearts, often using proof as the instrument. *Faith cometh by hearing.*² But this faith is in our hearts, and makes us say not 'I know' but 'I believe'. (248)

8 *Order.* See what is clear and incontrovertible about the whole state of the Jews. (602)

9 In the letter on injustice perhaps include:

The absurdity of the eldest son having everything, 'My friend, you were born on this side of the mountain, so it is right that your elder brother should have everything.'

'Why are you killing me?' (291)

10 The basis of all this lies in the wretchedness of human existence. Realizing this they have taken to diversions. (167)

11 *Order.* After the letter urging men to seek God, write the letter about removing obstacles, that is the argument about the Machine, how to prepare it and how to use reason for the search. (246)

12 *Order.* Men despise religion. They hate it and are afraid it may be true. The cure for this is first to show that religion is not contrary to reason, but worthy of reverence and respect.

Next make it attractive, make good men wish it were true, and then show that it is.

Worthy of reverence because it really understands human nature.

Attractive because it promises true good. (187)

II. VANITY

13 Two faces are alike; neither is funny by itself, but side by side their likeness makes us laugh. (133)

14 True Christians are, however, obedient to these follies; not that they respect follies, but rather the divine order which has subjected men to follies as a punishment. *For the creature was made subject to vanity. He shall be delivered.*¹ So St Thomas explains the passage in St James² about the rich being preferred, by saying that if men do not do so in the sight of God they are transgressing the order of their religion. (138)

15 Perseus, King of Macedonia, Paulus Emilius.
Perseus was criticized for not killing himself.³ (410)

16 *Vanity.* That something so obvious as the vanity of the world should be so little recognized that people find it odd and surprising to be told that it is foolish to seek greatness; that is most remarkable. (161)

17 *Inconstancy and oddity.* To live by one's work alone and to reign over the most powerful state in the world are two very different things.

They are combined in the person of the Grand Turk. (113)

18 An inch or two of cowl can put 25,000 monks up in arms.⁴ (955)

19 He has four lackeys. (318)

20 He lives across the water. (292)

21 If we are too young our judgement is impaired, just as it is if we are too old.

Thinking too little about things or thinking too much both make us obstinate and fanatical.

If we look at our work immediately after completing it, we

1 Rom. VIII. 20.

2 James II. 3.

3 See 117.

4 Reference to a medieval dispute regarding the shape of the Franciscan habit

are still too involved; if too long afterwards, we cannot pick up the thread again.

It is like looking at pictures which are too near or too far away. There is just one indivisible point which is the right place.

Others are too near, too far, too high, or too low. In painting the rules of perspective decide it, but how will it be decided when it comes to truth and morality? (381)

22 Flies are so mighty that they win battles, paralyse our minds, eat up our bodies. (367)

23 *Vanity of science.* Knowledge of physical science will not console me for ignorance of morality in time of affliction, but knowledge of morality will always console me for ignorance of physical science. (67)

24 *Man's condition.* Inconstancy, boredom, anxiety. (127)

25 The fact that kings are habitually seen in the company of guards, drums, officers and all the things which prompt automatic responses of respect and fear has the result that, when they are sometimes alone and unaccompanied, their features are enough to strike respect and fear into their subjects, because we make no mental distinction between their person and the retinue with which they are normally seen to be associated. And the world, which does not know that this is the effect of habit, believes it to derive from some natural force, hence such sayings as: 'The character of divinity is stamped on his features.' (308)

26 The power of kings is founded on the reason and the folly of the people, but especially on their folly. The greatest and most important thing in the world is founded on weakness. This is a remarkably sure foundation, for nothing is surer than that the people will be weak. Anything founded on sound reason is very ill-founded, like respect for wisdom. (330)

27 It is not man's nature always to go in one direction; it has its ups and downs.

Fever makes us both shiver and sweat. The chill is as good an indication of how high the fever will go as the heat itself.

It is the same with human inventions from age to age, and with the good and evil in the world in general.

*Change is usually pleasing to princes.*¹ (354)

28 *Weakness.* Men are wholly occupied in pursuing their good, but they could not justify their claim to possession, because they have nothing but human fancy and no strength to make its possession secure.

It is the same with knowledge, for illness removes it.

We are equally incapable of truth and good. (436)

29 *A warlike people who think life is not worth living if one cannot bear arms.*² They prefer death to peace, others prefer death to war.

Any opinion can be preferred to life, which it seems so natural to love dearly. (156)

30 We do not choose as captain of a ship the most highly born of those aboard. (320)

31 We do not care about our reputation in towns where we are only passing through. But when we have to stay some time we do care. How much time does it take? A time proportionate to our vain and paltry existence. (149)

32 *Vanity.* Respect means: put yourself out. (317b)

33 What amazes me most is to see that everyone is not amazed at his own weakness. We behave seriously, and everyone follows his calling, not because it is really a good thing to do so, in accordance with fashion, but as if everyone knew for certain where reason and justice lie. We are constantly disappointed and an absurd humility makes us blame ourselves and not the skill we always boast of having. But it is a good thing for the reputation of scepticism that there are so many people about who are not sceptics, to show that man is quite capable of the most extravagant opinions, since he is capable of believing that he is not naturally and inevitably weak, but is, on the contrary, naturally wise.

¹ Horace, *Odes*, III. 29.

