

The Provincial Letters. Blaise Pascal. Penguin Classics; trans. A.J. Krailsheimer; Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1982.

About the Author

This book was written in 1657 by a man of massive intellect, already admired for his brilliance in the fields of science and mathematics.

Background

This book still has considerable relevance for the Protestant-Catholic debate, given that Pascal centers his attention on contrasting views of grace.

Pascal had personal reasons for deciding to weigh into the debate. In 1646 Pascal's family was profoundly swayed by Jansenist teaching and his sister, Jacqueline became a nun in the convent that became the centre for Jansenism.

It was in November 1654 that Pascal's conversion occurred which resulted in him defending Port-Royal. Pascal had a deep respect for the piety he saw exemplified by those who lived at his sister's convent. By this time Pascal was already highly esteemed for the brilliance he had displayed in the fields of science and mathematics.

Jansenism represented another Catholic approach to understanding the grace of God and arguably was the greatest cause of division in the Catholic Church between the Reformation and the French Revolution.

In many respects Jansenists were close in thought and doctrine to the Protestant Reformers, though Jansenius rejected the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith, seeing this as a protracted and gradual process commencing with conversion. They too stressed original sin and human depravity to the point of concluding that people were incapable of saving themselves, although, unlike Calvinists, they did not believe that those who had been predestined by God for salvation could be assured of such standing.

Various popes condemned Jansenism (Innocent X, Alexander VII, Clement XI and Pius X). It was officially outlawed by the Catholic Church in 1712 and Jansenists were excommunicated in 1719. The convent of Port-Royal was leveled to the ground after the nuns were forcibly removed in 1710.

Letter 1

Letter written to a provincial gentleman by one of his friends on the subject of the present debates in the Sorbonne. Paris, 23 January, 1656

Pascal begins with Arnauld's response to the late Pope's condemnation of certain propositions. Arnauld accepted this condemnation but asserted these propositions were not to be found in Jansenius' book. Since Catholic bishops had asserted that these propositions were to be found in the book the question arose as to whether Arnauld was guilty of *temerity*, that is, error short of heresy, for claiming otherwise.

Background

Arnauld is Antoine Arnaud, the brother of the abbess of the convent of Port-Royal, which under Arnaud's mentor, Saint-Cyran (Jean Duvergier de Hauranne), had become the centre for Jansenism, the school within Catholicism now being treated as heretical. Cornelius Otto Jansenius, later Bishop of Ypres, had been a fellow-student with Saint-Cyran at Louvain. These two men desired to bring reform to the Catholic Church and saw the Jesuits and their methods as obstacles to this, opening up the Catholic Church to legitimate criticism. Jansenius' book is *Augustinus*, a work published after Jansenius died as the victim of an epidemic in 1576, being the fruit of some 20 years of solid research into the thought of Augustine, who was recognized as a peerless authority on the subject of grace.

In 1653 Innocent X declared as heretical five propositions that had been sent to him as extracts from *Augustinus* by the Faculty of Theology at the Sorbonne:

1. Some commandments of God are impossible to the righteous though they desire and strive to fulfil them, according to the power they possess at the moment; and they lack the grace which would render these commandments possible.
2. In the state of fallen nature, resistance to interior grace is impossible.
3. In order to deserve merit or demerit, in the state of fallen nature, man is not required to enjoy the freedom which excludes necessity; it is enough for him to enjoy freedom from constraint.
4. The semi-Pelagian admitted the need for interior and prevenient grace for every action, even in the act of initial faith: but they were heretics because they claimed this grace to be such that the human will was able to resist or obey it.
5. It is a renewal of the semi-Pelagian heresy to say that Christ died for all men without exception.

Krailsheimer points out that only one of the five propositions can be located in the text of Jansenius' writings and that even this one is suspect given its context.

For Pascal the real nub of the issue concerned a statement made by Arnauld "that the grace without which we can do nothing had failed in St. Peter when he fell."

Pascal now tries to understand why Arnauld was so opposed for saying this. So Pascal visits "one of the most zealous opponents of the Jansenists", proposing that the opponents formally decide that "grace is given to all men." [If they were to decide this then they would be demonstrating that they indeed opposed an essential aspect of Jansenist thought, e.g. proposition 5]. But this academic said this was problematic, that some of his party did not believe grace is given to all and he even quoted from Augustine: "We know that grace is not given to all men" (33).

So far, then, Pascal has failed to find out on what theological grounds these opponents reject Jansenist teaching. He has another try at identifying this. He reminds the academic that Jansenists taught "that grace is efficacious and determines our will to do good." He then asks the academic whether the opponents of Jansenism are prepared to unitedly condemn this. However, the academic does the very opposite, hailing this teaching as orthodox, consistent with Thomist and his own thought.

Background

Reflecting on this discussion, Pascal comments that he had overdone the Molinist role. In asking about whether efficacious grace determines whether the human will does good Pascal was cleverly exposing the fact that Thomists (following the thought of Thomas Aquinas) and Molinists (following doctrine first formulated by the Spaniard Luis de Molina in 1588), while both opposing Jansenists, disagreed on this very point.

The Molinist view of grace was rejected by Thomists, especially led by the Dominican Bañez. Both schools accepted that there was such a thing as *gratia efficax*, efficacious grace. But both schools answered in different ways the fundamental question as to how grace could be infallibly efficacious without compromising the freedom of the will, with the Molinists emphasizing the unrestrained freedom of the will and the Thomists placing their stress on the infallible efficacy of grace.

Thomists argue that it is the very nature of this grace that ensures its infallible success and teach the intrinsic efficacy of grace. Molinists argue that it is the free cooperation of the will that ensures the infallible success of grace and teach the extrinsic efficacy of grace. This question is still very much alive for Catholics today since the Council of Trent insists that grace is indeed efficacious but that simultaneously the consent of the will involves an unimpaired freedom.

