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978-0-521-03262-9 - Pascal and the Arts of the Mind

Hugh M. Davidson

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This book examines the ways in which Pascal posed and solved intellectual problems in three very different areas of his work: mathematics and mathematical physics, religious experience and theology, communication and controversy. Hugh Davidson shows how three of the classical 'liberal arts', rhetoric, dialectic, and geometry, pervade Pascal's method as liberating and guiding influences in his search for truth. They appear throughout his production, and are used and adapted with great skill both in his attacks on tradition in mathematics and physics, and in his defences of tradition in the sphere of religion and morality. Professor Davidson throws new light on both the diversity and the unity of Pascal's thought, and places it in the context of other seventeenth-century innovations in the use of traditional disciplines.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-03262-9 - Pascal and the Arts of the Mind
Hugh M. Davidson
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

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 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

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Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-03262-9 - Pascal and the Arts of the Mind
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Frontmatter
[More information](#)

To L. and A.

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Hugh M. Davidson
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

La méthode de ne point errer est recherchée de tout le monde. Les logiciens font profession d'y conduire, les géomètres seuls y arrivent, et, hors de leur science et de ce qui l'imite, il n'y a point de véritables démonstrations.

L'art de persuader a un rapport nécessaire à la manière dont les hommes consentent à ce qu'on leur propose, et aux conditions des choses qu'on veut faire croire.

Pour moi je n'ai pu y prendre d'attache et, considérant combien il y a plus d'apparence qu'il y a autre chose que ce que je vois, j'ai recherché si ce Dieu n'aurait point laissé quelque marque de soi.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-03262-9 - Pascal and the Arts of the Mind
Hugh M. Davidson
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Preface and acknowledgments</i>	<i>page</i> xiii
1 Nature and the world	i
2 Elements, complexes, and geometric	24
3 Multiplicity, unity, and dialectic	105
4 Ends, means, and rhetoric	210
5 Restatement and conclusion	248
<i>Bibliography</i>	261
<i>Index</i>	264

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-03262-9 - Pascal and the Arts of the Mind
Hugh M. Davidson
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Preface and acknowledgments

The history and nature of the liberal or intellectual arts has interested me for several years; and in the course of my acquaintance with the works of Pascal I have come to see many traces, even explicit developments, testifying to the presence of these arts in his intellectual universe. And so I have undertaken in this exploratory essay to study in some detail the relation of certain ones of those basic arts to Pascal's thought and works.

My intention has been less to interpret his achievement in some novel way than to watch him at work, to describe his practice, and to see to what extent that working could be related to the more general topic with which I began. As a starting point, it has seemed to me that Pascal recurrently finds himself in or puts himself in situations where the problems, paradoxes, mysteries that he needs to treat arise under three main headings, having to do with (1) things and quantities, (2) creatures and their Creator, and (3) polemical or dialogic communications.

However, one sees not only recurrent problems but also reappearing lines of attack on them, tendencies that bespeak something conscious and deliberate. From that observation it is easy to reach the idea of intellectual habits, of arts of the mind. I say arts, and not sciences, because the tendencies in question, although they abound in theoretical implications, are in essence practical and productive. As a result of their presence and functioning they make a large contribution to the fact that certain realities with determinate characteristics – the works of Pascal – have come into existence. I believe that to be a true statement, and offer it as pointing to active components in the line of necessary causality; I have no illusions regarding the

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-03262-9 - Pascal and the Arts of the Mind
 Hugh M. Davidson
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

xiv

Preface and acknowledgments

answer to the question of whether my argument provides anything like a sufficient explanation.

How to think about such arts? They are elusive: to do justice to them requires us to respect their ambiguity, while at the same time noting their movement, in particular contexts, toward fixity, toward a kind of crystallization. The same point may be made conversely: it is advisable to define them with some subject-matter in mind, with some intention regarding their application, in order to escape the risk of making them so abstract that they seem out of contact with reality. Moreover, in any particular case one must pay constant attention to the danger of conceiving and applying the notion of art itself in a reductive way. It is easy to let it become rigid and serve to inspire a set of rules or intellectual tropes, which then have little connection with the free judgments and spontaneous activities of a mind like that of Pascal. Finally, in a project such as this, one is tempted to simplify what is happening in works notable for their shifting combinations and balances of elements, and, as a result, to pass over without adequate comment the complexities into which the texts tend steadily to draw us.