² Livy, XXXIV. 17.

- Nothing strengthens the case for scepticism more than the fact that there are people who are not sceptics. If they all were, they would be wrong. (374)
- 34 This sect derives more strength from its enemies than from its friends, for human weakness is much more obvious in those who do not realize it than in those who do. (376)
- 35 *Heel of a shoe.* 'How well-made that is! What a skilful workman! What a brave soldier!' That is where our inclinations come from, and our choice of careers. 'What a lot that man drinks! How little that man drinks!' That is what makes people temperate or drunkards, soldiers, cowards, etc. (117)
- 36 Anyone who does not see the vanity of the world is very vain himself. So who does not see it, apart from young people whose lives are all noise, diversions, and thoughts for the future?
But take away their diversion and you will see them bored to extinction. Then they feel their nullity without recognizing it, for nothing could be more wretched than to be intolerably depressed as soon as one is reduced to introspection with no means of diversion. (164)
- 37 *Trades.* Fame is so sweet that we love anything with which we connect it, even death. (158)
- 38 Too much and too little wine.
Do not give him any, he cannot find the truth. Give him too much; the same thing. (71)
- 39 Men spend their time chasing a ball or a hare; it is the very sport of kings. (141)
- 40 How vain painting is, exciting admiration by its resemblance to things of which we do not admire the originals! (134)
- 41 *Two infinites, mean.* When we read too fast or too slowly we understand nothing. (69)
- 42 How many kingdoms know nothing of us! (207)
- 43 A trifle consoles us because a trifle upsets us. (136)

44 *Imagination.* It is the dominant faculty in man, master of error and falsehood, all the more deceptive for not being invariably so; for it would be an infallible criterion of truth if it were infallibly that of lies. Since, however, it is usually false, it gives no indication of its quality, setting the same mark on true and false alike.

I am not speaking of fools, but of the wisest men, amongst whom imagination is best entitled to persuade. Reason may object in vain, it cannot fix the price of things.

This arrogant force, which checks and dominates its enemy, reason, for the pleasure of showing off the power it has in every sphere, has established a second nature in man. Imagination has its happy and unhappy men, its sick and well, its rich and poor; it makes us believe, doubt, deny reason; it deadens the senses, it arouses them; it has its fools and sages, and nothing annoys us more than to see it satisfy its guests more fully and completely than reason ever could. Those who are clever in imagination are far more pleased with themselves than prudent men could reasonably be. They look down on people with a lofty air; they are bold and confident in argument, where others are timid and unsure, and their cheerful demeanour often wins the verdict of their listeners, for those whose wisdom is imaginary enjoy the favour of judges similarly qualified. Imagination cannot make fools wise, but it makes them happy, as against reason, which only makes its friends wretched: one covers them with glory, the other with shame.

Who dispenses reputation? Who makes us respect and revere persons, works, laws, the great? Who but this faculty of imagination? All the riches of the earth are inadequate without its approval. Would you not say that this magistrate, whose venerable age commands universal respect, is ruled by pure, sublime reason, and judges things as they really are, without paying heed to the trivial circumstances which offend only the imagination of weaker men? See him go to hear a sermon in a spirit of pious zeal, the soundness of his judgement strengthened by the ardour of his charity, ready to listen with exemplary respect. If, when the preacher appears, it turns out that nature has given him a hoarse voice and an odd sort of face, that his barber has shaved

him badly and he happens not to be too clean either, then, whatever great truths he may announce, I wager that our senator will not be able to keep a straight face.

Put the world's greatest philosopher on a plank that is wider than need be: if there is a precipice below, although his reason may convince him that he is safe, his imagination will prevail. Many could not even stand the thought of it without going pale and breaking into sweat.

I do not intend to list all the effects of imagination. Everyone knows that the sight of cats, or rats, the crunching of a coal, etc., is enough to unhinge reason. The tone of voice influences the wisest of us and alters the force of a speech or a poem.

Love or hate alters the face of justice. An advocate who has been well paid in advance will find the cause he is pleading all the more just. The boldness of his bearing will make it seem all the better to the judges, taken in by appearances. How absurd is reason, the sport of every wind! I should list almost all the actions of men, who hardly stir except when jolted by imagination. For reason has had to yield, and at its wisest adopts those principles which human imagination has rashly introduced at every turn. Anyone who chose to follow reason alone would have proved himself a fool. We must, since reason so pleases, work all day for benefits recognized as imaginary, and, when sleep has refreshed us from the toils of our reason, we must at once jump up to pursue the phantoms and endure the impressions created by this ruler of the world. Here is one of the principles of error, but not the only one.

Man has been quite right to make these two powers into allies, although in this peace imagination enjoys an extensive advantage; for in conflict its advantage is more complete. Reason never wholly overcomes imagination, while the contrary is quite common.

Our magistrates have shown themselves well aware of this mystery. Their red robes, the ermine in which they swaddle themselves like furry cats, the law-courts where they sit in judgement, the fleurs de lys, all this august panoply was very necessary. If physicians did not have long gowns and mules, if

learned doctors did not wear square caps and robes four times too large, they would never have deceived the world, which finds such an authentic display irresistible. If they possessed true justice, and if physicians possessed the true art of healing, they would not need square caps; the majesty of such sciences would command respect in itself. But, as they only possess imaginary science, they have to resort to these vain devices in order to strike the imagination, which is their real concern, and this, in fact, is how they win respect.

