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PASCAL'S THOUGHTS.

PART I.

THE MISERY OF MAN WITHOUT GOD.

A. MAN'S PLACE IN NATURE.

The Greatness and Littleness of Man.

LET man contemplate the whole realm of nature in the light and fulness of her majesty ; let him withdraw his mind from the base objects by which he is surrounded ; let him fix his eye on the brilliant light, placed like an everlasting lamp to give light to the universe ; then the Earth will appear to him like a point in the vast circuit described by this luminary. Let him stand and wonder at the vast extent covered by its orbit, itself a minute point compared with that described by the stars revolving in the firmament. But if our sight stops there, let imagination travel beyond : he would sooner grow tired trying to conceive than nature in furnishing him objects for his sight. The whole of this visible universe is only an imperceptible speck in the vast expanse

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of nature. No, we can form no adequate idea of it. Vain are our efforts to extend our conceptions beyond all imaginable space, we produce but atoms in place of the reality of things. It is an infinite sphere, the centre of which is everywhere, the circumference nowhere. In fine, it is the most striking manifestation of Divine Omnipotence, overwhelming the imagination dwelling on it in thought. Then returning into himself let man consider what he is compared with the All; let him consider himself as a wanderer in this remote province of nature from the little dungeon in which he finds himself lodged, I mean the universe, let him learn to appraise himself at the true value.

What is man in the Infinite? But to bring before his mind another equally amazing prodigy, let him in his researches of what can be known examine what is most trifling. A mite in its tiny body displays parts of incomparable littleness, limbs with their joints, veins in those limbs, blood in these veins, humors in this blood, drops in these humors, vapours in these drops, so that, in subdividing these last still further, he will exhaust his powers of conception, until the least object he can descry shall be the subject of our discussion; he may then think perchance that he has reached the extreme point of littleness in nature. I will, then, open before him a new abyss,

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THE INFINITELY GREAT AND LITTLE

I will paint for him not only the visible universe, but the immensity of nature as conceived by us within the limits of this epitome of an atom.

Let him see, then, an infinity of worlds, each having its own firmament, its planets, its earth, in due proportion as in the visible universe; in this Earth he will find animals down to mites in which he will find again the same characteristics, and yet in others, again, discovering the same thing in endless succession he will lose himself in these wonders, astounding alike in their smallness and greatness; for who can help wondering at our body but a little while ago imperceptible in the universe itself, imperceptible in the bosom of the whole, now become a colossus, a world, or rather a totality in respect to the nothingness beyond his grasp?

He who will give way to these considerations will be frightened at himself, and seeing himself suspended in the body nature has given him between these two abysses of the infinite and the nothing he will tremble at the sight of these marvels; and, I believe that, his curiosity changing into admiration, he will be more disposed to contemplate them in silence rather than in the spirit of presumptuous research.

For, after all, what is man in nature? nothing in respect of infinity, everything in respect of

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non-existence, placed midway between nothing and everything. Infinitely removed from understanding the extremes, the finality of things and their beginnings invincibly hidden from him in impenetrable mystery; equally incapable of seeing the nothing whence he came in the first instance, and the infinite in which he is engulfed.

What, then, will he do unless it be to discern what appears to be the middle of things, in a sempiternal despair of ever knowing either their beginning or their end? All things have come from nothing and are borne on to infinity. Who will trace this astonishing march? The author of these marvels understands them, no one else can.

Not having considered these infinites men have set themselves with temerity to investigate nature, as if they bore some proportion to her.

It is a strange thing this wish of theirs to understand the principle of things and thence to arrive at complete knowledge with a presumption as infinite as the object matter. For without doubt one cannot entertain such a design without a presumption, or a capacity like that of nature herself.

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Let us understand, then, our own limitation; we are something, but we are not everything, our mode of existence hides from us the knowledge of

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MAN BETWEEN TWO EXTREMITIES

first principles which spring from the nothing, and the littleness of our being hides from our view the infinite.

Our intelligence holds the same place in the realm of thought that our body occupies in the whole range of natural existence.

In every way limited this position of occupying the mean between two extremities turns up in all our infirmities, our senses are incapable of perceiving extremes. Too much noise deafens us; too much light dazzles; extreme distance, or propinquity impedes sight; excessive length, or brevity in speech renders it obscure; too much truth appals. I know of some, who cannot understand that to subtract four from nothing leaves nought. First principles appear to us too self-evident; too much pleasure proves irksome; too much harmony in music proves unpleasant; too many acts of kindness have an irritating effect. We like to have the means of paying over and above that we owe, "*Beneficia eo usque laeta sunt dum videntur exsolvi posse; ubi multum antevenere, pro grata odium redditur.*" We feel neither extreme heat, nor extreme cold. Qualities in excess are repugnant to our nature and leave us insensible. We do not feel, we simply endure them. Too much virility and too much senility are an impediment to the spirit, as

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also too much, and too little instruction. In fine, extreme things are for us as if they did not exist, nor in regard to these have we existence, they escape us, and we them.

