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Ethics and Casuistry

The Ethics of Debate in Pascal's *Provincial Letters*

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Since Philippe Sellier's essential work on the rhetorical dimension of the *Provincial Letters*,[1] which were written between January 1656 and March 1657, the literature on Pascal has developed an increasing interest in the way in which the French philosopher theorized his art of persuasion and his conception of argumentation.[2] This aspect is all the more relevant as, "beyond the learned and interdisciplinary man, Pascal is fundamentally a polemical being," as Jacques Plainemaison nicely put it.[3] The question of the ethics of debate naturally arises in this context, for, as much in the seventeenth century as in the twenty-first, the ambition to defeat one's adversary generally brings forth an agonistic mechanistic which often leads the opponents to get rid of ethics altogether. Furetière's very definition of the word "polémique" in his *Dictionnaire universel* points to this inherent tendency to go beyond reasonable limits in arguments when he says that "[Polemical] is an epithet we give to the works of authors who write one against another, and who sometimes criticize each other with too much bitterness."[4] Anyone can easily find examples for oneself of controversies whose dynamics seems to be ruled by nothing but the desire to overcome the contrary. In such cases, as is well known, the search for truth is run over by partisanship and by the thirst for power, which is itself fortified by the exhilaration of fight.

But what about Pascal, then? Should one believe that the controversy which opposes him to the Jesuits in the *Provincial Letters* is also moved by this single desire for victory, and hence devoid of any ethical dimension? This question, which is raised by "Pascal's polemical ethics,"[5] has already been the subject of Olivier Jouslin's vast inquiry which confronted "his libelli to those who forced him to engage in the fight, [and] to the texts of all his adversaries, whatever their importance was in the history of science or of religion."[6] The conclusion of this study is that, "Concerning Pascal, the obligation to talk was due to deep reasons that touched upon his personal researches."[7] In other terms, there is nothing left to chance in Pascal's polemics, because it may be held that, as Jouslin wrote it, "Pascal constructs his own thought by opposing himself to others."[8]

In the same spirit, but with a different perspective and in another way, we would like to argue in this essay ~~is~~ that it is through his critique of casuistry in the *Provincial Letters* that Pascal came to develop his own ethics. Before that, of course, he *had* a sort of ethics, namely, the Christian one. But it was, if we may say, a pre-reflective ethics: it was not really his own. We would like to defend the view that the more he wrote on the Jesuits' corruption of ethics, the more he set up the principles of his own ethics, which included an *ethics of discourse*—hence the subtitle to this essay, namely, "The Ethics of Debate in Pascal's *Provincial Letters*."

This paper will reconstruct Pascal's ethics as it gets formulated, arguably for the first time, in the *Provincial Letters*. In a first part, we shall understand how Pascal endorses the Christian ethics of moral righteousness through his critique of casuistry, of accommodation, and of the doctrine of probable opinions held by the Jesuits. This being established, we shall see that throughout the writing of the *Provincial Letters*, Pascal has come to reflect on how to argue, how to convince, and how to make a point *in a moral way* in an intellectual debate. This, we shall argue, takes him a step further than the required Christian ethics, so that the *Provincial Letters* become the place where he deploys for the first time the principles of his "art of persuasion" and where he elaborates an ethics

of his own, that is, a real *ethics of debate*.[9]

1 Pascal's Critique of Casuistry, Accommodation, and Probable Opinions: The Christian Ethics of Moral Righteousness

Pascal, who presents the anonymous narrator as an ingenuous man trying to figure out the reason for the many controversies that take place in the great Capital city, Paris, in order to explain them to his Provincial friend, writes his first "letters" as a reporter eager to interview the various protagonists concerned by the theological quarrel at stake. In this sense, Philippe Sellier talked about a sort of "theological journalism" ("journalisme théologique"[10]). The point of the controversy consists in the condemnation, by the Sorbonne's Faculty of Theology, of various propositions in Antoine Arnauld's writings. The debates took place during the whole month of January 1656, and the condemnation was pronounced on ~~the~~ January 29. In the meantime, the first letter appeared in a desperate attempt by Arnauld's Port Royal friends to appeal to public opinion in order to avoid the feared outcome. Yet, this letter arrived too late: as he explicitly wrote, Pascal was finishing the writing of his second letter, dated January 29, when he learned about the condemnation.[11]

In his fake role of a neutral, good-sensed man who just seeks for truth and tries to understand everyone's position in order to get a full grasp of what is being reproached to the Great Arnauld, Pascal pretended to be non-biased and to give everyone a chance to justify their point. But his untold goal was clearly to ridicule the lack of substance of the reproaches made to Arnauld. In this first section, we will focus primarily on the first ten letters of the *Provinciales* to establish our point concerning the two theoretical frames which come to clash: casuistry and "accommodations" on the one hand; absolute obedience and moral righteousness on the other. To this end, we can try to understand what the Jesuits represent and what the tradition of casuistry, which they perpetrate, consists in, in order to see why it is diametrically opposed to Pascal's conception of true devotion and of ethics.