Soldiers are the only ones who do not disguise themselves in this way, because their role is really more essential; they establish themselves by force, the others by masquerade.

That is why our kings have not attempted to disguise themselves. They have not dressed up in extraordinary clothes to show what they are, but they have themselves escorted by guards, scarred veterans.¹ These armed troops whose hands and strength are theirs alone, the drums and trumpets that march before them, and these legions which surround them make the most resolute tremble. They do not wear the trappings, they simply have the power. It would take reason at its most refined to see the Grand Turk, surrounded in his superb seraglio by 40,000 janissaries, as a man like any other.

We have only to see a lawyer in cap and gown to form a favourable opinion of his competence.

Imagination decides everything: it creates beauty, justice and happiness, which is the world's supreme good. I should dearly like to see the Italian book, of which I know only the title, worth many books in itself, *Dell'opinione regina del mondo*. Without knowing the book, I support its views, apart from any evil it may contain.

Such, more or less, are the effects of this deceptive faculty, apparently given to us for the specific purpose of leading us inevitably into error. We have plenty of other principles of error.

Longstanding impressions are not the only ones that can mislead us; the charms of novelty have the same power. Hence all

¹ Another reading gives 'halberds'.

the debate among men, who accuse each other either of following the false impressions of childhood or of rashly pursuing new ones. If anyone has found the golden mean, let him appear and prove it. Any principle, however natural it may be, even implanted in childhood, may be treated as a false impression either of education or of the senses.

'Because,' they say, 'you have believed since you were a child that a box was empty when you could not see anything in it, you believed that a vacuum could exist. This is just an illusion of your senses, strengthened by habit, and it must be corrected by science.' Others say: 'When you were taught at school that there is no such thing as a vacuum, your common sense was corrupted; it was quite clear about it before being given the wrong impression, and now it must be corrected by reverting to your original state.' Who then is the deceiver, the senses or education?

We have another principle of error in illnesses, which impair our judgement and sense. If serious illnesses do considerable harm, I have no doubt that the less serious ones have a proportionate effect.

Our own interest is another wonderful instrument for blinding us agreeably. The fairest man in the world is not allowed to be judge in his own cause. I know of men who, to avoid the danger of partiality in their own favour, have leaned over to the opposite extreme of injustice. The surest way to lose a perfectly just case was to get close relatives to commend it to them. Justice and truths are two points so fine that our instruments are too blunt to touch them exactly. If they do make contact, they blunt the point and press all round on the false rather than the true.

Man, then, is so happily constituted that he has no exact principle of truth, and several excellent ones of falsehood. Let us now see how many.

But the most absurd cause of his errors is the war between the senses and the reason. (82)

- 45 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.) (83)

46 *Vanity*. The cause and effect of love. Cleopatra.¹ (163)

47 We never keep to the present. We recall the past; we anticipate the future as if we found it too slow in coming and were trying to hurry it up, or we recall the past as if to stay its too rapid flight. We are so unwise that we wander about in times that do not belong to us, and do not think of the only one that does; so vain that we dream of times that are not and blindly flee the only one that is. The fact is that the present usually hurts. We thrust it out of sight because it distresses us, and if we find it enjoyable, we are sorry to see it slip away. We try to give it the support of the future, and think how we are going to arrange things over which we have no control for a time we can never be sure of reaching.

Let each of us examine his thoughts; he will find them wholly concerned with the past or the future. We almost never think of the present, and if we do think of it, it is only to see what light it throws on our plans for the future. The present is never our end. The past and the present are our means, the future alone our end. Thus we never actually live, but hope to live, and since we are always planning how to be happy, it is inevitable that we should never be so. (172)

48 The mind of this supreme judge of the world is not so independent as to be impervious to whatever din may be going on near by. It does not take a cannon's roar to arrest his thoughts; the noise of a weathercock or a pulley will do. Do not be surprised if

1 Cf. 413.

his reasoning is not too sound at the moment, there is a fly buzzing round his ears; that is enough to render him incapable of giving good advice. If you want him to be able to find the truth, drive away the creature that is paralysing his reason and disturbing the mighty intelligence that rules over cities and kingdoms.

What an absurd god he is! Most ridiculous hero! (366)

49 Caesar was too old, it seems to me, to go off and amuse himself conquering the world. Such a pastime was all right for Augustus and Alexander; they were young men, not easily held in check, but Caesar ought to have been more mature. (132)

50 *Raptus est* [?]. The Swiss take offence if anyone calls them noble, and prove their plebeian descent when they want to be considered eligible for high office. (305)

51 'Why are you killing me for your own benefit? I am unarmed.' 'Why, do you not live on the other side of the water? My friend, if you lived on this side, I should be a murderer, but since you live on the other side, I am a brave man and it is right.' (293)

52 *Good sense*. They are forced to say: 'You are not acting in good faith, we are not asleep, etc.' How I love to see this proud reason humbled and suppliant! For that is not how a man talks when you challenge his rights and he defends them by force of arms. He wastes no time saying that you are not acting in good faith, but punishes your bad faith with force. (388)

