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BOOK REVIEW

Blaise Pascal, *Writings on Grace: The Complete Écrits sur la grâce*, translated with an essay by Paul J. Griffiths (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2025), xxvi +173 pp.

The lively debate over grace in the first half of the seventeenth century has been the subject of numerous studies by, among others, Henri de Lubac, Leszek Kolakowski, Michael Moriarty, David Wetsel, Vincent Carraud, and William Wood. Meanwhile, a lively and thoughtfully curated series of publications by the Catholic University of America Press has made available key source texts of early modern Catholicism, including Guido Stucco's translation of Cornelius Jansen and Shaun Blanchard's and Richard Yoder's anthology of Jansenist writings. Paul Griffiths's translation of (and incisive commentary on) Pascal's *Écrits sur la grâce* is a most welcome addition to this series and an indispensable resource for understanding the stakes of the nature/grace debate in mid-seventeenth-century France.

In contrast to the urbane and witty tone of his *Provincial Letters* (esp. ## 1-10), and also quite unlike the much wider scope and lively style characterizing his *Pensées*, on which Pascal would embark shortly after completing (or abandoning?) his writings on grace, the language of the *Écrits* tends to be rather crabbed, technical, and formalist. As a result, the task facing the translator of these texts is at once simplified, the vocabulary and prose being tightly circumscribed, yet also complicated in that Pascal's forensic and ruminative style may induce fatigue. As Griffiths, whose translation of Pascal's *Écrits* is consistent, and consistently precise throughout, notes, the theological mystery of grace finds fitting expression in Pascal's halting and recursive style: "the stammer, the second thought, the self-check, the retracing, the repetition of an earlier thought in a moderately different key." Indeed, as presented in Michel LeGuern's authoritative edition, the *Écrits* give the impression of a temperament struggling with perseveration well beyond what can be attributed to the admittedly knotty topic of grace.

Perhaps to counterbalance a tendency in the *Écrits* to overfocus, other editors (Jean Mesnard, Jacques Chevalier) have sought to compensate for their sometimes claustrophobic feel by building bridges to the larger conversation into which, at least implicitly, Pascal was inserting himself in these writings. As LeGuern, whose edition of the *Écrits* (in Pascal's *Œuvres Complètes* II, 211-316) Griffiths is following, has noted, the textual history of these writings is no less tangled than the period's often acrimonious debate on the topic of grace. It was Pascal's nephew, Louis Périer, who in 1711 first reported finding the manuscript among his uncle's papers—"containing several incomplete pieces on grace and the Council of Trent." Deposited by Louis in the library of the abbey of Saint-German-des-Prés, the original manuscript may

well have been destroyed in a fire in 1794. Fifteen years earlier, the abbot Bossut had published a partial first version of these writings in vol. 2 of Pascal's works, then presented in three parts (a letter, a dissertation, and a discourse). Subsequent editors have arranged the text in entirely different ways, e.g., Chevalier, Mesnard, and now Le Guern. While a precise dating of the text may ultimately prove impossible, LeGuern's proposal of late 1656 and 1657 seems to accord well with the way the topic of grace is handled in the final eight letters of Pascal's *Provinciales*. It might also explain the incomplete nature of these writings, quite possibly abandoned in favor of the *Apologie* (a.k.a. the *Pensées*) immediately thereafter.

Major sources for Pascal's exploration of grace include Amable de Bourzeis' *Saint Augustin victorieux de Calvin et de Molina, ou Réfutation d'un livre intitulé* Le Secret du jansénisme, … (1652) and Antoine Arnauld's 1651 *Apologie pour les saints Pères de l'Église, défenseurs de la grâce de Jésus-Christ* (1651), the latter compendium having provided Pascal with key references to Aquinas and Peter Lombard for his *Lettres Provinciales*. Finally, and perhaps most crucially, there is the so-called *Trias* of Père Jean Sinnich (1603–1666). Under the pseudonym of Paulus Erynachus, the Irish-born Sinnich, one of the most adamant defenders of Jansen's *Augustinus*, compiles some 730 quarto pages of passages from Augustine, Prosper of Aquitaine, and Fulgentius on the subject of grace and free will, with interspersed citations of Pelagius, Cassian, and others. Prosper and Fulgentius in particular seem to have anticipated Jansenist efforts at "systematizing" Augustine's teachings on these subjects.

While alluding to some of these textual and contextual tangles, Griffiths's stated preference is to stay close to Pascal's analytic and typically hermetic approach, noting at the outset of his intriguing postscript ("Pascalianism Reconfigured") that he intends to "avoid the following topics: placement of Pascal's treatment of grace in the terrain of seventeenth-century analyses of the topic; placement of the *Writings* within the context of Pascal's *oeuvre* as a whole; assessment of the adequacy or accuracy of Pascal's use of his sources; analysis of Pascal's originality as a theorist of grace" (129n.). While that is certainly leaving out a great deal, it is of course the translator's prerogative to limit his commentary to text-immanent issues, which is what the post-script does—and does in the same incisive and bracing manner that readers of Griffiths' books have come to expect.