Casuistry is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "that part of ethics which resolves cases of conscience, applying the general rules of religion and morality to particular instances in which circumstances alter cases or in which there appears to be a conflict of duties."[12] In other terms, rather than using a single, general rule for everyone, casuistry is the art of adapting the rule to particular cases. This idea is clearly summed up in the sixth *Letter to a Provincial*, in the following exclamation which Pascal puts in the mouth of his fictional "Good Jesuit Father"[13]:

> "Alas!" the monk exclaimed, "our main object, no doubt, should have been to establish no other maxims than those of the Gospel in all their strictness: and […] if we tolerate some degree of relaxation in others, it is rather out of complaisance

> than through design. The truth is, sir, we are forced to it. Men have arrived at such a pitch of corruption nowadays that, unable to make them come to us, we must e'en [even] go to them, otherwise they would cast us off altogether; and, what is worse, they would become perfect castaways. It is to retain such characters as these that our casuists have taken under consideration the vices to which people of various conditions are most addicted, with the view of laying down maxims which, while they cannot be said to violate the truth, are so gentle that he must be a very impracticable subject indeed who is not pleased with them. The grand project of our Society, for the good of religion, is never to repulse any one, let him be what he may, and so avoid driving people to despair."[14]

As Pascal wrote in the preceding letter about the Jesuits, "It is in virtue of this 'obliging and accommodating conduct,' as Father Petau calls it, that they may be said to stretch out a helping hand to all mankind."[15] But the *accommodation* which is presented by them as an act of charity is rather an act of egoism and self-interest, as the phrasing in Letter VI interestingly suggests ("otherwise they would cast us off altogether; *and, what is worse, they would become perfect castaways*"). The Jesuits' primary interest is not in the salvation of the sinner's soul, as they come to pretend in a fake act of charity, but in themselves as a political and social institution, as they express it in the first place: they need members and followers. In this, they conflate ethics and politics and subordinate the former to the latter. As Giuseppe Pezzino showed,[16] this conflation is outrageous for Pascal.

The "art of accommodation" of the Society of Jesus at the practical level is very closely linked, at the epistemological level, to what has come to be called the "*doctrine of probable opinions,*" which was the subject of Letter V. Pascal ridicules the lack of respect for the divine law, but also the lack of respect for logic itself, that is, for the love of truth, through his irresistible irony:

> "And if an opinion be at once the less probable and the less safe, it is allowable to follow it," I asked, "even in the way of rejecting one which we believe to be more probable and safe?" "Once more, I say yes," replied the monk. "Hear what Filiutius, that great Jesuit of Rome, says: 'It is allowable to follow the less probable opinion, even though it be the less safe one. That is the common judgement of modern authors.' Is not that quite clear?"[17]

The only thing that matters is *to please and justify* the sinner, rather than to condemn him and force him to amend himself. Even when they know that something is false, the Jesuit casuists may still use it to absolve the sins confessed to them or to encourage bad actions: "I go further and say that there would be nothing unreasonable in his giving those who consult him a judgement held to be

probable by some learned person, even though he should be satisfied in his own mind that it is absolutely false."[18]

In other terms, truth, for the Jesuits, is a vain word. In this, Pascal presents these casuists as the new Sophists. But one should note that he does not present his own ethics in contrast to this "relaxed ethics."[19] He does not say: "See how ridiculous and self-contradictory their maxims are!" No: he just lets them dig their own grave by bringing to light their own contradictions and their own lack of consistency in an ironic way.

The *irony* of the *Provincial Letters* has been much studied, and rightly so.[20] Irony is a real weapon. Through it, the opinion of the narrator is easy to reconstruct. To convince oneself, one may just look at the following passage, still from Letter V:

> You don't understand it," said he [the good Father], interrupting me; "no doubt they are often of different sentiments, but what signifies that? Each renders his own opinion probable and safe. We all know well enough that they are far from being of the same mind; what is more, there is hardly an instance in which they ever agree. There are very few questions, indeed, in which you do not find the one saying yes and the other saying no. Still, in all these cases, each of the contrary opinions is probable.[21]

Pascal appeals to good sense. Any rational person will naturally despise such a blunt slap in the face of logic and truth. In writing in this ironical way, Pascal forces any good-willed reader to agree with him.

Indeed, Pascal's *Provincial Letters* were an immediate success, and irony was successful in the long run, even if it was not immediately successful at the political level. As Albert R. Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin wrote in the prologue to their book *The Abuse of Casuistry. A History of Moral Reasoning*,

> Ever since the French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal attacked the Jesuit confessors of Paris in his *Provincial Letters*, in the mid-seventeenth century, attempts to base a general account of ethics on the analysis and classification of "cases" and "circumstances" have been objects of disrepute, both among educated laypeople and among scholars, especially academic philosophers. In their eyes moral judgments can be securely grounded only by relating them back to universal principles; and any morality of circumstances and cases seems doomed (as Pascal declared) to serve as an invitation to excuse the inexcusable.[22]

Pascal inaugurates a whole literary tradition that would use irony against casuistry in order to criticize it as a mere moral imposture. In Molière's *Tartuffe*, casuistry is defined as the "science to expand the links of our conscience" ("science/D'étendre les liens de notre conscience"[23]). Passing through Crébillon Fils, we can find similar puns up to Voltaire, who was a great admirer of Pascal's style, and a master in the art of irony himself.