III. WRETCHEDNESS

53 Man is vile enough to bow down to beasts and even worship them. (429)

54 *Inconstancy*. Things have various qualities and the soul various tendencies, for nothing presented to the soul is simple, and the soul never applies itself simply to any subject. That is why the same thing makes us laugh and cry. (112)

55 *Inconstancy*. We think playing upon man is like playing upon an ordinary organ. It is indeed an organ, but strange, shifting and

changeable. Those who only know how to play an ordinary organ would never be in tune on this one. You have to know where the keys are. (111)

56 We are so unhappy that we can only enjoy something which we should be annoyed to see go wrong, and that can and does constantly happen to thousands of things. Anyone who found the secret of rejoicing when things go well without being annoyed when they go badly would have found the point. It is perpetual motion. (181)

57 It is not good to be too free.
It is not good to have all one needs. (379)

58 Tyranny consists in the desire to dominate everything regardless of order.

In the various departments for men of strength, beauty, sense and piety, each man is master in his own house but nowhere else. Sometimes they meet and the strong and the handsome contend for mastery, but this is idiotic because their mastery is of different kinds. They do not understand each other and their mistake lies in wanting to rule everywhere. Nothing can do that, not even strength: it is of no effect in the learned world and only governs external actions. — So these arguments are false . . .

Tyranny. Tyranny is wanting to have by one means what can only be had by another. We pay different dues to different kinds of merit; we must love charm, fear strength, believe in knowledge.

These dues must be paid. It is wrong to refuse them and wrong to demand any others. So these arguments are false and tyrannical: 'I am handsome, so you must fear me. I am strong, so you must love me, I am . . .' In the same way it is false and tyrannical to say: 'He is not strong, so I will not respect him. He is not clever, so I will not fear him.' (322)

59 When it comes to deciding whether we should make war, kill so many men, condemn so many Spaniards to death, it is a single man who decides, and an interested party at that; it ought to be an impartial third party. (296)

60 In fact laws are so vain that he would break free of them, so it is useful to deceive him.¹

What basis will he take for the economy of the world he wants to rule? Will it be the whim of each individual? What confusion! Will it be justice? He does not know what it is. If he did know he would certainly never have laid down this most commonly received of all human maxims: that each man should follow the customs of his own country. True equity would have enthralled all the peoples of the world with its splendour, and lawgivers would not have taken as their model the whims and fancies of Persians and Germans in place of this consistent justice. We should see it planted in every country of the world, in every age, whereas what we do see is that there is nothing just or unjust but changes colour as it changes climate. Three degrees of latitude upset the whole of jurisprudence and one meridian determines what is true. Basic laws change when they have been in force only a few years, law has its periods, the entry of Saturn into the house of the Lion marks the origin of a given crime. It is a funny sort of justice whose limits are marked by a river; true on this side of the Pyrenees, false on the other.

They confess that justice does not lie in these customs, but resides in natural laws common to every country. They would certainly maintain this obstinately if the reckless chance which distributed human laws had struck on just one which was universal, but the joke is that man's whims have shown such great variety that there is not one.

Larceny, incest, infanticide, parricide, everything has at some time been accounted a virtuous action. Could there be anything more absurd than that a man has the right to kill me because he lives on the other side of the water, and his prince has picked a quarrel with mine, though I have none with him?

There no doubt exist natural laws, but once this fine reason of ours was corrupted, it corrupted everything. *Nothing more is ours (what we call ours is by convention).*² *It is by virtue of senatorial decrees and votes of the people that crimes are committed.*³

¹ Montaigne is the source for many of the legal examples.

² Cicero, *De Fin.*, v. 21.

³ Seneca, *Ep.*, xciv.

*Just as we once used to suffer for our vices, we now suffer for our laws.*¹

The result of this confusion is that one man says that the essence of justice is the authority of the legislator, another the convenience of the sovereign, another present custom, and that is the most reliable. Merely according to reason, nothing is just in itself, everything shifts with time. Custom is the whole of equity for the sole reason that it is accepted. That is the mystic basis of its authority. Anyone who tries to bring it back to its first principle destroys it. Nothing is so defective as those laws which correct defects. Anyone obeying them because they are just is obeying an imaginary justice, not the essence of the law, which is completely self-contained: it is law and nothing more. Anyone wishing to examine the reason for this will find it so trivial and feeble that, unless he is used to contemplating the marvels of human fancy, he will be amazed that in a century it has acquired so much pomp and reverence. The art of subversion, of revolution, is to dislodge established customs by probing down to their origins in order to show how they lack authority and justice. There must, they say, be a return to the basic and primitive laws of the state which unjust custom has abolished. There is no surer way to lose everything; nothing will be just if weighed in these scales. Yet the people readily listen to such arguments, they throw off the yoke as soon as they recognize it, and the great take the opportunity of ruining them and those whose curiosity makes them examine received customs. That is why the wisest of legislators used to say that men must often be deceived for their own good, and another sound politician: *When he asks about the truth that is to bring him freedom, it is a good thing that he should be deceived.*² The truth about the usurpation must not be made apparent; it came about originally without reason and has become reasonable. We must see that it is regarded as authentic and eternal, and its origins must be hidden if we do not want it soon to end.

(294)

¹ Tacitus, *Ann.*, III. 25.

² St Augustine, *City of God*, IV. 27. The correct quotation is as given; Pascal had written 'does not know [ignoret]' for 'asks [inquirat]'.