This, then, is our true state. This renders us incapable of certain knowledge and of absolute ignorance. We float in a vast medium, ever uncertain and fluctuating, pushed from end to end. Any point to which we thought of attaching ourselves firmly gives way and fails us, and if we try to follow it up it will elude our grasp, flitting away a fugitive for ever. Nothing stays for us. This is our natural state, and, at all times, most contrary to our inclination. We are aflame with desire to find a firm sediment, an ultimate, fixed basis on which to build a tower which shall reach the infinite. But our whole foundation cracks and the ground beneath opens up the abyss.

Let us, then, cease from seeking assurance and stability. Our reason is at all times deceived by the shifting appearance of things. Nothing can fix the finite between the two infinities which enclose and fly from it.

This being understood we may rest satisfied each in the place where nature has placed us. This place assigned us as our lot, being always distant from both extremes, what does it matter if man has a trifle more knowledge of things? His

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MAN'S IMPOTENCE IN THE INFINITIES

possession only carries him a little higher. Is he not always infinitely distant from the end, and the duration of our life is it not at an equally infinite distance from eternity though it last ten years longer?

In view of these infinities, all finites are equal; nor do I see why he should let his imagination rest on one more than the other. The only comparison we can make of ourselves in our finite condition is accompanied by pain.

If man began by studying himself he would see how impotent he is to get beyond this; how impossible it is that a part should know the whole. But he may aspire to know at least those parts to which he bears some proportionate relation. But the parts in this world are so related and linked to one another that I consider it impossible to know one without the other, and without the whole.

Man, for example, is related to all that he knows. He requires space to contain him, time to exist in, movement to live in, the elements of which he is composed, heat and nourishment to sustain him, air to breathe. He sees the light, he feels bodies,—in short everything enters the blend of his being.

To know man, therefore, it is necessary to discover why he wants air to subsist in, and to know what air is he must know in what way it is related to human life, &c.

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Flame cannot exist without air: therefore to know the one we must know the other. All things, then, being either cause or effect, supporting, or receiving support, mediate, or immediate, and all things being held together by a natural and imperceptible link, joining those that are most distant and dissimilar, I hold that it is as impossible to know the parts without knowing the whole as it is to know the whole without detailed knowledge of the parts. What completes our impotence of the knowledge of things is the fact that they are simple in themselves, whereas we are composed of two heterogeneous natures different in kind, of soul and body; for it is impossible that the reasonable faculty can be anything but spiritual; and if any one were to assert that we consist of body alone this would preclude still more the knowledge of things, as there is nothing more inconceivable than to say that matter knows itself. It is impossible for us to know how it could know itself. And thus if we are simply material we can know nothing at all, and if we are composed of mind and matter we cannot know perfectly simple substances, whether they are corporeal or spiritual.

Hence it is that nearly all the philosophers confuse the ideas of things and speak of bodily things in terms of mind, and of spiritual things in

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MAN'S MISERY IN HIS GREATNESS

terms of body. For they boldly assert that bodies tend downwards, that they are attracted towards the centre, that they fly from destruction, that nature abhors a vacuum and has inclinations, sympathies, antipathies, all things which belong to the spirit exclusively. Again, in speaking of spirits they think of them in a fixed locality, or as moving from place to place, qualities which belong to bodies only.

Instead of receiving ideas of things as they are we tinge with qualities of our composite nature all the simple things we contemplate.

Who would not think, seeing us mixing up matter with mind in everything, that such a compound would be easily understood by us? Yet this is the least comprehensible thing of all. To himself man appears the most formidable object in nature; for he is unable to conceive what is body, and still less what is mind, and least of all how body and mind can be united. Here is the crown of all his difficulties and yet this constitutes the very nature of his being. *Modus quo corporibus adhaerent spiritus comprehendendi ab hominibus non potest, et hoc tamen homo est.*

The greatness of man consists in the grandeur of knowing himself to be miserable. A tree has no sense of its misery. True, it is misery to know ourselves to be miserable; but it is a grand thing,

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too, that he is miserable. These very miseries prove his grandeur. They are the miseries of a great nobleman, the miseries of a discrowned king.

For who finds himself miserable for not being king but he who has been dispossessed of his kingdom? Was Paulus Emilius considered unhappy because he ceased to be consul? On the contrary, everybody knew him to be happy for having been one as it was in the nature of things to be so for a time. But Perseus was known to be unhappy because he ceased to be king, in his case it was natural to be always king; so that it seemed strange that he could endure life. Who considers himself unhappy for having no more than one mouth? But who would not feel unhappy in having only one eye? One could not feel distressed for want of three eyes, but one would be unconsolable in possessing none at all. We have such a high idea of the human mind that we cannot bear its contempt or to be deprived of its esteem; and all human happiness consists in the enjoyment of this esteem....

And those who despise men most and rank them among the beasts still wish to be admired and trusted and are in contradiction with themselves by their own feelings, nature, which is stronger than all else, convincing them of the