

# **"Thoughts, Meditations and Prayers" ["Pensées" in original French] (first English edition 1688) by Blaise Pascal: A Canonical Book:**

Curated by Stephen A Batman

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## **Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition**

**Blaise Pascal, Thoughts, Meditations, and Prayers, 1688**



*Mr. Pascall's Thoughts and Reflections*

VIII. 57. \* Charity is not a Figurative Precept. To say that Jesus Christ, who is come to take away Figures and to establish Truth, should only come to settle the Figure of Charity, and to take away the Substance which was before, this is horrible.

58. \* The Heart has its Reasons, which Reason doth not comprehend; one finds it in a hundred things. It is the Heart that finds God, and not Reason. See then what true Faith is, God known to the Heart.

59. \* How many Bodies has Telescopes discovered to us, that were not known to the Ancient Philosophers? The Truth of the Scriptures were boldly question'd for making mention of such great numbers of Stars; there are but a hundred twenty and two, say some, we know

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**"THE HEART HAS ITS REASONS, WHICH REASON DOTHT NOT COMPREHEND":  
RARE FIRST EDITION IN ENGLISH OF PASCAL'S *PENSÉES*, 1688—"PASCAL'S  
WORK HAS, IN FACT, THE MARKS OF GENIUS" (PMM)**

*First edition in English of Pascal's posthumous and often controversial Pensées (Thoughts, Meditations, and Prayers), the brilliant philosopher's complex examination of "the age old controversy between faith and reason... a book for which the enquiring mind has had solid reason to be grateful" (PMM), and a work that exerted great influence on America's founding fathers, a handsome copy in contemporary calf.*

When Pascal died in 1662, he left behind a wealth of unpublished material, largely consisting of notes pinned together in the mathematician and philosopher's attempt to explain "all the contradictions and vicissitudes of human experience entirely in terms of faith and revelation, the one justifying the other." These notes were first collected and issued posthumously as Pascal's *Pensées* (Thoughts) in 1670 and first published in English in this London edition.

In this brilliant and often controversial work, "the reader will find questions asked and unanswered which will take him far beyond the age-old controversy between faith and reason... Pascal's work has, in fact, the marks of genius, exploring and stating all that can be said on both sides of the question it investigates... [It is] a book for which the enquiring mind has had solid reason to be grateful" (PMM 152).

Pascal expresses "a more radical view of reason than Descartes'. A mathematician himself who, before his religious conversion in 1654, made important contributions to science, Pascal believed that rooting Christian theology in reason and transparency of language amounted to relinquishing revelation... But instead of defending religion through rational arguments... [he] aims at subordinating the order of truth to a more complete view of the human condition. We are at once great, by virtue of our intellect, and miserable, by virtue of its fragility" (Hollier, 287-88).

Pascal proved a pivotal influence on such American Founding Fathers as Jefferson, who had a later translation in his library (see Sowerby 1516)... Translator Joseph Walker dedicated his translation of Pascal's *Pensées* to Robert Boyle.

With separate title page for *Discourse Upon Monsieur Pascall's* [sic] *Thoughts*; without front and rear blank leaves as often. Including Madam Perier's *Life of Monsieur Pascall* [sic]. Continuously paginated. ESTC R23135. Wing P645. Lowndes, 1795.

With armorial bookplate and owner signatures of E.J. Hodgson (one above title page), likely belonging to Edward Jarvis Hodgson. A prominent Canadian attorney on Prince Edward Island, Hodgson was appointed Queen's Council in 1879. After working on projects such as the Prince Edward Island railway, he served as Master of the Rolls and an Assistance Judge of the Supreme Court of Judicature of Prince Edward Island. From 1896 until his death in 1911, he was Chancellor of King's College University.

PASCAL, Blaise. Thoughts, Meditations, and Prayers... Together with a Discourse upon Monsieur Pascall's Thoughts... As also another Discourse on the Proofs of the Truth of the Books of Moses, And a Treatise... Done into English by Jos. Walker. London: Printed for Jacob Tonson, 1688. Small octavo (4-3/4 by 7-1/4 inches), contemporary speckled brown calf rebacked and recornered with original gilt-decorated spine laid down, raised bands, original burgundy Morocco spine label; pp. (42) 1-263, (9), 269-326, (327-328), 329-363, (364-367), 368-375 (1).

Interior pristine, mild rubbing to calf boards. A handsome near-fine copy of a seminal work in Western philosophy.

