

Blaise Pascal,
Provincial Letters,
Letter V

Born of a Rouen tax collector, Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) was an important mathematician (developing probability theory), inventor (he invented the hydraulic press and the syringe, and was one of the first two inventors of the mechanical calculator), and physicist. After a mystical experience (the *nuit de feu*), he threw in his lot with the Jansenists of Port-Royal, who

strenuously objected to Catholic laxity as a response to Calvinist rigorism, advocating for a kind of Puritanical Catholicism. In his satirical *Provincial Letters* (an exemplary instance of French prose writing), Pascal takes up the great controversy between the Jansenists and the Jesuits, the latter being the shock troops of the Counter Reformation set in motion by the Council of Trent (1545-1563). To Pascal, Jesuit casuistry simply reconciled people to worldliness.

Letter V

Sir, According to my promise, I now send you the first outlines of the morals taught by those good fathers the Jesuits—those men distinguished for learning and sagacity, who are all under the guidance of divine wisdom—a surer guide than all philosophy. You imagine, perhaps, that I am in jest, but I am perfectly serious; or rather, they are so when they speak thus of themselves in their book entitled “The Image of the First Century.” I am only copying their own words, and may now give you the rest of the eulogy: “They are a society of men, or rather let us call them angels, predicted by Isaiah in these words, ‘Go, ye swift and ready angels.’” The prediction is as clear as day, is it not? “They have the spirit of eagles; they are a flock of phoenixes (a late author having demonstrated that there are a great many of these birds); they have changed the face of Christendom!” Of course, we must believe all this, since they have said it; and in one sense you will find the account amply verified by the sequel of this communication, in which I propose to treat of their maxims.

Determined to obtain the best possible information, I did not trust to the representations of our friend the Jansenist, but sought an interview with some of themselves. I found, however, that he told me nothing but the bare truth, and I am persuaded he is an honest man. Of this you may judge from the following account of these conferences.

In the conversation I had with the Jansenist, he told me so many strange things about these fathers, that I could with difficulty believe them, till he pointed them out to me in their writings; after which he left me nothing more to say in their defence, than that these might be the sentiments of some individuals only, which it was not fair to impute to the whole fraternity. And, indeed, I assured him that I knew some of them who were as severe as those whom he quoted to me were lax. This led him to explain to me the spirit of the Society, which is not known to every one; and you will perhaps have no objections to learn something about it.

“You imagine,” he began, “that it would tell considerably in their favor to show that some of their fathers are as friendly to Evangelical maxims as others are opposed to them; and you would conclude from that circumstance, that these loose opinions do not belong to the whole Society. That I grant you; for had such been the case, they would not have suffered persons among them holding sentiments so diametrically opposed to licentiousness. But as it is equally true that there are among them those who hold these licentious doctrines, you are bound also to conclude that the Spirit of the Society is not that of Christian

severity; for had such been the case, they would not have suffered persons among them holding sentiments so diametrically opposed to that severity.”

“And what, then,” I asked, “can be the design of the whole as a body? Perhaps they have no fixed principle, and every one is left to speak out at random whatever he thinks.”

“That cannot be,” returned my friend; “such an immense body could not subsist in such a hap-hazard sort of way, or without a soul to govern and regulate its movements; besides, it is one of their express regulations, that none shall print a page without the approval of their superiors.”

“But,” said I, “how can these same superiors give their consent to maxims so contradictory?”

“That is what you have yet to learn,” he replied. “Know, then, that their object is not the corruption of manners—that is not their design. But as little is it their sole aim to reform them—that would be bad policy. Their idea is briefly this: They have such a good opinion of themselves as to believe that it is useful, and in some sort essentially necessary to the good of religion, that their influence should extend everywhere, and that they should govern all consciences. And the Evangelical or severe maxims being best fitted for managing some sorts of people, they avail themselves of these when they find them favorable to their purpose. But as these maxims do not suit the views of the great bulk of people, they wave them in the case of such persons, in order to keep on good terms with all the world. Accordingly, having to deal with persons of all classes and of all different nations, they find it necessary to have casuists assorted to match this diversity.

“On this principle, you will easily see that if they had none but the looser sort of casuists, they would defeat their main design, which is to embrace all; for those that are truly pious are fond of a stricter discipline. But as there are not many of that stamp, they do not require many severe directors to guide them. They have a few for the select few; while whole multitudes of lax casuists are provided for the multitudes that prefer laxity. “It is in virtue of this ‘obliging and accommodating, conduct,’ as Father Petau calls it, that they may be said to stretch out a helping hand to all mankind. Should any person present himself before them, for example, fully resolved to make restitution of some ill-gotten gains, do not suppose that they would dissuade him from it. By no means; on the contrary, they will applaud and confirm him in such a holy resolution. But suppose another should come who wishes to be absolved without restitution, and it will be a

particularly hard case indeed, if they cannot furnish him with means of evading the duty, of one kind or another, the lawfulness of which they will be ready to guarantee.

“By this policy they keep all their friends, and defend themselves against all their foes; for, when charged with extreme laxity, they have nothing more to do than produce their austere directors, with some books which they have written on the severity of the Christian code of morals; and simple people, or those who never look below the surface of things, are quite satisfied with these proofs of the falsity of the accusation.

“Thus are they prepared for all sorts of persons, and so ready are they to suit the supply to the demand, that when they happen to be in any part of the world where the doctrine of a crucified God is accounted foolishness, they suppress the offence of the cross, and preach only a glorious and not a suffering Jesus Christ. This plan they followed in the Indies and in China, where they permitted Christians to practise idolatry itself, with the aid of the following ingenious contrivance: they made their converts conceal under their clothes an image of Jesus Christ, to which they taught them in their writings to apply mentally the worship paid publicly to the idol Chacim-Choan and their Keum-fuccum.

“Such is the manner in which they have spread themselves over the whole earth, aided by the *doctrine of probable opinions*, which is at once the source and the basis of all this licentiousness. You must get some of themselves to explain this doctrine to you. They make no secret of it, any more than of what you have already learned; with this difference only, that they conceal their carnal and worldly policy under the garb of divine and Christian prudence; as if the faith, and tradition its ally, were not always one and the same at all times and in all places; as if it were the part of the rule to bend in conformity to the subject which it was meant to regulate; and as if souls, to be purified from their pollutions, had only to corrupt the law of the Lord, in place of ‘the law of the Lord, which is clean and pure, converting the soul which lithe in sin,’ and bringing it into conformity with its salutary lessons!

“Go and see some of these worthy fathers, I beseech you, and I am confident that you will soon discover, in the laxity of their moral system, the explanation of their doctrine about grace. You will then see the Christian virtues exhibited in such a strange aspect, so completely stripped of the charity which is the life and soul of them—you will see so many crimes palliated and irregularities tolerated, that you will

no longer be surprised at their maintaining that 'all men have always enough of grace' to lead a pious life, in the sense in which they understand piety. Their morality being entirely Pagan, nature is quite competent to its observance. When we maintain the necessity of efficacious grace, we assign it another sort of virtue for its object. Its office is not to cure one vice by means of another; it is not merely to induce men to practise the external duties of religion: it aims at a virtue higher than that propounded by Pharisees, or the greatest sages of Heathenism. The law and reason are 'sufficient graces' for these purposes. But to disenthral the soul from the love of the world—to tear it from what it holds most dear—to make it die to itself—to lift it up and bind it wholly, only, and forever, to God—can be the work of none but an all-powerful hand. And it would be as absurd to affirm that we have the full power of achieving such objects, as it would be to allege that those virtues, devoid of the love of God, which these fathers confound with the virtues of Christianity, are beyond our power."

