

CHAPTER 1

A Historical Perspective

PASCAL'S PREDICAMENT

A problem is something proposed for examination and solution. A problem becomes a puzzle when examination proceeds in a spirit of childlike fascination such that a solution becomes as much the opportunity for exercising the mind as for achieving a definite result. So highly did Bertrand Russell estimate conceptual and linguistic puzzles that he said logic's proper method was to assemble and analyze as many kindred puzzles as possible, and then to seek a systematic explanation of both their capacity to elicit bewilderment and their underlying nature. Certainly Russell's own efforts to explain the Liar ('I am lying') and related paradoxes proved as philosophically valuable for the questions raised as for the answers offered.

Problems that elicit an urgency of feeling in addition to a playfulness of intellect I shall call predicaments. A predicament is a human situation fraught with danger and pathos. Here intellectual constructs are immersed in feeling, and the problem beset human being is embedded in a context of social relations. While Russell was surely right that engagement with intellectual puzzles can yield insightful logical theories, his teacher, Alfred North Whitehead, was also correct in saying that general ideas which fail to take on an emotional pattern of memorable intensity remain ineffective for shaping personal and communal histories. Feeling and social relationships matter. Whitehead said that it is when predicaments are overcome, and not merely when puzzles are solved, that civilization advances.¹ Human life is itself an abiding predicament in the sense that people are always faced with decisions they hope will result in circumstances conducive to their happiness. When such decisions are made amidst memories of a wondrous childhood and intimations of an impending death, they constitute the most general of adult human predicaments. It is with this reality that reflection here must begin if it is to be faithful simultaneously to the generality of the philosophical ideal and the urgency of the religious quest.

The life and writings of Blaise Pascal portray a dramatic spiritual predicament. They portray a person contending mightily with sin and death; they also show a man who dares to think honestly about the resources that human beings bring to this confrontation. Upon reflection, Pascal discovered "the greatness and wretchedness of man."² His problem was thereby compounded. The question "What shall I do?" became linked to the more basic query "Who am I?". The predicament was intensified. Pascal consciously addressed this predicament in thought and action, yet his extraordinary efforts did as much to deepen as resolve the problem, at least for others besides himself. His famous "night of fire" conversion and his unfinished *Apology for the Christian Religion* have elicited very diverse interpretations. While most interpreters agree that what Pascal examines is "man in nature (l'homme dans la nature)," this phrase itself is rife with paradox.³ Pascal understood human nature as at once good by creation, yet sinful by Adam's fall; he saw the natural world as the realm of the infinite, and of the abyss as well; finally, he confessed God to be hidden and at the same time the only thing knowledge of which can provide happiness. That the human situation is characterized by these contradictory features is what makes it puzzling. That sin and godlessness bring death makes a remedy urgent. Part of Pascal's enduring appeal is that he made the spiritual problems besetting him yet more puzzling and their resolution more urgent; and he did so with intellectual incisiveness and elegance.

Interpreters of Pascal have frequently found in him a precursor of their own problems and preoccupations. In addition to wide acclamation as a forerunner of existentialism, Pascal has had several other laudatory titles bestowed upon him. The Marxist Lucien Goldmann has proclaimed Pascal "the first modern man" whose masterpiece, the *Pensées*, illustrates the transition from rational to dialectical thought;⁴ the Freudian Charles Baudouin sees him as a "passionate pilgrim" whose ascetic temperament represented "a sort of impressively transposed anorexia" and whose multifarious achievements reveal a distinctly modern strategy of sublimation;⁵ and the semiologist Louis Marin finds in Pascal the prototype of the self-conscious fashioner of self-referential texts whose critical intent is "to deconstruct the ideology of presence and its reproduction."⁶ Surely French intellectuals are especially prone to this sort of tendentious interpretation, yet I do think that there is something about Pascal's life and writings which makes them especially capable of mirroring the contemporary concerns of his readers. Forewarned by the example of predecessors in this sort of undertaking, I shall try to make the

case for the enduring significance of Pascal's predicament with a minimum of philosophical cant.

Pascal was a mathematician, physicist, and inventor; a philosopher, theologian, and prose stylist; and even an educator, entrepreneur, and philanthropist. He was accorded great eminence by the social and intellectual elites of his time; he was "admired not merely in all of France but in all of Europe" according to a contemporary observer.⁷ Among his greatest intellectual achievements was his formulation of the basic principles of probability theory in a series of epistolary exchanges with his countryman Pierre de Fermat; later, drawing upon the probabilistic ideas he helped make rigorous, he formulated a celebrated argument for the prudential character of theistic belief. In his thinking about both science and religion Pascal helped to transform an Aristotelian language of metaphysical necessity into the newer idiom of subjective probability. His wide experience and intellectual acuity enabled him to portray human predicaments and practices in novel ways.

By devising of a workable calculating machine and inaugurating an intracity bus service Pascal showed further evidence of an innovative and progressive character. Still he was hardly free from retrograde impulses. His advocacy of the Jansenist cause, with its revival of traditional Augustinian themes, is perhaps the most renowned expression of this conservatism, and the consequences of these views for his conception of disciplined spiritual life is the traditional aspect of his religiosity that will be of most concern here. To philosophers of religion Pascal presents both an innovative diagnosis of the ills of the human condition and a very traditional remedy for them. He has generally been more persuasive in his diagnosis than in his cure, and this has attracted the interest of thinkers convinced by alternative remedies, or convinced there is no remedy at all. He, like Kierkegaard, is a favorite Christian thinker of non-Christians.