Irony is a criticism which is expressed in a pleasant form; but it is a real criticism nonetheless, implying a real doctrinal point. The opposition drawn by Pascal in these letters is between a "relaxed ethics," fitting the greater number, and a true ethics for those (very few) who are truly pious. The pious person, according to Pascal, will prefer righteousness and the rigor of obeying the law. This brings us to concluding this first section with a positive account of Pascal's view of ethics as it arises through these first letters: there is one law; it is dictated by God; it is strict, and we have no choice but to submit ourselves to it entirely. There is no possible compromise with the divine law. This is what defines the "pious" person in contradistinction to the "relaxed" mass, as Pascal expressed in Letter V:

> On this principle, you will easily see that, if they had none but the looser sort of casuists [s'ils n'avaient que des casuistes relâchés], they would defeat their main design, which is to embrace all; for *those that are truly pious are fond of a stricter discipline*. But as there are not many of that stamp, they do not require many severe directors to guide them. They have a few for the select few, while whole multitudes of lax casuists are provided for the multitudes that prefer laxity [la foule des casuistes relâchés s'offre à la foule de ceux qui cherchent le relâchement].[24]

Which ethics is entailed by these sentences? Very simply put, it is the rigorous conception of Augustine and of Jansenius. According to Pascal and his Jansenist friends—the nuns and Solitaries gathered together at the Abbey of Port-Royal-des-Champs—accommodation is not an art, it is a crime; probable opinions are not a charitable openness of mind, they are a total misconception and ignorance of the one and true God. Anything falling short on this is not just "not quite good"; it is totally immoral and impious. In ethics like in religion, according to Pascal, it is all or nothing: you are good or you are bad, just like you are Christian or you are not. Letter XIV is crystal clear on this:

> To come to the point, with you, fathers, whom do you wish to be taken for?—for the children of the Gospel, or for the enemies of the Gospel? You must be ranged either on the one side or on the other; for there is no medium here. "He that is not with Jesus Christ is against him." Into these two classes, all mankind are divided.[25]

And to be a Christian is to be humble and obedient. As the *Pensées* will reiterate: “We must love God only and hate self only.”[26] To the contrary, the Jesuits' pride is such that they take themselves for God. Through their practice of casuistry, they act as if *they* were making the laws: “I see now that a single casuist may make new rules of morality at his discretion and dispose, according to his fancy, of everything pertaining to the Church regulation.”[27]

This takes us to the second section, which will be devoted to understanding in which respect Pascal elaborated personal moral convictions in addition to these basic Christian ones in the course of his debate with the Jesuits.

2 Pascal's Personal Ethical Elaboration: The Ethics of Debate

As all commentators agree, the tone of Letter XI changed drastically in order to become a direct attack (and self-defense). Pascal, still an anonymous writer at this point, directly wrote “to the Reverend Fathers, the Jesuits.” He used the same addressee until Letter XVI, dated December 4, 1656, and changed “to the Reverend Father Annat, Jesuit” in the two last letters (and in the fragment of Letter XIX, left unfinished). So, as we can see, things were getting more and more personal, although Pascal continued to hide his identity. It is also within the frame of this change of tone that Pascal made use of what we will now call his own “ethics of debate,” which is closely linked with the art of persuasion developed in the treatise named after it.

So far, Pascal's only ethics was the Christian one: the *true* Christian one, as he would specify; that is, the rigorous search for God's dictates and the total submission to them. From this Letter XI on, however, Pascal started to mix some extra rhetorical elements into his ethical conception, which is something we cannot find in Arnauld or in other Port-Royal theoreticians, who are more influenced by Cartesianism than by classical rhetoricians and humanists.

Pascal presents his argument for saying that his irony is holy and good, because far from “turning sacred things into ridicule,”[28] as the Jesuits accuse him to, he has constantly made an effort to defend sacred things. His main point is that impiety *is* truly worthy of scorn and mockery, so that a pious mockery is possible, and can even be necessary, as an aid to reason when the latter is insufficient.

> Just in proportion as Christian truths are worthy of love and respect, the contrary errors must deserve hatred and contempt; there being two things in the truths of our religion: a divine beauty that renders them lovely, and a sacred majesty that renders them venerable; and two things also about errors: an impiety, that makes them horrible, and an impertinence that renders them ridiculous.[29]

As Pascal will further show, this pious mockery can even be found in the Bible and in the Church Fathers—, and not just in one occasion, but in many:

> For these reasons, while the saints have ever cherished towards the truth the twofold sentiment of love and fear—the whole of their wisdom being comprised between fear, which is its beginning, and love, which is its end—they have, at the same time, entertained towards error the twofold feeling of hatred and contempt, and their zeal has been at once employed to repel, by force of reasoning, the malice of the wicked, and to chastise, by the aid of ridicule, their extravagance and folly.[30]

This point is important. In affirming that a legitimate, and even necessary, use of irony and mockery is needed to defend holy truths from being blasphemed, Pascal gives a first expression to an idea that will become his trademark: reason or the intellect is totally useless when left to itself. This is due to the fact that we are not pure intellects, but beings of (corrupted) flesh. The two treatises *On the Geometrical Mind* and *On The Art of Persuasion*~~,~~ were written in 1654 or 1655,[31] namely, just before his controversy with the Society of Jesus (we may recall that the letters were written between January 1656 and March 1657). There are reasons to believe that the *Provincial Letters* were the first "putting into practice," in the field of theology and ethics, the principles set out by Pascal in the *Art of Persuasion*.

