STUDIES IN PASCAL'S ETHICS

Series Minor

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A. W. S. BAIRD

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by

A. W. S. BAIRD

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FOREWORD

The aim of these studies is to show how Pascal's moral outlook reflects the influence on his thought of the basic doctrine of the three orders. This does not mean that an attempt is made to classify all Pascal's moral judgements in order to relate them to that doctrine. The intention is rather to distinguish the different moral stances Pascal takes, and to ascertain how far the apparent inconsistencies between them can be explained, if not reconciled, in the light of the orders.

It is made clear at the outset how the three orders form the framework of Pascal's scale of values, with the different orders representing at once categories of moral value and orders of being. The peculiar nature of this scale, in which moral and ontological values coalesce, calls for a double criterion, or variable, to allow for differences both of degree and of kind. Since the criterion of rank in the scale is reality, the assigning of value becomes largely a question of perspective: a quality from a given order taken by itself is real, and has moral value, but when compared with a quality from a higher order it loses both its reality and its worth.

Pascal's fluctuating estimate of natural ethics shows how this relativity inherent in the structure of the orders is reflected also in his judgements of value. Since value depends upon the perspective from which the judgement is made, Pascal is bound to appear to shift his ground: from one point of view acts based on the natural light of reason are accorded positive value, whereas from a different point of view all natural behaviour seems uniformly worthless.

The authoritarian approach to ethics which Pascal adopts in the *Provinciales* follows from the rejection of reason as the guide to conduct, and the denial of moral worth to acts in the natural order. If virtue is confined to the supernatural order, it is clearly necessary to look to some authority with supernatural credentials for moral guidance; and the Christian revelation, guaranteed by tradition, answers this purpose. As

a result Pascal denounces Jesuit moral theology, not only because of its reliance on reason, but also because of the Jesuits' willingness to accept the moral ideal of the contemporary nobility as the standard to which they attempt to shape Christian morality. In Pascal's terms this means disregarding the qualitative difference between the natural and supernatural orders, and he is therefore opposed both to the Jesuits, and to the code of aristocratic values with which he believes they are compromising.

Pascal seems to overlook some of the difficulties which result from applying the doctrine of the three orders to moral questions. In keeping with his conviction that virtue belongs to the supernatural order, he sets up the authority of Scripture as the criterion in ethics. But he does not see that to expect an individual to recognize that authority is already to presuppose he is capable, by himself, of making a valid moral judgement, even though the native power to do so is denied him. Pascal also fails to deal adequately with the linguistic problem involved in applying terms like 'justice' to moral qualities proper to both the natural and supernatural orders. Although he argues that such qualities are incommensurable, like the orders to which they belong, he not only uses the same word for both, but quite often takes them himself to mean the same thing.

The teleological approach to ethics, which Pascal favours in the *Pensées*, reinforces the tendency, latent in the doctrine of the three orders, to depreciate natural virtue. The moral worth of an act is determined by its relation to man's end. But since Pascal identifies the end with man's true good, God, who belongs to the supernatural order, good acts are immediately set beyond the scope of man's natural capacity. Virtue is therefore restricted to the range of acts man performs under the influence of divine grace in order to achieve his final satisfaction.

By emphasizing in his moral judgements the aspect of things as seen from the supernatural order, Pascal is able to make the pursuit of the true good appear more imperative, since, compared with it, all other goods seem illusory. The ready acceptance of the Platonic theme in Augustinian theology contributes further to this tendency to deprive the goods which belong to this world of any ethical character. Once again the relativity which characterizes Pascal's estimate of moral value is seen to result from treating value as a perspective of the three orders.

References for the *Pensées* are to the fragment number in the Lafuma (L.) and Brunschvicg (B.) editions. References for all other works by Pascal are to the edition of the *Œuvres complètes* by Jacques Chevalier in the "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade" (C.), and to the "Grands Ecrivains de la France" edition of the *Œuvres complètes* (G.E.).