Again, like Kierkegaard, Pascal is attractive to twentieth-century sensibilities because he acknowledged that people must live with contradictions; or as Goldmann says, he was a dialectical thinker. Pascal wrote eloquently about the greatness and wretchedness of human life, and while it is fair to say that he contrasted the "wretchedness of man without God" and the "happiness of man with God," it is improper to ascribe to him a traditional theological dualism.⁸ Even within the experience of wretchedness there is a possibility of greatness: "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.”⁹ In this passage reflective self-knowledge is said to give dignity to human wretchedness. Elsewhere Pascal suggests that it can flaw rare experiences of happiness: he envies the faithful who live “so unconcernedly (avec tant de négligence)”;¹⁰ he recommends unreflective devotional acts that “will make you believe and make you more docile (vous fera croire et vous abêtira)”;¹¹ and he implies regarding a man’s self-knowledge “that it is better for him not to know himself if he wants to be happy (qu’il lui meilleur de s’ignorer pour être heureux).”¹² Rational self-consciousness, says Pascal, both redeems our wretchedness and pollutes our happiness. Pascal realized viscerally that his extraordinary intelligence could not alone remedy his spiritual ills, yet he was equally convinced that faith should not entirely eclipse reason. He decried “two excesses: to exclude reason, to admit nothing but reason.”¹³

Reason, then, is both a blessing and a burden to those confronting the spiritual predicament that Pascal describes; it is emblematic of the contradictions which are the consequences of the loss of an original fullness of life and which are also impediments to its reattainment. Certainly Pascal’s own acute rational powers intensified his serious bouts of existential and theological deliberation. The results of these deliberations are evident in the several experiences of Christian religious conversion that punctuated his life. The second and most notable conversion occurred in 1654; it is commemorated in the famous memorial he inscribed on a scrap of paper and kept inside the lining of his clothes. In this short text one finds many of the philosophical and stylistic elements that previous Christian thinkers used in their descriptions of encounters with God. A central line of *The Memorial* reads simply “Fire,” suggesting that the encounter with God involves a spiritualized apprehension of light and heat. A repeated theme is that the Pascal feels “cut off (séparé)” from the God revealed in Jesus Christ; he yearns to overcome such isolation: “Let me never be cut off from him!”¹⁴ The desire to be joined with God is so important for Pascal because he understands salvation as an appropriation of the spiritual self-sufficiency of God. In *The Mystery of Jesus*, another intensely passionate religious text, he writes, “But he (Jesus Christ) healed himself and will heal me all the more surely. I must add my wounds to his, and join myself to him and he will save me in saving himself.”¹⁵ The way to effect this communion with Christ is also indicated in *The Memorial*; a sentence fragment reads: “Total submission to Jesus Christ and my director.”¹⁶ This reference to his spiritual director at the Abbey of Port-Royal, Monsieur Singlin, shows

that Pascal sought relief from his spiritual predicament, and from the deliberations it necessitated, in the surety of God's grace and in the stability afforded by a subordinate position in a hierarchical system of authority. Such avowals of obedience are the most traditional part of Pascal's spiritual remedy.

Pascal's life subsequent to his 1654 conversion is a subject of historical controversy. A hagiographical tradition indebted to his pious sisters Jacqueline and Gilberte claims that Pascal's last years were ones of solitary retirement at the Jansenist Abbey of Port-Royal des Champs. According to one story he broke cleanly and abruptly with his worldly ways of research, debate, and enterprise after a momentous incident at the Bridge of Neuilly. The story goes that Pascal and some companions were riding in a carriage drawn by several teams of horses when, due to faulty bits, the lead horses veered erratically off the bridge and toward the waters below. At the last moment, just before the carriage followed the horses to destruction, the leather reins broke, and the carriage and its occupants were spared harm. According to Gilberte, Pascal interpreted his deliverance from peril as a divine warning to mend his ways and pursue a solitary mode of life. Yet Pascal's modern biographers, such as Jean Mesnard, dispute this account, contending that Pascal did not immediately and permanently retire to Port-Royal after his conversion.¹⁷ While his greatest religious works were written subsequent to 1654, specifically *The Provincial Letters* and the unfinished *Pensées*, he also wrote then *The Mind of the Geometrician* (*De l'Esprit Géométrique*) and his essay on cycloids. Furthermore, while he gave to the poor with increased generosity after this date, his charitable venture of establishing an intracity bus service in 1662 was as socially transformative in its implications as was his earlier invention of a calculating machine. Though influential and not entirely baseless, Gilberte's biographical account of Pascal's later years is historically inaccurate and theologically unsophisticated. Until the onset of his final illness in March of 1659 Pascal engaged in only intermittent periods of devotional solitude, and his restriction of scholarly activities and other forms of public life fell far short of categorical renunciation.