In *The Art of Persuasion*, Pascal observes that "There are two ways by which opinions are received into the soul, which are its two principal powers: understanding and will."[32] Of course, "we ought never to consent to any but demonstrated truths; but the most usual, although against nature, is by the will. For every man is almost always led to believe *not through proof, but through that which is attractive*."[33] As he reiterates it a couple of lines later: "we believe almost only in the things we like."[34] The weakness of reason thus entails that even in the case of divine matters, "the art of persuasion consists as much in pleasing as it does in convincing, humanity being so much more governed by whim [caprice] than by reason."[35]

As Anthony McKenna explained, for Pascal, the mind never functions independently of the body.[36] Letter XVIII will develop something similar when Pascal sketches for the first time the theory of the three orders and says that faith is aided by the senses. In other terms, our access to anything, even to truths, is always mediated by the body. In no way could we, like in Descartes, have a direct intellectual intuition of any kind of truth. This is the reason why, as Pascal developed it in ~~*The Geometrical Mind*~~*L'esprit de géométrie* and in the *Pensées*, the order of the heart, not the intellectual order of the mind, is the one through which we perceive principles. As he wrote in the *Art of Persuasion*:

> Only God can put them [the highest truths] into the soul, and in the way he thinks fit. I know that he wanted them to enter from the heart into the mind, and not from

> the mind into the heart, in order to humiliate that proud power of reasoning which claims it ought to be the judge of what is chosen by the will, and to heal that feeble will which is completely corrupted by vile attachments.[37]

But if this is so, what is the difference between this desire to please the reader, which pervades all the *Provincial Letters* and made its success, and the fake art of disguise and of flattery which Pascal reproaches the casuists to be masters at? Is not Pascal at risk of self-contradiction here, since he too has recourse to the art of pleasing in order to deal with serious and sacred matters?

Pascal's answer is, again, expressed in Letter XI. The best proof that it is not blasphemous, as the Jesuits unduly reproach him, is that God himself uses irony, according to the Holy Scriptures:

> Do we not find God at once hates and despises sinners; so that even at the hour of death, when their condition is most sad and deplorable, Divine Wisdom adds mockery to the vengeance which consigns them to eternal punishment?[38]

God himself, in the Old Testament, occasionally makes use of "a discourse of mockery" ("un discours de moquerie"), and even "a bitter [stinging] irony" ("*une ironie piquante*")[39] as the fathers of the Church themselves recognize:

> It is worthy of remark here that the very first words which God addressed to man after his fall contain, in the opinion of the fathers, "bitter irony" and mockery. […] After having reduced him to this miserable condition, which was due to his sin, He taunted him in that state with the following terms of derision: "Behold, the man has become as one of us!—*Ecce Adam quasi unus ex nobis!*"—which, according to St. Jerome and the interpreters, is "a grievous and cutting piece of irony," with which God "stung him to the quick."[40]

And for Pascal to conclude: "Thus you see, fathers, that ridicule is, in some cases, a very appropriate means of reclaiming men from their errors, and that it is accordingly an act of justice."[41]

In a nutshell, ridicule or irony is a sacred art. There is a pious use of malign tools when it is for the emendation of the sinner. But how can we discriminate between a "good use" of mockery, and a

bad one? In order to explain it in Letter XI, Pascal switches the roles, and the ingenious man eager to learn from his fathers, becomes the one who teaches them how to think:

> I shall tell you, fathers (and I am ashamed I should have to teach you what I should have rather learnt from you), the marks which the fathers of the Church have given for judging when our animadversions flow from a principle of piety and charity, and when from a spirit of malice and impiety.[42]

This takes us directly to the magistral explanation, offered by Pascal in Letter XI, of his ethics of debate, which appeals to Tertullian in order to set out the principles of what we would like to call "good speech":

> The first of these rules is that the spirit of piety always prompts us to speak with sincerity and truthfulness; whereas malice and envy make use of falsehood and calumny.[43]
>
> […] It is not enough, however, to tell nothing but the truth; we must not always tell everything that is true; we should publish only those things which it is useful to disclose, and not those which can only hurt, without doing any good. And, therefore, as the first rule is to speak with truth, the second is to speak with discretion.[44]
>
> The third rule, fathers, is: That when there is need to employ a little raillery, the spirit of piety will take care to employ it against error only, and not against things holy; whereas the spirit of buffoonery, impiety, and heresy, mocks at all that is most sacred.[45]
>
> In short, fathers, to abridge these rules, I shall only mention another, which is the essence and the end of all the rest: That the spirit of charity prompts us to cherish in the heart a desire for the salvation of those against whom we dispute, and to address our prayers to God while we direct our accusations to men.[46]

