

Tolstoy On Pascal

Leo Tolstoy

1906

No one passion holds men so long in its power, or hides so continuously, sometimes to the very end, the vanity of temporal mundane life or so completely keeps men from understanding the significance of human existence and of its real beneficence, as the passion for worldly glory, in whatever form it may manifest itself : petty vanity, love of glory, ambition.

Every overweening desire involves its own punishment, and the sufferings that attend its satisfaction are proof of its worthlessness. Moreover, every overweening desire grows feeble with the passage of time; ambition, however, flares up more and more with the years. The main thing is that solicitude for human glory is always coupled with the thought of service to men, and a man when he seeks the approbation of others, is easily deceive into thinking that he is living not for himself but for the good of those whose approbation he seeks to obtain. And therefore this is the most insidious and dangerous of passions and more difficult than all others to exterminate. Only men of great spiritual powers deliver themselves from this passion.

Great spiritual powers give these men the possibility of quickly attaining great glory and these spiritual powers likewise give them the possibility of recognizing the nothingness of it.

A man of this quality was Pascal. Such a man was also our own Russian, Gogol. I think that through Gogol I came to understand Pascal. And each of them, although so entirely different in their characteristics, so absolutely different in their mental make-up and capacity, went through exactly the same experience.

Both very rapidly attained that glory which they passionately desired; both, having once attained it, immediately realized all the worthlessness of what had seemed to them the highest, the most precious advantage in the world, and both of them were terrified by that delusion in the power of which they had found themselves. They exerted all the powers of their souls in order to prove to men the complete horror of that delusion from which they had managed to escape, and proportionate to the magnitude of the disenchantment seemed to them the necessity of such a purpose, of such a direction of life, as that nothing could transcend it.

Both Gogol and Pascal found this in a passionate devotion to religion; in this too they found a reason for scorning all that they had hitherto attained, for all that they had done for the sake of glory. Well, glory had come to them and there was nothing in it but deception, consequently whatever had been done for its attainment had been unnecessary and nugatory. Only one thing was important : what that was was obscured by worldly desires for glory. The one important and necessary thing was that faith which gives the significance to life as it proceeds and a firm

direction of all its activity. And this recognition of the necessity of faith and of the impossibility of living without it so overwhelms such men that they can not cease from marveling how they themselves, how people in general can live without the faith which explains for them the significance of their lives and of death so inevitably awaiting them. And when they recognize this, such men direct all the powers of their intellects and of their souls to save men from this horrible delusion, from which they themselves have barely escaped, and of proving to them that it is impossible to live without faith, that faith is their only salvation; they strive to snatch from the hands of men this screen, which, as Pascal says, men hold before them while they are running to destruction.

Such a man was Pascal and herein consists his vast, his inestimable and far-reaching service.

Pascal was born in Clermont in 1623. His father was a well-known mathematician. The boy, from his first youth, like all children, after his father, became interested in mathematics, and displayed unusual ability. His father, anxious to avoid precocious development in the child, gave him no mathematical books; but the boy, listening to the conversations of the father with his learned friends began to his own incentive to develop a system of geometry. The father, realizing that such a work was extraordinary in a child, was so astonished and enraptured that he wept from emotion, and from that moment began to instruct his son in mathematics.

The boy was not only quick to take in what his father put before him but also went on to making independent discoveries in the domain of mathematics. His achievements attracted the attention not only of his neighbors but also of scholars; and Pascal, while still very young, became famous as a remarkable mathematician. The increasing fame of his scholarship, so much beyond his years, stimulated him to take part in affairs; his vast abilities afforded him the possibility of increasing his fame, and Pascal devoted all his time and strength to scientific matters and investigations. But from childhood his health had been feeble. Moreover his ever-increasing labors still further weakened him and while still a young man he fell seriously ill. After his illness, at the request of his father, he restricted his labors to two hours a day, while the rest of his time was spent in reading philosophical writings.

He read Epictetus, Descartes and the Essays of Montaigne. Montaigne's book impressed him : it confirmed him in his skepticism and in his indifference to religion. Pascal had always been religiously-incline and as a child had believed in the Catholic teaching in which he had been trained. Montaigne's book, while causing him to doubt, stimulated him to ponder over questions of belief, especially as to how far faith was essential for the intellectual life of man, and he began more than ever to fulfill his religious duties and while still reading philosophical works, he took up books of a religious character. Among those of this sort he came across the treatise of the Dutch theologian Jansen, "Regeneration of the Inner Man."

