

Irony, Wretchedness, and the Liberal Arts

Dimitrios Halikias 

In diagnosing a distinctively modern discontent, the Storeys have written a biography of a distinctively modern idea of happiness (141). Their achievement is to show that these two stories are the same. Montaigne's promise of what they term "immanent contentment" is itself connected to the ubiquitous if amorphous restlessness that plagues our culture today. Montaigne sought to find happiness not in transcendence or salvation, but in the simplicity of ordinary pleasures. Life is a game of variety and excitement, not an anguished pilgrimage to an eternal home. This counsel—meant to bring peace and to inoculate us against dogmatism—paradoxically underwrites the pervasive unhappiness of our time.

Why We Are Restless is a story of decline, an account of the transformation of nonchalant joy into vulgar alienation. Yet while criticizing Montaigne's proto-liberal philosophical anthropology, the Storeys have not written an exorcism. Immanent contentment is presented in its most charming form, particularly to those attracted to an academic life. The *Essays* model a brilliant alternative to the severity and humorlessness of contemporary culture. We find in these searching self-reflections a seductive defense of an intellectualism that balances levity and sobriety, curiosity and skepticism. Montaigne teaches us to play with ideas—even those that destabilize prevailing prejudices—but to avoid the extremes of antiquarian pedantry or Promethean fanaticism.

Pascal, Rousseau, and Tocqueville articulate distinct worries about the Montaignean project. Rousseau radicalizes immanence by injecting it with something more serious than mere contentment. Reacting to the decadence of the French salon, he experiments with political self-actualization, romantic love, and solitary authenticity. Tocqueville in turn describes the democratization of immanent contentment. The modern middle class is the rotten fruit of a Montaignean seed. Playful detachment becomes cold individualism; Montaigne's clever but obedient skepticism devolves into paranoid, Cartesian contempt for received forms and authorities.

If Rousseau radicalizes immanent contentment and Tocqueville traces its sociological degeneration, only Pascal offers a forthright critique of the ideal in its pure form. Immanent contentment cannot be saved by coupling it with politics or a religion of authenticity, nor does its failure consist in an affinity with bourgeois culture. The ethic itself is a promise of misery. Pascal thus breaks with the other two critics, offering the deepest diagnosis of the pathologies of Montaignean happiness.

Harvard University Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

We must thank the Storeys for rescuing Pascal from the murdering, dissecting hands of contemporary philosophy (philosophy of religion in particular). As they explain, the famous Wager is not an argument to be deployed *ex nihilo* to persuade from speculative principles. Indeed, for Pascal no philosophical argument can succeed that way. The Wager applies only to “seekers in anguish,” the Storeys write, whose recognition of their misery prepares them for the search for transcendence (87). Philosophers speak of being compelled to belief by the force of argument. That is not how persuasion works, Pascal insists. Reason does not act coercively on the passive reasoner but only succeeds when allied and harmonized with the will and the passions. “Your inability to believe comes from your passions, since reason brings you to this and yet you cannot believe. Work, then, on convincing yourself, not by adding more proofs of God’s existence, but by diminishing your passions.”¹

Metaphysical proofs of God, for example, “are so remote from men’s reasoning and so complicated” that even if we are convinced, we will forget within an hour how the argument works.² Pascalian philosophy demands the effort of body and soul; it is a project of spiritual exercise and moral transformation (88). We do not deceive ourselves into believing what we wish to be true—the caricature of the Wager—rather, we train ourselves to become a certain kind of person. Only so formed are we capable of understanding ourselves properly. All persuasion is thus a kind of conversion: “we must open our minds to proofs, confirm them through custom, but offer ourselves in humbleness to inspirations, which alone can produce a true and salutary effect.”³

In form and style, Pascal’s epistemology rebukes Montaigne’s cerebral curiosity. The two moralists share a fixation with the paradoxes and contradictions that delight skeptics, and neither is satisfied with straightforwardly rational explanations. But where Montaigne counsels ironic nonchalance in response to intellectual puzzlement, Pascal demands detachment and dependence on God. More than anyone else, the Storeys write, Pascal “reveals the restless unhappiness at the core of the modern soul, sadly seeking to absorb itself in a form of contentment not capacious enough to meet the demands of its self-transcending nature” (97–98). Where Montaigne instructs us to stop pursuing existential longings, Pascal challenges us to embrace our misery, not to imagine it away. Throughout this contrast, the Storeys remain fair and persuasive, yet it remains unclear why Pascal’s Augustinian anthropology should be characterized as distinctively modern.

¹Pascal, *Pensées*, 214, S680/L418. Cf. 43, S175/L142. Citations in footnotes are to page number and the Sellier and Lafuma fragment number in Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. Roger Ariew (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2005).