Pascal believes, like the Port-Royal logicians, that logic is important in an argumentative speech. In *The Art of Persuasion*, he agrees that the art of geometry consists "in three essential parts: in defining the terms that will be used through clear definitions, in proposing principles, or evident axioms, to prove the thing at stake, and in always substituting mentally in the demonstration the definitions in the place of the defined things."[47] However, the *Provincial Letters* give numerous examples of the lack of respect of this principle by the Jesuit casuists, who use language to

disguise, and who willingly promote equivocation, starting with the "proximate power"[48] [*pouvoir prochain*] of letter I, which is decried as an empty word, continuing with the "sufficient grace" which is not ultimately "sufficient" in Letter II,[49] or funny examples such as "attending several masses" by cumulating a couple of minutes here (in one mass) and a couple of minutes there (in another) in Letter IX.[50]

In the name of moral integrity, one must make good use of language and of the rules of logic. This is clearly a thing at which the Jesuits fail in their various acts of accommodation, and Pascal denounces it with great strength. But contrary to the logicians of Port Royal (such as Arnauld and Nicole), who were under the direct influence of Cartesianism, Pascal developed the idea that the weakness of reason obliges us to use rhetoric in order *to make truth enter the hearts*.[51] This is why the lesson of piety that he gives in Letter XI to the Jesuits, by addressing himself directly to them, ends up using sources inherited from Roman Antiquity and the humanistic world.

The three filters of good speech (truth, goodness, and necessity or usefulness) are attributed by the tradition to Socrates and are here referred to as Tertullian's, with the important addition of the fourth, and most essential, rule of being led by *charity*. They are borrowed from classics, in other words, and they are being Christianized. The Chevalier de Méré, who was Pascal's great friend, was one of those who would have shared his love for the humanist world. This is, by the way, the whole point of Pascal's admiration towards Montaigne, whose style and philosophy speak to the heart.[52] ~~On the contrary~~, a Christian thinker such as Malebranche took precisely Montaigne and Tertullian as dangerous examples of "strong imaginations" [*imaginations fortes*] in his critique of the power of seduction of their discourses in the *Search after Truth*.[53] Far from being afraid of that power of seduction, on the contrary, Pascal actively promoted it as a necessary tool for amending the soul. For, having applied the three filters of "truth," "goodness," and "necessity" to his own speech, and above all, that of "charity," he concluded that his use of irony was totally legitimate and subordinated to the pious enterprise of establishing the Christian truth.

In a nutshell, it may be said that the first ten letters of the *Provinciales* constitute the most scathing indictment that one could formulate *in the name of reason* against what we should not be afraid to call "bad faith"—and we did not intend it to be a pun, but it turns out that Pascal's letters are an indictment of *bad faith* in both senses of the term, because the Jesuits also just have a "bad conception of faith," according to Pascal. Through the critique of their accommodations and of their doctrine of probable opinions, in particular, Pascal showed the blasphemy contained in their maxims. At this point, however, reason *proved to be insufficient*. Irony, as we have seen, was used by Pascal from the beginning of the *Provincial Letters*: it constituted an appeal to good sense, but it was also pleasing. After Letter XI, Pascal had to use direct attack, but he also had to justify his recourse to jest and the rhetorical art of persuasion in the name of the necessity for truth to enter the mind through the heart. And this is where the novelty of his approach revealed all its potential, by moving from something implicit to an explicit ethical reflection. In addition to the Christian ethics of moral rigor and righteousness, Pascal made room for the art of pleasing as a sacred art when used for a good purpose. In the *Provincial Letters*, he thus used both "esprit de géométrie" and "esprit de finesse"[54] because of his conviction that *moral truths are to be felt*. Laughter and irony, but also all the tools that the rhetorical tradition has provided us with, are legitimate means to this end. Pascal thus developed an original ethics of debate, which included an ethics of pleasing

through his critique of casuistry in the *Provincial Letters*. This now personal ethics anchored itself in his conception of the weakness of reason and gave a first illustration to the theses developed in the *Art of Persuasion* and *The Spirit of Geometry*.

It should be noted that it is precisely this alliance between "esprit de géométrie" and "esprit de finesse" which made of the *Provincial Letters* a historical turning point. Indeed, this new ethics of debate inaugurated by Pascal in the frame of his critique of casuistry constitutes an essential landmark in what Marc Fumaroli called "the quarrel of Christian mockery" (*la "Querelle de la raillerie chrétienne*"[55]), which occupied the whole seventeenth century. This quarrel was fired by the publication in 1622 of François Garasse's *Doctrine curieuse des beaux esprits de ce temps*. The book of this Jesuit Father was intended against the freethinkers of the time, and was particularly aggressive against the French poet Théophile de Viau, whom Garasse targeted directly and criticized with a vehement tone. Precisely due to these verbal excesses, this libelous raised the problem of verbal violence in the frame of philosophical and religious controversies and in public debates more generally: Is brutality of speech legitimate, and even the sign of a saint indignation, or rather, should it be considered as a despicable lack of taste, doubled with an odious moral straying?[56]

