

Study Guide on Blaise Pascal's *Pensées*

Section I, #1 – 382

In *pensée* #130 (p. 32¹), Pascal writes, “[Man] is a monster that passes all understanding.” Why does Pascal think that man is an incomprehensible monster? (Consider, for example, p. 25 : #97, 29:114, 40:136, 45:147, 59ff:198.)

- What is man, in Pascal's understanding?
- How does man's nature relate to the question of religion and Christianity?
- How does the transmission of sin relate to man's nature? What is the relevance of grace (35:131)?

What is “the heart”? Do we know principles through it? Do we believe with it? How does it compare to the intellect and will? (Consider 28:110, 55:179, 94:298.)

Pascal claims that “[I]f we look closely, it is easy to distinguish the true religion amidst all this confusion” (73:236). In light of this claim:

- What method or methods of distinguishing the true religion does Pascal offer? Are they based on knowledge, experience, desire, nature, or something else?
- What signs or proofs does Pascal offer? (See, for example: 56:189, 90:280, 102:335, 91:284.) Are they convincing? Why does Pascal think that “It would have been no sin not to have believed in Jesus Christ without miracles” (55:184)? Is this a daring claim, or not? Is it reasonable?
- What does Pascal think the true religion “must necessarily” offer (46ff:149, 67:205, 69:214)? Why does he think these are necessary?
- In light of the above, can one distinguish the true religion? It is *easy* to distinguish it?

Why does Pascal claim that “no one is so happy as a true Christian, or so reasonable, virtuous, and lovable” (106:357)? Does he make a convincing case?

¹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, translated with an introduction by A. J. Krailsheimer. New York, Penguin Group: 1995. (All page numbers refer to this edition.)



“Man, then, is so happily constituted that he has no exact principle of truth, and several excellent ones of falsehood” (12:44). Consider the ways Pascal supports this claim, and the implications this claim has. It may be helpful to compare these thoughts with those of Descartes. (See our study guides on Descartes.)

- “[Imagination] is the dominant faculty in man, master of error and falsehood, all the more deceptive for not being invariably so” (9:44). In what ways is imagination deceptive? Is it a “master of error and falsehood”? Is Pascal right to blame it so?
- “[The senses and the reason] compete in lies and deception” (13:46). What does Pascal mean by this?
- “There is no certainty, apart from faith, as to whether man was created by a good God, an evil demon, or just by chance . . .” (33:131). Do you agree?
- “Moreover, no one can be sure, apart from faith, whether he is sleeping or waking . . .” (33:131).
 - Is this true? Are there any criteria by which to distinguish waking from sleeping?
 - How does this statement stand in relation to the following (28:110): “We know that we are not dreaming . . .”? What “part” of man knows this? Is it a kind of knowledge?
- Why does Pascal think that, if one seeks reason, he cannot avoid one of these three sects: the sceptics, the Platonists, and the dogmatists (35:131)?

“There is enough light for those who desire only to see, and enough darkness for those of a contrary disposition” (50:149). What kind of person does Pascal think can believe? What causes some people to “desire only to see”?

Is Pascal’s account of “true conversion” correct? What leads Pascal to claim that conversion consists in “self-annihilation before the universal being whom we have so often vexed . . .” (110:378)? Is this true? Why does he think that “we have deserved nothing but his disfavour” (*ibid.*)? What assumptions does this rest on?

Pascal claims that “The sign of the true religion must be that it obliges men to love God” (69, #214). Why does Pascal think love is the answer?

What was Pascal’s purpose in putting down these “thoughts”? What major themes are present in them? What order or unity is there between them?



- What audience is he addressing? What assumptions does it seem this audience has about religion, God, knowledge, human life, morality, *etc.*?
- Are the thoughts as a whole meant to be philosophical, theological, or in some other mode?
- What is his central thesis or theses?
- What are some of the more striking dichotomies that Pascal offers? What do they illustrate about the Christian religion?

What does Pascal mean by saying, “We can understand nothing of God’s works unless we accept the principle that he wished to blind some and enlighten others” (72:232)? What sense of “accepting” is required here? How does this point relate to the broader theme of the relation between man and God?