Such was the strain of my friend's discourse, which was delivered with much feeling; for he takes these sad disorders Q very much to heart. For my own part, I begat to entertain a high admiration of these fathers, simply on account of the ingenuity of their policy; and following his advice, I waited on a good casuist of the Society, one of my old acquaintances, with whom I now resolved purposely to renew my former intimacy. Having my instructions how to manage them, I had no great difficulty in getting him afloat. Retaining his old attachment, he 'received me immediately with a profusion of kindness; and after talking over some indifferent matters, I took occasion from the present season,¹ to learn something from him about fasting, and thus slip insensibly into the main subject. I told him, therefore, that I had difficulty in supporting the fast. He exhorted me to do violence to my inclinations; but as I continued to murmur, he took pity on me, and began to search out some ground for a dispensation. In fact he suggested a number of excuses for me, none of which happened to suit my case, till at length he bethought himself of asking me, whether I did not find it difficult to sleep without taking supper?

"Yes, my good father," said I; "and for that reason I am obliged often to take a refreshment at mid-day, and supper at night."

"I am extremely happy," he replied, "to have found out a way of relieving you without sin: go in peace—you are under no obligation to fast. However, I would not have you depend on my word: step this way to the library."

On going thither with him he took up a book, exclaiming, with great

rapture, "Here is the authority for you: and, by my conscience, such an authority! It is Escobar!"

"Who is Escobar?" I inquired.

"What! not know, Escobar" cried the monk; "the member of our Society who compiled this Moral Theology from twenty-four of our fathers, and on this founds an analogy, in his preface, between his book and 'that in the Apocalypse which was sealed with seven seals,' and states that 'Jesus presents it thus sealed to the four living creatures, Suarez, Vasquez, Molina, and Valencia, in presence of the four-and-twenty Jesuits who represent the four-and-twenty elders.'"

He read me, in fact, the whole of that allegory, which he pronounced to be admirably appropriate, and which conveyed to my mind a sublime idea of the excellence of the work. At length, having sought out the passage on fasting, "O here it is!" he said; "if a man cannot sleep without taking supper, is he bound to fast? Answer: By no means! Will that not satisfy you?"

"Not exactly," replied I; "for I might sustain the fast by taking my refreshment in the morning, and supping at night."

"Listen, then, to what follows; they have provided for all that: 'And what is to be said, if the person might make a shift with a refreshment in the morning and supping at night?'"

"That's my case exactly."

"Answer: Still he is not obliged to fast; because no person is obliged to change the order of his meals."

"A most excellent reason!" I exclaimed.

"But tell me, pray," continued the monk, "do you take much wine?"

"No, my dear father," I answered; "I cannot endure it."

"I merely put the question," returned he, "to let you know that you might, without breaking the fast, take a glass or so in the morning, or whenever you felt inclined for a drop; and that is always something in the way of supporting nature. Here is the decision: 'May one, without breaking the fast, drink wine at any hour he pleases, and even in a large quantity? Yes, he may: and a dram of hippo crass too.' I had no recollection of the hippo crass," said the monk; "I must take a note of that in my memorandum-book."

"He must be a nice man," this observed I.

“Oh! everybody likes him,” rejoined the father; “he has such delightful questions! Only observe this one in the same place, ‘If a man doubt whether he is twenty one years old, is he obliged to fast? No. But suppose I were to be twenty-one tonight an hour after midnight, and tomorrow were the fast, would I be obliged to fast tomorrow? No; for you were at liberty to eat as much as you pleased for an hour after midnight, not being till then fully twenty-one; and therefore having a right to break the fast day, you are not obliged to keep it.’”

“Well, that is vastly entertaining!” cried I.

“Oh,” rejoined the father, “it is impossible to tear one’s self away from the book: I spend whole days and nights in reading it; in fact, I do nothing else.”

The worthy monk, perceiving that I was interested, was quite delighted, and went on with his quotations. “Now,” said he, “for a taste of Filiutius, one of the four-and-twenty Jesuits: ‘Is a man who has exhausted himself any way—by going after a girl, for example, obliged to fast? By no means. But if he has exhausted himself expressly to procure a dispensation from fasting, will he be held obliged? He will not, even though he should have had that design.’ There now! would you have believed that?”

“Indeed, good father, I do not believe it yet,” said I. “Is it no sin for a man not to fast when he has it in his power? And is it allowable to court occasions of committing sin, or rather, are we not bound to shun them? That would be easy enough, surely.”

“Not always so,” he replied; “it depends.”

“Depends on what?” cried I.

“Oho!” rejoined the monk, “so you think that if a person experience some inconvenience in avoiding the occasions of sin, he is still bound to do so? Not so thinks Father Bruny. ‘Absolution,’ says he, ‘is not to be refused to such as continue in the proximate occasions of sin, if they are so situated that they cannot give them up without becoming the common talk of the world, or subjecting themselves to personal inconvenience.’”

“I am glad to hear it, father,” I remarked; “and now that we are not obliged to avoid the occasions of sin, nothing more remains but to say that we may deliberately court them.”

“Even that is occasionally permitted,” added he; “the celebrated casuist Basil Ponce has said so, and Father Bruny quotes his sentiment with approbation, in his *Treatise on Penance*, as follows: ‘We may

seek an occasion of sin directly and designedly, *primo et per se*—when our own or our neighbor’s spiritual or temporal advantage induces us to do so.”

“Truly,” said I, “it appears to be all a dream to me, when I hear grave divines talking in this manner! Come now, my dear father, tell me conscientiously, do you hold such a sentiment as that?”

“No, indeed,” said he, “I do not.”

“You are speaking, then, against your conscience,” continued I.

“Not at all,” he replied; “I was speaking on that point not according to my own conscience, but according to that of Ponce and Father Bruny, and then you may follow with the utmost safety, for I assure you that they are able men.”

“What, father! because they have put down these three lines in their books, will it therefore become allowable to court the occasions of sin? I always thought that we were bound to take the Scripture and the tradition of the Church as our only rule, and not your casuists.”

“Goodness!” cried the monk, “I declare you put me in mind of these Jansenists. Think you that Father Bruny and Basil Ponce are not able to render their opinion probable?”

“Probable won’t do for me,” said I; “I must have certainty.”

“I can easily see,” replied the good father, “that you know nothing about our doctrine of probable opinions. If you did, you would speak in another strain. Ah! my dear sir, I must really give you some instructions on this point; without knowing this, positively you can understand nothing at all. It is the foundation—the very A, B, C, of our whole moral philosophy.”

Glad to see him come to the point to which I had been drawing him on, I expressed my satisfaction, and requested him to explain what was meant by a probable opinion.

“That,” he replied, “our authors will answer better than I can do. The generality of them, and, among others, our four-and-twenty elders, describe it thus: ‘An opinion is called probable, when it is founded upon reasons of some consideration. Hence it may sometimes happen that a single very grave doctor may render an opinion probable.’ The reason is added: ‘For a man particularly given to study would not adhere to an opinion unless he was drawn to it by a good and sufficient reason.’”

“So it would appear,” I observed, with a smile, “that a single doctor may turn consciences round about and upside down as he pleases, and yet always land them in a safe position.”

“You must not laugh at it, sir,” returned the monk; “nor need you attempt to combat the doctrine. The Jansenists tried this; but they might have saved themselves the trouble—it is too firmly established. Hear Sanchez, one of the most famous of our fathers: ‘You may doubt, perhaps, whether the authority of a single good and learned doctor renders an opinion probable. I answer, that it does; and this is confirmed by Angeles, Sylvester, Navarre, Emanuel, Sa, etc. It is proved thus: A probable opinion is one that has a considerable foundation. Now the authority of a learned and pious man is entitled to very great consideration; because (mark the reason), if the testimony of such a man has great influence in convincing us that such and such an event occurred, say at Rome, for example, why should it not have the same weight in the case of a question in morals?’”

“An odd comparison this,” interrupted I, “between the concerns of the world and those of conscience!”

“Have a little patience,” rejoined the monk; “Sanchez answers that in the very next sentence: ‘Nor can I assent to the qualification made here by some writers, namely, that the authority of such a doctor, though sufficient in matters of human right, is not so in those of divine right. It is of vast weight in both cases.’”