It is on this point that the *Provincial Letters* constitute a radical change of paradigm for French and European culture, both on the rhetorical and on the ethical fields. This new art of debating, resolutely opposed to invective, is constructed on a double requirement: (a) to be precise in the use of terms (in conformity with what "esprit de géométrie" requires), and (b) to be pleasant and agreeable to read for the gentle and honest person,[57] who may even feel encouraged to laugh at this speech (in conformity with what "esprit de finesse" requires). Against the excesses of casuistry, Pascal reacts "both as a scandalized gentleman and as a geometer,"[58] as Dominique Descotes wrote. He thus unites the requirements of critical reason with the amenities of a speech which is both pleasant and ironical: in other terms, he combines the desire for rational distinction with what we may call *urbanitas, that is,* a mundane code of politeness which is conform to what Norbert Elias called the "civilizing process."[59]

This new way to debate, able to balance elegance and demonstrative rigor, intends to create an enlightened and well-policed laughter whose morality resides in its being essentially transitive: that is, it must *lead* the reader from a conniving amusement to the enlightened consciousness of what is at stake in the controversy. This aspect is what justified Olivier Jouslin's idea that "the famous plays on words concerning 'sufficient grace' and 'proximate power' are less innocent than is usually thought,"[60] insofar as they only have meaning in the frame of the mission that Pascal feels invested in vis-à-vis his audience and the public opinion. This is the very reason why, for him, there exists an "ethics of laughter," and why "it is allowed to man to laugh of man as long as this laughter has an ethical finality," as Jouslin put it.[61] In other words, in a much more efficient manner than the rage of invective would have permitted it, the laughter that Pascal intends to initiate has an intrinsic sense of measure to it. This moderation finds its expression in the politeness of a style that renounces any brutality and insult to the profit of the subtleties of an ironical speech whose vocation remains thoroughly ethical. In this sense, this laughter of joyous civility aims to be a laughter of intelligence, and a concrete tool in the search for rational and ethical discernment.

It is this very style, which exemplified the new ethics of debate opened by the *Provincial Letters*, that Pascal's posterity would precisely remember, as Voltaire's following remark clearly attests: “It is very strange that, since the French decided to write, they had not a single book written with good style until the year 1656 in which the *Provincial Letters* appeared.”[62] As we have intended to show, the critique of casuistry which Pascal developed in the frame of this written controversy prompted him to forge the first expression of a new ethics, which combined both the moral requirements of Christianity, and the ongoing reflection which he had on the best ways to foster rational reflection, clarity, and efficiency of speech, as illustrated in his *Art of Persuasion*. The *Provincial Letters* thus constitute a successful first attempt to mix the spirit of geometry and the spirit of finesse in the frame of an ethical and theological debate. The irony and ethical laughter used by Pascal make it clear that rhetorical means are not foreign to ethics and that, on the contrary, they can rightly be used, and indeed, *must* be used, for ethics not to remain a vain word.

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1 See Sellier (1985). Before him, see also Reisler (1978).

2 See notably Descotes (1993).

3 Plainemaison (2003, p. 7), translation ours. All quotes in French will be freely translated throughout this article except for those by Pascal, for which official translations will be used.

4 Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel*, 1690: "*Polémique*. C'est une épithète qu'on donne aux livres des auteurs qui écrivent les uns contre les autres, et qui se critiquent quelquefois avec trop d'aigreur."

5 See Jouslin (2006)

6 *Ibid*., p. 120.

7 "S'agissant de Pascal, l'obligation de parler tient à des raisons profondes qui touchent à ses recherches personnelles," *ibid*., p. 127.

8 "Pascal construit sa pensée en s'opposant," *ibid*., p. 125.

9 An excellent summary of the *Provincial Letters* can be found in the chapter devoted to this

writing by Richard Parish in the *Cambridge Companion to Pascal*. It may be said that the present paper offers a development to the suggestion contained in Parish's conclusion that “Far from being a period piece devoted to a forgotten example of inter-Christian bickering, therefore, the *Provinciales* afford a powerfully enduring object lesson in the means and methods of efficacious dispute.” (Parish, 2003, p. 199).

10 See Sellier (1985, pp. 252–253): “Lorsque Pascal se propose pour défendre la théologie de la grâce, en janvier 1656, à quelle forme littéraire songe-t-il? Va-t-il reprendre celle du traité, celle des longues lettres-dissertations de plusieurs de ses amis? Pas du tout. Il s'arrête à la forme volante de certains pamphlets de la Fronde, et plus précisément au format même et au nombre de pages de la *Gazette,* créée par Renaudot en 1631: huit pages in-4°, et éventuellement douze. Bien plus, il est en avance par rapport à cette même *Gazette*, lorsqu'il fait appel à des techniques journalistiques comme le ‘courrier des lecteurs' de dernière heure (à la fin de la *Quatorzième* ou de la *Seizième*). Pascal donne ses lettres de noblesse au journalisme théologique: avec les dix premières *Provinciales*, il joue au correspondant de presse: multipliant les interviewes, passant au grand reportage, il informe les provinciaux des événements de l'heure.”