- 61 *Justice*. Justice is as much a matter of fashion as charm is. (309)
- 62 *Three hosts*. What man could enjoy the friendship of the King of England, the King of Poland and the Queen of Sweden,¹ and believe that he would one day nowhere find refuge and sanctuary? (177)
- 63 *Glory*. Admiration spoils everything from our earliest youth. 'Well spoken! Well done! How good he is!'
The children of Port Royal who are not spurred on by envy and glory become indifferent. (151)
- 64 *Mine, thine*. 'This is my dog,' said these poor children. 'That is my place in the sun.' There is the origin and image of universal usurpation. (295)
- 65 *Diversity*. Theology is a science, but at the same time how many sciences? A man is a substance, but if you dissect him, what is he? Head, heart, stomach, veins, each vein, each bit of vein, blood, each humour of blood?
A town or a landscape from afar off is a town and a landscape, but as one approaches it becomes houses, trees, tiles, leaves, grass, ants, ants' legs, and so on *ad infinitum*. All that is comprehended in the word 'landscape'. (115)
- 66 *Injustice*. It is dangerous to tell the people that laws are not just, because they obey them only because they believe them to be just. That is why they must be told at the same time that laws are to be obeyed because they are laws, just as superiors must be obeyed because they are superior. That is how to forestall any sedition, if people can be made to understand that, and that is the proper definition of justice. (326)
- 67 *Injustice*. Jurisdiction is not defined in terms of the one administering but the one administered; it is dangerous to tell that to the people. But the people have too much faith in you; it will not harm them and may help you. It should therefore be published abroad. *Feed my sheep*,² not *yours*. You owe me pasturage. (879)

¹ Charles I (executed 1649), John Casimir (deposed, but reinstated, 1656), Christina (abdicated 1654).

² John XXI. 16.

68 When I consider the brief span of my life absorbed into the eternity which comes before and after – *as the remembrance of a guest that tarrieth but a day*¹ – the small space I occupy and which I see swallowed up in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I know nothing and which know nothing of me, I take fright and am amazed to see myself here rather than there: there is no reason for me to be here rather than there, now rather than then. Who put me here? By whose command and act were this time and place allotted to me? (205)

69 *Wretchedness.* Job and Solomon. (174b)

70 If our condition were truly happy we should not need to divert ourselves from thinking about it. (165b)

71 *Contradictions.* Pride counterbalances all these miseries; man either hides or displays them, and glories in his awareness of them. (405)

72 One must know oneself. Even if that does not help in finding truth, at least it helps in running one's life, and nothing is more proper. (66)

73 What causes inconstancy is the realization that present pleasures are false, together with the failure to realize that absent pleasures are vain. (110)

74 *Injustice.* They have found no other way of satisfying their concupiscence without doing wrong to others. Job and Solomon. (454)

75 Ecclesiastes shows that man without God is totally ignorant and inescapably unhappy, for anyone is unhappy who wills but cannot do. Now he wants to be happy and assured of some truth, and yet he is equally incapable of knowing and of not desiring to know. He cannot even doubt. (389)

76 But perhaps this matter goes beyond the scope of reason. Let us then examine what it has devised in matters over which it has control. If there is one thing to which, in its own interest, it must most earnestly have applied itself, it is the search for

¹ Wisdom v. 15.

the sovereign good. Let us see then where these powerful and penetrating souls have placed it, and whether they are in agreement.

One says the sovereign good consists in virtue, another in sensual pleasure, another in following nature, another in truth – *Happy the man who could know the reasons for things*¹ – another in total ignorance, another in indolence, others in resisting appearances, another in never feeling surprise – *To be surprised at nothing is almost the only way to find happiness and keep it*² – and the good sceptics in their ataraxia, doubt and perpetual suspension of judgement. Others even wiser say that it cannot be found, not even by wishing. That is a fine answer!

(Transpose after the laws the following article:)

So we must see whether this fine philosophy has come to any certain conclusions after such long and arduous toil. Perhaps at least the soul will come to know itself. Let us hear the regent masters of the world on this subject. What have they thought about its substance? 395. Have they been any luckier in locating it? 395. What have they discovered about its origin, duration, destination? 399. Could it be then that the soul is too noble a subject for its feeble understanding? Let us lower its gaze then on to matter. Let us see if it knows what its own body, to which it gives life, is made of, and the others it observes and moves at will. What have they known about it, these great dogmatists to whom no knowledge is denied? 393.³

Of these opinions [which is true].⁴

That would surely be enough if reason were reasonable. It is quite reasonable enough to admit that it has so far found no firm truth, but it has not yet given up hope of finding one. On the contrary, it pursues the quest as fervently as ever and is confident of possessing all the strength necessary for success.

We must then finish off the argument, and, after looking at its powers through their effects, examine them in themselves. Let us see if it lies within the powers and grasp of reason to seize the truth.

