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PASCAL

PASCAL literature grows apace, even on this side of the Channel. A few years ago Mme Duclaux (A. Mary F. Robinson) employed all the charm of her style and vivid imagination in painting a *Portrait of Pascal* (E. Benn, 1927); and if her publishers claimed too much in declaring that by her book 'to English readers for the first time Pascal the man stands revealed', it forms an excellent and stimulating introduction to a complex and fascinating study. Then came Mr Roger Soltau with a volume *Pascal the Man and the Message* (Blackie, 1927) which, while it lacks the brilliance of Mme Duclaux's narrative, is more reflective, treats the religious controversies of the time with more respect (although I am not sure that he gets quite to the bottom of them), and displays equal insight in handling the delicate question of Pascal's personal opinions. His book is of especial value in applying to present problems the lessons which Pascal has to teach. It is well-informed, earnest, and, in the best sense, edifying.

Lastly, there are Professor Clement Webb's quite recent lectures entitled *Pascal's Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford, 1929). One may guess what Pascal's reaction to this title would have been, especially if it was accompanied by Dr John Caird's remark that 'a philosophy of religion starts with the presupposition that religion and religious ideas can be taken out of the domain of feeling or practical experience and made objects of scientific reflection'. He would cry, 'It is the heart that feels God and not the reason'. Now, while for him the heart is not mere feeling and is indeed something other than feeling, involving all the natural instincts of man of which the affections are only a part, though a preponderant part, he claims for it precisely that quality of immediacy which, according to Dr Caird a few lines later, we lay aside when we pass into the sphere of philosophy. 'Il (le sentiment) agit en un instant, et toujours est prêt à agir.' . . . 'Prophétiser, c'est parler de Dieu, non par preuves du dehors, mais par sentiment intérieur *et immédiat*' (his own italics). And whereas he was always ready to give a reason for his hope, there has probably never lived a man less willing to treat the first principles of his faith as a matter for argument. However, when the Oriel Professor of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion writes a book about Pascal, it obviously requires the attention of the JOURNAL even though, as with great reluctance I am compelled to hold, it is hardly worthy of the high reputation of the chair and its late occupant. It is because of the eminence of the author and the perverseness of his book that I propose to devote a good deal of space to its consideration.

Of course Professor Webb has many wise and original things to say—*obiter dicta* of great philosophical and theological value, upon Kant, Absolute Idealism, Original Sin, religious experience, &c. It is only in connexion with seventeenth-century France in general, and with Pascal in particular, that he seems to lose grip, and that from insufficient knowledge of the language and circumstances of the time, and from almost complete want of sympathy with the man.

The want of sympathy is confessed quite naïvely in the author's preface. 'Pascal is not to me especially sympathetic, nor is he a teacher to whom I feel myself under a peculiar obligation.' Here I am tempted to quote Joseph Joachim, who, when musical scores were presented to him for judgement, would say plaintively, 'Why will they *gompose*? It is so easy not to *gompose*.'

To illustrate how want of linguistic knowledge may lead a commentator astray, I will take two contiguous passages on pp. 45 and 47.

Pascal wrote, 'C'est sur ces connaissances du cœur et de l'instinct qu'il faut que la raison s'appuie et qu'elle y fonde tout son discours'.

Professor Webb (p. 45) translates the last words, 'and takes it for the foundation of all its indirect inferences', justifying his rendering by a note, 'This seems to be here the meaning of *discours*, viz. *indirect* or immediate inference as opposed to such direct vision of all that is real *uno intuitu*, in one glance, as we naturally attribute to higher intelligences and to God'. All this subtlety and learning disappear before the simple fact that *discours*, to Pascal here as to La Fontaine, merely means argument or talk.

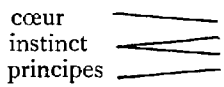
Cf. 'Jadis l'erreur du souriceau
Me servit à prouver le *discours* que j'avance:
J'ai pour le *fonder* à present
Le bon Socrate.'... (*Fables* xi 7.)