11 2nd Letter, Delphi Classics, 2020, p. 53 (transl. Thomas M'Crie, 1860): “I have just come to learn, when closing my letter, that the censure has passed.”

12 *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 20 volumes.

13 This comical character was introduced in letter IV and continued to be the main interlocutor up to Letter X.

14 Pascal, Letter VI. *Delphi Collected Works of Blaise Pascal*, pp. 108–109; Seuil p. 384: “Les hommes sont aujourd'hui tellement corrompus, que ne pouvant les faire venir à nous, il faut bien que nous allions à eux. Autrement ils nous quitteraient […]. Et c'est pour les retenir que nos casuistes ont considéré […] [qu'il fallait] établir des maximes si douces […] qu'on serait de difficile composition si l'on n'en était content; car le dessein capital que notre Société a pris […] est de ne rebuter qui que ce soit, pour ne pas désespérer le monde.”

15 Letter V, Delphi p. 86, Seuil, p. 388.

16 See Pezzino (2008, pp. 347–362).

17 Pascal, Letter V, Delphi p. 95 (Seuil p. 390).

18 Letter V, Delphi p. 96, Seuil p. 390: “Mais je dis de plus qu'il ne sera point hors de raison qu'il donne à ceux qui le consultent un avis tenu pour probable par quelque personne savante, quand même il s'assurerait qu'il serait absolument faux.”

19 Note 1 to letter IV.

20 See notably Anne Régent-Susini, “Rire des erreurs des hommes? *Les Provinciales*, une

comédie?" and Thirouin (1996).

21 Letter V, Delphi pp. 94–95 (Seuil p. 390).

22 See Jonsen and Toulmin (1988, p. 11).

23 *Tartuffe*, Acte IV, sc. 5. On literary representations of the figure of the Jesuit casuists, see Yves Bourassa, "*Ecce qui tollit peccata mundi*. La représentation du casuiste jésuite de la *Summa de casibus* au conte voltairien," Master's thesis, Trois-Rivières, Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, mars 2003.

24 Letter V, Delphi p. 85 (Seuil, p. 388).

25 Letter XIV, Delphi, p. 269 (Seuil, p. 439).

26 William Finlayson Trotter Translation, 1910, in Pascal, Blaise. *Delphi Collected Works of Blaise Pascal* (Delphi Classics, p. 828; Seuil, p. 546): "Il faut n'aimer que Dieu et ne haïr que soi" (S. 405, L. 373, B. 476).

27 The full quote reads as follows: "Reverend father," said I, "how happy the world is in having such men as you for its masters! And what blessings are these probabilities! I never knew the reason why you took such pains to establish that a single doctor, if a grave one, might render an opinion probable, and that the contrary might be so too, and that one may choose any side one pleases, even though he does not believe it to be the right side, and all with such a safe conscience, that the confessor who should refuse him absolution on the faith of the casuists would be in a state of damnation. But I see now that a single casuist may make new rules of morality at his discretion and dispose, according to his fancy, of everything pertaining to the Church regulation." [the English translation had: "to the regulation of manners," but the French edition explicitly says: "et disposer, selon sa fantaisie, de tout ce qui regarde la conduite de l'Église."] Letter VI, Delphi, p. 106 (Seuil, p. 393).

28 Letter XI, Delphi, pp. 196–197 (Seuil, p. 419): "This charge you repeat in all your productions, and carry it so far as to allege, that I have been "guilty of turning sacred things into ridicule." Such a charge, fathers, is no less surprising than it is unfounded. Where do you find that I have turned sacred things into ridicule? […] Is it possible you can have ventured to reiterate so often an idea so utterly unreasonable? Have you no fears that, in blaming me for laughing at your absurdities, you may only afford me fresh subject of merriment; that you may make the charge recoil on yourselves, by showing that I have really selected nothing from your writings as the matter of raillery but what was truly ridiculous; and that thus, in making a jest of your morality, I have been as far from jeering at holy things, as the doctrine of your casuists is far from being the holy doctrine of the Gospel?"

29 Letter XI, Delphi, p. 197 (Seuil, p. 419).

30 Letter XI, Delphi, pp. 197–198 (Seuil, p. 419).

31 See Jean Mesnard for a dating of 1654–1655 (Pascal, B. (1991), 447–466), and Pascal, *De l'esprit de géométrie et de l'art de persuader*, in *Œuvres complètes*, éd. Louis Lafuma, Paris, Seuil, 1963, p. 348: “Ces deux opuscules ont donc été rédigés au plus tard en 1657–1658,” ~~and Jean Mesnard for a dating of 1654–1655~~.

32 *The Art of Persuasion*, [2], Oxford, p. 193 (*De l'Esprit de géométrie et De l'Art de persuader*, in Seuil, p. 355: “il y a deux entrées par où les opinions sont reçues dans l'âme, qui sont […] l'entendement et la volonté”).

