
Blaise Pascal. Pensaments i opuscles

(Blaise Pascal. Thoughts and opuscles)

Translated and edited by Pere Lluís Font

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As the outcome of a life devoted to studying Blaise Pascal, with *Blaise Pascal. Pensaments i opuscles* (2021, Barcelona: Adesiara) Pere Lluís Font brings a new translation and edition of *Pensées* (“thoughts” in French) to the philosophical corpus in the Catalan language, along with some of his brief texts or opuscles that best represent the author’s religious and philosophical phase.

When dealing with the writings of an author of the history of philosophy outside its original language, it is wise to precede the reading with a two-part exercise. The first consists in learning about the existing translations, as well as the particularities of each of them. The second lies in choosing the edition based on its purpose. If we want to access the writings of one of Western history’s most incisive minds in Catalan and want to engage in this previous exercise that should precede this venture, then we find ourselves in the position of examining this new edition. What are its forerunners? What are its contributions and singularities? What editorial decisions were taken? How can and should it be read?

In this case, it is the fourth Catalan translation of *Pensées*, preceded by the partial translations by Manuel de Montoliu (1904, Barcelona: Biblioteca Popular de ‘L’Avenç’), by Joan Gomis i Sanahuja (1972, Madrid: Seminarios y Ediciones S. A.) and the recent complete translation by Miquel Costa (2015, Barcelona: Ara Llibres). In *Blaise Pascal. Pensaments i opuscles*, Pere Lluís Font provides all the tools to understand and study the text, but he prioritises ensuring that they do not break the rhythm of the reading itself. Thus, the book can be read freely and easily without neglecting the demands of a specialised scholarly use of it. It therefore meets two kinds of expectations with which one may want to examine Pascal’s philosophy: those of a broad educated audience and those of scholars. In this review, we have focused on the editorial choices that enable this book to achieve this twofold goal.

Physically, *Blaise Pascal. Pensaments i opuscles* is a hardcover book with two different-coloured satin bookmarks. Its size should not be intimidating: the 791 pages seem like few when compared with what they offer. The Introduction (pp. 9-88) offers a meticulous, concise study, to which we shall return. It then contains a Timeline (pp. 89-101) and an updated Bibliography (pp. 103-113) of the main editions and studies of *Pensées*. The two core parts, as mentioned above, are the new translation of *Pensées* (pp. 117-514), complemented by the Opuscles (pp. 517-585). Next, we find a Concordance Table (pp. 587-599), which we shall discuss below, followed by an Analytical Index (pp. 601-615), an Onomastic Index (pp. 617-626), an Index of Celebrated Quotes (pp. 627-643) and finally an extensive Notes section (pp. 645-791).

The Introduction is abreast of the latest scholarly research and surveys Pascal's life, the intricate history of the different editions of *Pensées* and the keys to reading it. It is enriched by Pere Lluís Font's own research, which includes Pascal's less studied influences—such as Grotius and the Catalans Ramon Martí and Ramon Sibiuda—important nuances given the cliché of his dislike of Descartes, his often-ignored complicity with the Libertines (he is considered a potential Libertine) and his foreshadowing Kant on anthropological issues.

In the biographical section, we learn that Pascal was born in 1623 in what is today, Clermont-Ferrand. He started to produce scientific-technical advances at the age of 16 which stood out for their precocity, polyvalency and impact in mathematics, engineering and physics. In 1646, Pascal converted to Jansenism, a Christian current associated with the Port-Royal abbey and characterised by its revival of Augustinism. Due to issues regarding the interpretation of grace, predestination and sin in human nature, the Jansenist current was at the heart of different controversies since it emerged, including the tenacious polemic against the Jesuits and several papal condemnations. These theological turbulences prompted a shift in Pascal's intellectual life. Based on what is known as his 'second conversion' in 1654, his scientific output declined in favour of his almost exclusive dedication to theology. In this last stage of his life, Pascal adopted literary and philosophical writing and actively participated in Jansenism's polemics. He published *Lettres provinciales* between 1656 and 1657. Having always suffered from fragile health, he died in Paris in 1662 at the age of 39 as he was preparing an apologia of Christianity.