## **Introduction**

Blaise Pascal's "Pensées" (French for "Thoughts") stands as one of the most profound philosophical and theological works in Western literature. First published posthumously in 1670, eight years after Pascal's death, the work represents an unfinished apologetic for the Christian faith that Pascal had been preparing in the final years of his life. The book emerged from Pascal's personal notes intended for a comprehensive defense of Christianity that he never completed. The fragmentary nature of the text, far from diminishing its power, has contributed to its enduring influence, as generations of readers have engaged with Pascal's incisive observations on human nature, faith, reason, and the human condition.

Pascal wrote during a period of significant intellectual and religious ferment in 17th century France. The Scientific Revolution was transforming European understanding of the natural world, while religious conflicts continued to shape the cultural landscape. The rise of rationalism, championed by thinkers like René Descartes, was challenging traditional religious authority. Within this context, Pascal sought to defend Christian faith not by rejecting reason but by demonstrating its limitations and pointing to the deeper truths accessible through the heart. His work emerged from his involvement with the Jansenist movement, a Catholic reform movement that emphasized human depravity, divine grace, and predestination, putting it at odds with the dominant Jesuit approach of the time. The political climate of France under Louis XIV was increasingly hostile to Jansenism, adding urgency to Pascal's apologetic project.

## **The Author**

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) was a remarkable polymath whose contributions spanned mathematics, physics, religious philosophy, and literature. Born in Clermont-Ferrand, France, Pascal showed extraordinary intellectual abilities from an early age. By sixteen, he had produced significant work on projective geometry, and at nineteen, he invented a mechanical calculator to help his father, a tax collector. His scientific achievements included important work on hydraulics, clarifying concepts of pressure and vacuum, and pioneering probability theory through correspondence with Pierre de Fermat.

Pascal's life took a decisive turn in 1646 when his family came into contact with Jansenist doctors who treated his father's broken hip. This encounter initiated Pascal's first religious conversion, though he subsequently experienced what biographers call his "worldly period" (1648-1654). On November 23, 1654, Pascal had an intense mystical experience that he recorded in a document known as the "Memorial," which he carried sewn into his coat until his death. Following this profound religious experience, Pascal aligned himself with the Jansenist community at Port-Royal and devoted himself to religious writing.

Despite chronic poor health throughout his life, Pascal remained intellectually active until his death at the age of 39. An autopsy revealed significant problems with his stomach, other abdominal organs, and brain lesions that likely contributed to his frequent headaches. His final words were, "May God never abandon me," reflecting the deep faith that had become central to his life and thought. Beyond his religious writings, Pascal also demonstrated practical innovation, establishing one of the first public transportation systems in Paris shortly before his death.

## **Why this is a Canonical Book**

"Pensées" merits inclusion in the canon of essential works because it profoundly engages with fundamental questions about human nature and the relationship between faith and reason that continue to shape American intellectual and cultural life. Pascal's exploration of human greatness and wretchedness offers a nuanced anthropology that resonates with America's complex understanding of human potential and limitation. His insistence that humans are both noble in their capacity for thought and miserable in their finitude speaks to the tension between American optimism about human capability and the recognition of human fallibility that informs our constitutional system of checks and balances.

Pascal's famous wager—arguing that belief in God is rational even without certainty—represents an early form of decision theory that continues to influence American philosophical and theological discourse. His approach to faith as involving both reason and the "reasons of the heart" speaks to the American religious tradition that has always balanced intellectual inquiry with personal spiritual experience. This balance has shaped American religious life from the Great Awakening through contemporary expressions of faith.

Furthermore, Pascal's critique of diversions—our tendency to distract ourselves from confronting existential questions—offers profound insight into contemporary American culture's struggle with constant entertainment and digital distraction. His observation that "all of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone" has never been more relevant than in our hyperconnected age. Pascal's work thus provides a critical lens for examining American consumerism and the restless pursuit of distraction that often characterizes modern life.

Pascal's emphasis on the limits of reason also offers an important counterbalance to purely rationalistic approaches to governance and society. His recognition that "the heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of" reminds us that human communities and political systems must account for more than just rational self-interest—a perspective that has influenced American communitarian traditions and critiques of pure individualism. In these ways, "Pensées" continues to offer valuable insights for American political and cultural self-understanding.

## Five Timeless Quotes

1. "All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone."

