III. Introduction to Pascal and Jansenism

Although Jansenism first saw the light of day in the rather pessimistic Augustinian teaching of the Belgian, Cornelius Jansen, whose book Augustinus (1640) proposed a kind of "Catholic Calvinism" as the true Augustinian doctrine, nonetheless it was in France that this heresy made headway. There, the followers of the Abbe, Saint Cyran, and later Abbe Antoine Arnauld gathered around the reformed Benedictine Convent of Port Royal, where Antoine's sister, Angelique Arnauld, was Abbess. The Jansenists, protesting against what they thought were the lax standards of the day, held to a very strict view of predestination, moral rigorism, especially in regard to the reception of the sacraments. This caused a head-on collision with the Jesuits, whom they saw as absolving from sins too easily if there were any probable grounds for absolution. The Jansenists saw Holy Communion as only for those who were of impeccable lives and even they were to receive infrequently. These emphases brought condemnations from the Holy See (1653). Their influence persisted, and because Jansenism was a reform movement when it was needed, it drew many bright and sincere people, among them Blaise Pascal, a mathematician, whose definitive conversion on November 23, 1653, convinced him that philosophical reasoning could contribute little to the haunting questions of belief. In his brilliant Pensées (pub. 1670), he shows man as tragically torn between greatness and misery from which only faith can free him. His earlier Provincial Letters (1655) were satirical and sarcastic attacks on the Jesuits, the enemies of the Jansenist party.


Religion Requires Both Head and Heart

Order. Men despise religion; they hate it, and fear it may be true. To remedy this, we must begin by showing that religion is not contrary to reason, and deserves reverence; we must inspire respect for it. Then we must make it attractive, so that good men may wish it were true. Lastly we must prove that it is true.

Deserving reverence, because it has a thorough knowledge of man; attractive because it promised true benefits.

One of the confusions of the damned will be that they will be condemned by their own reason, with which they have claimed to disprove the Christian religion.

Two extremes: to rule out reason, and to admit nothing but reason.

If we submit everything to reason, there will be no mystery and no super-natural element in our religion. If we violate the principle of reason, our religion will be absurd, and it will be laughed at.

Preface. The metaphysical proofs of God's existence are so remote from man's reasoning and so complicated that they make no great impression. Even if some men are affected by them, the effect does not last beyond the moment in which they see the proof; an hour later they are afraid they have been taken in. WHAT THEY HAVE LEARNED OUT OF CURIOSITY THEY HAVE LOST BY THEIR PRIDE.

The Wager

Infinity-nothing. Our soul is cast into the body, where it finds number, time, and dimensions. On these it reasons, calling them natural and necessary, and it can believe in nothing else.

A unity joined to infinity adds nothing to it, any more than one foot added to infinite length. The finite is annihilated in the presence of infinity, and becomes a pure zero. So is our intellect before God, so is our justice before divine justice. But there is not so much disproportion between our justice and God's as there is between unity and infinity.

God's justice must be vast, like His compassion. Now justice towards the reprobate is less vast, and must be less amazing than mercy towards the elect.

We know that there is an infinite, and do not know its nature. As we know it to be untrue that numbers are finite, it is therefore true that there is a numerical infinity. But we do not know its nature;
it cannot be even and it cannot be odd, for the addition of a unity cannot change it. Nevertheless it is a number, and all numbers are finite, it is therefore true that there is a numerical infinity. But we do not know its nature; it cannot be even and it cannot be odd, for the addition of a unity cannot change it. Nevertheless it is a number, and all numbers are either even or odd (this is certainly true of every finite number). So, we may well know that there is a God without knowing what He is.

Is there no substantial truth, seeing that there are so many truths that are not the truth itself?

We know then the existence and nature of the finite, because we too are finite and have extension. We know the existence of the infinite and do not know its nature, because it has extension like us, but unlike us no limits. But we know neither the existence nor the nature of God, because He has neither extension or limits.

But by faith we know that He exists; in glory we shall know His nature. Now I have already shown that we can very well know a thing exist without knowing its nature.

Let us now speak according to the light of nature.