“Well, father,” said I, frankly, “I really cannot admire that rule. Who can assure me, considering the freedom your doctors claim to examine everything by reason, that what appears safe to one may seem so to all the rest? The diversity of judgments is so great”

“You don’t understand it,” said he, interrupting me; “no doubt they are often of different sentiments, but what signifies that? Each renders his own opinion probable and safe. We all know well enough that they are far from being of the same mind; what is more, there is hardly an instance in which they ever agree. There are very few questions, indeed, in which you do not find the one saying Yes, and the other saying No. Still, in all these cases, each of the contrary opinions is probable. And hence Diana says on a certain subject: ‘Ponce and Sanchez hold opposite views of it; but, as they are both learned men, each renders his own opinion probable.’”

“But, father,” I remarked, “a person must be sadly embarrassed in choosing between them!”

“Not at all,” he rejoined; “he has only to follow the opinion which

suits him best.”

“What! if the other is more probable?”

“No Matter.”

“ And if the other is the safer?”

“No matter,” repeated the monk; “this is made quite plain by Emanuel Sa, of our Society, in his Aphorisms: ‘A person may do what he considers allowable according to a probable opinion, though the contrary may be the safer one. The opinion of a single grave doctor is all that is requisite.’”

“And if an opinion be at once the less probable and the less safe, is it allowable to follow it,” I asked, “even in the way of rejecting one which we believe to be more probable and safe?”

“Once more, I say Yes,” replied the monk. “Hear what Filiutius, that great Jesuit of Rome, says: ‘It is allowable to follow the less probable opinion, even though it be the less safe one. That is the common judgment of modern authors.’ Is not that quite clear?”

“Well, reverend father,” said I, “you have given us elbow-room, at all events! Thanks to your probable opinions, we have got liberty of conscience with a witness! And are you casuists allowed the same latitude in giving your responses?”

“O yes,” said he, “we answer just as we please; or rather, I should say, just as it may please those who ask our advice. Here are our rules, taken from Fathers Layman, Vasquez, Sanchez, and the four-and-twenty worthies, in the words of Layman: ‘A doctor, on being consulted, may give an advice, not only probable according to his own opinion, but contrary to his opinion, provided this judgment happens to be more favorable or more agreeable to the person that consults him—*Si forte haec illi favorabilior*. Nay, I go further, and say, that there would be nothing unreasonable in his giving those who consult him a judgment held to be probable by some learned person, even though he should be satisfied in his own mind that it is absolutely false.’”

“Well, seriously, father,” I said, “your doctrine is a most uncommonly comfortable one! Only think of being allowed to answer Yes or No, just as you please! It is impossible to prize such a privilege too highly. I now know the advantage of the contrary opinions of your doctors. One of them always serves your turn, and the other never gives you any annoyance. If you do not find your account on the one side, you fall back on the other, and always land in perfect safety.”

“That is quite true,” he replied; “and accordingly, we may always say with Diana, on his finding that Father Bruny was on his side, while Father Lugo was against him: *Saepe, premente deo, fert deus alter opem*. If one god presses us hard, another delivers us.”

“I understand you,” resumed I; “but a practical difficulty has just occurred to me, which is this, that supposing a person to have consulted one of your doctors, and obtained from him a pretty liberal opinion, there is some danger of his getting into a scrape by meeting a confessor who takes a different view of the matter, and refuses him absolution unless he recant the sentiment of the casuist. Have you not provided for such a case as that, father?”

“Can you doubt it?” he replied. “We have bound them, sir, to absolve their penitents who act according to probable opinions, under the pain of mortal sin, to secure their compliance. ‘When the penitent,’ says Father Bruny, ‘follows a probable opinion, the confessor is bound to absolve him, though his opinion should differ from that of his penitent.’”

“But he does not say it would be a mortal sin not to absolve him,” said I.

“How hasty you are!” rejoined the monk; “listen to what follows; he has expressly decided that, ‘to refuse absolution to a penitent who acts according to a probable opinion, is a sin which is in its nature mortal.’ And to settle that point, he cites the most illustrious of our fathers—Suarez, Vasquez, and Sanchez.”

“My dear sir,” said I, “that is a most prudent regulation. I see nothing to fear now. No confessor can dare to be refractory after this. Indeed, I was not aware that you had the power of issuing your orders on pain of damnation. I thought that your skill had been confirmed to the taking away of sins; I had no idea that it extended to the introduction of new ones. But from what I now see, you are omnipotent.”

“That is not a correct way of speaking,” rejoined the father. “We do not introduce sins; we only pay attention to them. I have had occasion to remark, two or three times during our conversation, that you are no great Scholastic.”

“Be that as it may, father, you have at least answered my difficulty. But I have another to suggest. How do you manage when the Fathers of the Church happen to differ from any of your casuists?”

“You really know very little of the subject,” he replied. “The Fathers were good enough for the morality of their own times; but they lived

too far back for that of the present age, which is no longer regulated by them, but by the modern casuists. On this Father Cellot, following the famous Reginald, remarks: 'In questions of morals, the modern casuists are to be preferred to the ancient fathers, though those lived nearer to the times of the apostles.' And following out this maxim, Diana thus decides: 'Are beneficiaries bound to restore their revenue when guilty of misappropriation of it? The ancients would say Yes, but the moderns say No; let us, therefore, adhere to the latter opinion, which relieves from the obligation of restitution.'

"Delightful words these, and most comfortable they must be to a great many people!" I observed.

"We leave the fathers," resumed the monk, "to those who deal with Positive Divinity.' As for us, who are the directors of conscience, we read very little of them, and quote only the modern casuists. There is Diana, for instance, a most voluminous writer; he has prefixed to his works a list of his authorities, which amount to two hundred and ninety six, and the most ancient of them is only about eighty years old."

"It would appear, then," I remarked, "that all these have come into the world since the date of your Society?"

"Thereabouts," he replied.

"That is to say, dear father, on your advent. St. Augustine, St. Chrysostom, St. Ambrose, St. Jerome, and all the rest, in so far as morals are concerned, disappeared from the stage. Would you be so kind as let me know the names, at least, of those modern authors who have succeeded them?"

"A most able and renowned class of men they are," replied the monk. "Their names are, Villalobos, Conink, Llamas, Achoker, Dealkozer, Dellacruz, Vera-Cruz, Ugolin, Tambourin, Fernandez, Martinez, Saurez, Henriquez, Vasquez, Lopez, Gomez, Sanchez, de Vechis, de Grassis, de Grassalis, de Pitigianis, de Graphaeis, Squilanti, Bizozeri, Barcola, de Bobadilla, Simancha, Perez de Lara, Aldretta, Lorca, de Scarcia, Quaaranta, Scophra, Pedrezza, Cabrezza, Bisbe, Dias, de Clavasio, Villagut, Adam a Manden, Iribane Binsfeld, Volfangi a Vorberg, Vosthery, Strevesdoerf."

"O my dear father!" cried I, quite alarmed, "were all these people Christians?"

"How! Christians!" returned the casuist; "did I not tell you that these are the only writers by whom we now govern Christendom?"

Deeply affected as I was by this announcement, I concealed my emotion from the monk, and only asked him if all these authors were Jesuits?

“No,” said he; “but that is of little consequence; they have said a number of good things for all that. It is true the greater part of these same good things are extracted or copied from our authors, but we do not stand on ceremony with them on that score, more especially as they are in the constant habit of quoting our authors with applause. When Diana, for example, who does not belong to our Society, speaks of Vasquez, he calls him ‘that phoenix of genius;’ and he declares more than once, ‘that Vasquez alone is to him worth all the rest of men put together’ *instar omnibus*. Accordingly, our fathers often make use of this good Diana; and if you understand our doctrine of probability, you will see that this is no small help in its way. In fact, we are anxious that others besides the Jesuits would render their opinions probable, to prevent people from ascribing them all to us; for you will observe, that when any author, whoever he may be, advances a probable opinion, we are entitled, by the doctrine of probability, to adopt it if we please; and yet, if the author do not belong to our fraternity, we are not responsible for its soundness.”

“I understand all that,” said I. “It is easy to see that all are welcome that come your way, except the ancient fathers; you are masters of the field, and have only to walk the course. But I foresee three or four serious difficulties and powerful barriers which will oppose your career.”

“And what are these?” cried the monk, looking quite alarmed.