On p. 47 Professor Webb complains that Pascal 'should in the same "thought" use "esprit" now as the common designation of *l'esprit de géométrie* and *l'esprit de finesse*, now as the name of the former in contrast with *le jugement* taken as equivalent to the latter'. In simpler words, that Pascal in the same passage uses *esprit* now of the mind and now of the heart.

The reference is not given but apparently fr. 4 (ed. Brunschvicg) is meant, where, it may be remarked, the word *esprit* occurs explicitly only in the sense of *géométrie*. The heading is not *esprit de géométrie, esprit de finesse* as in fr. 1 but merely *géométrie, finesse*. That is perhaps a pedantic point. It is enough to say that in Pascal's time *esprit* was freely used of both the intellectual and the emotive faculties. *Vide* Littré *s.v. esprit* for abundant examples. The fact is that philosophers,

until they began to invent their own peculiar and ill-sounding jargon, were content to use current terms (remember Malherbe and his *crocheteurs du Port au Foin !*), leaving the intelligent reader to determine by the context the proper connotation in each case.

In this connexion let me say that closer acquaintance with the MS would perhaps have saved Professor Webb from blaming Pascal for confusing the instinctive and the fundamental intellectual processes. He says that Pascal ranges or identifies *cœur* with both *instinct* and *principes*, and he quotes fr. 281, 'coeur, instinct, principes' in support. But it is pure assumption to say that Pascal here meant to identify the three concepts. Indeed the form of the note, scribbled in the mutilated margin of fr. 237, thus:



suggests by the arrangement of the words and their radiating lines a reference to some other concept or concepts which would have made the matter clear. May it have been *raison*, to which, according to Pascal elsewhere, each of the three is opposed in its own way? In any case the fragment in question, 281, hardly serves as 'a text' on which to found a charge of confusion of thought.

Again, in order to be thoroughly at home with Pascal you must explore the obscurer corners of the age in which he lived. There are signs that Professor Webb has been content to stand on the outskirts.

'The Abbé St. Cyran'—an unknown and impossible title—may be a slip; but to suggest that Pascal was one of a few 'Jansenists' who would not have accepted the name, betrays ignorance of the fact that it was an offensive nickname which no Augustinian then or now can suffer in silence. 'C'est le mot du monde le plus équivoque, le plus captieux, et dont on abuse le plus pour calomnier les gens de bien et les plus catholiques' wrote Arnauld (*Œuvres* t. viii p. 560), and in our generation M. A. Gazier refused it with equal vigour (cf. *Hist. du mouvement janséniste*, 1922, pp. v ff). Then again, Mersennet the mathematician was not a Jesuit father but a Minim, and himself engaged in lively scientific controversy with the Company. These are trifles, but the contrast between the time-serving of Descartes and the passionate, dynamic faith of Pascal suffers from a very colourless and indeed misleading description of the former's 'Christianity'. 'Descartes was . . . a theist, a Christian and a Roman Catholic.' A theist certainly; but a Christian as Pascal understood, or indeed as we understand the term? To say that 'his Christianity has the appearance of being based on his resolve to follow the religious tradition of his country rather than on any

personal realization of its sole adequacy to meet the demands of his soul' is true; but it is not nearly strong enough. J. P. Mahaffy comes nearer the facts when he asserts roundly that Descartes was not a Christian at all, or a true churchman. In his heart of hearts he was a sceptic who put no trust in the truth of revelation. He postulated a God, ruler and orderer of the world, and contemplation of the Deity seemed to him the highest of delights. He accepted orthodox belief as a convenient shelter while his own house was building; but that structure, when completed, and his whole habit of thought, justify alike the anxiety of his friends to clear his posthumous reputation from the taint of heresy, and the exasperation of Pascal over his lukewarmness. Cf. Mahaffy *Descartes* in Blackwood's Philosophical Classics, p. 194.

With regard to Pascal himself Professor Webb passes a number of judgements some of which can be refuted from his own pages.