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Section II, #1–30; Section III, #32–33

“And that is why I shall not undertake here to prove by reasons from nature either the existence of God, or the Trinity . . . not just because I should not feel competent to find in nature arguments which would convince hardened atheists, but also because such knowledge, without Christ, is useless and sterile” (Page 141, # 449). Having read this passage, how would Pascal try to convince a hardened atheist of the truth of Christianity? Does he do this in the *Pensées*? Consider 151:463, 151:466, and 133:427 & 428.

Consider “Pascal’s wager” (121 ff.: 418):

- Pascal claims that “This is conclusive and if men are capable of any truth this is it” (124:418). Why does Pascal believe this? Is it true? What kind of men, if any, are capable of this truth?
- Is it necessary that one wager one way or the other? Why cannot someone be “agnostic”? (122–123:418, 128:427.)
- Examine the wager Pascal presents:
 - What are the choices, as he sees them?
 - What makes for a reasonable wager, in general?
 - How do these rules demand that each person wager for God?
- Is there really an equal chance (“50/50”) of gain or loss? Do men know this, or is it the default stance we must take, not knowing which alternative is more likely?
- Is the wager convincing? Who, if anyone, might be convinced by such a claim?

Does Pascal’s wager arrive at the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, or is it not so specific? Will a person who takes up the wager be led to faith, something prior to faith, or something different altogether? What kind of foundation does the wager rest upon—is it charitable, selfish, rational, practical, or something else?

How do miracles fit into Pascal’s account? Why does he call miracles one of “the two foundations” (270:861)? What are miracles foundational for? What is the relationship between miracles and doctrine (269:858)?



In light of the *Pensées* as a whole, what does Pascal mean by “the heart”?

- “The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing” (127:423). How does the heart relate to reason? How does it relate to knowledge, to conviction, and to belief?
- “That is what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by reason” (127:424). How does the heart perceive God? Does Pascal think reason also perceives God? If so, how? What is special about the heart’s way of perceiving?
- “All our reasoning comes down to surrendering to feeling” (188:530, see also 188:531). What is meant here by “feeling”? In what way does reasoning relate to or base itself on feeling?
- “Memory and joy are feelings, and even mathematical propositions can become feelings, for reason makes feelings natural and natural feelings are eradicated by reason” (211:646). How do feelings relate to the heart? In what way does Pascal see reason as eradicating natural feelings?

Why does Pascal bring up prophecy (Series XII, p. 154 ff.)? What role does he think prophecy plays in Christianity and in the individual’s conversion?

What is the relation between “Habit and Conversion” (Series XXX, p. 247 ff.)? Consider Pascal’s claim that “Custom is our nature. Anyone who grows accustomed to faith believes it” (125:419), as well his sentiment, “We must acquire an easier belief, which is that of habit” (247:821). How does habit guide a person toward faith? What is the essential difference between habitual acts of faith and the true possessing of it?

In *pensée* #850 (p. 266), Pascal writes, “God tempts but does not lead into error.” Explain this passage—what does Pascal intend by it? In what way does God tempt, and what kind of error does he not lead us to? Is God’s hiddenness involved (127:427, 135:429, and 237:781)?

What does Pascal think about original sin (219:695)? How is it brought into the discussion of man’s state and the Christian religion? (130:427).

Pascal writes that “We shall never believe, with an effective belief and faith, unless God inclines our hearts, and we shall believe as soon as he does so” (110:380). If this is true, is it right to blame unbelievers? Are they at fault for their unbelief? How do Pascal’s



proofs (153:482) relate to unbelievers—if they demand assent, are the unbelievers at fault for denying them?

Having read a greater part of the *Pensées*, reflect on the compilation as a whole:

- Are these thoughts meant to be philosophical, theological, or in some other mode?
- Does Pascal have a central thesis? What does he set out to prove?
- Is Pascal convincing? Has he shown what he set out to prove?
- What principles does Pascal assume in his *Pensées*? What are his starting points, in terms of philosophy, human nature, and religion?
 - In what way does he see them as principles? Consider: “All their principles are true, sceptics, stoics, atheists, etc . . . but their conclusions are false, because the contrary principles are also true” (207:619).
 - Does Pascal believe that he has avoided the false conclusions of others? If so, how?

Suggested use: This study guide includes a few questions and observations about Blaise Pascal’s *Pensées*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the work; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.