Pascal is now perplexed and asks the academic to explain what made Arnaud's proposition heretical. The academic retorted that the heresy consisted in a failure to recognize "that the righteous have the power to fulfil God's commandments in the way in which we understand it" (34). However, Pascal, after talking with a fervent Jansenist later returned to this academic reporting that "the Jansenists agreed on the power of the righteous to fulfil the commandments" (34-35).

The academic told Pascal he was not theologically sophisticated enough to understand the difference between the Jansenists and opponents like himself. He maintained that they differed in their understand of the nature of the "power" in question. Opponents like himself insisted that the power is *proximate*, something, he claimed, the Jansenists did not accept.

Pascal, confused by this new term, is sent back to the Jansenists for clarification. He is informed that Molinists can't even agree among themselves what is meant by proximate power, yet have agreed to use this word in order to destroy Arnaud.

Pascal next asks a Molinist what it means "to have a proximate power to do something" (36). He is told "it means having everything necessary for doing it, so that nothing more is needed in order to act." Pascal concludes that "having *proximate power* to cross a river means having a boat, boatman, oars, and so on, so that nothing more is needed" and that "having *proximate power* to see means having good sight, and being in good light. For anyone with good sight in the dark would not have proximate power to see... since he would need light, without which no one can see" (36-37).

Now Pascal returns to the notion that "all the righteous always have proximate power to keep the commandments", concluding this means "that they always have the grace necessary for fulfilling them, so that they lack nothing as far as God is concerned" (37). Since they already have all that is necessary for praying God to help them there is no need for them to have any fresh grace to pray. He also confirms that this particular Molinist school's position is that the righteous do not need an efficacious grace to pray to God.

Pascal asks neo-Thomists among the Dominicans to explain *proximate power*. He is told, contrary to the Molinist position he has just heard, that it is "not the power which contains everything needful for action." Pascal is told that a man with good sight in the dark nevertheless has the *proximate power to see*. Consequently, though the righteous always have the *proximate power* to pray to God they do "need extra assistance to pray, otherwise they will never pray" (37), that is, "an efficacious grace, not given to all". When this neo-Thomist declares the contrary opinion to be heretical Pascal tells him he is not merely calling Jansenists heretics but at least some Molinists as well. The neo-Thomist prevaricates, not prepared to call these Molinists heretics merely because they use the same term *proximate power* and even though the neo-Thomist position is not discernibly different from the Jansenist position.

Background

In 1607 a papal order had forbidden further disputes on the question of grace following some 20 years of disputation between Molinists and Thomists. Now these two Catholic factions are papering over these underlying cracks with a term concerning the meaning of which they do not agree.

Pascal concludes that since the Molinists and Thomists are not prepared to contest each other's differing views then neither side is able to condemn the following Jansenist positions:

1. That grace is not given to all men.
2. That all the righteous have power to fulfil God's commandments.
3. That in order to fulfil them, and even to pray, they still need an efficacious grace which irresistibly determines their wills.
4. That this grace is not always given to all the righteous, and depends on the pure mercy of God.

Pascal does not hide his contempt for "this barbaric Sorbonical word", namely *proximate power*.

Letter 2

Second letter written to a provincial by one of his friends. Paris, 29 January, 1656

Pascal is visited by a friend who is “fully conversant with the Jesuits’ secrets” (41). Pascal asks for clarification as to the points at issue between the Jesuits and the Jansenists. His friend identifies two main issues: (1) *proximate power*; (2) *sufficient grace*.

Background

The Society of Jesus (Jesuits) was founded by Ignatius Loyola in 1534. They spearheaded the Counter Reformation and promoted Molina’s position on the relationship of grace and the human will. The Protestant Reformers stressed human depravity and the complete inability of people to save themselves, teaching that original sin has radically damaged the freedom of the will, e.g. Luther’s book *The Bondage of the Will*. Against this the Molinism of the Jesuits insisted that people have genuinely free wills and are themselves able to contribute significantly, through their works, to their own salvation.

Pascal now learns that “the Jesuits claim that there is a grace given generally to all, so subject to free will that this makes it efficacious or not as it chooses without any fresh assistance from God, and without anything more being needed for it to act effectively”, hence *sufficient grace*, “because by itself it is sufficient for action” (41).

Background

As Pascal indicates, the Molinists emphasize the concept of *sufficient grace*. According to their view, God’s grace is always intrinsically sufficient but it is the exercise of free will which by the giving or withholding of extrinsic consent determines whether God’s offer of grace becomes efficacious or remains merely sufficient.

By contrast, the Jansenists “will not admit the existence of any actually sufficient grace which is not also efficacious; in other words, all forms of grace which do not determine the will to effective action are insufficient for action, because they say that we never act without *efficacious grace*” (41).

But, complicating the picture, was the disagreement between the Jesuits and the neo-Thomists. For the latter “agree with the Jesuits in admitting a *sufficient grace* given to all men, but yet they maintain that men never act through this grace alone, and that before they can act they need God to give them an *efficacious grace* really determining their wills to action, and not given by God to all men” (41-42).

Background

Molinists regarded the Thomistic approach as illogical, given their insistence on the intrinsic efficacy of grace, since if grace is not able to effect salvation in an unaided manner then it is necessarily insufficient. Thomists, presupposing an essential difference between sufficient and efficacious grace, argued that it is the working of a new grace that enables sufficient grace to become efficacious grace. According to this reasoning, it must be a rebellious exercise of free will which causes God to refrain from applying the supplementary grace that otherwise would have caused sufficient grace to become efficacious. The Molinists argue that Thomists are necessarily saying something they do not want to say, namely that if the will is so able to block God's work of grace then God has no part in influencing the disposition of the will. But this then means that Thomists are left only with sufficient grace, not efficacious grace.

