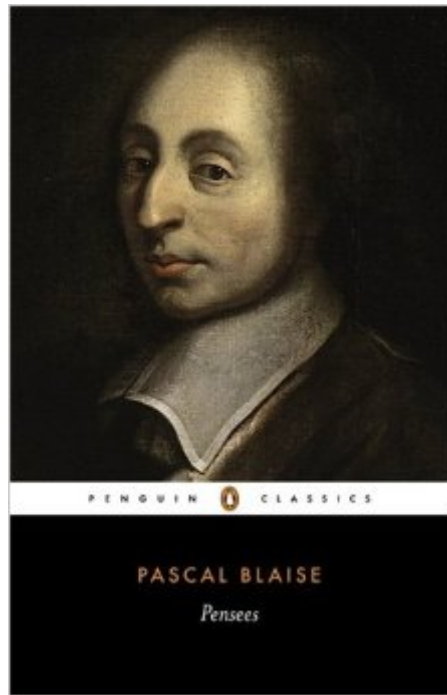


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# Pensees (Penguin Classics)



## Synopsis

Blaise Pascal, the precociously brilliant contemporary of Descartes, was a gifted mathematician and physicist, but it is his unfinished apologia for the Christian religion upon which his reputation now rests. The *Pensées* is a collection of philosophical fragments, notes and essays in which Pascal explores the contradictions of human nature in psychological, social, metaphysical and - above all - theological terms. Mankind emerges from Pascal's analysis as a wretched and desolate creature within an impersonal universe, but who can be transformed through faith in God's grace. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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## Customer Reviews

I always thought of Pascal as a great scientist, but as a somewhat dated Christian apologist. The general treatment of Pascal by both science and humanities is at best an unreflective nod to the importance of his scientific discoveries and a momentary and uncomfortable glance at his 'other' writings. The lack of serious consideration given to Pascal's 'other' writings by philosophy and

theology departments and their absence from science curriculums is indicative of major bias and ignorance. Why? Pascal's science is embarrassing to defenders of prevalent Darwinian atheistic science because of his zeal for the Christian faith. Pascal made some important discoveries but he "abandoned science for religion" and for that reason is tagged as an historical anachronism - he like many of the scientists of the 17th century were heavily tainted with 'folk belief' and superstitions. Pascal's Science and Faith is embarrassing to those philosophers and theologians that cannot reconcile the two aspects of human *Pensees* - thoughts. They like to think of Pascal as an early 'existentialist' like Kierkegaard who made a 'leap' of faith against the atheistic dogmas of material science; but Pascal did not support their radical dichotomy of science versus faith. Shunned on both sides for different reasons (for centuries!), Pascal is finally becoming more and more appreciated as someone who was 'between' faith and science; a position becoming more fashionable. All you have to do is read 'The *Pensees*' to quickly see it as one of the most important, beautiful and penetrating books ever written. The *Pensees* ('Thoughts') are a long series of fragments on the human situation, Jesus Christ, God, revelation, Infinity and finitude. But it is the little pieces that you find, like lost treasures, that ring through to your very being that sets Pascal's *Pensees* apart as a book for living and reflecting and not merely analyzing. "We sail over a vast expanse, ever uncertain, ever adrift, carried to and fro. To whatever point we think to fix and fasten ourselves it shifts and leaves us; and if we pursue it it escapes our grasp, slips away, fleeing in eternal flight - Man's condition: inconstancy, ennui, unrest." "The last step that Reason takes is to recognize that there is an infinity of things that lie beyond it. Reason is a poor thing indeed if it does not succeed in knowing that."