²*Ibid.*, 55, S222/L190.

³*Ibid.*, 199, S655/L808.

For Pascal, suffering flows from the contradictions of human nature, from the simultaneous curse of original sin and promise of divine reconciliation. The key paradox is man's condition as a "thinking reed."⁴ Our greatness is defined by the recognition of our wretchedness, and our wretchedness consists in the memory of our prelapsarian greatness. Infinite in faculty yet the quintessence of dust, as Hamlet's monologue runs. In Pascal's words: "What a chimera then is man! What a surprise, what a monster, what chaos, what a subject of contradiction, what a prodigy! Judge of all things, weak earthworm; repository of truth, sink of uncertainty and error; glory and garbage of the universe!"⁵ We suffer because of our condition, not because of Rousseauian social alienation or Tocquevillian democratic homogenization. Indicting modernity typically involves condemning the free market, the vanity of consumerist competition, or the anomie of liberal individualism. But none of those targets can be blamed for a wretchedness tied to our fallen nature. The proper response to man's schizophrenic condition is descent into suffering followed by ascent (through grace) beyond the self. That is, after all, the basic incarnational dynamic of the Christian faith: *exitus* and *reditus*.

The Storeys' generally just treatment of Pascal oddly neglects any reference to original sin. Pascal notes the apparent obscenity of the claim that we can inherit sin from our first parents. Nevertheless, "without this most incomprehensible of all mysteries, we are incomprehensible to ourselves. . . . Man is more unintelligible without this mystery than this mystery is unintelligible to man."⁶ What modernity brings is not existential restlessness, but our willful blindness of it. Where Montaigne spreads "nonchalant contentment," the Storeys write, Pascal "begins with such self-satisfied souls and attempts to awaken them and set them in motion" (63). There is nothing new about the Christian attack on lukewarmness. What is new is that nonchalance has become a social ideal, not just a mark of hypocrisy or falling short. The modern ethic of immanent contentment might thus be blamed for sweeping away the resources that once offered us the vocabulary to honestly address our wretchedness. The Montaignean anthropology does not produce our suffering but obscures the depths of our misery.

The Storeys have given us a much-needed meditation on the maladies of our culture, not a set of prescriptions. Yet they suggest in the final pages that we might better confront our condition by restoring the art of choosing and liberal education. Patience, reflection, and the study of great books will help us to see through the superficial vision of happiness that guides our choices and our confusions. In concluding this way, the Storeys respond primarily to the Tocquevillian anxieties outlined in the preceding chapter. One wonders how these suggestions would have sounded to Pascal. For the

⁴Ibid., 31, S145/L113; 64, S231/L200.

⁵Ibid., 36, S164/L131.

⁶Ibid., 37, S164/L131.

Storeys, Pascal teaches us that “the true adventure of the human soul begins not in study abroad but right here—alone in our rooms,” illuminated by the voices of the past (181). But Pascal’s adventure consists in the cosmic drama of sin and salvation unfolding within each human soul. That is a very different adventure from, for example, Machiavelli’s conversations with the great souls of antiquity from his study.⁷

In a sense, the turn to great books might rehabilitate an ironic, Montaignean intellectualism. Montaigne, after all, was the perfect model of liberal education. He knew and read everything. He mastered the classics while teaching himself never to fall under their spell, never to be bewitched by promises of transcendence. As the Storeys note, Montaigne offered an education in a kind of *phronesis*, reading and judging for himself without surrendering to the authority of the past (30). A great-books education might foster the nonchalance with which our troubles began. The seminar room becomes a playground. Students race through the canon, try on ideas for size, and acquire the gnosis to join the remnant of cultured society. Pascal would likely have demanded ascetic self-denial rather than a core curriculum.

There is no doubt something attractive about dilettantish urbanity. Once exposed to the pleasures of the intellectual life, liberally educated students gravitate toward ideas as a kind of high-class hedonism. They have, after all, discovered intellectual riches neglected by the mass of their society. To that student, Pascal offers the necessary correction. If the liberal arts are to be defended, it is because they point to the one thing needful, not because they offer an intellectual feast. The Montaignean temptation remains a permanent occupational hazard for the easily distracted intellectual, for whom the life of the mind is a life of pleasant diversion. The liberally educated academic falls in love with the game, the agitated hunt of ideas, but is terrified of ever catching the true prize.⁸

⁷“At the door I take off my clothes of the day, covered with mud and mire, and I put on my regal and courtly garments; and decently re clothed, I enter the ancient courts of ancient men, where, received by them lovingly, I feed on the food that alone is mine and that I was born for.” Niccolò Machiavelli to Vettori, in *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 109.

⁸Pascal, *Pensées*, 40, S168/L136.