This observation has achieved remarkable resonance in our digital age, where constant connectivity and endless entertainment options make solitude increasingly rare. Pascal recognized that our aversion to quiet reflection leads us to seek diversions that prevent us from confronting essential questions about our existence. For contemporary Americans, this insight offers a powerful critique of our culture of distraction and consumption. The proliferation of smartphones, social media, and streaming services has made it easier than ever to avoid sitting quietly with our thoughts. Yet Pascal suggests that this avoidance lies at the root of our discontent. His words challenge us to consider how our restless pursuit of diversion might prevent us from developing the inner resources needed for meaningful lives and thoughtful citizenship. In a democracy that requires reflective citizens capable of reasoned judgment, Pascal's call to embrace solitude and contemplation remains profoundly relevant.

2. "The heart has its reasons which reason knows not of... We know the truth not only by the reason, but by the heart."

This famous statement articulates Pascal's conviction that human understanding encompasses more than rational calculation. It acknowledges that certain truths are grasped through intuition, emotion, and moral sensibility—what Pascal calls "the heart." This insight speaks directly to ongoing American debates about the proper relationship between reason and emotion in public life. While the Enlightenment tradition that influenced America's founding emphasized rational deliberation, Pascal reminds us that human beings are not merely reasoning machines. His perspective offers a valuable corrective to purely technocratic approaches to governance and validates the role of moral intuition and empathy in political judgment. In our current polarized climate, where political discourse often privileges either cold rationality or raw emotion, Pascal's integrated view of human knowing suggests a more holistic approach that honors both reason and the "reasons of the heart."

3. "Man is only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed. There is no need for the whole universe to take up arms to crush him; a vapor, a drop of water is enough to kill him. But even if the universe were to crush him, man would still be nobler than his slayer, because he knows that he is dying and the advantage the universe has over him. The universe knows none of this."

This meditation on human fragility and dignity captures the paradoxical nature of human existence—physically vulnerable yet cognitively transcendent. Pascal's thinking reed metaphor speaks powerfully to the American tradition of recognizing both human dignity and human limitation. It resonates with the constitutional framework that both empowers democratic self-governance and constrains it through checks and balances, acknowledging that humans are capable of both nobility and corruption. In our technological age, as artificial intelligence and biotechnology raise new questions about human uniqueness, Pascal's insight into the distinctive value of human consciousness and self-awareness takes on renewed significance. His words remind us that human dignity rests not on physical power but on our capacity for self-reflection and meaning-making—a perspective that can inform ethical approaches to emerging technologies and environmental challenges.

4. "Justice without might is helpless; might without justice is tyrannical. Justice without might is gainsaid, because there are always offenders; might without justice is condemned. We must then combine justice and might, and for this end make what is just strong, or what is strong just."

This penetrating analysis of the relationship between justice and power speaks directly to the American constitutional project. Pascal recognizes that justice requires enforcement to be effective, while power requires legitimacy to be accepted. This insight illuminates the American system's attempt to create institutions that are both just and powerful—courts with enforcement mechanisms, executives constrained by law, legislatures accountable to voters. In our current political climate, where debates rage about the proper scope of government power and the nature of justice, Pascal's words remind us that these concerns must be addressed together rather than in isolation. His perspective offers wisdom for contemporary discussions about criminal justice reform, international relations, and the balance between security and liberty—all areas where Americans continue to wrestle with the proper relationship between justice and might.

5. "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction."

This sobering observation about the dangers of moral certainty speaks to America's ongoing struggle with religious extremism and ideological polarization. Pascal, himself deeply religious, nevertheless recognized the potential for sincere conviction to enable harmful actions by providing moral justification for them. This insight has relevance for understanding religious violence, political fanaticism, and the ways ideological certainty can override ethical constraints. In a diverse democracy like America, where religious and political convictions vary widely, Pascal's warning highlights the importance of humility and restraint in how we act on our deepest beliefs. It suggests that healthy democratic discourse requires a balance between conviction and openness to correction—a balance that remains challenging to maintain in our polarized political landscape.