“They are, the Holy Scriptures,” I replied, “the popes, and the councils, whom you cannot gainsay, and who are all in the way of the Gospel.”

“Is that all!” he exclaimed; “I declare you put me in a fright. Do you imagine that we would overlook such an obvious scruple as that, or that we have not provided against it? A good idea, forsooth, to suppose that we would contradict Scripture, popes, and councils! I must convince you of your mistake; for I should be sorry you should go away with an impression that we are deficient in our respect to these authorities. You have doubtless taken up this notion from some of the opinions of our fathers, which are apparently at variance with their decisions, though in reality they are not. But to illustrate the harmony between them would require more leisure than we have at present; and as I would not like you to retain a bad impression of us, if you agree to meet with me tomorrow, I shall clear it all up then.”

Thus ended our interview, and thus shall end my present communication, which has been long enough, besides, for one letter. I am sure you will be satisfied with it, in the prospect of what is forthcoming.

I am, etc.

Voltaire,
Twenty-fifth Letter

No other person exemplifies the Enlightenment more than does Voltaire, *nom de plume* of François-Marie Arouet (1694-1778). His father was a lawyer serving as a minor treasury official, and his mother belonged to the minor nobility. Voltaire tirelessly opposed regnant power structures, especially the Catholic Church (himself being a deist), and he fought for civil rights. First published in 1733, when Voltaire was already famous as a playwright and poet, the satirical *Philosophical Letters* (or the *Letters upon the English Nation*) was a bestseller based on his time in England. In the Twenty-Fifth of these letters, Voltaire resists the pessimism of Pascal's *Pensées*. Reading Pascal and Voltaire together, we are confronted by the possible inhumanities of both worldliness and religiosity.

TWENTY-FIFTH LETTEROn Mr. Pascal's *Pensees*

I send you the critical notes on Pascal's *Pensees* that I made a long time ago. Pray do not compare me with Hezekiah, who wanted to burn all of Solomon's books. I respect Pascal's genius and eloquence, but the more I respect them, the more I am persuaded that he himself would have corrected many of those *Pensees* that he wrote down haphazardly, intending to examine them later; and it is while I am admiring his genius that I challenge some of his ideas.

It seems to me on the whole that the spirit in which M. Pascal wrote these *Pensees* was to show man in an odious light. He is determined to paint us all as wicked and miserable. He attacks human nature much as he attacked the Jesuits: he imputes to human nature that which is true only for some men; he eloquently insults the human race. I dare to take humanity's part against this sublime misanthrope. I dare to affirm that we are neither so wicked nor so miserable as he claims. More, I am quite persuaded that if, in the book that he intended to write, he had followed the plan that appears in the *Pensees*, he would have written a book full of eloquent illogicalities and admirably deduced inaccuracies. I even believe that all those books that have recently been made to support Christianity are more capable of offending than of edifying. Do those authors pretend to know more than Jesus Christ and the apostles? That is like trying to support an oak with a fence of reeds; one can clear away those useless reeds with no risk of harming the tree.

I have carefully chosen some of Pascal's thoughts; I put my responses below them. It is for you to decide whether I am wrong or right.

I. The grandeur and the misery of man are so visible that true religion must necessarily teach us that there is in him some great principle of grandeur, and at the same time some great principle of misery. For true religion must know our nature in depth, which is to say that it must know about all its greatness and all its misery, and the reasons for each of them. Further, true religion must explain for us these astonishing contradictions.

This kind of reasoning seems false and dangerous, for the fables of Prometheus and Pandora, Plato's androgynous figures, and the dogmas of the Siamese account for these apparent contradictions equally well. Christianity will not be less true if one refrains from drawing such specious conclusions, which serve only to advertise one's wit.

Christianity teaches only simplicity, forbearance, charity: reduce it to

metaphysics and it becomes a source of error.

II. Examine this question in all the world's religions, and see whether any other than Christianity can explain it satisfactorily.

Might it be the one that the philosophers taught, which offers as its sole good that good that is within us? Is that true virtue? Have they found the cure for our ills? Does one cure the arrogance of man by making him the equal of God? And those who compare us to the beasts, and who offer earthly pleasure for our highest good, have they provided a remedy for our lust?

The philosophers did not teach religion; it is not their philosophy that must be challenged. No philosopher ever claimed to be inspired by God, for then he would have ceased to be a philosopher and have become a prophet. The issue is not whether Jesus Christ is greater than Aristotle; it is to demonstrate that the religion of Jesus Christ is the true one, and that those of Mohammed, the pagans, and all the others, are false.

III. And nevertheless, absent this most incomprehensible mystery, we are incomprehensible to ourselves. The tangled nature of our condition derives its twists and turns in the abyss of original sin, so that man without this mystery is more incomprehensible than the mystery is itself incomprehensible to man.

Is Absent this incomprehensible mystery man is incomprehensible a reasoned statement? Why the desire to go beyond what Scripture says? Is there not some arrogance in believing that Scripture requires some support, and that philosophical ideas can provide it?

How would M. Pascal have replied to a man who might have said to him: "I know that the mystery of original sin is a matter of my faith and not of my reason. I perfectly understand what man is, without added mysteries. I see that he comes into the world like other animals; that a mother's birth-pangs are worse if she is frail; that sometimes women and female animals die in childbirth; that there are sometimes misformed children who live deprived of one or more of the senses, or without the ability to think; that those whose nature is best developed are those that have the liveliest emotions; that self-esteem is the same in all men, and is as necessary to them as the five senses; that this self-esteem was given to us by God that we might preserve ourselves, and that He has given us religion to control this self-esteem; that our ideas are correct or meaningless, murky or clear to the degree that our organs are more or less strong, more or less acute, and to the extent that we have stronger or weaker emotions; that we depend completely

on the air that surrounds us, the food that we eat, and that in all of this there is nothing contradictory. Man is not a puzzle, as you imagine in order to have the pleasure of unriddling it. Man seems to be in his proper place in nature, superior to the animals that he resembles in body; inferior to other beings that he no doubt resembles by his ability to think. He is like all that we see, a mixture of bad and good, of pleasure and pain. He has received emotions to make him act, and reason by which to govern his actions. If man were perfect, he would be God; these imagined contrarieties, which you call contradictions, are the necessary elements that make up man, who is what he should be.

IV. Let us take notice of our acts; let us observe ourselves and see whether we do not find living examples of these two natures.

Could so many contradictions appear in a simple being?

This double nature of man is so apparent that some have thought we have two souls, because a simple subject seems to them incapable of such striking and sudden changes, of unbounded presumption and a terrible despondency of the heart.

Our different desires are not contradictions in nature, and man is not a simple being. He is made up of an innumerable number of organs. If one of these organs is the least bit changed, it must change all the impressions of his brain, and the animal must then have new thoughts and new desires. It is very true that we are at times overcome with sorrow, and at times swollen with pride, and this must be so when we find ourselves in different situations. An animal caressed and nourished by its master, and another whose throat is cut slowly and neatly in order to dissect it, are subject to very different emotions; we are the same, and the differences within us so little contradict one another that it would be contradictory if they did not exist.

The fools who have said that we have two souls could as well have said, for the same reason, that we have thirty or forty, for a man in the heat of passion often has thirty or forty different ideas about the same matter, and must necessarily have them as different aspects of the matter present themselves.

This so-called doubleness of man is as absurd an idea as it is metaphysical. I could as well say that the dog that bites and caresses has a double nature; that so does the hen that takes such care of her chicks and then abandons them so completely as not to recognize them; that a mirror that shows different objects at the same time is doubled; that the tree that is now leafy, now bare, is doubled. I admit that man

is incomprehensible, but so is all of nature, and there are no more apparent contradictions in man than there in all the rest of the world.

V. Not to wager that God exists is to wager that he does not exist. Which wager will you take? Let us weigh the gain and loss that come with adopting the belief that God exists. If you win, you win all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager that He exists, then, without hesitation.-Yes, I must wager; but perhaps I wager too much.-Let us see: since there is equal risk of winning and losing, even if you might win but two lives in exchange for one, you could still win.