This summary of neo-Thomist thought confuses Pascal because he can't see how it differs from Jansenist teaching. His friend admits that the only difference is that Dominican neo-Thomists say sufficient grace is given to all men whereas the Jansenists teach not all receive this sufficient grace. However, when it is all boiled down Pascal can't see any substantial difference, since neo-Thomists still believe efficacious grace, not given to all, is necessary in order to act.

Given that the neo-Thomists are actually closer in thought to the Jansenists than to the Jesuits Pascal finds it difficult to understand why the Jesuits have teamed up with the neo-Thomists against the Jansenists and why they aren't also inveighing against the neo-Thomists as well. He is told that everyone excepting sophisticated theologians assume that because both Jesuits and neo-Thomists use the same term they are teaching the same thing and that the Jesuits think this is a good strategy for eventually getting their own doctrine established.

Pascal gets into a conversation with a neo-Thomist and clarifies that they believe that all people need not only *proximate power*, which never enables them to act, but also *sufficient grace*, which also does not enable people to act. The neo-Thomist insists it is sufficient grace even though it is of no effect without efficacious grace. Pascal summarises, "That means that all have enough grace, and all do not have enough; that this grace suffices, although it does not suffice; that it is sufficient in name and insufficient in fact. Quite honestly, Father, this is a very subtle doctrine" (44).

Pascal asks the neo-Thomist:

...if for dinner you were given just two ounces of bread and a glass of water, would you be pleased with your prior if he told you that this was sufficient food for you, on the grounds that by adding something else (which he was not going to give you) you would have everything necessary for a good dinner? How then can you allow yourself to say that all men have *sufficient grace* to act, when you admit that a further grace is absolutely necessary for action, and is not possessed by all men? (44)

The neo-Thomist insists that it is a heresy to deny that *efficacious grace* is necessary for effective action. Pascal responds that he doesn't know what position to adopt. This neo-Thomist has just said the Jesuit position is heretical. Yet to agree with the neo-Thomist contravenes common sense and the Jesuits view neo-Thomists as demented. The Jansenist position which denies sufficient grace is the only one that appears to concord with faith and reason.

Pascal's Jansenist friend then gets the neo-Thomist to concede that while he and Jesuits speak of *sufficient grace* given to all that they both disagree on the substantial meaning of this term. In reality the neo-Thomists do not really believe that sufficient grace is given to all on any reasonable definition of the word *sufficient*. The neo-Thomist then explained that they had adopted use of this term because the Jesuits controlled popular belief and they wanted to avoid being treated like Calvinists and Jansenists.

Letter 3

Third letter written to a provincial by way of answer to the foregoing. Paris, 9 February 1656

Quoting from Augustine and Chrysostom Arnauld states: "The Fathers show us a righteous man in the person of St. Peter in whom that grace failed without which we can do nothing" (55). Augustine had commented that "God left St. Peter without grace" and Chrysostom said Peter's fall occurred "because grace failed him". Yet it was this solitary proposition by Arnauld, indistinguishable from the thought of Church Fathers, that the Molinists inexplicably described as "temerarious, impious, blasphemous, anathematized and heretical" (55). A leading Molinist, M. Le Moine remarked, "This proposition would be Catholic in the mouth of anyone else; it is only in M. Arnauld that the Sorbonne has condemned it" (60).

Pascal concludes, "It made me realize that this is a new kind of heresy. It is not M. Arnauld's views which are heretical, it is just his person. It is a personal heresy. He is not heretical for having said or written anything, but merely because he is M. Arnauld" (60).

Letter 4

Four letter written to a provincial by one of his friends. Paris, 25 February 1656

Pascal seeks clarification about the Jesuit disagreement with the Jansenists about *actual grace*. A Jesuit priest defines it as "an inspiration from god through which he lets us know his will and arouses in us the desire to accomplish it" (61). The priest distinguishes between the Jesuit and Jansenist understandings of actual grace:

We claim that God gives actual grace to all men, on the occasion of each temptation, because we maintain that, if one every occasion of temptation you did not have the actual grace to refrain from sin, whatever sin you committed could never be imputed to you. The Jansenists on the contrary say that sins committed without actual grace are still imputed to us (61).

Pascal seeks further clarification and is told: "an action cannot be imputed as sinful unless God gives us, before we commit it, knowledge of the evil contained therein and an inspiration which moves us to avoid it" (62).

Pascal is amazed, realizing this “would mean that none of the sins which take us by surprise or are committed while God is wholly absent from our minds could be imputed to us” (62). But the Jesuit even cites from books that present this very position.

With skilful satire Pascal teases out the implications: “I can see incomparably more people justified by this ignorance, and forgetfulness towards God, than by grace and sacraments” (64). Again:

Oh, Father, what a blessing for some of the people I know! I must bring them along to you. You can hardly have met people with fewer sins, for they never think of God; vice has warped their reason: “They have never known their infirmity nor the physician who can cure it. They have never thought of desiring spiritual health, still less of praying God to grant it;” so that they are still in a state of baptismal innocence according to M. Le Moine. “The thought of loving God has never entered their heads, nor that of being contrite for their sins;” thus, according to Fr. Annat, they have committed no sin through being without charity or repentance; their life is a continual search for pleasure of every kind, uninterrupted by the slightest twinge of remorse. Such excesses had led me to believe that their damnation was assured; but I learn from you, Father, that these same excesses ensure their salvation. Blessings on your head, Father, for justifying people in this way! Others teach how to cure souls by painful austerities, but you show that the souls which one would have believed to be most desperately ill are in the best of health. What an excellent path to happiness in this world and the next! I had always thought that the less one thought of God the more sinful one was. But, from what I can see, once one has managed to stop thinking of him altogether the purity of all one’s future conduct becomes assured. Let us have none of these half-sinners, with some love of virtue; they will all be damned. But as for these avowed sinners, hell cannot hold them; they have cheated the devil by surrendering to him (64-65).