In this book it was argued that beside carnal desire, there is also a sinful desire of the soul, consisting in the satisfaction of human inquisitiveness, at the basis of which lies the same essence as is found in every desire : egotism and selfishness, and that such a subtle desire more than any other separates man from God. This book powerfully affected Pascal. With the sincerity characteristic of great minds, he felt the truth of this argument as applied to himself, and although the renouncing of his scientific occupations and of the fame that they would bring him were for him a great deprivation, or rather the very reason that they were a great deprivation, he resolved to cease his fascinating scientific occupations and to expend all his powers in solving for himself and for others those questions of faith which more and more insistently preoccupied him.

Nothing is definitively known as to Pascal's relations to women or as to the influence on his life exerted by the temptations of woman's love. As he wrote a small work entitled *Discours sur les passions de l'amour*, in which he says that the greatest happiness vouchsafed to man, love, is a pure spiritual feeling and ought to serve as the fountain of all the highest blessings, his biographers assume that Pascal in his youth was enamored of a woman belonging to a social station superior¹ to his and that his love was not returned. At all events, even if there were such a love, it had no consequences in Pascal's life. The chief interests of his youth were involved in the struggle between his aspirations for scientific studies and for the fame brought to him by them and the realization of the emptiness, the futility of these occupations and the harmfulness of the seductions of vanity, and the desire of devoting all his powers to the service of God only.

So, even at this period of his life, when he had decided to forswear scientific occupations, he happened to read about Torricelli's investigations into the vacuum. Feeling that this problem was incorrectly decided and that a more accurate determination of it might be obtained, Pascal could not restrain his desire to verify these experiments. Having verified them he made his famous discoveries regarding the weight of the atmosphere. These discoveries attracted to him the attention of the whole scientific world. He received many letters; savants came to visit him, and he was praised to the skies. And the struggle with the temptations of wordly glory became more violent than ever.

To assist him in this struggle, Pascal wore next his body a belt with nails which tore into his flesh, and every time when it seemed to him that in his reading or in his hearing expressions of praise, or vanity, awoke in him, he pressed his elbow against the belt so that the nails might stick into his flesh and remind him of the whole train of thoughts and feelings which had turned him away from the temptation of glory.

In the year 1651 he met with an accident, not apparently very important in itself, but destined to have a great influence on his spiritual condition. On the bridge of Neuilly he fell from his carriage and narrowly escaped death. About this same time his father died. This two-fold reminder of death influenced Pascal even more to study deeply into the problems of life and of death. Pascal's life became more and more absorbed in religious occupations until, in 1655, he entirely shut himself off from the world. He joined the Jansenists in the Society of Port-Royal and began to live an almost monastic life, thinking out and preparing his great treatise, in which he tried to prove, first, the absolute necessity of religion for the reasoning life of mankind, and, secondly, the verity of that religion which he himself professed. But even here the temptations of human glory did not leave Pascal in peace.

The Jansenist Society of Port-Royal, in which Pascal was living attracted the enmity of the powerful Jesuit order, whose intrigues availed to close the schools for men and women conducted there, and the monastery itself was threatened by the danger also of being suppressed.

Residing in the midst of the Jansenists and sharing their beliefs, Pascal could not remain indifferent to the situation of his coreligionists, and being involved in the controversy with the Jesuits, he wrote in defense of the Jansenists a book entitled *Letters to a provincial*. In this work Pascal did not so much explain and defend the teachings of the Jansenists as he criticized their enemies, the Jesuits, proving the incorrectness of their doctrines. This book had an enormous success, but the fame which it obtained did not deceive Pascal.

¹ Charlotte de Roannez, sister of the duc of Roannez, one of Pascal's most intimate friends. Extant letters from Pascal to the young duchess show no traces of sentimentality. Tr.

His whole life was not devoted to the service of God.

He devised for himself rules for the conduct of his life and strictly followed them, not deviating from them either through indolence or through illness. Poverty he considered the basis of virtue. "Not only is there no evil", he said "in overtaking and in lowliness, but in them lies our happiness. Christ was poor and lowly and had nowhere to lay his head." Pascal, by renouncing everything possible and reducing himself to poverty, lived with only what was absolutely necessary. He dispensed as far as possible with service, availing himself of help only when through illness he could not move. His quarters were of the simplest and so were his table and his dress. He took care of his own room and got his own meals.

He was in constantly increasing ill health and his sufferings never ceased; but he endured his sufferings not only with patience but even with a joy and happiness amazing to his intimates. "Do not pity me," he would say to those that expressed sympathy with him, "illness is the natural condition of the Christian, because in this state the Christian is such as he ought always to be. It accustoms him to the lack of all good things and to sensual pleasures, it accustoms him to refrain from the passions which beset a man all his life long, to be without pride, without greed, to be always in the expectancy of death."