Clearly it is false to say, "Not to wager that God exists is to wager that He does not exist," for someone who doubts and wishes to learn is clearly not wagering one way or the other.

Moreover, this entry seems a trifle indecent and childish; this idea of a wager, of loss and gain, ill befits the seriousness of the subject.

And more, my desire to believe a thing is not a proof that this thing exists. I will give you, you might say, the whole world, if I believe you are right. I hope then, with all my heart, that you are right, but until you have proved this, I cannot believe you.

Begin, one might say to M. Pascal, by convincing my reason. I would benefit, no doubt, if there were a god; but if in your doctrine God has come but for so few people, if the number of the elect is frighteningly small, if I can do nothing for myself, tell me, pray, how I should benefit by believing you? Would I not do better to be persuaded of the contrary? How dare you show me infinite happiness to which only one man in a million has the right to aspire? If you wish to convince me, do so differently, and do not at times talk of games of chance, of wagers, of heads and tails, and at other times frighten me by strewing thorns in the path that I wish to take, and must. Your reasoning would but create atheists, if the voice of nature did not cry out that there is a god with as much strength as these subtleties have weakness.

VI. Seeing the blindness and the misery of man, and those astonishing contrarities that his nature reveals, and seeing all of nature dumb and man without light, abandoned to himself and as if lost in this little corner of the universe, not knowing who put him there, what he was put there to do, what he will become when he dies, I become terrified like a man who has been taken in his sleep to a dreadful desert island, and who awakens not knowing where he is³ and having no way to escape; and seeing all that I wonder how one could fail to despair in such a miserable condition.

While reading this reflection, I receive a letter from one of my friends

who lives in a far distant country. Here is what he writes:

“I am here as you left me, neither happier nor sadder, neither richer nor poorer, enjoying perfect health, having everything that makes life pleasant, without love, avarice, ambition, and envy; and as long as these conditions continue, I shall dare to call myself a happy man.”

There are many men as happy as he. It is with men as it is with animals. This dog sleeps and eats with its mistress; that one turns a spit and is just as content; another goes mad and is killed. As for me, when I look at Paris or London, I see no reason whatever to feel the despair that M. Pascal describes. I see a city that does not in the least resemble a desert island but is inhabited, opulent, well ordered, where men are as happy as human nature will permit. What wise man would be ready to hang himself because he does not know how to see God face to face, and because his reason cannot untangle the mystery of the Trinity? One might as well despair because one does not have four feet and two wings.

Why make us terrified of our own nature? Our life is not as miserable as some would have us think. To look at the universe as a prison cell, and all men as criminals who will be executed, is the belief of a fanatic. To believe that the world is a place of delights in which one will have only pleasure is the daydream of a sybarite. To believe that the earth, men, and animals are what Providence intended them to be, is, I think, to be a wise man.

VII. (The Jews believe) that God will not forever leave the other nations in darkness; that a redeemer will come for all; that they are in the world to proclaim his coming; that they were created precisely to be the heralds of this great coming and to call all the nations to unite with them in awaiting this redeemer.

The Jews have always expected a redeemer, but their redeemer is for them, not for us. They await a Messiah who will make the Jews masters of the Christians, and we hope that the Messiah will one day unite Jews and Christians; in this respect they believe exactly the opposite of what we believe.

VIII. The law by which this people is governed is the oldest law of the world as well as the most perfect, and the only one that a State has obeyed without interruption. This is what Philo the Jew shows in various places, as does Josephus in *Against Apion*, where he admirably shows that it is so old that the very word law was unknown to antiquity for more than a thousand years after it was instituted, so that Homer, who writes of so many nations, never used the word.

And it is easy to judge the perfection of this law simply by reading it, wherein one sees that it has provided for so many circumstances with such wisdom, equity, and judgment that the most ancient Greek and Roman legislators, having some knowledge of it, borrowed its central precepts: this is evident in those laws that they called The Law of the Twelve Tables and in other proofs that Josephus presents.

It is quite untrue that the law of the Jews is the oldest of laws, since before [the days of] Moses, their legislator, they lived in Egypt, the country the most famous in all the world for its wise laws.

It is quite untrue that the word “law” was not known until after Homer’s day: he speaks of the laws of Minos; the word “law” is found in Hesiod; and even if the word “law” were not found either in Hesiod or in Homer,⁴ that would prove nothing. There were kings and judges, therefore there were laws.

It is also very untrue that the Greeks and the Romans took their laws from the Jews; this could not have happened at the beginning of their republics, for at that time they could not have been acquainted with the Jews; nor could it have happened in the era of their greatness, for then they held these barbarians in a contempt known to all the world.

IX. This people is also remarkable for their loyalty. They keep lovingly and faithfully the book in which Moses declares that they have always been unfaithful to God; and that he knows they will become yet more so after his death; but that he calls heaven and earth as witnesses against them that he has warned them sufficiently; that at last God, angry with them, will scatter them among all the people of the earth; that as they have angered Him by worshipping gods that were not their gods, so will he anger them by calling on a people that was not His own people. And yet this book that insults them in so many ways is one that they cling to at the risk of their lives. Such loyalty has no counterpart in the world nor its root in nature.

There are examples of such loyalty everywhere, and it has its root in nature alone. The pride of each Jew is invested in the belief that it is not his detestable behavior, his ignorance of the arts, his coarseness that has condemned him, but that it is God’s wrath that punishes him. He believes with some satisfaction that only miracles could defeat him, and his nation, which God chastises, is His beloved.

Let a preacher mount the pulpit and say to the French: “You are miserable creatures who have neither courage nor manners; you were beaten at Hochstaedt and at Ramillies-⁵ because you did not know how to defend yourselves”: he would be stoned. But were he to say: “You

are Catholics beloved by God; your terrible sins irritated the Eternal, who gave you up to the heretics at Hochstaedt and at Ramillies; but when you returned to the Lord, he blessed your courage at Denain": these words would make him beloved by the congregation.

X. If there is a God, we must love only Him and not his creatures.

We must most tenderly love creatures; we must love our nation, our wife, our father, our children; and it is so necessary to love them that God makes us love them despite ourselves. To believe otherwise serves only to produce uncouth logicians.

XI. We are born wicked, for each person cares only for himself. This is against all order. We must care for all. And that inclination toward oneself is the beginning of all disorder in war, in government, in economy, etc.

This is in accord with all order. It is as impossible for a society to be formed and to persist without self-esteem as it is to create children without desire, to think of feeding oneself without appetite, etc. It is self-esteem that allows us to love others; it is by our common needs that we are useful to the human race; this is the foundation of all commerce; it is the unbreakable bond between men. Without this not one art would have been invented, nor a society of ten people formed; it is this self-esteem, which each animal received from nature, that warns us to respect others. Law controls this love of self, and religion perfects it. It is certainly true that God could have made creatures that care solely for the good of others. In this case, merchants would have gone to the Indies out of charity, and the mason would cut stones to please his neighbor. But God made things differently. Let us not condemn the instinct that He gives us, and let us use it as He commands.

XII. (The hidden meaning of the prophecies) could not induce error, and there was but one nation so carnal as to misunderstand it.

For when blessings are abundantly promised, what save their greed prevented them from recognizing true blessings, and made them assume that blessings meant the riches of this world?

In truth, would even the cleverest people of the earth have understood this differently? They were slaves of the Romans; they were waiting for a redeemer who would make them victorious and who would make Jerusalem respected throughout the world. How, even with all their reason and insight, could they have recognized in Jesus, poor and hung on the cross, this conqueror and king? How could those to whom the Decalogue had not mentioned the immortality of the soul have

imagined a heavenly Jerusalem when they heard the name of their capital? Without some greater insight, how could a people so attached to its law have recognized in the prophecies, which were not part of their law, a god hidden in the form of a circumcised Jew, who by his new religion destroyed and made abominable both circumcision and the Sabbath, sacred foundations of Jewish law? Once again, let us adore God without trying to penetrate the obscurity of His mysteries.

XIII. The time of the first coming of Jesus Christ is predicted. The time of the second is not, for the first had to be hidden whereas the second will be dazzling and so manifest that even its enemies will recognize it.