# Five Major Ideas

## 1. The Greatness and Misery of Man

Central to Pascal's anthropology is his understanding of humans as simultaneously great and wretched. He writes that "man's greatness comes from knowing he is wretched" and observes that humans occupy a middle position between everything and nothing, angels and beasts. This paradoxical view of human nature has profound implications for how we understand ourselves and organize our societies. Pascal sees human greatness in our capacity for thought, self-awareness, and moral judgment, yet recognizes our wretchedness in our mortality, limitations, and propensity for self-deception. This nuanced anthropology offers an alternative to both naive optimism about human perfectibility and cynical pessimism about human corruption. For American political thought, Pascal's perspective provides a philosophical foundation for institutions that both empower human agency and restrain human excess. It suggests that a healthy society must both nurture human potential and acknowledge human limitation—a balance that American democracy continually strives to achieve through its combination of popular sovereignty and constitutional constraints.

## 2. Diversion and the Flight from Self-Confrontation

Pascal offers a penetrating analysis of human diversion—our tendency to seek entertainment and activity to avoid confronting existential questions and our own mortality. He observes that "the sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room" and notes how we pursue hunting, gambling, and other diversions not for their intrinsic value but to escape self-reflection. This insight has remarkable relevance for contemporary American consumer culture, which offers unprecedented opportunities for distraction through entertainment, social media, and constant connectivity. Pascal suggests that our restless pursuit of diversion stems from an unwillingness to confront our finitude and the ultimate questions of existence. His analysis invites Americans to consider how our economic system, which depends on constant consumption, might exploit and intensify this human tendency to seek distraction. It challenges us to create spaces for contemplation and meaningful engagement amid the noise of modern life—a challenge that has significant implications for education, civic participation, and spiritual well-being in American society.

## 3. Pascal's Wager and Rational Faith

Perhaps Pascal's most famous contribution to philosophy of religion is his "wager" argument, which approaches belief in God as a rational decision under uncertainty. Pascal argues that when faced with the possibility of God's existence, the rational choice is to believe, since the potential gain (eternal happiness) is infinite if God exists, while the loss is finite if God does not exist. This approach represents an early application of decision theory to religious questions and offers a distinctive perspective on the relationship between faith and reason. Rather than attempting to prove God's existence conclusively, Pascal suggests that belief can be rational even without



certainty. This perspective has influenced American religious thought, which has often emphasized pragmatic approaches to faith alongside more evidential or experiential justifications. Pascal's wager continues to provoke discussion about rational approaches to religious commitment in a pluralistic society where Americans hold diverse beliefs about ultimate questions. It suggests that religious faith need not be opposed to rational consideration but can incorporate reasoned assessment of life's fundamental options.

#### **4. The Limits of Reason and the Role of the Heart**

Pascal famously declared that "the heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of," articulating his conviction that human understanding encompasses more than rational calculation. He recognized that certain first principles are known through intuition rather than demonstration and that moral and religious truths often require a kind of knowing that transcends purely logical analysis. This perspective offers an important counterbalance to rationalistic approaches that dominated much Enlightenment thought. For American intellectual life, Pascal's insight suggests that public discourse should make room for moral intuition, emotional intelligence, and spiritual perception alongside rational argument. His view has influenced American pragmatism, which similarly recognized multiple forms of knowing, and continues to inform discussions about the proper role of reason, emotion, and intuition in areas ranging from bioethics to political deliberation. Pascal's integrated understanding of human knowing offers resources for addressing contemporary challenges that require both analytical rigor and moral wisdom.

#### **5. The Hidden God and the Search for Truth**

Pascal explores the theme of the "hidden God" (*Deus absconditus*)—a God who provides sufficient evidence to be found by those who sincerely seek but remains concealed enough that those who are indifferent can avoid finding him. This theological perspective has broader implications for how Pascal understands truth-seeking generally. He suggests that the most important truths are not immediately obvious but require sincere seeking, and that our moral dispositions affect our ability to recognize truth. This insight speaks to the American tradition of religious liberty, which presupposes that authentic faith requires freedom of conscience rather than coercion. It also has relevance for how we understand the pursuit of truth in a democratic society, suggesting that genuine inquiry requires not just intellectual ability but also moral virtues like humility, perseverance, and openness. In an era of information abundance and competing truth claims, Pascal's perspective reminds Americans that finding truth requires more than access to information—it demands sincere seeking and virtuous character.