This book, representing Pascal's 'pensees', or thoughts, contains many provocative views that have managed to arouse critics from many different perspectives. And while there are several strains of Pascal's thought that I considerably dissent from, it can hardly be denied that in many ways, Pascal's insights into human character as it relates to the divine are not easily dismissed, at least intellectually. Because this work is a collection of thoughts rather than a systematic presentation, which is what Pascal ultimately had in mind but his illness and subsequent death prevented, the reader will likely find Pascal to be quite quotable. There are quite a few 'one liners' in here that are profound to the point of being humorous when one thinks about how insightful his thoughts are. And Pascal, in arguing in favor of the truth of Christianity, makes a very big investment in fulfilled prophecy and the history of the Jews that readers should find interesting. His 8 page discourse on indifference at the beginning of the second section is among the best 8 pages I've ever read and

have succeeded in providing a noticeable amount of discomfort for atheists for three centuries now. The portion of *Pensees* that is the most well known is Pascal's wager argument early in the second section. Personally, this argument, while interesting, is not the most compelling argument he makes and I consider it a shame that the wager argument has really overshadowed what I believe to be Pascal's most provocative argument in favor of the Christian religion - his anthropological argument. While not stated in this manner, section 1 of *Pensees* spends considerable time developing the notion that the extreme paradox of humanity (as Pascal sees it) of both immense greatness and horrible evil demand an explanation. How can man be both, and what worldview best explains this clear reality? These are the questions that Pascal presents, and he argues that only the Biblical narrative of man from creation forward provides an intelligent framework upon which to explain the human condition adequately. It is a very provocative argument that a number of thoughtful theologians from Groothuis to McKenzie have opined upon quite recently, and it is an argument that deserves extensive thought not just about the Christian religion, but about the very nature of man and whether Pascal's grasp of it is correct or not. I have found that one can take the sketches of the argument put forward by Pascal here and get into some very deep anthropological water that is healthy, even if one ultimately takes issue with Pascal's paradox. Being a Jansenist, Pascal was not as willing as mainstream Roman Catholicism to rely on human reason, believing that man's 'wretchedness' calls such reason into question. As such, the reader will notice that Pascal tends to employ a general polemic against reason, even though he clearly refutes the complete abandonment of reason. But as part of this general polemic, he clearly distrusts natural theology as well as the rationalizations of the philosophers (which is kind of ironic), believing that philosophical rationalizing is ultimately an impediment to faith. It is in these basic areas (and a few others) which I respectfully dissent from Pascal in varying degrees. Pascal intends here to walk a fine line between what he believed to be the logical absurdity of faith in complete contradiction to reason, but also of the bankruptcy as he saw it of reason alone becoming the basis for our faith. In my own reading of the book, my view is that Pascal devoted more energy to dealing with the latter concern than the former. A highly provocative book that has, and will continue to arouse thought and contemplation at the deepest levels.

Pascal, the brilliant mathematician, physicist, and engineer, presents in his posthumously titled *Pensees*, his philosophy of religion and a paradox rich and challenging defense of Christian faith. Says Pascal, "Knowledge has two extremes which meet; one is the pure natural ignorance of every man at birth, the other is the extreme reached by great minds who run through the whole range of

human knowledge, only to find that they know nothing... but it is a wise ignorance which knows itself. Those who stand half-way... pretend to understand everything... they get everything wrong."The book is a collection of unfinished writings; arguments and ideas which he had scribbled, intending to then develop and elaborate. As such, the text is disjointed and even mysterious; statements are abrupt, incomplete, dogmatic. Yet, out of respect for the intellectual accomplishments of the great French mathematician, these notes were published essentially as he had left them. They contain many gems; profound statements which stand like islands in a sea of sometimes jumbled thoughts. Pascal's themes are: the nature of human knowledge, the affliction of pride, the blindness and tyranny of self, the boundaries of reason, the hiddenness of God, and his own argument for "wagering" not only on God, but on the Christian faith. Two things are obvious; (1.) the arguments are not in the form in which Pascal intended to offer them, therefore, (2.) this is not a definitive apologetic. However, Pascal's arguments are rather unique and as such they are interesting even in their [often] crude form. Read this book in conjunction with the writings of C.S. Lewis, Augustine, or Sundar Singh.

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