Again and again he refuses to him the title of philosopher *stricto sensu*. Yet he admits that Pascal had already reached the position from which Kant bombarded and destroyed the old proofs of God's existence. Pascal may have come to it by a short cut, by a religious experience rather than by philosophic criticism; but any way he was there. Professor Webb allows that Pascal desired to see life steadily and see it whole, and what philosopher does more than that? He half applauds Voltaire's gibe at the magnificent passage on the Orders (fr. 793), 'Il est à croire que M. Pascal n'aurait pas employé ce galimatias dans son ouvrage, s'il avait eu le temps de le revoir', and while admitting the spiritual passion, he finds the language inappropriate to a philosophical subject. He gives his reasons. The first is definitely wrong. Pascal wrote, 'La distance infinie des corps aux esprits figure la distance infiniment plus infinie des esprits à la charité, car elle est surnaturelle'. Professor Webb, commenting, speaks of 'the illusory air of mathematical precision introduced by the words "infinitely infinite" . . . as though one were dealing with infinities . . . susceptible of mathematical treatment, whereas this is not here the case, since the first-mentioned *distance* . . . is of course purely metaphorical'. It is not. Pascal is describing two different orders of being. As there is a disparateness between spatial infinity and the finite, so there is between this infinity and the infinity of the supernatural order; and he speaks with mathematical precision.

The second reason is trivial and pedantic: 'Even when he speaks of "the firmament, the stars, the earth *and its kingdoms*" as belonging to the material order, one sees this confusion (of the disparateness between bodies and thoughts) creeping in. The division of the earth into kingdoms belongs to *political* geography; and only *physical* geography is relevant here.' Has Professor Webb forgotten not only poetic

licence, but the *regna orbis terrae* of the Temptation? Would he draw the same distinction there?

'Pascal was not the recipient of a prophetic mission.' Yet Professor Webb has just before defined prophets as men 'who come forth charged as it were with a message to men, whether it be a threatening doom or a gospel of grace'. What about the feverish missionary activity of Pascal's last years expressed in the scattered fragments upon which he flung burning thoughts and trenchant arguments meant to save the souls of his worldly friends, warn them of judgement to come, and prepare the ground for the sowing of Divine Grace?

This last consideration supplies the answer to Professor Webb's charge of lack of confidence in moral intuitions, founded upon one of Pascal's contrasts between human and divine justice. 'Je croyais que notre justice était essentiellement juste et que j'avais de quoi la connaître et en juger. Mais je me suis trouvé tant de fois en faute de jugement droit qu'enfin je suis entré en défiance de moi et puis des autres.' Upon which Professor Webb observes, 'Such scepticism as this knocks the bottom out of ethics altogether'. Pascal means to knock the bottom out of the freethinker's ethics, self-complacency and acquiescence in custom and convention. His doubts as to the value of human justice, his depreciation of all natural notions of justice apart from revelation, and his final conclusion (which is like that of Hobbes's *Leviathan*) that laws are to be obeyed simply because there is power behind to enforce them, arise from his conviction of human variability and imbecility which the scientific observer accepts but against which the Christian rebels. 'Je cherche le sûr', he cries; and that he finds in God alone, the *Deus absconditus* whose ways are not our ways, whom unassisted nature and unassisted reason do not plainly declare, though He may be found by those who seek Him and to whom He wills to reveal Himself.

Of this last notion Pascal is not merely 'a forerunner of many contemporaries of our own among whom Rudolf Otto is perhaps the best known in this country'; he is the successor of Isaiah and the upholder of a view which runs all through the Bible from Psalmist and Prophet to Evangelist. No doubt he goes too far when he makes the obscurity of religion a proof of its truth; but he is honestly keeping to the teaching of scripture and the facts of Christian experience.

His immediate purpose is to awaken the freethinker to the absolute weakness and limitation of human reason as an instrument of knowledge and convince him that he cannot by its exercise arrive at truth.

The character of Pascal's supposed interlocutor must always be kept in mind not only in the Wager, where Professor Webb rightly recog-

nizes it, but all through the Apology, which is not intended for the seriously doubting seeker after God, but for the reckless and indifferent worldling. It was not his purpose to insist 'on the disinterestedness of morality', *à la Kant*, but to rouse to a sense of man's weakness and wickedness and the grave danger arising therefrom.