Without claiming to have succeeded in overcoming those difficulties, I should like at least to state some principles that have guided me. These arts have a triple derivation. (1) They come out of the personal experience of Pascal; (2) they come out of the intellectual tradition as its possibilities were actively confronted in the first decades of the seventeenth century in France; and (3) they come out of what might be called a “heuristic matrix,” a procedural framework consisting of a set of variable factors, all of them interrelated, and subject as a group to different kinds and degrees of determination.

In connection with the first of these conditions, I would say that what Pascal had to do, starting from his personal experiences, was to generalize, so as to get above the particularity of those experiences and to extract from them the materials of scientific, moral, and religious truth. In the second place, he was called upon to innovate against a background, to find new ways of conceiving and using three traditional disciplines. In the third perspective – and I wish to emphasize

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-03262-9 - Pascal and the Arts of the Mind
Hugh M. Davidson
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Preface and acknowledgments

xv

that this is the one that has interested me most and has influenced most what I have done here – Pascal had to specify, to be clear about his assumptions and their consequences for inquiry and communication. He had to make his way from general themes concerning interpretation, discovery, arrangement, and synthesis to more and more definite formulations, so that he might deal effectively with the characteristics of the objects before him for study.

In showing how Pascal may be approached in terms drawn from the matrix just mentioned, I have decided to use rhetoric, dialectic, and geometric as the names of the three principal arts to be analyzed, the last being my way of generalizing the sense of the term “geometry,” which seemed less suitable because of its more limited and more strictly mathematical connotations. I realize that all three have had complicated histories, and that they have ties to particular – and often opposed – thinkers and theories. My way of using the various authorities has been quite free – *à mes risques et périls*. I believe that the various borrowings have come together into something like a coherent ensemble. In any case, what is said in the following pages will illustrate the powers of geometric, dialectic, and rhetoric, and give, I hope, some plausibility to my hypothesis concerning the way in which Pascal understood and appropriated them for use in realizing his projects.

Readers familiar with the writings of the late Richard P. McKeon, for many years Distinguished Service Professor of Philosophy and Greek at the University of Chicago, will recognize my indebtedness to him and in particular to his publications regarding the liberal arts. I do not mean to suggest that he has been in any way responsible for my investigation or its conclusions. In fact, I have developed and applied a number of notions in ways that diverge markedly from lines of thought suggested by his analyses. However, it is a pleasure for me, in making this acknowledgment, to recall his intellectual generosity and his keen interest in the extensions and sometimes surprising transformations that ideas and methods undergo as they pass from mind to mind.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03262-9 - Pascal and the Arts of the Mind

Hugh M. Davidson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xvi

Preface and acknowledgments

The substance of this book is closely related to work done and conclusions reached in seminars offered in two Spring terms (in 1980 and in 1989) at the Folger Institute in Washington, D. C. I wish to express my thanks to that unique institution for the opportunity to have a part in its research programs. I have also gained much from conversations with colleagues: Professor John Lyons, Professor Mary McKinley, and Professor David Rubin, all of the University of Virginia; Professor Buford Norman, of the University of South Carolina; Professor David Wetsel, of Arizona State University; and Professor Jean Mesnard of the Sorbonne. I owe a great debt to recent scholarship on Pascal; I list gratefully the principal items in the bibliography.

And, especially, I wish to acknowledge the help of Doctor Katharina Brett, of the Cambridge University Press. I consider it a great stroke of good fortune to have had her patient and friendly assistance over a period of many months.

Editorial note. In the body of my text I give the locations of passages quoted in three editions: (1) that of the *Oeuvres complètes* of Pascal in one volume by Louis Lafuma (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1963, in the collection “L’Intégrale”); (2) that of the *Oeuvres complètes* in the monumental series being published by Jean Mesnard (Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1964 *et seq.*), the fourth volume of which appeared in 1992; and (3) that of the *Pensées* published by Philippe Sellier (Paris: Mercure de France, 1976).

Each reference includes an item showing the page in the Lafuma edition; after the page number – preceded by “L” – I use the letters a, b, c, and d to show the quadrant of the page in which the passage is to be found. Where the text is also available in the Mesnard edition, I give a second page indication, preceded by “M” and I, II, III, or IV, according to the volume number. Passages cited from the *Pensées* have always two notations, the first referring to the Lafuma edition and the second, preceded by an “S”, to that of Sellier. For added convenience where the *Pensées* are concerned, I include after the page indication the letter “f” followed by the fragment number. Examples: (L65c; MIII 329) or (L550a, f417; S40, f36).