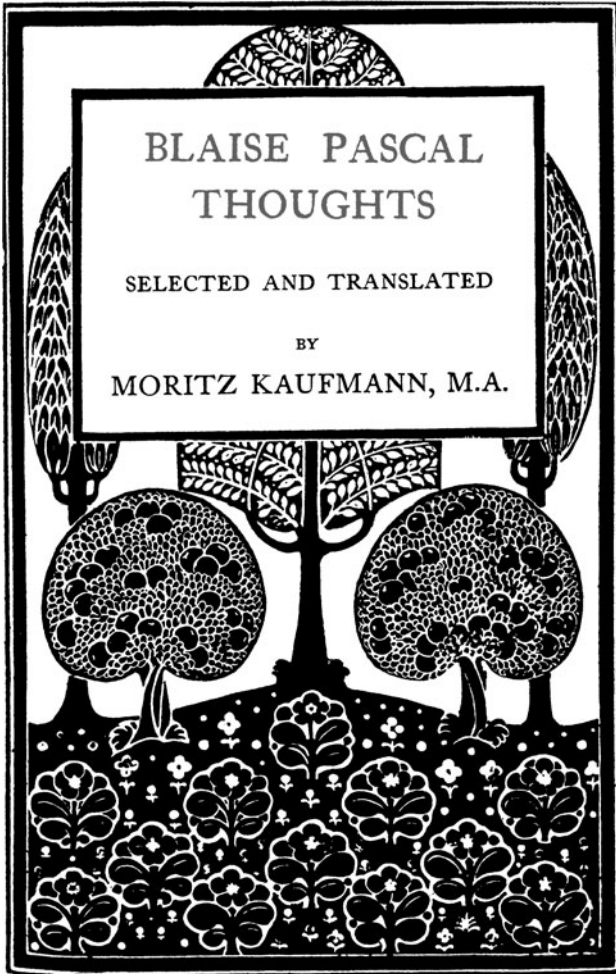


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INTRODUCTION

BLAISE PASCAL, the author of the “Thoughts,” was born at Clermont-Ferrand in Auvergne, June 19th, 1623. He belonged to an old legal family of distinction ; one of its members was ennobled by Louis XI. in 1478 for administrative services. His grandfather was treasurer of France, and his father, Etienne Pascal, was second president of the Court of Aides at Clermont, a man of considerable attainments, and the friend of most of the leading scientists and philosophers of his time. He relinquished his official post to devote himself entirely to the education of his son, who was in delicate health, but the child gave very early proofs of mathematical genius. His treatise on Conic Sections, written at the age of sixteen, excited the “mingled incredulity and astonishment” of Descartes. He was also the inventor of a calculating machine and ranks high among the scientific discoverers of that day. His religious experiences under the Jansenists date back to 1648, but his final or “definite” conversion took place in 1654, as the result of a miraculous escape from a serious

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carriage accident on the pont de Neuilly in Paris. The rest of his short life was spent mostly in pious seclusion and self-denying beneficence. As a temporary inmate of Port-Royal he engaged in controversy with the Jesuits and wrote the “immortal” Letters of a Provincial, and it was his intention to write an Apology of Christianity against Scepticism on similar lines. To this we owe the “Thoughts,” a number of detached memoranda, jotted down from time to time as the materials for this work. Ill-health and an early death (he died August 19th, 1662) put an end to this plan, and the loose but mostly well-wrought-out thoughts, like so many clear-cut diamonds without a setting, remained in “the beautiful disorder” in which he left them until they were collected by his friends and published by them with alterations, additions, and omissions in 1670. The criticisms of V. Cousin published in 1842 pointed out the necessity of revision, and a restored text by M. Prosper-Faugère appeared in 1844.

Other editors, starting from different stand-points, have since then endeavoured to arrange and re-arrange the “Thoughts” in the order in which they suppose, from very insufficient data, that Pascal intended to place them. We follow that of M. Havet, as best adapted for an

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epitome of devotional reading in the present day.

Pascal, it should be remembered by those who make use of this manual, speaks with the authority of a scientific expert, as an original thinker, and profound student of human nature. Here we have a glimpse, so to speak, into the torture-chamber of his own mind, with its insatiable desire for spiritual enlightenment and intense love and pity for struggling humanity, anticipating in a curious way the perplexities of all those who think deeply and feel ardently in the pursuit of truth in our own day¹.

If his arguments, founded on Scripture proofs, prophecy, and miracles (considerably curtailed in the present selection), have lost some of their cogency with the progress of biblical criticism, his presentation of Christianity in its adaptation to human nature possesses still an undiminished value, heightened by the charm of his illuminating style, which unites elegance with almost geometrical precision and the playful ease of a man of the world with the concentration of religious ardour.

It is, however, the intellectual integrity of the

¹ On this the present writer ventures to refer to an article contributed by him to *The Quarterly Review* for April, 1906.

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“Thoughts” in their effort to reconcile thought and feeling by a fearless appeal to reason, and yet in a reverent spirit, which appeals so strongly to the spirit of our age. In their passionate earnestness in the search after truth they are calculated to stimulate and guide those who in the midst of modern difficulties surrounding religious speculation are ready to follow Pascal’s exhortation *Croyez sciemment*. Seeing how he faced “the spectres of the mind,” though less willing than he was to stifle doubt by the exaltation of faith, they will, perchance, endeavour, as one of his latest editors says, “to follow him from a distance to the solitary rock of high endeavour which forms one of the spiritual summits of humanity.”

M. K.

August 10, 1908.