33 *Ibid*. [italics added].

34 *The Art of Persuasion* [4], Oxford, pp. 193–194.

35 *The Art of Persuasion* [9], Oxford, p. 195 (Seuil, p. 356: “L'art de persuader consiste autant en celui d'agréer qu'en celui de convaincre, tant les hommes se gouvernent plus par caprice que par raison”).

36 See McKenna (2000). See also the classical study by Laporte (1950).

37 *The Art of Persuasion* [3], Oxford p. 193 (Seuil, p. 355: “Dieu lui-même a voulu en effet que les vérités les plus hautes ‘entrent du cœur dans l'esprit, et non pas de l'esprit dans le cœur, pour humilier cette superbe puissance du raisonnement'.”)

38 Letter XI, Delphi p. 198 (Seuil, p. 419).

39 Letter XI, Seuil, p. 419.

40 Letter XI, Delphi, pp. 198–199.

41 Letter XI, Delphi, p. 199; Seuil, p. 420: « la moquerie est quelquefois plus propre à faire revenir les hommes de leurs égarements, et qu'elle est alors une action de justice ».

42 Letter XI, Delphi, p. 205 (Seuil, p. 422).

43 Letter XI, Delphi, p. 206 (Seuil, p. 422).

44 *Ibid*.

45 Letter XI, Delphi, p. 207 (Seuil, p. 422).

46 Letter XI, Delphi, pp. 207–208 (Seuil, p. 422).

47 “Cet art consiste en trois parties essentielles: à définir les termes dont on doit se servir par des définitions claires; à proposer des principes ou axiomes évidents pour prouver la chose dont il s'agit; et à substituer toujours mentalement dans la démonstration les définitions à la place des définis” (Seuil, p. 356).

48 “The difference between us is so subtle that it is with some difficulty we can discern it ourselves- you will find it rather too much for your powers of comprehension. Content yourself, then, with knowing that it is very true the Jansenists will tell you that all the righteous have always the power of obeying the commandments; that is not the point in dispute between us; but mark you, they will not tell you that that power is proximate. That is the point.”(Letter I, Delphi p. 33).

49 Letter II, Delphi, p. 47: “What I complain of,” returned my friend” “is, that you do not proclaim it everywhere, that by sufficient grace you understand the grace which is not sufficient.” (Seuil, p. 377: “Je me plains, lui dit mon ami, de ce que vous ne publiez pas de toutes parts que vous entendez par grâce suffisante, la grâce qui n'est pas suffisante”).

50 Letter IX, Delphi, p. 173.

51 See Romeo (2008).

52 Pascal mentions “l'incomparable art de conférer” of Montaigne in the second fragment of *L'esprit de géométrie*.

53 See Malebranche, Nicolas, *La recherche de la vérité*, part III, chapter 2.

54 Perhaps we could say, in this sense, that Pascal's style, like that of Voltaire according to Starobinski, was “a double-shot weapon.” On this phrase, see Starobinski, Jean (1966). “Le fusil à deux coups de Voltaire: La philosophie d'un style et le style d'une philosophie (À la mémoire de Leo Spitzer).” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, ~~1966, pp.~~ 277–291.

55 See Fumaroli (1980, pp. 326–334). On this question, see also Ferreyrolles, Gérard (2009). “Éthique et polémique en christianisme: le cas des *Provinciales*,” in Jean-Claude Darmon & Philippe Desan (eds.). *Pensée morale et genres littéraires*. Paris: PUF, ~~pp.~~ 63–80; and Morel, Jacques (1979). “Pascal et la doctrine du rire grave: Onzième *Provinciale*,” in *Méthodes chez Pascal*. Paris: PUF, ~~pp.~~ 213–222.

56 On this, see Chauffour, Julien (2023). *Érasme et l'*ars male dicendi. *Archéologie et poétique de l'invective d'Ammien Marcellin à Ulrich von Hutten*. Thèse de doctorat, Université du Québec à Rimouski.

57 The ideal of the gentleman and of the distinguished lady can be summed up in the French phrase “*honnêtes gens*.”

58 See Descotes (2008, p. 189).

59 On this, see Elias (1978).

60 “Les fameux jeux de mots sur ‘grâce suffisante' ou ‘pouvoir prochain' sont moins gratuits qu'on ne le pense souvent.” Jouslin (2006, p. 128).

61 “[Il est] permis à l'homme de rire de l'homme dès lors que ce rire a une finalité morale.” *Ibid*., p. 132.

62 “Il est bien étrange que depuis que les Français s'avisèrent d'écrire, ils n'eurent aucun livre écrit d'un bon style jusqu'à l'année 1656 où les *Lettres provinciales* parurent.” Voltaire, entry “Style,” *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*, in Voltaire (2013, p. 291). See also, in *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*: “Ses *Lettres provinciales*, qui paraissaient alors, étaient un modèle d'éloquence et de plaisanterie. Les meilleures comédies de Molière n'ont pas plus de sel que les premières lettres provinciales. Bossuet n'a rien de plus sublime que les dernières.” Voltaire (2016, p. 107)).