Another story, this one preserved by Gilberte's daughter, Marguerite Périer, contributed to Pascal's reputation as an ascetic. She records that Pascal was converted by a sermon delivered by Monsieur Singlin at Port-Royal de Paris on the day of the Conception of the Virgin Mary. She further surmises that the example of the Virgin Mary commended in the sermon prompted a conversion experience which included a pronounced depreciation of human

sexuality.¹⁸ As revealed in the *Pensées*, Pascal's personal piety did include an express commitment to traditional Augustinian values: "True religion teaches us our duties, our weaknesses, pride and concupiscence, and the remedies, humility and mortification."¹⁹ He several times identifies bodily passions as enemies that must be destroyed by Christ.²⁰ Indeed, he contributed himself to the literature of self-denial with his theme of the self's hatefulfulness ("Le moi est haïssable").²¹ Thus family recollections and Pascal's own statements led a lineage of pious commentators to accord him an ascetic and saintly status. Now, while it seems true that Pascal gave up his own indefinite marriage plans upon his 1654 conversion, his advice to others was far less categorical. In a series of letters written in the autumn of 1656 to the Duc of Roannez and his sister, the latter of whom was then contemplating spiritual retirement as a nun at Port-Royal, Pascal encouraged a sense of Christian vocation but refrained from explicit abjurations. Of ascetic austerity he wrote very sensibly: "For it is neither austerity toward the flesh nor tribulation of the spirit but rather the good impulses of the heart which have merit and which relieve bodily and mental suffering."²² So, like his solitariness, Pascal's ascetic nature has been much exaggerated.

It is precisely upon the basis of the hagiographical traditions inaugurated by Gilberte and others that Friedrich Nietzsche called Pascal "the most instructive victim of Christianity."²³ He essentially accepted Gilberte's portrayal of her brother but interpreted Pascal's change of life quite oppositely. Nietzsche bewailed Pascal's fate of becoming the sort of man for whom Christian faith "resembles in a gruesome manner a continual suicide of reason."²⁴ Furthermore, he saw Pascal as destined to this demise, his self-hatred and morbid humility being no aberration, but instead, the true character of Christian spirituality which most Christians concealed from themselves with delusions of monkish love and learning. According to Nietzsche, Pascal attained a tragic greatness because he endured the horrible truth of Christianity once he had judged it to be the only alternative to the banalities of commerce, academic scholarship, and polite society. Nietzsche, of course, proposed a radically non-Christian alternative—his philosophy of the will to power—yet he continued to respect Pascal as "the admirable logician of Christianity."²⁵

My task in the remainder of this chapter is to present a more adequate interpretation of Pascal's predicament than did either Gilberte or Nietzsche. I am convinced that Pascal's predicament is as fraught with meaning as these commentators claim, yet I believe that meaning is different from what either supposes. From the

vantage point of the late twentieth century Pascal's predicament appears multiform: he was a mathematical physicist whose knowledge of the natural world seemed to alienate him from nature; he was a prose stylist whose most public communications seemed to accompany his increasing retirement to a strict religious community; and he was a philosopher whose self-knowledge seemed to depreciate his sense of worth as a human being. A radical depreciation of nature, society, and self seems to inform Pascal's deliberations about what one should do when bemired in sin and confronted by death. Supernatural revelation, submission to external authority, and self-mortification seem to be the hallmarks of his conception of a spiritually disciplined response to this situation. A philosophical argument for spiritual discipline motivated solely by the experienced disutility of knowledge of self, society, and the world amounts to little more than a rationalization of despair. Individual quotations from Pascal's writings can be cited which suggest this sort of rationale.

Yet a quite different case can also be made. Readers of Pascal must not shy away from the contradictions and complexities of his thought; to do so misses his creativity. Just as Pascal's attitude toward human reason was complex and ambivalent—reason being capable of partially redeeming human wretchedness and partially polluting human happiness—so too must the other central categories of his thought be given polyvalent characterizations. God is not absent from nature, but is hidden there; society is not abandoned, but becomes an arena of redemptive mission; and while the self may be hateable, it is also the thinking agent which reflects God's majesty. Pascal's spiritual remedy, like the predicament he articulated, is especially profound because it both recalls traditional elements and suggests a more novel point of view. I believe that the progressive elements are especially manifest in his famous Wager argument, in his notion of diversion, and in his modification of the epistemological foundationalism of Aristotle and Descartes. They provide a subtle intellectual counterpoise to his severe Jansenist piety.

Pascal believed that it is an irreducible part of the human predicament that momentous decisions cannot be avoided. Neither listless boredom nor strategies of diversion are successful evasions; they merely conceal one's choices, mostly from oneself. In fact, Pascal says, even apparently insignificant actions are responses to the twin perils of sin and death. Since people thereby act and endure the consequences of their actions, and since their actions are always attendant with risk, Pascal construes these actions as implicit wagers—wagers not on the outcome of some contrived game, but on

the outcome of the contest between God and the Devil for the allegiance of the human soul. It is characteristic of Pascal's penetrating and paradoxical mind that he accused his aristocratic friends of seeking to flee their greatest responsibilities by pursuing games of table and field, yet he then used ideas formulated by reflection upon games of chance in order to justify the choice that Christians make when they believe in the God who promises eternal life. A game of dice for Pascal is both a symbol betokening wretchedness and trope recommending salvation.

It is also characteristic of Pascal that his subtle insight into the behavior of his contemporaries gains its full meaning in the context of Augustinian theology. Any genuine remedy to the "wretchedness of man" must overcome both spiritual boredom and addictive passions. All passions, even diverting ones, are expressions of the concupiscence which mars human nature after Adam's fall. It blinds the eyes and distracts the mind, and for the resulting want of information, bad decisions become automatic. "We run heedlessly into the abyss after putting something in front of us to stop us seeing it."²⁶ A spiritually disciplined life, or something so simple as the experience of solitude, eradicates diversions and makes one struggle with boredom. It restricts a person to the momentous alternatives of thinking or not thinking, especially, of thinking or not thinking about God.