The priest lamely insists that all of these impious people have in fact entertained thoughts of conversion and have experienced the desire of giving themselves to God; that God has made everyone aware of the evil he or she is going to do and implanted a desire to avoid sin or seek God’s help. He claims only the Jansenists oppose this view.

Pascal retorts he “certainly used to believe that one was damned for not having good thoughts” but finds it very strange to think the Jansenists are heretics for not believing that everyone has good thoughts. He continues,

But, Father, I feel obliged in conscience to enlighten you and tell you that there are thousands of people who never have such desires, who sin with no regrets, who rejoice and glory in their sin (66).

The priest contends that Pascal cannot prove from Scripture that the Jesuit doctrine is false. Pascal responds,

What, Father! Must we appeal to Scripture to prove something so obvious? This is not a matter of faith, nor even of logic. It is simply a fact. We see it, we know it, we feel it (67).

However, Pascal proceeds to argue against this position from Scripture, noting, for example, how Paul called himself “‘chief among sinners’ because of a sin which he declared was committed ‘out of ignorance and not without zeal’” (68). He recalls how Jesus warned of those who would believe they were doing God a service in striving to destroy the Church.

Pascal won’t allow the priest even to retreat to a position of limiting the Jesuit doctrine to the righteous, observing how they fall into sins of surprise and into secret

snarcs laid by concupiscence; how they yield to pleasure when they think they are only yielding to necessity; how they persuade themselves they are fighting for the truth only to realize later they were contending for their own interests; how they sometimes eagerly pursue bad things because they believed them to be good; and how they have secret sins.

Pascal concludes that both sinners and the righteous "do not always have actual grace on every occasion when they sin" (70). He urges the priest to stop saying "that it is impossible to sin when ignorant of righteousness", rather with Augustine and the Church Fathers "it is impossible not to sin when ignorant of righteousness", as Augustine himself said: "He must inevitably sin who is ignorant of righteousness" (70).

The priest cites a Jesuit scholars statement "that an action can incur no blame when it is involuntary" (70) and that "for an action to be voluntary it must proceed from someone who sees, knows and appreciates whatever evil and good lies therein" (71).

Pascal points out that this would mean

there are hardly any voluntary actions in life, for one hardly ever thinks of all that. How many oaths are sworn in gambling, how many excesses committed during debauchery, how much wild behaviour at carnival time, none of which is voluntary, and consequently neither good nor bad, because unaccompanied by these "mental reflections on the good or bad qualities" of what one is doing! (71)

His Jansenist friend shows that Jesuits are mistaken if they believe their view is supported by Aristotle and also cites from Augustine's *Retractions*:

Those who sin through ignorance perform their action only because they want to do so, although they sin without wishing to sin. Thus even this sin of ignorance can only be committed by the will of the person committing it, but by a will directed towards the action and not towards sin; nevertheless this does not prevent the action being a sin, because for that it is enough to have done what one was obliged not to do (73).

Letter 5

Fifth letter written to a provincial by one of his friends. Paris, 20 March 1656

This letter is concerned with the spirit of the Society of Jesus. Pascal thinks that each Jesuit is free to say what he thinks. His Jansenist friend points out the Society has "a special rule forbidding them to print anything without the consent of their superiors" (75). This friend contends that the Society uses "strict evangelical precepts" with one type of person but that they have different sets of precepts to suit different kinds of people; that their aim "is to embrace everyone":

...if they are criticized for extreme laxity, they at once publicly produce their austere directors and books they have written on the rigour of the Christian law; and simple people and those who go no deeper into things are satisfied with such evidence.
...when they are in countries where a crucified God is regarded as folly, they suppress the scandal of the Cross, and preach only Christ in glory, and not Christ in agony; as they have done in India and China, where they have even allowed Christians to practise idolatry... (76)
....This is how they have spread all over the world, thanks to the doctrine of *probable opinions*, the source and basis of all this disorder...(77)

Speaking with a Jesuit friend Pascal is invited to consider the views of the Jesuit scholar Escobar who compiled a Moral Theology. A discussion ensues as to when it is legitimate for a person to refrain from fasting. Pascal discovers, as the Jesuit applies

the doctrine of probable opinions, that there are rules to allow almost any excuse to be used. For example, Emmanuel Sa is cited: "One may do what one thinks lawful according to a probable opinion, although the contrary is more certain" (83). Pascal is even told: "When the penitent follows a probable opinion... the confessor must absolve him, although his own opinion is contrary to that of the penitent" (84-85). To refuse to do so, he is informed, is a mortal sin.

Letter 6

Sixth letter written to a provincial by one of his friends. Paris, 10 April 1656

This letter is concerned with "how the casuists reconcile the contradictions arising between their opinions and the decisions of the popes, councils and Scripture" (88).

Pascal's Jesuit friend explains various methods of reconciliation:

1. The interpretation of terms, e.g. Pope Gregory XIV decrees that murderers not be permitted sanctuary in churches but be dragged out, while a Jesuit says the opposite. Solution? Redefine what is meant by "murderers".
2. Appealing to favourable circumstances, e.g. various popes had excommunicated priests who had taken off their habit, but the Jesuits defined some occasions on which a priest might do this without being excommunicated, including going out to steal or going incognito to a brothel.
3. Application of the principle of probable opinions, e.g. a papal decision is viewed as only valid "to the extent of the sphere of probability of his opinion" (91).

Pascal asks the priest to explain the chief principles established by Jesuit casuists. The priest responds:

Alas, our chief aim would have been to establish no other principles save those of the Gospel in all their rigour; and it is evident enough from the rules governing our own behaviour that if we tolerate such laxity in others, it is out of kindness rather than design. We are forced to. Men today are so corrupt that since we cannot make them come to us, we must go to them. Otherwise they would forsake us; they would do worse, they would give way to utter abandon. And it is to keep hold of them that our casuists have considered the vices to which the people of every condition are most inclined, so as to establish such lenient principles (without offending against the truth, however) that you would be very hard to please if you did not find them satisfactory; for the basic policy which our Society has adopted for the good of religion is not to rebuff anyone lest people fall into despair (93).