The time of the second coming of Jesus Christ was predicted even more clearly than that of the first coming. M. Pascal had apparently forgotten that Jesus Christ, in the twenty-first chapter of Luke, said explicitly, "When you see Jerusalem surrounded by an army, know that the desolation is near ... Jerusalem will be trodden underfoot, and there will be signs in the sun and the moon and the stars; the waves of the sea will make a great noise ... The powers of the heavens shall be shaken; and then they will see the son of man, who will come in a cloud with great power and majesty."

Is this not the explicit prediction of the second coming? But, if this has not yet happened, it is not for us to dare interrogate Providence.

XIV. The Messiah, according to carnal Jews, is to be a great earthly prince. According to carnal Christians, he came to dispense us from loving God, and to give us sacraments that will accomplish everything without our effort. Neither of these is the true Christian or Jewish religion.

This section is more a satiric gibe than a Christian reflection. We see here that he is attacking the Jesuits. But in truth, did any Jesuit ever say that Jesus Christ has come to dispense us from loving God? The dispute about loving God is only a dispute about words, like most other scientific quarrels that have caused such lively hatred and such appalling harm.

There is yet another defect in this section. It assumes that awaiting the Messiah was a matter of Jewish doctrine. It was simply a consoling idea current throughout this nation. The Jews hoped for a redeemer. But they were not commanded to believe this as an article of faith. All their religion was set forth in the books of the Law. The Jews never considered the prophets as legislators.

XV. To examine the prophecies, one must understand them. For if one believes that they have only one meaning, it is certain that the Messiah has not come; but if they have two meanings, it is certain that he has come in the person of Jesus Christ.

The Christian religion is so true that it does not need dubious proofs; now, if something could shake the foundations of this holy and reasonable religion, it is this statement by M. Pascal. He insists that everything in Scripture has two meanings; but someone who had the misfortune to be an unbeliever could say to him: "He who gives two meanings to what he says intends to deceive men; and this duplicity is always punished by the law. How then could you without blushing accept in God those things that one punishes and detests in man? What am I saying? With what scorn and indignation do you not treat the oracles of pagans because they had two meanings! Might one not rather say that the prophecies that directly concern Jesus Christ have but one meaning, like those of Daniel, Micah, and others? Might one not even say that, even had we no knowledge of the prophecies, religion would be no less assured?"

XVI. The infinite distance between body and soul is a figure of the infinitely more infinite distance between souls and holy love, which is supernatural.

One might suspect that M. Pascal would not have used this nonsense in his work if he had had the time to write it.

XVII. The most obvious weaknesses are strengths for those who well understand things. For example, the two genealogies of Saint Matthew and Saint Luke: it is obvious that they were not made by collusion.

Should the editors of Pascal's *Pensees* have printed this thought, of which the exposition alone is perhaps capable of injuring religion? What is the use of saying that these genealogies, these fundamental elements of the Christian religion, contradict each other, without describing the ways in which they can be reconciled? One must give an antidote together with the poison. What would one think of an attorney who said: My client contradicts himself, but this weakness is a strength for those who can well understand such things?

XVIII. Then let no one continue to reproach us for this lack of clarity, since we freely admit it; but let them recognize the truth of religion, even in its obscurity, by what little light we do have, and in our lack of concern for understanding it.

What strange signs of truth does Pascal bring us! What other signs

would falsehood propose? What! Would it be enough, if one wanted to be believed, to say: I am obscure, I am incomprehensible! It would be wiser to present only the illumination of faith, instead of the shadows of erudition.

XIX. If there were but one religion, God would be all too apparent.

What! You say that if there were but one religion God would be all too apparent! Eh! Do you forget that you say, on each page, that one day there will be but one religion? According to you, God will thus be all too apparent.

XX. I say that the Jewish religion consisted in none of these things, save only in the love of God and that God disapproved of all the other things.

What! Did God disapprove of everything that he himself so carefully, and in so much detail, commanded the Jews to do? Is it not more accurate to say that the law of Moses consisted both of love and of ritual? Reducing all to love of God would perhaps smack less of a love of God and more of the hatred that all Jansenists bear toward their neighbors the Molinists.⁷

XXI. The most important thing in life is the choice of a profession; chance governs the matter; custom makes one a mason, soldier, roofer.

What else makes soldier, masons, and all manual laborers, if not what we call chance and custom? The only work one chooses for oneself is the work of the intellect, but it is quite natural and reasonable that custom should determine the work that most people do.

XXII. If each one examines his thoughts, he will find himself always preoccupied by the past and the future. We scarcely think of the present; and if we do think about it, it is only to gain some insight so that we can plan the future. The present is never our goal; the past and the present are our means and only the future is our goal.

Rather than complaining, we must thank the creator of nature for having given us the instinct that unceasingly points us toward the future. Man's most precious treasure is this hope that softens our woes and paints our future pleasures in the colors of our present pleasures. If men were so unfortunate as to think only of the present, no one would sow grain, nor build, nor plant, nor provide for anything: all would lack for everything in the midst of this illusory enjoyment. Could a mind like M. Pascal's give itself to a more foolish adage than this one?

Nature has established that each man should enjoy the present, eating, making children, listening to beautiful sounds, using his abilities to think and to feel; and that, putting these aside even while he is in the midst of them, he should also think of tomorrow, without which he would perish miserably today.

XXIII. But when I looked more closely, I found that man's reluctance to rest, and to reside within himself, comes from a most effective cause, that is to say from the natural misery of our feeble and mortal condition, a condition so miserable that nothing can console us if nothing prevents us from thinking of it and when we consider only ourselves.

This phrase consider only ourselves means nothing.

What could a man be who does not act, and who is presumed to contemplate himself? Not only do I say that such a man is an imbecile, useless to society, but also that such a man could not exist; for what would such a man contemplate, his body, his feet, his hands, his five senses? Either he would be an idiot or else he would be using all these things. Would he simply contemplate his ability to think? But he cannot contemplate this ability without using it. Either he will think of nothing, or he will think of ideas that he has already had, or he will invent new ones; now, he can only have ideas that come from outside him. Thus he is necessarily preoccupied either by his senses or by his ideas; thus he is either maddened or an idiot.

Once again, it is impossible for human nature to stay in this imagined stupefaction; it is ridiculous to think it could be; it is insane to aspire to it. Man is born for action as sparks fly upward and a stone drops. Not to be active and not to exist are the same thing for mankind.⁹ The sole difference is in the activity, gentle or tumultuous, dangerous or useful.

XXIV. Man has a secret instinct that provokes him to look outside himself for diversion and work, that comes from his awareness of his continual misery; and he has another secret instinct, the vestiges of the greatness of his first condition, which makes him recognize that there is no happiness save in rest.

This secret instinct, being the first principle and the necessary foundation of society, comes rather from God's kindness. This instinct, and not the awareness of our misery, is the source of our happiness. I do not know what our first parents did in the earthly paradise, but if each of them had thought only of himself, the existence of the human race would have been much at risk. Is it not absurd to think that

they had perfect senses, that is, perfect ability to act, and had them only for contemplative purposes? And is it not foolish for wise heads to imagine that laziness is an emblem of greatness, and that action cheapens our nature?

XXV. This is why, when Cineas told Pyrrhus,⁷ who intended to enjoy leisure with his friends once he had conquered a great part of the world, that he would do better to increase his well-being by enjoying his leisure now rather than by seeking it in so arduous a way, he gave advice full of difficulties, and that was scarcely more reasonable than the plans of the ambitious young man. Both believed that man, had he but himself and his possessions, could be content with out filling the emptiness of his heart with imaginary hopes, which is false. Pyrrhus could not have been happy, either before or after having conquered the world.

The example of Cineas is fine for the satires of [Boileau] but not for a philosophical book. A wise king can be happy at home; and since Pyrrhus is portrayed as a madman, the example proves nothing for the rest of humanity.

XXVI. We must recognize that man is so miserable that he would be bored even without any external cause, by the very nature of his condition.