This is the proper context for Pascal's famous argument known as "The Wager."²⁷ It is addressed to persons no longer absorbed by diversions, but who are still calculating rationalists shaped by the gaming mentality. It speaks in the voice of someone convinced of the uselessness of proofs for God's existence yet insistent that thought be given to God as that which is most formidable and most valuable in human life. The Wager argument offers a new way of thinking about God. Nicholas Rescher provides this summary: "What is at issue is the pragmatic validation of a praxis in terms of its potential benefits, which in turn engenders an oblique, indirect validation of belief in the existence of God as a presuppositional precondition for this praxis"; he concludes: "a shift from cognition to praxis is the pivot of the Wager argument."²⁸

From theory to praxis, from evidence to prudence, and from necessity to probability—the Wager argument initiates each of these innovative transitions. Pascal believed that by properly employing these new resources one can rationally recommend belief in God. God's existence may not be rationally proved but it can be responsibly presupposed. Still he knew that it could not effect faith, and faith

in Jesus Christ he thought was the only genuine way out of the predicament posed by sin and death. To this recognition of the limitation of reason he had a most traditional response:

Get it into your head that, if you are unable to believe, it is because of your passions, since reason impels you to believe and yet you cannot do so. Concentrate then not on convincing yourself by multiplying proofs of God's existence but by diminishing your passions.²⁹

The passage concludes with a recommendation to accept church discipline and profess God's glory. The new and the old are ever combined in Pascal's thought.

Spiritually disciplined practices figure in two ways in the acquisition of a saving faith in Jesus Christ. First, they combat diversions; they counter the trivializing and numbing effects of activities which engage the mind only so much as to prevent it from being engaged by the profound concerns of life and death, and sin and salvation. Second, spiritual discipline quiets "the passions." They allow the dictates of reason to become effective in action by suppressing competing impulses. Pascal's psychology is clearly Platonic in the sense that a rational part of the soul is given the task of mastering its appetitive and spirited complements. Yet there is also an Aristotelian element here because Pascal talks about habit as the empowering force in Christian conversion:

Proofs only convince the mind; habit (*la coutume*) provides the strongest proofs and those that are most believed. It inclines the automaton, which leads the mind unconsciously along with it. . . . It is, then, habit that convinces us and makes so many Christians.³⁰

Spiritually disciplined practices thus serve to break bad habits and establish new ones. They are the preparation and implementation of reason, making rational reflection about God both possible and effective. They combine with reason in the fixation of faith. For a good Augustinian like Pascal, they also depend upon the presence of God's grace, being ultimately a work of the Holy Spirit rather than an individual achievement. Hence in Pascal's view faith is attained through the interconnected operations of habituation, ratiocination, and inspiration.³¹

Opting to trust God and accept church discipline serves a social function according to Pascal. It makes the Christian a "fixed point" by which others can note the progress of secular society toward depravity.³² When portrayed as a proto-existentialist Pascal is too often abstracted from the social realities of his time. Pascal scrutinized diverting pastimes as a member of an elite stratum of French society. He was the son of a successful lawyer who enjoyed considerable wealth and, at most times, court favor. Hence laboring to provide food and shelter did not occupy the minds of persons like him. With few of the demands of quotidian occupations, persons like Pascal were more likely to ward off thoughts of death with "some novel and agreeable passion which keeps them busy, like gambling, hunting, some absorbing show, in short by what is called diversion (*divertissement*)."³³ Pascal perceived his social peers to be consumed with a desire for power in their occupations or for diversion in their recreations. Each pursuit achieves the same end: "Being unable to cure death, wretchedness, and ignorance, men have decided in order to be happy, not to think about such things."³⁴

Pascal reduced the most respected social pursuits to more humble categories. Art became for him a type of diversion for the upper classes; Pascal never took much pride in his own literary gifts. Scientific research, like the *beaux-arts* confined to the upper classes in the seventeenth century, took on for him no more significance than other forms of practical work. In a letter to Pierre de Fermat, Pascal presented his last recorded thoughts on the labors of mathematicians: "For to speak to you frankly about geometry, I consider it to be so unprofitable that I make little distinction between a man who is merely a geometrician and a skillful artisan."³⁵ For Pascal, the social options of his day seemed few: marriage and career, bachelorhood and diversion, or submission to the church. For Pascal, the quest for spiritual discipline begins with a recognition of a diseased and atrophied community life.

Pascal understood that one of the most distressing aspects of the human predicament is that when people try to resolve it they frequently compound its harm. Certainly *divertissement* is portrayed by him as such an illusory source of relief. The counterpart of *divertissement* as a mode of practice is the theoretical orientation now called foundationalism. Pascal, like Descartes, used the metaphor of the foundations of an edifice to convey the role of first principles in a scientific exposition of knowledge. Unlike Descartes, Pascal understood methodological prescriptions for securing first principles as strategies for attaining happiness apart from God, or at least, apart

from revealed truth. Just as people seek comfort and safety in a well-constructed domicile so too do they seek a more rarefied sort of security from a rigorous system of cosmological knowledge; yet in Pascal's view the disquietude caused by the unpredictable destructiveness of nature and the inevitable demise of human life was not reparable by a purely intellectual conversion.³⁶ He rejected the strategy of a rationally theistic foundationalism inaugurated by Plato and reformulated by Descartes. He instead affirmed elements of Socratic skepticism which emphasized the intermediate status of the agent of knowledge as neither fully ignorant nor fully informed; he combined this Socratic skepticism with the modified Platonism of his Augustinian theology.