The luxury with which his loving relatives tried to surround him was burdensome to him. He besought his sister to place him in a hospital for incurables in order that he might with them live out the last days of his life; but his sister was unwilling to heed his request and he died at home.

Before his death he lay for some hours unconscious. Only just before the end he lifted himself up from his couch and with a joyful expression said: "Do not leave me Lord." These were his last words.

He died August 19, 1662.

Man requires for his happiness two beliefs: one, the belief that there is an explanation of the meaning of life, and the other – that he can find in this the very best explanation of life.

Pascal, better than anyone else, accomplished the first of these. Fate – God – did not grant him to accomplish the second.

Like a man who is dying of thirst and plunges into the water lying before him without investigating its qualities, so Pascal, without investigating the characteristics of that Catholicism in which he had been educated, saw in it the truth and the salvation of men. Satisfied that it was water, satisfied that it was the faith!

It stands to reason that no one has the right to surmise as to what might have been, but it is impossible to picture to oneself a man of genius like Pascal justifying himself in a belief in Catholicism. He did not succeed in exposing it to that mental force which he directed toward the proof of the necessity of faith and therefore in his soul dogmatic Catholicism remained complete. Without touching it he leaned on it. He was torn on that which it possesses of truth. He drew from it the intensive labor of self-improvement, the struggle with temptations, his aversion to riches and his firm belief in a merciful God, to which he surrendered his soul when he came to die.

He died having accomplished only one part of his work, without having completed, without having even begun to do the other. But in spite of this second part of his labors not having been accomplished, no less precious is the first: the marvelous book of *Pensées*, made up from scattered fragments of paper, on which the great dying Pascal jotted down his thoughts.

Wonderful fate of this book!

A prophetic book appears; the multitude stand in perplexity, dumbfounded by the force of the prophetic word; alarmed, they want to comprehend, to have it explain, to learn what to do.

And here come those men, who, as Pascal says, think that they know and therefore torment the world; these men come and say : "Here it is useless to comprehend, to explain : it is all very simple. This Pascal ("it was the same with Gogol), as you see, believed in the Trinity, in the Holy Communion; it is plain that he was a sick, abnormal man; and therefore in his weakness and sickness, he misunderstood everything. A better proof of this is that he repudiated, abjured even that good which he had accomplished and which delights us (because we understand this), and laid the greatest stress on absolutely useless 'mystical' ratiocinations about the fate of man, about the life to come. Consequently it is necessary to take from him not what he himself considered important, but what we can understand and what pleases us."

And the multitude rejoiced; but did not comprehend that power was they needed to mount to that height to which Pascal wanted to lift them; and here it was perfectly simple. Pascal discovered the law by which pumps work. Pumps are very useful and this was an excellent thing; but all that he said about God, about immortality, all this is mere emptiness, because he believed in God, in the Bible. Effort is not needed by us to attain to this; on the contrary we can from the height of his abnormality astonishingly and indulgently acknowledge his service, in spite of his abnormality!

Pascal showed that men without religion are either animals or madmen; he led them by the nose into their deformity, into their senselessness, he proved to them that no science could take the place of religion. But Pascal believed in God, in the Trinity, in the Bible, and therefore it was to them a settled fact that what he said to them about the senselessness of their lives and about the vanity of science was false. Science itself, the subject of life itself, this senselessness itself, which so irresistibly appealed to them, this very subject, this very science, this very senselessness they considered as truth, while they considered Pascal's reasoning to be the fruit of his sick abnormality. It was impossible to them to understand the force of the thought and of the word of this man and while they numbered him with the classics, the subject-matter of his book was not appreciated by them.

Yes, nothing is so pernicious, so destructive to the true progress of humanity as these arguments, adroitly adorned with every kind of contemporary ornaments, put forward by men *qui croient savoir* – who think they know, and who in Pascal's opinion *bouleversent le monde*, - upset the worlds!

But the light shines even in the darkness and there are men who, without sharing Pascal's belief in Catholicism and yet comprehending that he, in spite of his mighty intellect, might believe in Catholicism, preferring to believe in it rather than not to believe in anything, understand the significance of his marvelous book, which irresistibly proves to men the essential necessity of faith, that is to say, the steadfast relation of man to the world and its origin.

And comprehending this men can not fail to find that the questions raised by Pascal will be answered by faith in accordance with the degrees of their moral and intellectual development.

1906.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Leo Tolstoy
Tolstoy On Pascal
1906

Original text from RevoltLib.com, 2021.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net