

Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*
XIII. Submission and Use of Reason

167. "Submission and use of reason; that is what makes true Christianity."
168. "How I hate such foolishness as not believing in the Eucharist, etc. If the Gospel is true, if Jesus Christ is God, where is the difficulty?"
169. "I should not be a Christian but for the miracles, says St. Augustine."
170. "*Submission*. One must know when it is right to doubt, to affirm, to submit. Anyone who does otherwise does not understand the force of reason. Some men run counter to these three principles, either affirming that everything can be proved, because they know nothing about proof, or doubting everything, because they do not know when to submit, or always submitting, because they do not know when judgement is called for.
"Sceptic, mathematician, Christian; doubt, affirmation, submission."
172. "The way of God, who disposes all things with gentleness, is to instill religion into our minds with reasoned arguments and into our hearts with grace, but attempting to instill it into hearts and minds with force and threats is to instill not religion but terror. *Terror rather than religion.*"
173. "If we submit everything to reason our religion will be left with nothing mysterious or supernatural.
"If we offend the principles of reason our religion will be absurd and ridiculous."
174. "St. Augustine. Reason would never submit unless it judged that there are occasions when it ought to submit.
"It is right, then, that reason should submit when it judges that it ought to submit."
175. "One of the ways in which the damned will be confounded is that they will see themselves condemned by their own reason, by which they claimed to condemn the Christian religion."
177. "Contradiction is a poor indication of truth.
"Many things that are certain are contradicted.
"Many that are false pass without contradiction.
"Contradiction is no more an indication of falsehood than lack of it is an indication of truth."
182. "There is nothing so consistent with reason as this denial of reason."
183. "Two excesses: to exclude reason, to admit nothing but reason."
184. "It would have been no sin not to have believed in Jesus Christ without miracles."
185. "Faith certainly tells us what the senses do not, but not the contrary of what they see; it is above, not against them."
188. "Reason's last step is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it. It is merely feeble if it does not go as far as to realize that.
"If natural things are beyond it, what are we to say about supernatural things?"

Other *Pensées* on the same theme

111. “I can certainly imagine a man without hands, feet, or head, for it is only experience that teaches us that the head is more necessary than the feet. But I cannot imagine a man without thought; he would be a stone or an animal.”

113. “*Thinking reed*. It is not in space that I must seek my human dignity, but in the ordering of my thought. It will do me no good to own land. Through space the universe grasps me and swallows me up like a speck; through thought I grasp it.”

200. “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.

“Thus all our dignity consists in thought. It is on thought that we must depend for our recovery, not on space and time, which we could never fill. Let us then strive to think well; that is the basic principle of morality.”

110. “We know the truth not only through our reason but also through our heart. It is through the latter that we know first principles, and reason, which has nothing to do with it, tries in vain to refute them. The sceptics have no other object than that and they work at it to no purpose. We know that we are not dreaming, but, however unable we may be to prove it rationally, our inability proves nothing but the weakness of our reason, and not the uncertainty of all our knowledge, as they maintain.... Principles are felt, propositions proved, and both with certainty though by different means. It is just as pointless and absurd for reason to demand proof of first principles from the heart before agreeing to accept them as it would be for the heart to demand an intuition of all the propositions demonstrated by reason before agreeing to accept them.

“Our inability must therefore serve only to humble reason, which would like to be the judge of everything, but not to confute our certainty. As if reason were the only way we could learn! Would to God, on the contrary, that we never needed it and knew everything by instinct and feeling! But nature has refused us this blessing, and has instead given us only very little knowledge of this kind; all other knowledge can be acquired only by reasoning.

“That is why those to whom God has given religious faith by moving their hearts are very fortunate, and feel quite legitimately convinced, but to those who do not have it we can only give such faith through reasoning, until God gives it by moving their heart, without which faith is only human and useless for salvation.”

423. “The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing: we know this in countless ways.

424. “It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason. That is what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by the reason.”

44. “*Imagination*. It is the dominant faculty in man, master of error and falsehood, all the more deceptive for not being invariably so. [...] Setting the same mark on true and false alike.

“I am not speaking of fools, but of the wisest men, amongst whom imagination is best entitled to persuade. Reason may object in vain, it cannot fix the price of things. [...]

“[It] has established a second nature in man. [...] It makes us believe, doubt, deny reason; it deadens the senses, it arouses them. [...] [It] cannot make fools wise, but it makes them happy. [...]

“How absurd is reason, the sport of every wind! [...] For reason has had to yield, and at its wisest adopts those principles which human imagination has rashly introduced at every turn.... Reason never wholly overcomes imagination, while the contrary is quite common. [...]

(Pascal on Reason, continued)

“Imagination decides everything: it creates beauty, justice, and happiness, which is the world’s supreme good.

“It is still just one way in which we are inclined toward error and blind to it.

“Our own interest is another wonderful instrument for blinding us agreeably. [...]

“But the most absurd cause of his errors is the war between the senses and reason.”

410. “This internal war of reason against the passion has made those who wanted peace split into two sects. Some wanted to renounce passions and become gods, others wanted to renounce reason and become brute beasts. But neither side has succeeded, and reason always remains to denounce the baseness and injustice of the passions and to disturb the peace of those who surrender to them. And the passions are always alive in those who want to renounce them.”

530. “All our reasoning comes down to surrendering to feeling.

“But fancy is like and also unlike feeling, so that we cannot distinguish between these two opposites. One person says that my feeling is mere fancy, another that his fancy is feeling. We should have a rule. Reason is available but can be bent in any direction.

“And so there is no rule.”

539. “The will is one of the chief organs of belief, not because it creates belief, but because things are true or false according to the aspect by which we judge them. When the will likes one aspect more than another, it deflects the mind from considering the qualities of the one it does not care to see. Thus, the mind, keeping in step with the will, remains looking at the aspect preferred by the will and so judges by what it sees there.”

756. “*Thought*. All man’s dignity consists in thought, but what is this thought? How silly it is!

“Thought, then, is admirable and incomparable by its very nature. It must have had strange faults to have become worthy of contempt, but it does have such faults that nothing is more ridiculous. How great it is by its nature, how vile by its faults!”

769. “Only the Christian chooses not to walk by natural reason = “the imagination of their hearts.”

820. “There are two ways of persuading men of the truths of our religion; one by the power of reason, the other by the authority of the speaker.

“We do not use the latter but the former. We do not say: ‘You must believe that because Scripture, which says it, is divine,’ but we say that it must be believed for such and such a reason. But these are feeble arguments, because reason can be bent in any direction.”

837. “Now, humanly speaking, there is no such thing as human certainty, only reason.”

887. “Descartes useless and uncertain.”

ii. “Cannot forgive Descartes for having no use for God.”

vi. “When the late M. Pascal wanted to give an example of a fantasy for which obstinacy could win approval, he usually put forward Descartes’ opinions on matter and space.”

ix. “The late M. Pascal called Cartesianism ‘the Romance of Nature, something like the story of Don Quixote’.”