An expert geometrician himself, Pascal followed Plato and Aristotle in believing that rigorous knowledge should conform to the axiomatic form of presentation which had proved so effective in the development of geometry. Items of knowledge were most certainly connected by logical deduction. On this point he seemed to harbor little doubt. This fact is ironic because Augustine accepted some Academic arguments for the inefficacy of logic which cited logical paradoxes as evidence. (See *Contra Academicos* 3.29.) Pascal directed his skepticism toward the sets of first principles, or in geometrical parlance, the axioms, from which theorems were logically deduced. Theorems derived from axioms have the rules of inference to vouch for their truth, while the axioms themselves were said to have a character of "self-evidence"—they are so evidently true that one cannot clearly conceive them to be false. Pascal correctly surmised that the development of the mathematical and physical sciences since antiquity required first principles sufficiently informative so as to make claims of self-evidence implausible; furthermore, his sense of the depth of human fallibility made him judge to be unpromising Descartes' methodological route to basic truths. Pascal came to believe that first principles gained their cogency by the heart, not the mind, by intuition and not logical evidence, ultimately, by faith and not reason. Herein lies Pascal's famous dichotomy of faith and reason, and his motivations for giving faith priority even to the point of elevating devotional life to a status superior to scientific research. Pascal's theological objections to Cartesian rationalism may not themselves have been particularly progressive, but they forced him to adopt a more practical strategy for solving his predicament, and this I think was fortuitous.

An example of an area of mathematical research which lacks unproblematic axioms is analysis or calculus. This mathematical topic

was pioneered by Pierre de Fermat and by Pascal himself—elements of his essay on cycloids proved influential in Leibnitz's formulation of basic principles of integral calculus.³⁷ This area of mathematics touched upon problems of the infinitesimal and the infinite, and helped provide metaphors for Pascal's description of human life as the experience of dwelling suspended between "two abysses of infinity and nothingness."³⁸ Knowledge has no worldly foundation and human beings have no secure natural abode. "What is man in nature? A nothing compared to the infinite, a whole compared to the nothing, a middle point between all and nothing, infinitely remote from an understanding of the extremes; the end of things and their principles are inevitably hidden from him in impenetrable secrecy."³⁹ Pascal eloquently says that the human predicament cannot be adequately addressed without attentiveness to the natural world; yet he is equally eloquent in saying that nature cannot be reduced to an object of human intellectual mastery and technological control. The natural world in its beauty and terror points him to God, and reminds him of the necessity that grace and habit aid reason in the spiritual life.

Many aspects of Pascal's predicament which were once germane to a select company of privileged individuals like himself are now characteristic of the middle classes of developed nations. A more productive and less regimented economy allows many people to enjoy the breadth of occupational and recreational experience Pascal enjoyed. Their predicament is in many cases intensified by experiences of the insufficiency of several different paths to self-fulfillment. Also, advances in education and communication have enabled many people to bring sophisticated tools of analysis and multiple points of view to an understanding of the spiritual challenge of their death and their ineradicable shortcomings. As was the case for Pascal their predicament is deepened by sensitivity to complexities and inconsistencies in their situation.

Pascal's insight that people divert themselves from contending with the most important issues in their lives was especially prescient of today's consumerist culture. An immense variety of diverting consumer products and services are available today, and they are available to persons of relatively modest means. Hunting is now supplemented by other survivalist pursuits and various forms of commercialized thrill seeking; alcoholism occurs now as only one manifestation of the abuse of an expanding list of licit and illicit drugs; debauchery is pandered to by the traditional prostitutes and pornographers, and by new dating services and high-tech means of sexual titillation; and finally, gambling, Pascal's favored example,

is now cultivated alike by government lotteries, corporate casinos, and organized crime. This list only includes correlates to the diversions Pascal mentions; it is sufficient to indicate that much of contemporary culture is devoted to creating a life of *divertissement*.

In the intellectual realm Pascal's views likewise signalled many broader developments. His rejection of self-evident epistemological foundations has increasingly found favor with recent philosophers, though his resort to faith as an alternative source of certainty has not proved nearly as portentous. Likewise Pascal's appreciation of the value of restating traditional intellectual conundrums in terms of practice and probability has proved prescient, though his interest in traditional theological perplexities has not been widely shared. For philosophers of religion Pascal's legacy includes the strategy of conceiving God's relation to the human predicament in a new way. As Rescher notes, it is a relation couched more in practical than theoretical terms. This point of view, I believe, holds great promise and will be adopted in the chapters that follow. I admit that Pascal's own practical approach conceives human interests and benefits in an entirely otherworldly way; thus it cannot be too easily identified with the pragmatism of William James, who was indebted to Pascal for parts of his own philosophy of religion, nor with the emphasis on praxis in Marxist thought and recent Christian theology. Still an important shift commences with him: spiritual life self-reflectively locates its origins in a practical predicament. Also, Pascal's example of bringing new scientific ideas to bear upon traditional theological problems will be emulated here. Indeed, the second part of this essay is concerned with the use of some increasingly important scientific notions for understanding practical regimens of religious behavior.