(73)

1 Virgil, *Georgics*, II. 490.

2 Horace, *Ep.*, I. VI. I.

3 These numbers are references to pages in Pascal's edition of Montaigne.

4 Cicero, *Tusc.*, I. II.

IV. BOREDOM

- 77 *Pride*. Curiosity is only vanity. We usually only want to know something so that we can talk about it; in other words, we would never travel by sea if it meant never talking about it, and for the sheer pleasure of seeing things we could never hope to describe to others. (152)
- 78 *Description of man*. Dependence, desire for independence, needs. (126)
- 79 How tiresome it is to give up pursuits to which we have become attached. A man enjoying a happy home-life has only to see a woman who attracts him, or spend five or six pleasant days gambling, and he will be very sorry to go back to what he was doing before. It happens every day. (128)

V. CAUSES AND EFFECTS

- 80 Respect means; put yourself out. That may look pointless, but it is quite right, because it amounts to saying: I should certainly put myself out if you needed it, because I do so when you do not; besides, respect serves to distinguish the great. If respect meant sitting in an armchair we should be showing everyone respect and then there would be no way of marking distinction, but we make the distinction quite clear by putting ourselves out. (317)
- 81 The only universal rules are the law of the land in everyday matters and the will of the majority in others. How is that? Because of the power implied.
That is why kings, who have another source of power, do not follow the majority of their ministers.
Equality of possessions is no doubt right, but, as men could not make might obey right, they have made right obey might. As they could not fortify justice they have justified force, so that

right and might live together and peace reigns, the sovereign good. (299)

82 Wisdom leads us back to childhood. *Except ye become as little children.*¹ (291)

83 The world is a good judge of things, because it is in the state of natural ignorance where man really belongs. Knowledge has two extremes which meet; one is the pure natural ignorance of every man at birth, the other is the extreme reached by great minds who run through the whole range of human knowledge, only to find that they know nothing and come back to the same ignorance from which they set out, but it is a wise ignorance which knows itself. Those who stand half-way have put their natural ignorance behind them without yet attaining the other; they have some smattering of adequate knowledge and pretend to understand everything. They upset the world and get everything wrong.

Ordinary people and clever people make up the run of the world; the former despise it and are despised in their turn. All their judgements are wrong and the world judges them rightly. (327)

84 *Descartes*. In general terms one must say: 'That is the result of figure and motion,' because it is true, but to name them and assemble the machine is quite ridiculous. It is pointless, uncertain, and arduous. Even if it were true we do not think that the whole of philosophy would be worth an hour's effort. (79)

85 *Extremes in the law are extremes of injustice.*² Majority opinion is the best way because it can be seen and is strong enough to command obedience, but it is the opinion of those who are least clever.

If it had been possible, men would have put might into the hands of right, but we cannot handle might as we like, since it is a palpable quality, whereas right is a spiritual quality which we manipulate at will, and so right has been put into the hands of might.

1 Matt. xviii. 3. 2 Terence, *Heaut.*, iv. v. 47.

Thus the name of right goes to the dictates of might.

Hence the right of the sword, because the sword confers a genuine right.

Otherwise we should see violence on one side and justice on the other. (End of the 12th *Provincial Letter*.)

Hence the injustice of the Fronde,¹ which sets up its alleged right against might. It is not the same thing with the Church, because there genuine justice exists without any violence. (878)

86 *Of true justice.*² We no longer have any. If we had, we should not accept it as a rule of justice that one should follow the customs of one's country.

That is why we have found might when we could not find right. (297)

87 The chancellor is a grave man, dressed in fine robes because his position is false; not so the king. He enjoys power, and has no use for imagination. Judges, doctors, etc., enjoy nothing but imagination. (307)

88 It is the effect of power, not of custom, for those capable of originality are rare. Those who are strongest in numbers only want to follow, and refuse recognition to those who seek it for their originality. If they persist in wanting recognition and despising those who are not original, the others will call them ridiculous names and may even beat them. So do not be conceited about your subtlety, or keep your satisfaction to yourself. (302)

89 *Cause and effect.* It is really remarkable; I am supposed not to honour a man dressed in brocade and attended by seven or eight lackeys. Why! He will have me thrashed if I do not bow to him. His clothes represent power. It is the same with a horse in fine harness compared to another. It is funny that Montaigne does not see what a difference there is, and asks in surprise why people find any. Indeed, he says, how does it happen, etc. (315)

¹ General name for the civil wars in France, 1648-53.

² Cicero, *De Officiis*, III. 17.

90 *Cause and effect.* Gradation. Ordinary people honour those who are highly born, the half-clever ones despise them, saying that birth is a matter of chance, not personal merit. Really clever men honour them, not for the same reason as ordinary people, but for deeper motives. Pious folk with more zeal than knowledge despise them regardless of the reason which makes clever men honour them, because they judge men in the new light of piety, but perfect Christians honour them because they are guided by a still higher light.

So opinions swing back and forth, from pro to con, according to one's lights. (337)

91 *Cause and effect.* One must have deeper motives and judge everything accordingly, but go on talking like an ordinary person. (336)

92 *Cause and effect.* It is then true to say that everyone is the victim of illusion, because the ordinary person's opinions are sound without being intellectually so, for he believes truth to be where it is not. There is certainly some truth in these opinions, but not as much as people imagine. It is true that we should honour the gentry but not because gentle birth is a real advantage. (335)

93 *Cause and effect.* Constant swing from pro to con.

Thus we have shown that man is vain to pay so much attention to things which do not really matter, and all these opinions have been refuted.

Then we showed that all these opinions are perfectly sound, so that, all these examples of vanity being perfectly justified, ordinary people are not as vain as they are said to be. Thus we refuted the opinion which refuted that of the people.

