

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), *Pensees*

When I see the blind and wretched state of man, when I survey the whole universe in its dumbness and man left to himself with no light, as though lost in this corner of the universe, without knowing who put him there, what he has come to do, what will become of him when he dies, incapable of knowing anything, I am moved to terror, like a man transported in his sleep to some terrifying desert island, who wakes up quite lost and with no means of escape. Then I marvel that so wretched a state does not drive people to despair. I see other people around me, made like myself. I ask them if they are any better informed than I, and they say they are not. Then those lost and wretched creatures look around and find some attractive objects to which they become addicted and attached.

‘I see the terrifying spaces of the universe hemming me in, and I find myself attached to one corner of this vast expanse without knowing why I have been put in this place rather than that, or why this brief span of life allotted to me should be assigned to one moment rather than another of all the eternity which went before me and all that which will come after me. I see only infinity on every side, hemming me in like an atom or like the shadow of a fleeting instant. All I know is that I must soon die, but what I know least about is this very death which I cannot evade.

‘Just as I do not know whence I come, I do not know whither I am going. All I know is that when I leave this world I shall fall forever into nothingness or into the hands of a wrathful God, but I do not know which of these two states is to be my eternal lot. Such is my state, full of weakness and uncertainty. And my conclusion from all this is that I must pass my days without a thought of seeking what is to happen to me.’

The only good thing for men is therefore to be diverted from thinking of what they are, either by some occupation which takes their mind off it, or by some novel and agreeable passion which keeps them busy, like gambling, hunting, some absorbing show, in short by what is called diversion. That is why men are so fond of hustle and bustle, that is why prison is such a fearful punishment; that is why the pleasures of solitude are so incomprehensible.

I have often said that the sole cause of man’s unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room.

The only thing that consoles us for our miseries is diversion. And yet it is the greatest of our miseries. For it is that above all which prevents us from thinking of ourselves and leads us imperceptibly to destruction. But for that we would be bored, and boredom would drive us to seek some more solid means of escape, but diversion passes our time and brings us imperceptibly to our death.

Man does not know the place he should occupy. He has obviously gone astray; he has fallen from his true place and cannot find it again. He searches everywhere, anxiously but in vain, in the midst of impenetrable darkness.

We desire truth and find in ourselves nothing but uncertainty. We seek happiness and find only wretchedness and death. We are incapable of not desiring truth and happiness and incapable of

either certainty or happiness. We have been left with this desire as much as punishment as to make us feel how far we have fallen.

We have an incapacity for proving anything which no amount of dogmatism can overcome. We have an idea of truth which no amount of skepticism can overcome.

‘What must I do? I see nothing but obscurities on every side. Shall I believe I am nothing? Shall I believe I am God?’

In a word man knows he is wretched. Thus he is wretched because he is so, but he is truly great because he knows it.

Man’s greatness comes from knowing he is wretched: a tree does not know it is wretched. Thus it is wretched to know that one is wretched, but there is greatness in knowing one is wretched.

If he exalts himself, I humble him. If he humbles himself, I exalt him. And I go on contradicting him until he understands that he is a monster that passes all understanding.

All those contradictions which seemed to take me further from the knowledge of any religion are what led me most directly to the true religion.

What can be seen on earth indicates neither the total absence, nor the manifest presence of divinity, but the presence of a hidden God. Everything bears this stamp.

If there were no obscurity man would not feel his corruption: if there were no light man would not hope for a cure. Thus it is not only right but useful for us that God should be partly concealed and partly revealed, since it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness as to know his wretchedness without knowing God.

Knowing God without knowing our own wretchedness makes for pride. Knowing our wretchedness without knowing God makes for despair. Knowing Jesus Christ strikes the balance because he shows us both God and our own wretchedness.

Christianity teaches men then these two truths alike: that there is a God, of whom men are capable, and that there is a corruption in nature which makes them unworthy. It is of equal importance to men to know each of these points: and it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness as to know his own wretchedness without knowing the Redeemer who can cure him. Knowing only one of these two points leads either to the arrogance of the philosophers, who have known God but not their own wretchedness, or to the despair of the atheists, who know their own wretchedness without knowing their Redeemer.

The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of Christians is a God of love and consolation: he is a God who fills the soul and heart of those whom he possesses: he is a God who makes them inwardly aware of their wretchedness and his infinite mercy: who unites himself with them in the depths of their soul: who fills it with humility, joy, confidence, and love: who makes them incapable of having any other end but in him.