On the contrary, man in this respect is fortunate, and we owe much to the author of nature who has made us bored with inaction, thus forcing us to be useful to our neighbors and ourselves.

XXVII. How does it happen that this man, who recently lost his only son and who, burdened with lawsuits and quarrels, was so distressed this morning, thinks no more of these things now? Do not be surprised: he is intent on seeing where a stag, which his dogs have been chasing for six hours, will emerge. That is all a man needs, however full of sorrow he may be. If one can persuade him to engage in some diversion, he will be happy as long as he does so.

This man does very well: dissipation is a better cure for sorrow than quinine is for fever; then let us not accuse nature, which is always ready to rescue us.

XXVIII. Imagine a number of men in chains, all condemned to death, some of whom are slaughtered each day in full view of the others; those who remain see their own condition in the fate of their fellows, and, looking at one another with anguish and without hope, await their turn. This is the image of the human condition.

This is assuredly an improper comparison; miserable men in chains, slaughtered one after another, are miserable not only because they suffer, but also because they experience what the other men do not. Man's natural fate is neither to be in chains nor to be slaughtered; but all men are made like animals and plants, to grow, to live for a certain time, to reproduce themselves, and to die. In a satire one may present man in a bad light as much as one wants; yet if one will but use his reason, he will admit that of all the animals man is the most perfect, the most fortunate, and the one that lives longest. Then instead of wondering at and complaining about misfortune and the shortness of life, we should wonder at and rejoice in our happiness and its duration. Simply reasoning as a philosopher, I dare to say that there is much pride and arrogance in suggesting that because of our nature we ought to be better than we are.

XXIX. Wise pagans who said there is but one God were persecuted; the Jew hated, and the Christians even more so.

At times they were persecuted, as would be today a man who came to preach the worship of one god, independent of accepted ritual. Socrates was not condemned for saying, there is but one God, but for having opposed the formal religion of his country, and for having ineptly made powerful enemies. As for the Jews, they were hated not because they believed in only one god, but because they foolishly hated the other nations; because they were barbarians who massacred their conquered enemies without pity; because this vile people, superstitious, ignorant, deprived of arts and commerce, scorned the more civilized nations.

As for the Christians, the pagans hated them because they tried to destroy both religion and the Empire, in which at last they succeeded; just as the Protestants became masters in those countries where they had long been hated, persecuted, and massacred.

XXX. Montaigne's defects are great. He uses filthy and improper words. That is worthless. His opinions on suicide and on death are horrible.' i

Montaigne writes as a philosopher, not as a Christian; he is simply stating the pro and the con of suicide. Philosophically speaking, how does a man who can no longer serve society do harm by leaving it? An old man has the [kidney stones] and suffers unbearable pains because of it; someone says to him, "If you are not cut you will die; if you agree to be cut you might continue to mumble, drool, and drag through life for another year, a burden to yourself and to others." I imagine that the fellow would then choose to be no longer a burden to others; this

is more or less the case that Montaigne describes.

XXXI. How many stars have the telescopes revealed to us that did not exist for earlier philosophers? People boldly attacked the Bible because it speaks in so many places of the great number of stars. There are but one thousand and twenty-two, said they; we know that.

It is certain that in discussing the physical world Holy Writ has always expressed itself in the language of its time; thus it asserts that the earth stands still, that the sun moves, etc. It did not state that the stars are innumerable because of refined astronomy, but because this was the common opinion. In fact, although our eyes can detect only a thousand and twenty-two stars, when we stare at the heavens our dazzled eyes seem to see an infinity of them. The Bible, then, expresses popular assumptions, for it was not given to us in order to make astronomers of us; and it is quite likely that God did not reveal to Habakkuk, to Baruch, or to Micah that one day an Englishman named Flamsteed² would put into his catalogue more than seven thousand stars observed by the telescope.

XXXII. Is it courageous for a dying man, in his weakness and agony, to defy an all-powerful and eternal God?

Such a thing has never happened, and only if he were out of his head could he say, "I believe in a god, and I defy him."

XXXIII. I gladly believe the stories whose witnesses let themselves be slaughtered.

The difficulty is not simply to know whether one will believe witnesses who died to uphold their beliefs, as many fanatics have done, but also to know whether indeed these witnesses died for this reason, whether their testimony has been preserved, whether they lived in the countries where they are said to have died. Why is it that Josephus, born in the time of Christ's death, Josephus the enemy of Herod, Josephus so indifferent to Judaism, did not say one word about it? This is what M. Pascal ought to have successfully explained, as have so many eloquent writers since his day.

XXXIV. The two extremes of the sciences meet. One of them is pure natural ignorance, in which all men find themselves at birth; the other extreme is the one reached by those great souls who, having examined all that man can know, discover that they know nothing and find themselves again in the ignorance from whence they departed.

This reflection is mere sophistry, and its falseness lies in the word ignorance, which one can understand in two ways. He who knows not

how to read and write is ignorant; but a mathematician, who may not know the hidden principles of nature, is not at the point of ignorance from which he departed when he began to learn to read. M. Newton did not know how man can move his arm when he wishes to, but he was not less learned about all other things. He who knows not Hebrew but who knows Latin is learned by comparison with him who knows only French.

XXXV. Being happy does not consist in being delighted by diversions, for they come from somewhere else and outside; thus happiness is dependent and subject to being disturbed by the thousand accidents that make afflictions inevitable.

He who has pleasure is happy at that moment, and this pleasure can only come from without. Only external objects can give us sensations and ideas, just as we can only nourish our bodies by ingesting foreign substances that are changed into our own.

XXXVI. Great genius, and its absence, are condemned as folly. Only mediocrity is considered good.

Not great genius but excess of vivacity and volubility is condemned as folly. Great genius means great judgment, great precision, great breadth of knowledge, all of which are diametrically different from madness.

Great absence of intellect means a defect of imagination, a lack of ideas; this is not madness but stupidity. Madness is a disorder of the organs that prompts one to see too many things too quickly, or that excessively and violently concentrates the imagination on a single object. Nor is it mediocrity that is considered good, but rather the rejection of the two extremes; this is the golden mean, not mediocrity.

XXXVII. If our condition were truly happy, we would not need to distract ourselves from thinking about it.

Our condition is precisely to think about external things, with which we have a necessary relationship. It is false to think that one can distract a person from thinking about the human condition, for no matter what he thinks about, he thinks of something necessarily linked to the human condition; and, once again, beware: to think of oneself apart from natural things means thinking about nothing, truly about nothing.

Far from hindering a man from thinking about his condition, we talk to him of nothing but his good qualities. We speak to a learned man

about his reputation and his knowledge, to a prince about what befits his grandeur, and to everyone we speak of pleasure.

XXXVIII. Great men and lesser ones are subject to the same accidents, annoyances, and passions. But the former are at the top of the wheel, the others closer to the center and thus less upset by the same dislocations.

It is false that lesser men are less upset than great ones; on the contrary, their despair is greater because they have fewer resources. Of one hundred men who kill themselves in London, ninety-nine are of low condition, and scarcely one of the upper class. The image of the wheel is ingenious and misleading.

XXXIX. Men are not taught to be honorable, although they are taught everything else, and yet they take pride only in that. Thus, they take pride in knowing the only thing that they have not learned.

Men are taught to be honorable, and without that, few would become such. Let your son as a child take whatever comes to hand, and at fifteen he will be a highwayman. Praise him for telling a lie, and he will bear false witness; encourage his desires, and he will surely be debauched. Men are taught everything-virtue, religion.

XL. What a stupid project Montaigne undertook to paint himself! Not as an aside, forgetting his tenets, as all men do, but intentionally revealing himself in the light of his own principles; for, saying stupid things by chance or carelessly is a common mistake, but deliberately to report such stupid things is intolerable.

What a charming project is Montaigne's-to depict himself naively as he has done! For he depicts human nature itself; and how feeble of Nicole,¹³ of Malebranche, of Pascal, to attempt to disparage Montaigne.