But we must now refute this last proposition and show that it is still true that the people are vain, although their opinions are sound, because they do not see the truth when it is there, and assume things to be true when they are not, with the result that their opinions are always thoroughly wrong and unsound. (328)

94 *Sound opinions of the people.* The greatest of evils is civil war.

It is bound to come if people want to reward merit, because everyone will claim to be meritorious. The evil to be feared if the

succession falls by right of birth to a fool is neither so great nor so certain. (313)

95 *Sound opinions of the people.* It is not mere vanity to be elegant, because it shows that a lot of people are working for you. Your hair shows that you have a valet, a perfumer, etc., bands, thread, braid, etc., show . . . It means more than superficial show or mere accoutrement to have many hands in one's service.

The more hands one employs the more powerful one is. Elegance is a means of showing one's power. (316)

96 *Cause and effect.* Human weakness is the reason for so many canons of beauty; for instance, being a good lute-player. It is only our weakness which makes it a bad thing [not to be one?]. (329)

97 *Cause and effect.* Concupiscence and force are the source of all our actions. Concupiscence causes voluntary, force involuntary actions. (334)

98 How is it that a lame man does not annoy us while a lame mind does? Because a lame man recognizes that we are walking straight, while a lame mind says that it is we who are limping. But for that we should feel sorry rather than angry.

Epictetus goes much further when he asks: Why do we not lose our temper if someone tells us that we have a headache, while we do lose it if someone says there is anything wrong with our arguments or our choice? (80)

99 The reason for that is that we are quite certain that we have not got a headache, and are not limping, but we are not so sure we are making the right choice. Consequently, since the only thing that makes us sure is the evidence available to us, we hesitate and are taken aback when the evidence available to someone else makes him see just the opposite. All the more so when a thousand other people scoff at our choice, because we are obliged to prefer our judgement to that of so many others, and that is a bold and difficult thing to do. There is never such a clash of views over a lame man.

Man is so made that if he is told often enough that he is a fool he believes it. By telling himself so often enough he convinces

himself, because when he is alone he carries on an inner dialogue with himself which it is important to keep under proper control. *Evil communications corrupt good manners.*¹ We must keep silence as far as we can and only talk to ourselves about God, whom we know to be true, and thus convince ourselves that he is. (536)

100 *Cause and effect.* Epictetus. Those who say: 'You have a headache.' It is not the same thing; we are sure about our health but not about being right, and he certainly talked plain nonsense.

All the same he thought he had proved his point by saying that it is either in our power or not, but he did not see that it is not in our power to control our heart, and he was wrong to conclude that it is from the existence of Christians. (467)

101 Ordinary people have some very sound opinions. For instance:

1. In choosing diversion and preferring the hunt to the capture. The half-learned scoff and triumphantly use this to prove how foolish people are, but, for a reason these men cannot grasp, the people are right.

2. In distinguishing men by external things like noble birth and wealth. The world triumphs again in showing how unreasonable that is, but it is perfectly reasonable. Cannibals laugh at a child-king.

3. In taking offence at a slap on the face or being so eager for glory; but this is most desirable because of the other essential benefits it entails. A man who shows no resentment at being slapped is overwhelmed with insults and forced into need.

4. In taking chances, going to sea, crossing a plank. (324)

102 Either Jews or Christians must be wicked. (759)

103 *Right, might.* It is right to follow the right, it is necessary to follow the mighty.

Right without might is helpless, might without right is tyrannical.

Right without might is challenged, because there are always evil men about. Might without right is denounced. We must

therefore combine right and might, and to that end make right into might or might into right.

Right is open to dispute, might is easily recognized and beyond dispute. Therefore right could not be made mighty because might challenged right, calling it unjust and itself claiming to be just.

Being thus unable to make right into might, we have made might into right. (298)

- 104 What a great advantage to be of noble birth, since it gives a man of eighteen the standing, recognition and respect that another man might not earn before he was fifty. That means winning thirty years' start with no effort. (322)

VI. GREATNESS

- 105 If an animal did rationally what it does by instinct, and if it spoke rationally what it speaks by instinct when hunting, or warning its fellows that the prey has been lost or found, it would certainly go on to talk about matters which affect it more seriously, and it would say, for instance: 'Bite through this cord; it is hurting me and I cannot reach it.' (342)
- 106 *Greatness.* Causes and effects show the greatness of man in producing such excellent order from his own concupiscence. (403)
- 107 The parrot wipes its beak although it is clean. (343)
- 108 What part of us feels pleasure? Is it our hand, our arm, our flesh, or our blood? It must obviously be something immaterial. (339b)
- 109 *Against Scepticism.* It is odd that we cannot define these things without making them obscure; we talk about them all the time. We assume that everyone conceives of them in the same way, but that is a quite gratuitous assumption, because we have no proof that it is so. I see indeed that we apply these words on the same occasions; every time two men see a body change its position they both use the same word to express what they have seen, each of them saying that the body has moved. Such conformity of

application provides a strong presumption of conformity of thought, but it lacks the absolute force of total conviction, although the odds are that it is so, because we know that the same conclusions are often drawn from different assumptions.