Letter 7

Seventh letter written to a provincial by one of his friends. Paris, 25 April 1656

This letter continues Pascal's conversation with the Jesuit priest. It opens with comments from the priest concerning the principles of the casuists regarding the gentry:

You know that the ruling passion with persons of this class is the point of honour, which drives them constantly to acts of violence which appear quite contrary to Christian piety; so that almost all of them would have to be excluded from our confessionals if our Fathers had not somewhat relaxed the strictness of our religion in order to adapt themselves to human weakness (102).

The priest goes on to explain the Jesuit method of *directing the intention*, which he regards as comparable to the doctrine of probability. So, for example, servants may be

required to be the accessories of evil, yet by “deflecting their intention from the evil... and applying it to the profit they get out of it” they are *directing the intention* (103).

Pascal comments that this makes everything permissible. The priest protests that we never tolerate anyone having the formal intention of sinning just for the sake of sinning; and that if anyone insists on having no other end in evil-doing but evil itself, we break with him; that is diabolical; to that there is no exception whether of age, sex or rank (103).

But directing the intention enables “acts of violence commonly practised in defence of honour” to be permitted. The method is to deflect a person’s intention from the desire for vengeance, deemed criminal, and applying it to a person’s desire to defend his honour, deemed lawful. The priest cites various biblical texts forbidding revenge but goes on to maintain that what is really condemned is the intention of rendering evil for evil, whereas the desire to avoid infamy or harm to oneself justifies retaliation.

Pascal asks for evidence that it is lawful to fight a duel. The priest cites from a Jesuit scholar who argues that this is justified if a man would be called a coward if he did not turn up for a duel, so that for the sake of his honour and, therefore, his self-defence, not because he has the express intention of fighting a duel, he may turn up and defend himself if he is “attacked”. He then quotes other Jesuit texts permitting dueling.

Pascal comments,

These passages made me wonder at seeing piety inspire the King to use his power to forbid and abolish dueling in the State, while it makes the Jesuits devote their subtlety to permitting and authorizing it in the Church (107).

Indeed, texts are even cited permitting one to challenge another to a duel on the basis of directing the intention. Pascal presses the priest further asking if it is lawful to “direct one’s intention as to be able to kill for having been called a liar” (111). The priest obliges, citing Jesuit texts permitting this. Pascal concludes that the Jesuit doctrine is “that one may kill slanderers with safety of conscience, provided one’s person is safe too” (113). He then asks whether it is possible to direct one’s intention to kill in order to preserve property, to which again he receives an affirmative reply.

The priest cites texts showing that “priests and religious are even permitted to forestall those trying to blacken them by defamation by killing them in order to prevent it. But always provided that the intention is properly directed” (114). Pascal concludes that the Jansenists must be as good as dead, but this opinion is rejected on the basis that the Jansenists pose no real threat to the Jesuit reputation. To which Pascal retorts, “Does the Jansenists’ life then depend only on whether they harm your reputation?” (115). He also observes:

...when all is said, the intention of the one who wounds does not bring any relief to the one wounded. He does not notice this secret direction, and only feels that of the blow inflicted on him. And I am not sure if one would not feel less regret at seeing oneself brutally killed by people in a rage, than feeling oneself conscientiously stabbed by the devout (116).

Letter 8

Eighth letter written by a provincial by one of his friends. Paris, 28 May 1656

Pascal confides that he has great trouble restraining himself while talking with the Jesuit priest and relates:

For no matter how he tones down his principles, those I have to tell you all tend in fact to favour corrupt judges, usurers, fraudulent bankrupts, fallen women and sorcerers, who are all somewhat generously dispensed from paying back what they earn in their respective professions (117).

Pascal recalls how the priest cited texts rationalizing (1) the reception of bribes by judges, (2) the practice of usury, (3) theft resulting from diverting a thief from robbing a poor person by pointing out a rich person he can rob instead, and (4) the retention of property acquired by criminals and sorcerers.

Letter 9

Ninth letter written to a provincial by one of his friends. Paris, 3 July 1656

The Jesuit priest recommends a book entitled *Paradise opened to Philagie by means of a hundred easily performed devotions to the Mother of God*. The priest lists some of these devotions:

- Salute her when coming upon her images.
- Reciting the little rosary of the ten pleasures of the Virgin.
- Frequently uttering her name.
- Charging the angels to pay her one's respects.
- Desiring to build multitudinous churches to her name.
- Greeting her every morning and evening.
- Say Ave Maria every day in honour of the heart of Mary.

The priest goes on to speak of such practices as being effective to save people even if they continue to live lives of moral depravity. A long discussion ensues in which Jesuit texts are cited which ridicule traditionally austere piety and which rationalize conduct which would normally have been considered sinful, e.g. deceit and perjury, failure to keep promises, provocative dressing by women and various approaches to receiving the mass which would normally have been considered shocking.

Letter 10

Tenth letter written to a provincial by one of his friends. Paris, 2 August 1656

Pascal now describes "mitigations of confession" as the best means devised by the Jesuits "for attracting all and rebuffing none" (147). The priest explains:

...having shown you in all our previous conversations how we have eased the scruples which troubled consciences, by proving that what people thought wrong is not so at all, it remains to show you now the method of easily expiating what is genuinely sinful, by making confession as easy as it used to be hard (147).

The strategies adopted to effect this include:

1. Allowing a penitent to have two confessors, one for mortal and another for venial sins.
2. Allowing a penitent to confess his sin in a way that disguises the fact that it is one he has frequently committed. When told the confessor has no right to ask if this sin

is habitual, Pascal responds, "I might as well say that a physician has no right to ask his patient if he has had the fever for long" (148).