On the other hand, the way Pascal drew upon many Platonic and Augustinian resources is vulnerable to the criticism that they too compounded the difficulties he confronted; the next two chapters will expound these early Christian resources and offer a critical evaluation of them. Nietzsche's appreciative criticism of Pascal, briefly mentioned above, foreshadows the philosophical continuation of the project endeavored here. Nietzsche's negation of traditional ascetic ideals is something with which any sympathetic treatment of spiritual discipline must contend. Also, Nietzsche's way of rejecting religion while insisting upon spiritual self-mastery is a continuation of the philosophical rethinking of this issue begun by Pascal himself and which I shall carry forward in the subsequent chapters of this essay.

CLEMENT'S RATIONALE

That Pascal gave a traditional response to his novel articulation of the human spiritual predicament does not immediately imply that his response was inadequate. If one concludes that the nature and consequences of Pascal's 1654 conversion do not provide a model for contemporaries who share the main features of his predicament, then a case should be made to this end. It should be argued that the practices he recommends, and the philosophical notions which undergird them, suffer from significant deficiencies. I shall try to make such a case. In order to do so the relevant philosophical notions and religious practices must be identified. It is not difficult to locate works containing these precedents; indeed, it is more difficult to choose from among the plethora of available materials. Historical and heuristic considerations will guide my choice.

Pascal was a partisan of the theological views of Cornelis Jansen, a Dutch Roman Catholic theologian who crusaded for a traditional conception of personal holiness and against what he perceived to be the licentious theological innovations of certain Jesuits. Jansen's views were published posthumously in a book entitled *Augustinus*. As the title suggests, Jansen found Augustine's doctrine of election, with its strong affirmation of grace's efficacy and irresistibility, to be a useful theological tool for enforcing a comparably adamant Christian moral code.

In some ways these theoretical and practical manifestations of rigor were not well matched, as theological views intended to motivate disciplined behavior would more naturally seem to presuppose some appreciation for individual moral exertion. On the other hand, the philosophical conceptions of God and human nature in Augustine's thought unequivocally provided resources for a severe religious ethic such as was advocated by Jansen. This second set of ideas, though, owes less to Augustine's retrieval of Paul than to his version of a Christian Platonism. Of course, Augustine was not the first Christian thinker to appropriate elements of Greek philosophy for the purpose of articulating a conception of disciplined Christian behavior. Clement of Alexandria, writing in the latter part of the second century, is arguably the first in this lineage. He preceded Augustine in drawing upon the resources of the Platonic tradition, but he did not anticipate Augustine's doctrine of election; he quite freely confessed spiritual achievement to be a joint product of God's grace and human effort. While Clement drew upon the earlier writings of Justin Martyr, he more self-consciously justified his borrowings from Greek philosophy

and gave more sustained attention to religious practices than did Justin. In large part these traits emerged from Clement's efforts to overcome the bias of orthodox Christians against philosophy and to counter Gnostic use of philosophy for authorizing extremely ascetic practices.

There are also heuristic reasons for turning to Clement's writings as a source for early Christian conceptions of the spiritual life. These writings are more ample than Justin's, but less extensive than Augustine's. Also, they more directly address the issues of interest here. Of Clement's several extant writings, one, *Paedagogus*, is devoted to practical prescriptions for Christian behavior, and a second, the *Stromata*, contains a chapter which philosophically describes and justifies Christian spiritual life. This latter text has pagan parallels in both Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism, e.g., respectively, the second book of Apuleius' *De dogmate Platonis* and the first book of Plotinus' *Enneades* (1.4). Greek philosophers like these Platonists were quite critical of Olympian religion and much inclined to understand philosophy as concerned with the discovery and pursuit of a way of life leading to happiness. So were the Stoics, to whose views Clement's probable teacher, Pantaenus, was attracted before his conversion to Christianity. These parallels suggest that Clement is historically close to the origin of a philosophical conception of spiritual discipline which has informed Christian practice until the era of Pascal. Indeed, Clement's rationale for spiritual discipline will be summarized in this chapter because it is representative of the tradition of spirituality inherited by Pascal. The themes that Pascal presents imagistically in his mystical writings, e.g., *The Memorial* and *The Mystery of Jesus*, Clement first articulated discursively in the texts cited above. In a discursive format these themes are also more available for philosophical evaluation.

In the seventh book of the *Stromata* Clement describes the beliefs and practices of the Christian "gnostic (γνωστικόν)".⁴⁰ He deliberately tries to wrest this term from the Alexandrian followers of Valentinus. When employing the term in the presentation of apostolic teaching, he invokes other Greek philosophical conceptions. Clement's attempt is epitomized by his special way of identifying the Platonic theme of "assimilation to God (ὁμοίωσις θεῷ)" with, first, the Genesis affirmation that Adam was made in the "image and likeness of God" (Gen. 1.26) and, subsequently, with Paul's call to be imitators of Christ, the second Adam (I Cor. 11.1).⁴¹ Christian Gnostics, like the heretical Valentinians, made similar claims. What distinguishes Clement from Valentinus is the strenuous effort he makes to have

knowledge of a transcendent God distinct, but continuous with, a less sophisticated faith in Christ; also, he sought to make the experiential preconditions for each sort of divine encounter, likewise, distinct but continuous. That meant integrating a plan for ascetic self-discipline with a regimen of moderate social behavior; in more philosophical terms, it meant articulating compatible paths of salvation consisting of the extirpation of the passions (ἀπάθεια, adapted from Stoic ethics) and their moderation (μετριοπάθεια, more characteristic of Aristotelian ethics). Contrary to the more extreme Gnostics, each path is affirmed as a legitimate way of coming to see and know God, and while the final vision—when Christians no longer “see in a mirror dimly but . . . face to face” (I Cor. 13.12)—is reserved in both cases until after death, Clement was sufficiently elitist to claim that Christians following an ascetic life more fully anticipate this vision before death than do other Christians.