That is enough to cloud the issue, to say the least, though it does not completely extinguish the natural light which provides us with certainty in such matters. The Platonists would have wagered on it, but that makes the light dimmer and upsets the dogmatists, to the glory of the sceptical clique which stands for ambiguous ambiguity, and a certain dubious obscurity from which our doubts cannot remove every bit of light any more than our natural light can dispel all the darkness.

[Verso] The least thing is of this kind. God is the beginning and the end. Eccl.

1. Reason.

(392)

110 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 all our knowledge, as they maintain. 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 there is an infinite series of numbers, and reason goes on to 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 before agreeing to accept them as it would be absurd for the heart to demand an intuition of all the propositions demonstrated by reason before agreeing to accept them.

Our inability must therefore serve only to humble reason,

which would like to be the judge of everything, but not to confute our certainty. As if reason were the only way we could learn! Would to God, on the contrary, that we never needed it and knew everything by instinct and feeling! But nature has refused us this blessing, and has instead given us only very little knowledge of this kind; all other knowledge can be acquired only by reasoning.

That is why those to whom God has given religious faith by moving their hearts are very fortunate, and feel quite legitimately convinced, but to those who do not have it we can only give such faith through reasoning, until God gives it by moving their heart, without which faith is only human and useless for salvation. (282)

111 I can certainly imagine a man without hands, feet, or head, for it is only experience that teaches us that the head is more necessary than the feet. But I cannot imagine a man without thought; he would be a stone or an animal. (339)

112 Instinct and reason, signs of two natures. (344)

113 *Thinking reed.* It is not in space that I must seek my human dignity, but in the ordering of my thought. It will do me no good to own land. Through space the universe grasps me and swallows me up like a speck; through thought I grasp it. (348)

114 Man's greatness comes from knowing he is wretched: a tree does not know it is wretched.

Thus it is wretched to know that one is wretched, but there is greatness in knowing one is wretched. (397)

115 *Immateriality of the soul.* When philosophers have subdued their passions, what material substance has managed to achieve this? (349)

116 All these examples of wretchedness prove his greatness. It is the wretchedness of a great lord, the wretchedness of a dispossessed king. (398)

117 *Man's greatness.* Man's greatness is so obvious that it can even be deduced from his wretchedness, for what is nature in animals we

call wretchedness in man, thus recognizing that, if his nature is today like that of the animals, he must have fallen from some better state which was once his own.

Who indeed would think himself unhappy not to be king except one who had been dispossessed? Did anyone think Paulus Emilius was unhappy not to be consul? On the contrary, everyone thought he was happy to have been so once, because the office was not meant to be permanent. But people thought Perseus so unhappy at finding himself no longer king, because that was meant to be a permanent office, that they were surprised that he could bear to go on living. Who would think himself unhappy if he had only one mouth and who would not if he had only one eye? It has probably never occurred to anyone to be distressed at not having three eyes, but those who have none are inconsolable. (409)

118 Man's greatness even in his concupiscence. He has managed to produce such a remarkable system from it and make it the image of true charity. (402)

VII. CONTRADICTIONS

119 *Contradictions.* (After showing how vile and how great man is.) Let man now judge his own worth, let him love himself, for there is within him a nature capable of good; but that is no reason for him to love the vileness within himself. Let him despise himself because this capacity remains unfilled; but that is no reason for him to despise this natural capacity. Let him both hate and love himself; he has within him the capacity for knowing truth and being happy, but he possesses no truth which is either abiding or satisfactory.

I should therefore like to arouse in man the desire to find truth, to be ready, free from passion, to follow it wherever he may find it, realizing how far his knowledge is clouded by passions. I should like him to hate his concupiscence which automatically makes his decisions for him, so that it should not

blind him when he makes his choice, nor hinder him once he has chosen. (423)

120 We are so presumptuous that we should like to be known all over the world, even by people who will only come when we are no more. Such is our vanity that the good opinion of half a dozen of the people around us gives us pleasure and satisfaction. (148)

121 It is dangerous to explain too clearly to man how like he is to the animals without pointing out his greatness. It is also dangerous to make too much of his greatness without his vileness. It is still more dangerous to leave him in ignorance of both, but it is most valuable to represent both to him.

Man must not be allowed to believe that he is equal either to animals or to angels, nor to be unaware of either, but he must know both. (418)

122 APR¹ *Greatness and wretchedness.* Since wretchedness and greatness can be concluded each from the other, some people have been more inclined to conclude that man is wretched for having used his greatness to prove it, while others have all the more cogently concluded he is great by basing their proof on wretchedness. Everything that could be said by one side as proof of greatness has only served as an argument for the others to conclude he is wretched, since the further one falls the more wretched one is, and vice versa. One has followed the other in an endless circle, for it is certain that as man's insight increases so he finds both wretchedness and greatness within himself. In a word man knows he is wretched. Thus he is wretched because he is so, but he is truly great because he knows it. (416)

123 *Contradictions.* Contempt for our existence, dying for nothing, hatred of our existence. (157)

124 *Contradictions.* Man is naturally credulous, incredulous, timid, bold. (125)

¹ It used to be thought that these initials represented an abbreviation for 'At Port Royal', referring to conferences Pascal gave there, but this is no longer generally accepted, and no alternative has yet commanded assent. See also 149.

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P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

Translated with an Introduction by A. J. Krailsheimer



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