3. Permitting the penitent not to divulge the circumstances which aggravate a sin.

The priest explains too how penance is also mitigated. Confessors don't have to demand repentance, only to take the penitent at his or her word if they "tell him that they are sorry for the past and intend to do better in the future" (152), even if all the evidence is to the contrary.

Pascal raises Matthew 5:29 when a Jesuit authority is cited who permits entrance into brothels to convert prostitutes even if "it is highly probable that they will sin" (155). When the priest nevertheless defends the practice Pascal responds by quoting counter opinions by Jesuit authorities and calls into question the doctrine of attrition, according to which fear of eternal punishment is sufficient with the sacrament of confession and, therefore, sufficient for salvation, without need for contrition. He is then reproved:

What is this? You read our authors then? You do well, but you would do still better only to read them with one of us. Do you not see that by reading them on your own, you have concluded that these passages contradict those who maintain our doctrine of attrition? Whereas we could have shown you that nothing more enhances them (156-157).

After more discussion along these lines, Pascal asks,

When you say 'attrition motivated solely by fear of punishment' is enough with the sacrament to justify sinners, does it not follow that one could expiate sins in this way all one's life, and so be saved without ever in one's life having loved God? (158-159)

The priest goes on to cite authorities which debate at what times and how often one should love God and concludes by approving teaching "that (observe God's goodness) we are not so much bidden to love him as not to hate him" (160).

Upon hearing this, Pascal is no longer able to restrain himself and exclaims, "Oh, Father! You test patience beyond all endurance, and no one can listen to the things I have just heard without horror" (161). He proceeds to rebuke the priest for his connivance in such odious thinking, citing Romans 1:32:

Was it not enough to permit men so many forbidden things by means of the palliations you have introduced? Did you also have to give them occasion to commit the very crimes you could not excuse, by offering them absolution so easily and surely, by destroying priests' power to that end, and obliging them to absolve, more as slaves than judges, the most inveterate sinners, with no fear of God, no change of life, no sign of regret, apart from promises broken a hundred times; without penance, 'if they are unwilling to accept it'; and without avoiding the occasions of vice 'if they find it inconvenient'? But you go even further, and the liberty you have taken to shake the most sacred rules of Christian conduct does not stop short of the total overthrow of the love of God. You break 'the great commandment on which hang all the law and the prophets'; you attack piety in its heart; you take away the spirit that gives it life; you say that the love of God is not necessary to salvation; and you even go so far as to claim that 'this dispensation from loving God is the advantage that Christ brought to the world'. This is the height of impiety. The price of Christ's blood shall be to win for us the dispensation from loving him; but 'since God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son', the world, redeemed by him, shall be exempted from loving him! Strange theology for our times! You dare to lift St Paul's 'anathema against those who do not love the Lord Jesus.' You destroy what St John says, that 'he that loveth not

abideth in death', and what Jesus says himself, that 'he that loveth him not keepeth not his sayings.' Thus those who have never loved God all their lives are by you made worthy to enjoy him throughout eternity... (161-162)

Letter 11

Eleventh letter written by the author of the letters to a provincial to the reverend Jesuit fathers. 18 August 1656

Appealing to Scriptural examples, Pascal defends the way he has mocked Jesuit casuistry. After a reiteration of critiques already made in the earlier letters Pascal sets out criteria provided by the Church Fathers for "judging whether criticism derives from a spirit of piety and charity, or from a spirit of impiety and hatred" (170):

1. To speak truthfully: "the spirit of piety always leads us to speak with truth and sincerity, whereas envy and hatred employ falsehood and slander" (170).
2. To speak discreetly: "we must also not speak the whole truth, because we ought to bring up only those things which it is useful to reveal, and not that which could only cause pain without doing any good" (171).
3. The "spirit of piety leads one to use [satire] only against errors, and not against sacred things; whereas the spirit of buffoonery, impiety and heresy laughs at what is most holy" (172).
4. The "spirit of charity inspires a hearty desire for the salvation of those whom we attack, and makes us pray to God even while we rebuke men" (172).

Pascal proceeds to cite Jesuit texts indicating Jesuit violations of all these criteria.

Letter 12

Twelfth letter written by the author of the letters to a provincial to the reverend Jesuit fathers. 9 Sept 1656

Pascal cites insulting written Jesuit descriptions of him as "impious, buffoon, ignoramus, clown, impostor, slanderer, rogue, heretic, crypto-Calvinist, disciple of Du Moulin [sc. Protestant minister of Charenton], possessed by a legion of devils" (178).

Pascal defends critiques he has previously made of Jesuit casuistry in the face of Jesuit claims that these are impostures, e.g. the issue of alms given from superfluous wealth, the issue of simony, the issue of bankruptcy and the issue of homicide.

Letter 13

Thirteenth letter written by the author of the letters to a provincial to the reverend Jesuit fathers. 30 Sept 1656

Pascal continues at even greater length with the issue of homicide. In the process he notes:

But with those questions which concern both religion and the state you have divided your decisions, and created two questions in these matters: one, which you call theoretical, where considering crimes in themselves, taking no account of the interests of the state but only of the law of God, which forbids them, you permit them without hesitation, thus subverting God's law which condemns them; the other, which you call practical, where, considering possible prejudice to the state and the presence of magistrates maintaining public safety, you do not always approve in practice the

murders and crimes which theoretically you find permissible, so that you cover yourselves as regards the judges (198).

Letter 14

Fourteenth letter written by the author of the letters to a provincial to the reverend Jesuit fathers. 23 Oct 1656

The whole letter is devoted to the issue of homicide, citing Scripture to show:

1. "God alone has the power to take life, and yet, in establishing laws for the execution of criminals, he has entrusted this power to kings and states" (208).
2. "But as it is God who gave them this right, he obliges them to exercise it as he would himself, that is with justice..." (208).