Eight years later, the preparations for his last work were published in Port-Royal as his 'thoughts'. Since then, in their cropped form, the fragments have (accidentally) been able to be read as aphorisms that are as unlikely as they are provocative: in short, they are an endless source of fascination. On the one hand, scholars (or '*pascalitzants*') have spent centuries debating the question of their appropriate order. Indeed, the handwritten notes were in bundles of papers bound with string in a drawer. Sometimes the fragments follow each other to build arguments, as in the celebrated *Pascal's wager*, but they are often just embryonic sketches of scattered ideas that do not obey any thematic or even graphic sequence on the surface of the pages. To further complicate matters, two copies of Pascal's manuscript were made, and in around 1711 Louis Périer, his nephew, discovering that some of the original sheets had been getting lost, sewed the remaining ones together to form what is known as the *recueil original*. However, all three 'orig-

inal' sources have discrepancies in their details, and occasionally in entire fragments. Therefore, each edition of *Pensées* that has been published is inevitably a reconstruction and a suggested roadmap for reading. While some editors try to reproduce the fragments' location in the original manuscripts, others try to restore the chronology of the writing, and yet others try to group together the fragments to create a systematic or at least thematic exposition.

The editorial decisions in this new volume reflect Pere Lluís Font's desire for Pascal to remain accessible. Therefore, the edition focuses on tracing the systemic order of Brunschvicg (*maior* and *minor* editions), amending the different flaws of those editions and leaving the questions on miracles and the latest fragments discovered for the appendix. With this choice, the edition stands apart from both Lafuma's organisation—considered canonical by the majority of scholars today—and other 'objective' organisations that seek to be faithful to the order of one of the three aforementioned original sources. In the opinion of the editor and translator, Brunschvicg's order 'has irrefutably and continuously shown its virtues to meet the demands of the educated, non-specialised reader' and also has the benefit of being the most 'pedagogical' (p. 82-3). Pere Lluís Font believes that despite their scholarly advantages, objective organisations put too much distance between the meaning of the writing and the general reader. Similarly, instead of using footnotes, the edition places the notes at the end of the volume, freeing up the pages devoted to *Pensées* itself and to the opuscles, and encouraging seamless reading. Additionally, the inclusion of the Index of Celebrated Quotes meets two needs that an expert reader presumably does not have: first, it helps to identify celebrated quotes, and secondly, it corrects supposed quotes by Pascal (that are approximate or simply false) that are circulating in the secondary literature and other media. Nonetheless, the editorial choices are aimed at showcasing Pascal's current relevancy and natural appeal by ensuring access by an educated audience in the broad sense.

Due to the fragmentary nature of *Pensées*, it is illuminating to find there some of the same themes that are developed in the opuscles, such as considerations on Pyrrhonism, doubt, Montaigne and the balance between lightness and darkness in the miracles. Each of the seven opuscles is accompanied by an introduction that clarifies the nature of the text. However, we are told in the Introduction that four more opuscles would have complemented *Pensées* but were excluded because they had been translated in the *Escrits de filosofia de la ciència* (Pere Lluís Font, 2017, Girona: Ela Geminada). Therefore, it is worth noting that the volume is not self-contained in this regard.

Below are some of the factors which imbue this edition with the highest academic rigour. First, the translation resists the temptation to improve Pascal's style and preserves the agrammatical structures of his schematic annotations. Secondly, the Catalan lexis is precise with regard to the French from the seventeenth century and Pascal's own idiolect. Likewise, references to the sources of the fragments are provided within brackets, or it notes that Pascal had deleted the text. Additionally, the Concordance Table correlates the predominant systems of referencing the fragments of *Pensées* and thus provides a map so that it can be read in Lafuma's order,

for example. Although this is not an exhaustive list of this book's advantages for scholarly use, we should also highlight the richness of the Notes section, which compiles more than 1,500 details, clarifications and references.

In conclusion, in Pere Lluís Font's edition of *Blaise Pascal. Pensaments i opuscles*, the two levels of reading—the broad, educated audience and scholars—coexist happily without either causing detriment to the other. When choosing among the existing translations, this is clearly an outstanding one worth considering. Readings like this one will unquestionably get us to engage in conversations with thinkers from other centuries, and as Descartes said, to converse with those of other centuries is almost the same thing as to travel.