So in the Wager, the man must be made to feel that he must choose between belief and disbelief, and the nature of the chances on one side and the other are set before him in a way which he will understand from his experience of the gaming-table. This is Pascal's eager task, and to say that in it he does nothing to discourage 'the eudaemonism . . . which finds its great critic in Kant' is really beside the point.

Finally, I note two other places where Professor Webb seems to me to have read the *Pensées* wrong.

(1) 'It is not man's imperfections which strike Pascal as a paradox and enigma, but the contrast of misery and greatness in human nature; and for this he finds the only possible solution in the doctrine of the Fall whereby man lost his crown.'

(2) 'The Jew's God is but an earthly providence. Pascal appears to forget that the cry of Psalm lxxiii 25 is in the Scriptures which the Jew shares with the Christian; and he oddly contrasts with the God of the Jews the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of the Christians. "We have no knowledge of God", he declares, "except in Jesus Christ."'

But it is quite clear that Pascal is thinking here of the carnal Jews alone, about whom there is a whole series of reflexions. When he thinks of the true Jews, he says (fr. 608): 'Les Juifs et les chrétiens connaissent le même Dieu.'

And what is the other phrase but a translation or adaptation of Matthew xi 27, supported by John i 18? This may be 'exaggerated Christocentricism' but it is taken from the Gospel.

At the close of all this criticism which is addressed to only one aspect of the book I may perhaps be allowed to state in a couple of paragraphs what I imagine to be the main contributions to philosophy and religion of a man to whom I for one feel a peculiar obligation and who I believe has a special message for this generation.

(1) Confining himself to the study of human nature—he had done with abstractions ('J'avais passé longtemps . . .' fr. 144), he takes as his starting-point pure Pyrrhonism which he developes and exaggerates in order that men may be led to dig down to the foundations of mundane knowledge, and finding them hollow, reject with scorn the sham truths and the sham goods upon which they have been content to rest.

The doubt in which Montaigne lazily wrapt himself, the doubt from

which Descartes started to build his pretentious system, are used by Pascal to level away all human speculation and superstition, and prepare the ground into which God, if He wills, may sow the seed of grace and enable man to recover his lost greatness. Pascal is indeed no constructive philosopher, but he *is* a critical philosopher. 'Se moquer de la philosophie c'est vraiment philosopher.' None but a true philosopher could dare to say that.

(2) By the Provincial Letters he taught the value of sincerity in religion, founded the method of honest discussion, and armed the conscience against the misuse of casuistry. In the *Écrits sur la Grâce* he tried to mitigate the harshness of unadulterated Jansenism (and there is evidence to shew that he was gradually being weaned from that impossible creed) and to bring the atmosphere of pure science into the study of the queen of sciences, 'La théologie est le centre de toutes les vérités'.

(3) In the Apology which is latent in the *Pensées* he traced fresh defences for Christianity. 'Pendent opera interrupta' was taken by his editors for the unfinished work. We may complete the quotation

'minaeque murorum ingentes',

'threatenings of mighty walls for the safeguarding of the Faith'. For, teaching scepticism towards that Faith as apprehended solely by Reason, he summoned to its defence the whole nature of man, and formed a fortress against which the gates of hell shall not prevail.

(4) Finally, in a hundred thoughts, whether intended for the Apology, or simply the reflexion of his own burning heart, taught by suffering and great love, he saw deeper into things human and higher into things divine than any man since the Apostles of the Lord. And to that Lord he sought, passionately, to bring men as he himself had been brought. 'Ainsi je tends les bras à mon Libérateur qui, ayant été prédit durant quatre mille ans, est venu souffrir et mourir pour moi sur la terre dans les temps et dans toutes les circonstances qui en ont été prédites; et, par sa grâce, j'attends la mort en paix, dans l'espérance de lui être éternellement uni; et je vis cependant avec joie, soit dans les biens qu'il lui plaît de me donner, soit dans les maux qu'il m'envoie pour mon bien, et qu'il m'a appris à souffrir par son exemple.'

H. F. STEWART.