In the process he observes:

...there has never been a law permitting private individuals to kill, or tolerating it, as you do, to protect oneself from insult or loss of honour or property, if one is not at the same time in danger of one's life; this, Fathers, I maintain even infidels have never done. They have on the contrary expressly forbidden it... (209-210).

In this letter Pascal indicts the Jesuits for their rationalization of murder.

Letter 15

Fifteenth letter written by the author of the letters to a provincial to the reverend Jesuit fathers. 23 Nov 1656

In this letter Pascal sets out to demonstrate that in their writings Jesuits have intentionally lied and slandered and that they have consciously and deliberately imputed to their enemies crimes of which they knew them to be innocent.

Letter 16

Sixteenth letter written by the author of the letters to a provincial to the reverend Jesuit fathers. 4 Dec 1656

Pascal accuses the Jesuits of having used their writings to spread a fiction against Jansenius, maliciously misusing "a few ambiguous words in one of his letters" (237). Pascal shows that their charges of financial impropriety are unfounded. But he protests vigorously at what he calls "one of the blackest slanders ever to issue from your minds", namely their allegation "that holy nuns and their directors 'do not believe in the mystery of transubstantiation and the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist'" (238). Along with this Arnauld had been accused of being "really a Calvinist" and the nuns and their directors of being "in league with Geneva against the most Blessed Sacrament of the altar" (240). Pascal, citing from texts, shows these accusations are absurd and malicious.

In the course of his harangue Pascal clarifies his own position with respect to Calvinism:

Everyone knows, Father, that the Genevan heresy consists essentially, as you yourselves mention, in believing that Jesus Christ is not contained in the sacrament; that it is impossible for him to be in more than one place; that he is really only in heaven, and should only be worshipped there, and not on the altar; that the substance of the bread remains; that the body of Jesus Christ does not enter our mouths or

breast; that is only eaten through faith, so that the wicked do not eat it; and that the mass is not a sacrifice but an abomination (241).

Having carefully considered and having demonstrated the absurdity of the four proofs of heresy alleged by the Jesuits regarding transubstantiation Pascal turns his gun on the Jesuits:

Their words are as Catholic as yours, but their conduct confirms their faith, yours belies it. For if you believe as they do that this bread is really changed into the body of Christ, why do you not demand like them that the hearts of stone and ice of those whom you advise to approach it be sincerely changed into hearts of flesh and love? If you believe that Jesus Christ is there in a state of death, to teach those who approach him to die to the world, to sin and to themselves, why do you welcome into his presence those in whom vices and criminal passions are still fully alive? And how can you deem fit to eat the heavenly bread those who are not fit to eat the earthly? (252)

Letter 17

Seventeenth letter written by the author of the letters to a provincial to the Reverend Father Annat, S.J. 23 January 1657

Pascal responds to the way in which Father Annat has treated him as a heretic, demanding proof. Annat claimed he belonged to the convent of Port-Royal and, having declared Port-Royal to be heretical automatically concluded Pascal must be heretical too. However, Pascal repudiates the charge that he belongs to Port-Royal and insists he is "attached to no community and no individual whatsoever" (261).

Pascal retaliates: "I tell you that you destroy Christian morality by separating it from the love of God" (261).

Pascal also notes that Annat treats the Jansenists as heretics claiming that they teach: That God's commandments are impossible: that grace is irresistible, and that we are not free to do good and evil: that Jesus Christ did not die for all men, but only for the predestined: and in short that they maintain the Five Propositions condemned by the Pope? (263)

Pascal observes that the Jansenists have loudly claimed to believe none of these things alleged of them and protest at having these propositions accredited to them. Annat called them "outwardly Catholics but inwardly heretics" (265) and Pascal, in response, asks whether there is anyone of whom this might not be said. Pascal complains against the tactics adopted by the Jesuits: "as fast as they [the Jansenists] cleared themselves of one heresy, your Fathers substituted another, so that they should never be cleared" (266).

Pascal takes up the issue of Pope Innocent X having declared the Five Propositions in Jansenius are heretical. The Jesuits had argued that since a pope's pronouncements are infallible it follows that Jansenism is indeed heretical. At length Pascal establishes that there is a long Catholic tradition of accepting that general councils and popes cannot err "in defining dogmas of faith, but they can err on questions of fact" (270; citing the Jesuit, Cardinal Bellarmine). Indeed, he even points out that two general councils and two popes confirmed the condemnation of Pope Honorius' letters. He reminds Annat that the Jansenists also condemn the Five Propositions and do not agree that Jansenius taught them. Pascal argues it is quite understandable that Pope

Innocent X should make an error of fact given that he had been misled by Jesuit insistence that the Propositions were in Jansenius "word for word".

Pascal perceives that this attack on Jansenists is a political manoeuvre by the Jesuits. Having been unable in the past to win the debate with the Thomists over the question of sufficient grace, they see that by ruining the efficacious grace insisted on by the Jansenists, they can promote Molina's version of sufficient grace. However, their subterfuge is to have Jansenism condemned on other grounds so that their doctrine of efficacious grace, akin to that of the Thomists, will also be called into question.

Letter 18

Eighteenth letter to the Reverend Father Annat (from the copy printed at Cologne), S.J. 24 March 1657

Pascal charges that Annat, having failed to prove the Jansenists guilty of heresy, has accused them of heresy for failing to condemn Jansenius' sense, while refusing to explain what this means. Again Pascal maintains that the Jesuits have no real interest in seeking to clarify what they understand to be Jansenius' sense since it is all a political ploy on their part to "one day fall back on to the doctrine of efficacious grace, by showing that it is nothing but that of Jansenius, which you would not find hard" (280).

