



To Those Who Doubt

Among Outsiders

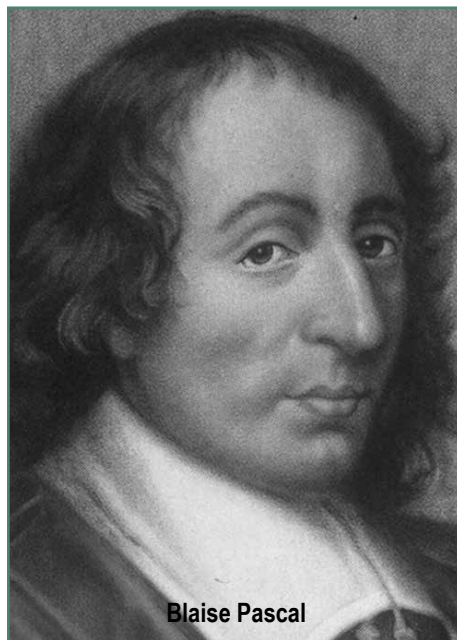
It has been nearly a decade since I redeployed from Afghanistan. I still recall the majestic immensity of the powdered peaks looming in the distance like the Misty Mountains. The night skies were radiant, the bright red eye of Mars clearly discernable among the multitude of stars uninhibited by light pollution. A few green chemlights, hanging from tent flaps like fireflies in suspended animation, emitted the only artificial light in camp.

I remember a particular day under those skies in the dry chill of February. The elevation, the sense of dizzying height and indifferent nature led me to that vertigo so vividly painted by Kierkegaard. A void opened before me, something I had never seen in the little world I occupied back home. It was the realization of my utter insignificance; of the dust I truly was. Everything around me was sucked into this void—my family, my friends, my career, my petty concerns. All seemed utterly passing and trivial. I stared into the abyss and the abyss in turn claimed something from me.

I returned home a new father, with no steady job, unmoored from any sense of transcendent meaning in day-to-day existence. By some rather roundabout circumstances, I picked up a book from a New England library that changed the trajectory of my moral development: Colin Wilson's *The Outsider*.

Wilson had an outsized influence on my life in the following four years of curated despair prior to my reversion. *The Outsider* spoke to me as a young man in crisis. The shock and awe of Nietzsche's thunderstorm, the alienation of Dostoevsky's Underground Man, and the ennui of Henri Barbusse all spoke to me with a clarifying sense of the unclarity of life. But it was Wilson's sophomore sequel, *Religion and the Rebel*, that helped me mature past the

dead ends erected by materialism and atheistic existentialism. Most of the figures discussed were protestants, but it was my first exposure to Blaise Pascal. Pascal loomed, if not large, then at least weighty enough to return to, again and again, even before I took the final step to return to the Church. His influence on T. E. Hulme is expressed in the notebook published in installments prior to his death by friendly artillery fire in the Great War:



Blaise Pascal

Everything that I shall say later in these notes is to be regarded merely as a prolegomena to the reading of Pascal, as an attempt to remove the difficulties of comprehension engendered in us by the humanism of our period.¹

Despite his flirtations with Henri Bergson's philosophy, Hulme was a man who had his own journey to fulness of the Catholic faith cut short by an untimely death. He saw the truth of Original Sin and the

necessity of the Church's traditions to guide mankind: "Man is extraordinarily fixed and limited animal whose nature is absolutely constant. It is only by tradition and organisation that anything decent can be got out of him."² This is consistent with Pascal, who summed up his apologetics project in a succinct outline:

First part: Misery of man without God.
 Second part: Happiness of man with God.
 Or, First part: That nature is corrupt.
 Proved by nature itself.
 Second part: That there is a Redeemer.
 Proved by Scripture.³

Like Hulme, there is an express acknowledgement of limits of mankind—limits to his talents and physical abilities but also to his ability to satisfy himself intellectually and spiritually. Man does not, after all, live by bread alone. The external structure of order—derived from revelation and tradition—provides mankind a chance to rise above his fallen state. And we must assent to the structures of the Church to move beyond our mental roadblocks and tendency to doubt. Hulme advises us to follow his predecessor:

. . . Pascal's advice to the skeptic on the remedy for unbelief: There are people who know the way . . . follow the way by which they began . . . by acting as if they believed . . . taking the holy water, having masses said . . . this will make you believe and *deaden your acuteness*. But this is always misrepresented. It is *not pragmatism*, you are not to deaden your *natural acuteness*, but the false and artificial acuteness of an artificial condition. Living in a sceptical atmosphere, you are in an unnatural attitude which prevents you from seeing

objective truth. Taking the holy water, the attempt to assume another artificial attitude, will at least break up the first state, and, making your mind a *tabula rasa*, will enable you to see the truth as it is objectively, independent entirely, of your attitudes.⁴

Lest the reader accuse Hulme of making religion a mechanical process of rituals used to force one into belief, it is rather that the ritual serves to crystallize one's religious beliefs into something actionable, and for those who are struggling through dryness, to reawaken their devotion through the constancy of repetition:

Sentiment cannot easily retire into itself in pure thought; it cannot live and feed on itself for very long. In wandering, thought is easily displaced by other matters. So that the man who deliberately sets himself the task of thinking continuously of a lover or dead friend has an impossible task. He is inevitably drawn to some form of ritual for the expression and outflow of the sentiment. Some act which requires less concentration, and which at an easy level fulfills his obligations to sentiment, which changes a morbid feeling into a grateful task and employment. Such as pilgrimages to graves, standing bareheaded and similar freaks of a lover's fancy. The same phenomena can be observed in religion. A man cannot deliberately make up his mind to think of the goodness of God for an hour, but he can perform some ritual act of admiration whether it be the offering of a sacrifice or merely saying amen to a set prayer.⁵

Let us consider the thoughts of Pascal as he attempted to work this problem out for himself.

Pascal

The Church rejects fideism, the position that truths of the faith cannot be explicitly grasped by reason. There is a degree of nuance as to how faith and reason interact in sinful man, and Pascal can certainly be accused of tipping the scales in favor of faith, judged if nothing else by the Jansenist company he kept. Despite this, Pascal was the rational man par excellence by contemporary standards. He was a brilliant mathematician raised in an atmosphere of academic skepticism and the humanism of

Montaigne. And yet, he never internalized any sort of informed infidelity. He rather went along with the cultural Catholicism of his day, until his family embraced the burgeoning community of Port Royal.⁶ This "first conversion" was really an encounter with a set of doctrines that would guide his temperament, remaining nevertheless in the world.

Pascal's nascent fideism is illustrated in his confrontation with the Capuchin friar Saint-Ange, who preached a Christianity demonstrably provable by mere reason. Pascal and his merry band of young enthusiasts drove the poor friar out of two

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homes with their letters to the local ordinary condemning the man for heresy.⁷ And yet his own assent to the faith is formulated in a very rational decision to believe. For the benefit of man steeped in the culture of doubt, he attempts to bring the doubter back to God by speaking a familiar language. But this effort would come later.

Pascal entered a period of spiritual dormancy in which he stifled his conscience in favor of returning "to the world" via the typical seventeenth century pastimes of the well-to-do: balls, gaming, and displays of his intellectual prowess at the salon. Pascal's true conversion, or one might say his reversion, occurred in a manner of inspiration—a vision so striking that he immediately took up his pen and recorded what he saw:

Fire
God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God
of Jacob, *not of the philosopher and
scholars.*
Certitude, certitude, feeling, joy,
peace.
God of Jesus Christ.⁸

Like St. Thomas Aquinas calling all his writings so much straw in comparison with the divine vision, Pascal's prodigious talents in the sciences gave way to deep piety, expressing itself in an attempt to systematize the Apology for the Faith. That this work was never completed is a loss to literary posterity, but the fragments that remain give his work a sagely character, like the gathered maxims of a Greco-Roman moralist who has discovered Christ.