If there is a God, He is infinitely incomprehensible, since, being undivided and without limits, He bears no relation to us. We are, therefore, incapable of knowing either what He is, or whether He exists. This being so, who will be so rash as to decide the question? Not we who bear no relation to Him.

Who, then, will blame Christians for being unable to give a reason for their belief, since they profess a religion which they cannot explain by reason? In proclaiming it to the world, they declare that it is a foolishness, stultitiam, and then you complain that they do not prove it. If they approved it, they would be denying their own statement; their lack of proof shows that they are not lacking in sense.

'Yes, but although this excuses those who present religion in that way, and we cannot, therefore, blame them for doing so without advancing reasons, it does not excuse those who accept it.'

Let us then examine this point, and say: 'Either God is, or He is not.' But which side shall we take? Reason can decide nothing here, there is an infinite chaos between us. A game is on, at the other side of this infinite distance, and the coin will fall heads or tails. Which will you gamble on? According to reason you cannot gamble on either; according to reason you cannot defend either choice.

But do not blame those who have decided for making a wrong choice; you know nothing about the matter.

'No, I shall not blame them for the choice they have made, but for making any choice at all. For the man who calls heads and the man who calls tails have made the same mistake. They are both wrong: the proper thing is not to bet at all.'

Yes, but you must bet. There is no option; you have embarked on the business. Which will you choose, then? Let us see. Since you must choose, let us see which will profit you less. You have two things to lose: truth and good, and two things to stake your reason and your will, your knowledge and your happiness? Let us weigh the gain and loss in calling heads, that God exists. Let us estimate the two chances; if you win, you win everything; if you lose, you lose nothing. Do not hesitate, then; gamble on His existence.

'This is splendid. Yes, I must make the bet; but perhaps I shall stake too much.'

Let us see. There being an equal chance of gain or loss, supposing you had two lives to gain for one, you might still gamble. But if you stood to gain three, you would have to (being compelled to take part in the game), And since you have to play you would be foolish not to stake your one life for three in a game where the chances of gain and loss are equal. But here there is an eternity of life and happiness to be won. And this being so, even if there were an infinity of chances and only one in your favour, you would be right to stake one life against two; and it would be absurd, since you are compelled to play to refuse to stake one life against three in a game in which one of an infinity of infinite happiness. But there is an infinity of infinite happiness to be gained, there is one chance of winning against a finite number of chances that you will lose, and what you are staking is finite. And so, since you are compelled to play, you would be mad to cling to your life instead of risking it for an infinite gain, which is as liable to turn up as a
loss--of nothing.

For it is no use saying that our gain is uncertain, and that the infinite distance between the certainty of what we stake and the uncertainty of what we gain puts the finite good which we certainly risk on a level with the infinite, which is uncertain. This is not the case. Every gambler risks a certain sum to gain an uncertain one; and yet when he stakes a finite certainty to gain a finite uncertainty, he is not acting unreasonably. There is not an infinite difference between the certainty of loss. But the uncertainty of winning is proportionate to the certain amount of the stake, and the odds in favour of gain or loss. If therefore there are as many chances on one side as on the other, the odds are equal; and the fixed sum at stake is equal to the uncertain gain; there is no infinity of difference between them. And so our argument is infinitely strong when only the finite is at stake in a game in which the chances of gain and loss are equal, and infinity is to be won. This is demonstrable; and if men are susceptible to any truth, here is one.

'I confess and admit it. But yet, is there no way of seeing the face of the cards?'

Yes, Holy Scripture and other writings, etc.

'Yes. But my hands are tied and my mouth is gagged. I am not free. Something holds me back, for I am so made that I cannot believe. What would you have me do?'

What you say is true. But at least be aware that your inability to believe arises from your passions. For your reason urges you to it, and yet you find it impossible. Endeavour, therefore to gain conviction, not by an increase of divine proofs, but by the diminution of your passions. You wish to cure yourself of unbelief, and you ask for remedies. Learn from those who have been hampered like you, and who now stake all their possessions. These are the people who know the road that you wish to follow; they are cured of the disease of which you wish to be cured. Follow the way by which they began: by behaving as if they believed, by taking holy water, by having Masses said, etc. This will bring you to belief in the natural way, and will soothe your mind.