XLI. When I reflect on the reason that we put so much trust in so many imposters who say that they have remedies, even to the point of putting our lives in their hands, it seems to me that the reason for this is that true remedies do exist; for it does not seem possible that there would be so many false remedies, and that they could be believed, if there were no true ones. If there had never been such true remedies, if all evils had been incurable, men could not possibly believe that they could concoct cures, and it is even more impossible that others would have trusted those who boasted of having them. Similarly, if a man boasted of being able to prevent death, no one would believe him, because there is no instance of such a thing. But numbers of real cures have been found and recognized even by the

wisest of men, and this fact has shaped our belief. The existence of remedies cannot be generally denied since some have been shown to be effective; thus the people, who cannot distinguish which of them are true, believe them all. Likewise, people believe false theories of the moon's influences because some of them, such as the tides, are true.

And it seems to me equally evident that there are so many false claims of miracles, revelations, enchantments, because some are real.

It seems to me that human nature does not need the truth in order to fall into falsehood. Men mistakenly claimed a thousand influences of the moon before imagining even the least relationship between the moon and the tides. The first man who was ill easily believed the first charlatan. No one has seen a werewolf or a sorcerer, and many have believed in them. No one has witnessed the transmutation of metals, and many have been ruined by their belief in the philosopher's stone. Did the Romans, the Greeks, all the pagans believe in the false miracles with which they were inundated only because they had witnessed some that were true?

XLII. The harbormaster governs those who are aboard a ship, but where do we find an equivalent for our moral code?

In this one maxim, acknowledged by all nations:

“Do not do to the other what you would not have done to yourself.”

XLIII. *Ferox gees nllam esse vitam sine armis putat.* They prefer death to peace; the others prefer death to war. Any opinion can be preferred to life, the love of which is so strong and so natural.

Tacitus said this of the Catalans, but there have never been any of whom one has said or could say, “They prefer death to war.”

XLIV. The more intelligence one has, the more one recognizes originality in men. Ordinary people see no differences among them.

There are very few truly original men; almost all govern themselves, think, and feel as a result of custom and education. Nothing is so unusual as a mind that walks a new path; but in this crowd of men who march together, each has a slightly different way of proceeding, which a sharp eye will recognize.

XLV. There are thus two kinds of minds: one that sees the consequences of first principles clearly and deeply, and that is the just mind, and one that understands many different principles without confusing them, and this is the geometer's mind.

Nowadays, I believe, we might call the geometer's mind the methodical and reasoning mind.

XLVI. It is easier to bear death when one does not think about it than it is to think about death when one is not in peril.

One cannot say that a man bears death easily or with difficulty when he is not thinking about it. Who feels nothing bears nothing.

XLVII. We believe that all men conceive of and are aware of objects in the same way; but we believe this quite arbitrarily, even though we have no proof of it. I clearly see that people use the same words in the same circumstances, and that each time two men see snow, for instance, they both express the sight of the object using the same words, saying that snow is white; and from this conformity of expression we derive a strong assumption of a conformity of ideas; but this is not perfectly convincing even if there is reason to wager that it is true.

One should not use whiteness as proof. White, which is a mixture of all rays of light, shines brilliantly, eventually dazzles, and has the same effect on all eyes; but one might say that perhaps other colors are not seen the same way by all eyes.

XLVIII. All our reasoning in the end yields to feelings.

Our reasoning gives way to feelings in matters of taste, not in matters of science.

XLIX. Those who judge a work by rules are, with respect to others, like those who have a watch compared to those who do not have one. One says, "We have been here for two hours," another says, "It has only been three quarters of an hour." I look at my watch: I say to the first, "You are bored," and to the second, "Time goes quickly for you."

In matters of taste, music, poetry, painting, taste takes the place of the watch, and someone who judges only by rules judges badly.

L. Caesar was too old, in my opinion, to go off and entertain himself by conquering the world. This entertainment was good for Alexander; he was a young man whom it was difficult to stop; but Caesar should have been more mature.

Ordinarily we assume that Alexander and Caesar left home with the intention of conquering the world, but it was not that way at all: Alexander succeeded Philip as the commander of Greece, and had been charged with the legitimate task of taking vengeance for the injuries

inflicted by the king of Persia upon the Greeks; he fought their common enemy and continued his conquests as far as India because the kingdom of Darius extended to India; just as the Duke of Marlborough would have come as far as Lyon had it not been for Marshal de Villars.'⁵

As for Caesar, he was one of the most prominent men of the Republic. He quarreled with Pompey as the Jansenists quarreled with the Molinists; the question was who would exterminate the other. One single battle, in which barely ten thousand men were killed, decided everything.

Indeed, M. Pascal's reflections may be altogether false. Caesar's maturity was necessary to cope with so many intrigues; and it is astonishing that Alexander, at his age, should have renounced pleasure to undertake so difficult a war.

LI. It is amusing to think that there are men in this world—for example, robbers and so on—who, having rejected all the laws of God and nature, have made their own laws that they obey most meticulously.

It is even more useful than amusing to think this, for it proves that no human society can survive without laws for a single day.

LII. Man is neither an angel nor a beast; the misery is that whoever wishes to play the angel becomes a beast.

Whoever wants to destroy the passions, rather than governing them, wants to play the angel.

LIII. A horse does not seek to have its companion admire him; when they race we see some kind of emulation in them, but it is not significant; for, once in the stable, the heaviest and the least shapely does not give up his hay to the others. Men are not like this: their ability does not satisfy them, and they are not content unless they gain some advantage from it over the others.

The most ungainly man does not surrender his bread to others; but the stronger takes it from the weaker; and it is with animals as it is with men: the large eat the small.

LIV. If man were to begin by studying himself he would see how incapable he is of going beyond himself. How can a part know the whole? He might hope perhaps to know the parts to which he has some resemblance. But all the parts of the world have so much connection and involvement with one another that I believe it impossible to know one thing unless one knows the others, and the whole.

Man must not be discouraged from seeking what is useful for him, simply because he cannot know everything.

We know many things that are true; we have sought out many useful inventions. Let us comfort ourselves even if we do not know the connections between a spider and the rings of Saturn, and continue to examine what is in our grasp.

LV. If lightning fell on low places, poets and those who know how to think only about such matters would be at a loss for proofs.

A comparison is not a proof either in poetry or in prose: in poetry it is a kind of embellishment, and in prose it serves to clarify and to make matters more vivid. Poets who have compared the misfortunes of the great with the lightning that strikes mountains would construct different comparisons if different things happened.

LVI. It is this mixture of spirit and body that has caused almost all philosophers to confuse ideas, and to attribute to the body what pertains only to the spirit, and to spirit what can only apply to the body.

If we knew what spirit is, we could complain about the fact that philosophers have attributed to it what does not belong to it, but we know neither spirit nor body. We have no knowledge of one, and we have only imperfect knowledge of the other, thus we cannot know what are their limits.

LVII. As people say poetic beauty, they should also speak of geometric beauty and medicinal beauty. But we do not say this; and the reason is that we know the objects of geometry or medicine very well, but we do not know what makes up the harmony that is the object of poetry. We do not understand the natural model that we must imitate; and lacking such knowledge we have invented bizarre terms: golden age, the wonder of the age, deadly laurel, magnificent star, etc., and we call this jargon poetic beauty. But someone imagining a woman clothed in these terms would see a pretty girl all covered with mirrors and chains of brass.

This is quite false: one should not say geometric beauty or medicinal beauty, because a theorem and a purgative do not give a pleasant impression, and one uses the word beauty only for things that charm the senses, like music, painting, eloquence, poetry, symmetrical architecture, etc.

M. Pascal's reason is equally false. We know very well what is the object of poetry: it is to paint with strength, precision, delicacy, and

harmony; poetry is harmonious eloquence. M. Pascal must have had very little taste to say that deadly laurel, magnificent star, and other foolishness is poetic beauty; and it must be that the editors of these *Pensees* were people little versed in literature if they printed a comment so unworthy of its illustrious author.

I do not send you my other comments on M. Pascal's *Pensees*, which would require much too much discussion. It is enough to have tried to point out a few of this great genius's mistakes of inattention; it is a consolation for a mind as limited as mine to be persuaded that the greatest of men make mistakes like the rest of us.