Clement and Gnostics like Valentinus draw upon some of the same Greek resources—Orphic, Pythagorean, and especially, Platonic, Peripatetic, and Stoic materials. The task of identifying the classical sources Clement used in describing and justifying spiritual practices is a complex one. It will be simplified here by selecting for investigation three notions of special importance, all of which can be gleaned from the seventh book on spiritual life in the *Stromata*. Giving them names, they are the themes of suprasensual vision, unencumbered causality, and static hierarchy. These notions, or categorical themes, are the result of a history of philosophical thinking that Clement inherits. It was customary in older scholarship, such as Charles Bigg’s classic volume, *The Christian Platonists of Alexandria*, to understand Clement as rather directly appropriating materials from Plato, Aristotle, and Chrysippus. More recent research, e.g., Salvatore Lilla’s *Clement of Alexandria: A Study in Christian Platonism and Gnosticism*, holds that the synthesis of second-century Middle Platonism constitutes the proper philosophical source for most of Clement’s philosophical ideas.⁴² Granting this historical point, I shall sometimes speak of Clement’s intellectual heritage in an abbreviated fashion that neglects to mention these Middle Platonic intermediaries. That my interests here are more philosophical than historical motivates this usage.

One intermediary I cannot fail to mention is Philo of Alexandria. In his *Philosophy of the Church Fathers* Harry Wolfson provocatively presents the history of Christian philosophy as beginning with Philo.⁴³ This overstates the case, but it does well to emphasize that a major factor in Clement’s intellectual environment was the Hellenistic

Judaism of Alexandria for which Philo's writings provide ample representation. Each of the themes denominated above are prefigured in Philo's writings. For instance, in the tract *De vita contemplativa* Philo describes a Jewish community devoted to the study of Torah and a disciplined communal way of life. There he employs the theme of suprasensual vision to condemn traditional Egyptian religion, with its animal images of deities, and to recommend the exegetical practices of the "Therapeutae." The Egyptians, Philo writes, "have lost the use of the most vital of senses, sight"; the true import of this judgment is clarified by subsequent remarks: "And by this I do not mean the sight of the body but of the soul, the sight which alone gives a knowledge of truth and falsehood."⁴⁴ In a more affirmative tone Philo observes that by means of the allegorical interpretation of sacred scripture—"by looking through the words as through mirrors"—the Therapeutae were able "to discern the inward and hidden through the outward and visible."⁴⁵ These brief quotations suggest the central features of the theme of suprasensual vision: (1) visual perception is a model for all types of human knowledge, and (2) a vision somehow unmediated by sensual materiality is paradigmatic of the highest sort of wisdom, including sacred wisdom.

The theme of suprasensual vision posits that the goal of the Christian life is to attain a vision of God that transcends perception with the eyes and becomes a more intimate sort of communion. In the seventh chapter of the *Stromata*, Clement writes:

Counted as holy among the holy, and translated absolutely and entirely to another sphere, they (gnostic souls) keep on always moving to higher and yet higher regions, until they no longer greet the divine vision in or by means of mirrors, but for loving hearts feast for ever on the uncloying, never-ending sight, radiant in its transparent clearness, while throughout the endless ages they taste a never-wearying delight, and thus continue, all alike honored with an identity of preeminence.⁴⁶

The dualism of visible and intelligible spheres shows definite Platonic influence, as does the intermixture of language of love and ascent. In a subsequent part of the same passage Clement explicitly invokes Platonic language in labelling this vision a "gnostic assimilation" (*γνωστικῆς ἐξομοιώσεως*). The language here suggests that the object perceived is not strictly sensible and that the encounter itself is not strictly ocular. In a later passage Clement is more explicit in stressing

the intellectual and suprasensual character of this vision: "When he (the Christian gnostic) gets hold of a scientific principle, he believes that he sees the Lord, while he directs his eyes to the unseen; and if he fancies that he sees what he is unwilling to see, he chides the faculty of vision whenever he is conscious of a feeling of pleasure at the visual impression; since he desires to see and hear nothing but what beseems him."⁴⁷ The true Christian gnostic experiences a seeing which is not seeing—a knowing which is not knowing. Indeed, at the conclusion of the chapter of the *Stromata* which deals with issues of faith and knowledge Clement affirms the central tenets of a negative or apophatic theology. (See *Stromata* 5.11–12.) Part of his motivation at this juncture is pastoral; he is consistently concerned with reconciling the faith of uneducated Christians with the knowledge of more sophisticated pagan converts. A trusting knowing of what God is not integrates elements of faith and knowledge.