The experience of that November night in 1654 did not make Pascal, as noted by T. S. Eliot, a mystic, like that near-contemporary Jacob Boehme who saw the divine in a dish.⁹ He maintained his worldliness, that is his grounding in the world, and tempered it with this new religious insight, becoming "a man of the world among ascetics, and an ascetic among men of the world".¹⁰ It certainly yielded a type of commitment that transcended mere theorizing about the Faith:

The Christian thinker—and I mean the man who is trying consciously and conscientiously to explain to himself the sequence which culminated in faith, rather than the public apologist—proceeds by rejection and elimination. He finds the world to be so and so; he finds its character inexplicable by any non-religious theory; among religions he finds Christianity, and Catholic Christianity, to account most satisfactorily for the world and especially for the moral world within; and thus, by what Newman calls "powerful and concurrent" reasons, he finds himself inexorably committed to the dogma of the Incarnation.¹¹

Like many who perhaps put away influences when they no longer seem satisfactory, I bid adieu to my affair with the writings of Colin Wilson. He was certainly a starting point—the breach from which I entered in earnest the world of literature, poetry, philosophy, and finally back to the Faith. Pascal has likewise been a starting point, and even perhaps my lodestar in a life ever so incrementally committed to living that Faith. He is a primer for a man plagued by doubt but wishing to seriously consider the claims of the Church; and once he assents, to truly live them. He is not the first choice, as Eliot reminds us, for the devotional reader or the student of theology. He, among the moralists challenging conventional wisdom and conventional hypocrisy,

emphasized commitment to the search for truth. He teaches us to take the search seriously—there is nothing worth more than truth. Indeed, our very souls depend upon finding and living it.

Pascal empathizes with the skeptic who only sees sin in the world with no conception of redemption:

Let us imagine a number of men in chains and all condemned to death, where some are killed each day in the sight of the others, and those who remain see their own fate in that of their fellows and wait their turn, looking at each other sorrowfully and without hope. It is an image of the condition of men.¹²

In such a gloomy portrait of existence, and a true one for fallen man with no recourse to their Redeemer, Pascal says we must make a choice—do we accept misery and error, risking the loss of the True, the Good, and Beautiful for all eternity? Or do we assent to a saving faith that promises redemption?

Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is.¹³

Pascal urges the doubter, as referenced by Hulme above, to participate in the ritual of the Church, as this discipline and self-denial open the channels of grace to flow into one's life. He further tells us that the ensuing practice of the virtues can only be a positive development, regardless of residual doubt. He says all of this as one who has traveled the same road as the doubter, as one that has, on his knees, laid everything at the feet of God.¹⁴

Whatever one's opinion on the wager, one's existential choice to follow it to its conclusion is far more pressing than evaluating the theory. Nevertheless, two are worthy of mention. One challenge cites the inability to believe—speaking from my own experience, the struggle to believe coincides with the perceived inability (but in reality, the refusal) to change one's life, to defy one's passions. To the critics who raise the notion of the "inconsistency of revelation" among religions, I can only point to the late Fulton Sheen's reckoning of the founders of religion and how

none hold a candle to our Lord's definitive pre-announcement and four hundred fifty-six prophecies made flesh from the Old Testament.¹⁵

Pascal, as the type of one kind of religious believer, which is highly passionate and ardent, but passionate only through a powerful and regulated intellect, is in the first sections of his unfinished Apology for Christianity facing unflinchingly the demon of doubt which is inseparable from the spirit of belief.¹⁶

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Eliot claims Pascal perhaps laid too much emphasis on the use of miracles in apologetics, but the Frenchman's enthusiasm is inextricably linked to his sister's miraculous healing by one of the Holy Thorns—which, coincidentally, also gave heart to the Port Royal community under fire for promoting heresy. Eliot is right insofar as miracles are for the edification of the believer, not to open the eyes of the nonbeliever. Nor does Christ wish for us to rely on miracles. Recall Christ's admonition to St. Thomas. Dom Marmion, in *Christ, The Life of the Soul*, notes that:

He makes faith in Him the indispensable condition of His miracles. . . . Where He does not meet faith, He deliberately limits the effects of His power. The Gospel expressly says that at Nazareth, "He wrought not many miracles, because of their unbelief."¹⁷

Perhaps Pascal's usage of miracles was just as much a way of shoring up his own faith as it was a rhetorical device for the benefit of his apologetics.

Pascal offered an alternative to the casuistry of the Jesuits of his day, and equally

to the fashionable skepticism of the salons. He provided a way back to the serious practice of the faith, through commitment and thoughtful engagement with the abyss of doubt. He remains relevant today, even if we—and God-willing we do—move beyond his limitations. We are likewise indebted to Hulme for fighting against the triumphal humanism of his day, a time when Progress' inevitable victory was dashed on the rocks of the Great War. We can only pray for more intellects to continue this fight today.

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