## **Three Major Controversies**

### **1. The Jansenist Controversy and Religious Authority**

Pascal's "Pensées" emerged from his involvement with Jansenism, a Catholic reform movement that emphasized human depravity, divine grace, and predestination. This theological perspective put Pascal at odds with the dominant Jesuit approach of his time, which he critiqued for what he saw as moral laxity and casuistry. The controversy surrounding Jansenism reflected deeper tensions about religious authority, the interpretation of Augustine, and the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom. While these specific theological disputes may seem remote from contemporary American concerns, they connect to ongoing debates about religious authority and interpretation that continue to shape American religious life. The tension between emphasizing human depravity versus human capability, divine sovereignty versus human freedom, and strict versus accommodating moral standards remains present in American religious discourse. Pascal's position in these controversies reveals his commitment to rigorous moral standards and deep spiritual authenticity—values that continue to resonate with many American religious traditions even as they provoke disagreement about their proper application.

## **2. Rationalism, Skepticism, and Faith**

Pascal's approach to the relationship between faith and reason generated controversy in his time and continues to provoke debate today. He criticized both the rationalism of Descartes, which he saw as overestimating human reason's capacity to reach certainty, and the skepticism of Montaigne, which he believed undermined the possibility of knowledge. Instead, Pascal advocated a position that recognized reason's legitimate but limited role, complemented by the "reasons of the heart" and illuminated by faith. This middle position has been controversial from multiple directions—criticized by rationalists for giving too much ground to faith and by fideists for conceding too much to reason. In the American context, Pascal's perspective challenges both secular rationalism that excludes religious insight from public discourse and religious fundamentalism that rejects critical inquiry. His integrated approach to faith and reason offers a third way that has influenced American religious intellectuals from Jonathan Edwards to Reinhold Niebuhr, though it continues to generate controversy in a culture often divided between secular and religious worldviews.

## **3. The Ethics of Diversion and Modern Progress**

Pascal's critique of diversion—our tendency to seek entertainment and activity to avoid confronting existential questions—stands in tension with modern notions of progress and prosperity. While Pascal saw our restless pursuit of diversion as evidence of human misery and self-deception, modern consumer capitalism celebrates the proliferation of entertainment options and technological conveniences as signs of progress. This tension has played out in American culture through various critiques of consumerism, technological determinism, and the "busy" lifestyle. Pascal's perspective has influenced American cultural critics who question whether material progress has delivered genuine human flourishing. His suggestion that "all of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone" challenges the assumption that more options for diversion necessarily improve human life. This critique has proven controversial in a culture that often equates freedom with increased choice and measures

progress through economic growth and technological advancement. Pascal's perspective invites Americans to consider whether our pursuit of distraction might actually diminish rather than enhance human flourishing—a question that remains contentious in discussions about technology, education, and the good life.

## **In Closing**

Civic-minded Americans should read Pascal's "Pensées" because it offers profound insights into the human condition that remain remarkably relevant for navigating contemporary challenges. In an age of increasing polarization, Pascal's nuanced understanding of human nature—both great and wretched—provides a foundation for political humility that acknowledges both human dignity and human limitation. His recognition that "the heart has its reasons which reason knows not of" offers wisdom for bridging divides in a society where rational argument alone often fails to persuade across ideological boundaries.

Pascal's penetrating analysis of diversion speaks directly to our distraction-saturated culture, challenging us to create space for the quiet reflection necessary for thoughtful citizenship. His observation that "all of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone" diagnoses a condition that has only intensified with digital technology, suggesting that civic renewal might begin with recovering the capacity for contemplation and self-examination.

For Americans wrestling with questions of faith in a pluralistic society, Pascal offers a perspective that neither dismisses religious insight as irrational nor exempts it from critical examination. His approach to faith as involving both reasoned consideration and the "reasons of the heart" provides a model for how religious conviction might inform public life without demanding exemption from reasoned discourse.

Perhaps most importantly, Pascal's work reminds us that the most fundamental human questions transcend particular political arrangements and historical circumstances. His exploration of human restlessness, mortality, and the search for meaning speaks to perennial aspects of the human condition that shape our political and cultural life in ways we often fail to recognize. By engaging with these deeper dimensions of human experience, "Pensées" helps us see beyond immediate political controversies to the underlying human realities that give them significance.

In a cultural moment often characterized by superficial engagement and partisan certainty, Pascal's combination of intellectual rigor, moral seriousness, and genuine seeking offers a model of engagement worthy of emulation. His work challenges Americans to think more deeply, question more honestly, and seek truth more sincerely—civic virtues essential for the flourishing of democratic life. For these reasons, Pascal's "Pensées" deserves recognition as a canonical work that continues to illuminate the human condition and inform our collective self-understanding.

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