A second pastoral reality helps explain Clement's fondness for the language of suprasensual vision. This language expresses the paradoxical experience of Christians who receive divine grace in the sacrament of baptism. One is saved by dying and rising with Christ, yet one still needs to pursue a fuller communion with God. Clement is rather frankly a synergist, believing that while God's grace is necessary for salvation, human effort is also required for attaining the higher stages of spiritual life. For this effort both philosophy and spiritual disciplines like devotional prayer and physical austerities are important. Practical regimens of behavior which moderate or extirpate the passions are crucial because they make possible a vision of God untainted by sensuality: they, along with God's grace, are antidotes to a human sinfulness that corrupts affective dispositions in the direction of inordinate sensual attachments. Philosophy is a different sort of schooling in the apprehension of transcendent realities. Clement believed that philosophy served a comparable function for the ancient Greeks as the Mosaic Law served for the Jews—it restrained sin and prepared adherents for the reception of the Gospel of Christ. For individual development, too, philosophy serves as a propaedeutic; it brings the student beyond the stage of understanding attainable in the liberal arts, and then readies that pupil to receive the deepest mysteries revealed by Christ. Philosophy, like spiritually disciplined practices, is only partially successful: the pious Christian attains a vision of God in this life, but one still tainted by sensual impairments. This intermediary situation is the condition of the baptized Christian during mortal life.

It is in this context of pastoral concerns that Clement's employment of the philosophically pregnant theme of suprasensual vision should be understood. As the goal of the spiritual life this vision bears the philosophical influence of Plato's contrast between human knowledge of the visible and intelligible worlds. Like many ancient Greek philosophers, Plato based his empirical epistemology upon the paradigm of visual perception. Then when speaking of geometrical knowledge in the *Republic*, Plato identifies it as knowledge of the intelligible rather than the visible world, because while geometers employ images, they do so only as illustrations, the actual objects of study being immaterial. Socrates is portrayed as saying, "The very things which they mold and draw, these things they treat in their turn as only images, but what they really seek is to get sight of those realities which can only be seen with the mind" (ἀ οὐκ ἄν ἄλλως ἴδοι τις ἢ τῆ διανοίᾳ).⁴⁸ Dialectical reasoning, the other mode of genuine knowledge, does not proceed deductively from first principles, but from these principles it ascends yet higher to the one first principle "making no use whatever of any object of sense but only of pure ideas moving on through ideas to ideas and ending with ideas."⁴⁹ Such passages are the philosophical inspiration for Clement's adoption of the theme of suprasensual vision.

Two stages of philosophical generalization are evident in the history recounted here. First, Plato uses the notion of geometrical knowledge, with its idealized objects and its axiomatic structure, in order to explain the character of all reliable knowledge. Then, Clement and the tradition he appropriates uses the Platonic conception of knowledge for explaining the character of the human encounter with God. With each generalization there is a correlative valuation: knowledge which is not conformable to the geometrical pattern is depreciated as are encounters with God not conformable to the Platonic vision. This philosophically informed description of experiencing God implies that a vision of God is valuable not only for strictly soteriological reasons, but also because as a mode of knowledge it represents the highest achievement of a human being, at least, according to Platonic philosophy. It also underlies Clement's rationale for specific spiritual disciplines, for instance, chastity. Restraint on sexual desire promotes that passionless state of being which is a prerequisite for an suprasensual vision of God. Clement is careful to allow that this virtue may consist of modest sexual intercourse among marriage partners or of celibacy by religious adepts: he shuns a radically world-denying ethic.⁵⁰

Pascal was an intellectual heir of this twofold generalization. He believed that genuinely reliable knowledge is presentable in the axiomatic form characteristic of geometry, and he confessed that God can be apprehended as spiritualized light and heat. He likewise drew the conclusion that quelling human passion was a prerequisite for the fruition of the spiritual life. Hence Pascal's conversion experience, and the practical changes in behavior it effected, was not simply a manifestation of his own peculiar psychology; it was also the expression of a long tradition of reflection upon the nature and meaning of a spiritually disciplined life.

The second categoreal theme was introduced indirectly when reference was made to the passionless state of being which is a prerequisite for the vision of God. This anthropological version of the theme of unencumbered causality is based upon a theological counterpart which is logically and temporally prior. The latter version says that God is a First Cause so powerful as to create and rule the entire world, and it also says that God is so transcendent to this created realm as to be immune from any reciprocal action by creation. Thus the Christian gnostic who acts in a passionless way is imitating the divine model of agency. Christians are called to glorify God's creative power as it is physically manifest in the natural world. Yet they are also called to know God as a causal power of another sort: "Being ruler therefore of himself and of all that belongs to him the gnostic makes a genuine approach to truth, having a firm hold of divine science, for the name science would fitly be given to the knowledge and firm hold of intellectual objects; its function in regard to divine things is to investigate what is the First Cause (*πρῶτον αἰτίαν*). . . that through which all things were made and without which nothing has been made."⁵¹ Clement here portrays God as a First Cause in the sense of being the ultimate source of the world's intelligibility; this philosophical conception complements the more anthropomorphic picture of God as a personified agent who creates and rules the physical world.

Henry Chadwick believes that Clement's doctrine of creation is the central and distinctive feature of Clement's thought: his affirmation of the goodness of God's creation distinguishes him from the world-fleeing Gnostics and his affirmation of a natural knowledge of divine providence distinguished him from the naturalistic hedonism of many pagans.⁵² Certainly Clement's portrayal of God as a personified agent of creation is congenial with the Biblical account of creation; on the other hand, his attribution to God of the title of First Cause is characteristic of Greek philosophical foundationalism.