However, Pascal does note that Annat has been forced to make a statement about the Jansenist position concerning efficacious grace:

It is not enough in order to justify Jansenius to say that he only maintains efficacious grace, because there are two ways of maintaining it: one heretical, according to Calvin, which consists in saying that the will moved by grace has no power to resist¹; the other orthodox, according to St. Thomas and the Sorbonnists, founded on principles established by the councils, which is that efficacious grace by itself so governs the will that we always have power to resist it...

...that Jansenius would be Catholic if he defended efficacious grace according to the Thomists, but he is heretical because he is contrary to the Thomists and in conformity with Calvin, who denies us power to resist grace (280-281).

From this Pascal concludes that Annat and the Jesuits effectively define Jansenius' sense to mean "Calvin's sense". Pascal suggests that if the Jesuits had only intended to condemn Calvin's heresy under the name of Jansenius they could have saved themselves a lot of trouble by declaring this earlier.

Pascal declares that this leaves Annat with no grounds for further criticism of the Jansenists since they certainly detest the same Calvinist heresy that the Jesuits detest. Pascal states that the Jansenists:

not only hold that one can resist those weak movements of grace, so-called excitant or inefficacious grace, by not performing the good which they inspire, but that they are also as firm in upholding against Calvin the will's power to resist even efficacious and victorious grace, as in defending against Molina the power of this grace over the will, being equally jealous of each of these truths (282).

¹ For Calvin's position on the relationship between the will and grace see *Will and Grace: As Viewed in John Calvin's Institutes*: www.facetofaceintercultural.com.au

This simultaneous defence of the irresistibility of God's grace and the freedom of the will is in tune with Augustine's explanation:

God changes man's heart by a heavenly sweetness which he infuses and which, surpassing fleshly delights, fills man, who realizes on the one hand his mortality and nothingness and on the other discovers God's greatness and eternity, with a distaste for the delights of sin, which separate him from incorruptible good; and finding his greatest joy in the God who enchants him, he infallibly inclines towards him of his own accord by a movement at once wholly free, voluntary and full of love; so that it would be a pain and punishment to be cut off from him...

This is how God disposes of man's free will without imposing any necessity, and how free will, which can always resist grace but does not always wish to do so, inclines no less freely than infallibly towards God, when he wishes to attract to it by the sweetness of his efficacious inspiration (282-283)

Pascal even quotes confirmatory words by Pope Clement VIII:

God creates in us the movement of our will and disposes efficaciously of our hearts, by the dominion which his supreme Majesty has over the wills of men as over all other creatures under heaven, according to St. Augustine (283).

Pascal takes all this as destroying "Luther's impiety", condemned by the Council of Trent: "that we do not co-operate in any way in our salvation, any more than inanimate things" (283). But, going on the attack, Pascal maintains that this simultaneously destroys:

"the impiety of Molina's school, which will not recognize that it is the force of grace itself which effects our cooperation in the work of our salvation, and thus ruins the principle of faith established by St. Paul 'that it is God who worketh in us both the will and the deed'" (283).

Pascal next cites biblical texts that are seemingly contradictory (283-284):

- "Return unto the Lord" (Hos 14:1) vs. "Turn us again, O God" (Ps 80:3).
- "Cast away from you all your transgressions" (Ezek 18:31) vs. "Lord, thou has forgiven the iniquity of thy people" (Ps 84:2).
- "Bring forth fruits meet for repentance" (Mt 3:8) vs. "Lord, thou has wrought all our works in us" (Isa 26:12).
- "Make you a new heart and a new spirit" (Ezek 18:31) vs. "A new heart will I give you and a new spirit put within you" (Ezek 36:26).

He argues:

The only way of reconciling these apparent contradictions which ascribe our good deeds now to God and now to ourselves is to recognize that, as St. Augustine says, "our good deeds are our own, because of the free will producing them, and they are also God's, because of his grace, causing our free will to produce them". And as he says elsewhere, God makes us do what he pleases by making us desire what we might not desire: "*a Deo factum est ut vellent quod et nolle potuissent*" (284).

He maintains that the Jansenists are in complete agreement with the Thomists on this matter and quotes the Thomist, Alvarez, to demonstrate that Thomists follow the consistent doctrine of Augustine. Pascal returns to the matter of demonstrating that it is perfectly reasonable to think of popes making errors of fact, noting that popes themselves have declared "that popes and the greatest kings are more liable to be deceived than people with less important occupations" (292). Further, he observes that popes usually insert into their letters the following clause: "*Si ita est; si preces*

veritate nitantur. If things are as we are given to understand; if the facts are correct" (293). If not stated, Pascal urges, then these words are understood. He observes, "It is obvious from this that as the popes give force to their bulls only inasmuch as they are based on correct facts, the bulls alone do not prove the facts true, but on the contrary, according even to the canonists, the truth of the facts makes the bulls acceptable" (293-294).

Pascal has also something to say in this connection about Galileo:

It was in vain too that you obtained from Rome the decree against Galileo, which condemned his opinion regarding the earth's movement. It will take more than that to prove that it keeps still, and if there were consistent observations proving that it is the earth that goes round, all the men in the world put together could not stop it turning, or themselves turning with it (296).

He continues:

Do not imagine either that Pope Zachary's letters excommunicating St Virgil for maintaining the existence of Antipodes have annihilated this new world, or that, though the Pope had declared that this opinion constituted a very dangerous error, the King of Spain was not better off for believing Christopher Columbus, who had just come back, than the judgement of the Pope, who had never been there; or that the Church did not derive great benefit from this, since it provided so many peoples with knowledge of the Gospel who would otherwise have perished in their paganism (296).

A Fragment of a Nineteenth Letter

This letter too was evidently directed at Annat. In it he notes that the Jansenists are in great distress but commends them for the nobility of the behaviour they have displayed in the face of an apparent Jesuit victory.