'But that is just what I am afraid of.'

And why? What have you to lose?

But to show you that this will lead you there, it is this that will lessen your passions, which are your great obstacles......

......Now what harm will come to you if you follow this course? You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, generous, a sincere friend, and a truthful man. Certainly you will be without those poisonous pleasures, ambition and luxury. But will you not have others? I tell you that you will gain in this life, and that at every step you take on this road you will see such certainty of gain and such nothingness in your stake that you will finally realize you have gambled on something certain and infinite, and have risked nothing for it.

'Oh your words transport me, ravish me, etc.'

If this argument pleases you, and seems convincing, let me say that it is the utterance of a man who has knelt before and after, praying that infinite and undivided Being to whom he submits all he has that He may bring all your being likewise into submission, for your own good and His glory, and that thus strength may be brought into touch with weakness.


First: Some precepts of God are impossible to just men with regard to the present power that they possess because they lack the grace by which the precepts could be possible...

Second: Interior Grace is never resisted in the state of lapsed nature...

Third: Freedom from necessity in men is not required for merit or demerit in the state of fallen nature, but freedom from coercion suffices...
Fourth: Semipelagians admit the necessity of prevenient interior grace for single acts, even for the beginning of faith, and in this they are heretics, that the desire Grace to be of such a kind to which human will can resist or conform...

Fifth: It is Semipelagian to say that Christ died and shed His blood for all men...


"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 the people, they waive 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 would 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 offense 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 practice 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 to transfer mentally those adorations which they rendered ostensibly to the idol of Cachinchoam and Keum-fucum. This charge is brought against them by Gravina, a Dominican, and is fully established by the Spanish memorial presented to Philip IV, king of Spain, by the Cordeliers of the Philippine Islands, quoted by Thomas Hurtado, in the 'Martyrdom of the Faith,' page 427. To such a length did this practice go, that the Congregation De Propaganda were obliged expressly to forbid the Jesuits, on pain of ex-communication, to permit the worship of idols on any pretext whatever, or to conceal the mystery of the cross from their catechumens; strictly enjoining them to admit none to baptism who were not
thus instructed, and ordering them to expose the image of the crucifix in their churches; all of which is amply detailed in the decree of that Congregation, dated the 9th of July, 1646, and signed by Cardinal Capponi.

"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 yourselves 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 lieth 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 virtue 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 not 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 practice 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 disenthrall the soul from the love of the world—to tear it from what it holds most dear—to make it one 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 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 and disorders very much to heart. For my own part, I began to entertain a high admiration for 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, 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, "Oh, here it is!" he said; "treatise I, example 13, no. 67: '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 apprise you 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 at the same place, no. 57: '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 hippocrass," said the monk; "I must take a note of that in my memorandum, '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 mid-

night, and 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 Filiius, one of the four-and-twenty Jesuits: 'Is a man who has exhausted himself any way—by profligacy, 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. "What! is it no sin for a man not to fast when he has it in his power? 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; "that is just as it may happen."

"Happen how?" cried I.

"Oh!" 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 Boiny. '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 deliverately court them."

"Even that is occasionally permitted," added he; "the celebrated casuist Basil Ponce has said so, and Father Bauny quotes his sentiment with approbation,
in his Treatise on Penance, as follows: "We may seek
an occasion of sin directly and designedly--primo as 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!...."

"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 that point; without knowing this,
positively one can understand nothing at all. It is
the foundation—the very A, B, C, of our whole moral
philosophy...."

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.'

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. That
what Piusius, the 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?"

"Oh, 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, Basquez, 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 favor-
abillior seu exoptation sit. 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
falso."

"Well, seriously, father," I said, "your doctrine
is a most uncommonly comfortable one! Only think
of being allowed to answer yes or not, just as you
please! It is impossible to prize such a privilege
too highly. I see now 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 Bauny was on his side, while Father Lugo
was against him: Saepè premente deo, fert deus
alter opem." (when one God presses hard, another brings
relief)