In his pellucid summary of the theology of grace set forth in the *Écrits*, Griffiths largely concurs with Pascal's account. Doing so is, for a Catholic theologian, not without risks in that Pascal evidently draws on those works by the late Augustine (*On Grace and Rebuke*, *On the Predestination of the Saints*, *On the Gift of Perseverance*) whose teaching on grace the Church has never fully accepted; and Pascal's labored attempts, in *Écrit* no. 1 (viz., to show that his account is fully compatible with Session 6 of the Council of Trent) notwithstanding, we are a long way from Catholic teaching on grace as formulated by Aquinas (*ST* 2-1-109-114) or indeed the Council. As Griffiths notes, "that grace works infallibly and invincibly upon those who get it is one of Pascal's central claims about grace, and one of the central difficulties in what he writes about it" (133). In fact, in Pascal's zero-sum-game account of grace, leaving "open the possibility that failure to persevere in the Christian life is due to something about the one who fails, and not to something about the one who gives grace" (138) constitutes an impermissible move. For "so long as we are graced (with effective grace), we do not, because we cannot, separate ourselves from the one who

dazzles us with grace's delights" (139). Not only does grace constitute a gift unaccountably and gratuitously given to some human beings, but its "effectiveness" also determines *how* those who, for no merit of their own, receive this gift will respond to it. One may ask, however, whether a transcendently (pre)determined response is a response at all.

Pascal's account of effective grace as irresistible and encompassing every conceivable human action is likely to resonate more with readers of Calvin than Aquinas who, with good reason, maintains that "God does not justify us without ourselves" and that, in order to be saved, we must "consent to God's justification by a movement of our free-will" (*ST*-1-2-111 A2). Free will, according to Pascal, can only express itself in sin or, as Griffiths puts it, in "falling and failing: falling and freedom go together syntactically as tightly as grace and election" (140). Such an antinomian view of effective grace and (utterly damaged) nature implicitly, if not intentionally, voids the human person of all meaningful agency. Those who find themselves to have unaccountably received effective grace will "unfailingly" experience delight and "unfailingly act in accordance with it." Perhaps so, yet where human agency has been reduced to epiphenomenal status, little more than a placeholder in God's soteriological game, the question concerning human being, its essential quiddity, presses disconcertingly to the fore; and here it won't do to argue that "Pascal is not committed to positions on the ontology of kinds of grace as many of his contemporaries and opponents were, but rather to grace's grammar: to deploying talk about kinds of grace when suggestive and useful, and dropping them when not" (134n.). He very much *is* giving us an ontology, such as when (in Griffiths's formulation) "we *know*" that God has "saved some by election and not others" (143; italics mine). Being *eo ipso* indemonstrable, such "knowledge" undergirds Pascal's entire outlook, both in the *Écrits* and in the *Pensées*, on the Christian faith, "a belief mixed with fear [not hope]" that one may be "among the small number of the elect." It also has the presumably unintended effect of eroding the significance of the sacramental order (baptism, last rites, etc.), which for Pascal can never ensure election quite simply because at any moment or, as he puts it, *dans l'instant suivant*, in our lives God may yet withdraw the grace that is formally instantiated by the sacraments. Not by accident, it is anxiety, not hope, which for Pascal constitutes the one epistemic and affective constant in human existence.

That Pascal insists on God's effective grace as the sole "cause and source and principle of ours" (*la cause et la source et le principe*) points to a latent influence of univocalist and voluntarist theologies, it being premised that to grant the human person *any* agency in the drama of salvation would supposedly diminish God's power, and that justification (or indeed any concept of justice) is strictly a function of God's unfathomable will. While Griffiths choses not to backtrace the theological traditions that may be in- or de-forming Pascal's account of (*de facto* irresistible) grace and "fear-laced belief," his until now sympathetic exposition of the *Écrits* has brought him to a point where the question concerning the relation between divine and human agency can no longer be avoided: "What language is available to Christians, then, for specifying the relation between our wills and God's when we are acting rightly?" (147). Now, most Catholic theologians will likely concur with Griffiths that "the fundamental mistake in Christian talk about God's agency and ours … is to construe our action and God's as competitive" (148). Quite so, but is that not exactly what Pascal does? To define, with Pascal, "human freedom … [as] what we do when we respond, *as we must*, to grace" (148; italics mine),

and to insist that "Christian life is a matter of grace from beginning to end. No element of it is ours" (150) is to frame human agency as strictly epiphenomenal (a "secondary cause") in relation to a divine will whose efficacy, being total, could logically never enter into consciousness. It is, in effect, to void the concept of agency altogether.

Admittedly, that is the position taken by Pascal in his *Écrits*, though there is some evidence to suggest that his "chain of concepts so tightly linked" undergoes some loosening in the *Pensées*, whose theological anthropology is of far greater scope and complexity. Still, Griffiths stays the course when noting that, for Christians, the very proposition of "anything at all not made by God," including the concept of action, must be anathema. Indeed, unlike for Pascal, Griffiths would extend this stipulation to Adam and Eve even *before* the Fall; that is, we ought to reject the notion that prelapsarian Eve and Adam were able to act righteously solely on the basis of "sufficient" (not "effective") grace. Obviously, all that is deeply speculative, and Griffiths presumably urges this modification for the sake of fortifying the "Pascalian" axiom that "sequestering" any action or thing whatsoever from God is ontologically impossible and theologically impermissible. One may (and probably should) ask, however, whether granting beings, both animate and human, agency—including, crucially, the choice of refusing or cooperating with God's gift of grace—need be interpreted as diminishing and, thus, subverting Christianity's axiom of divine omnipotence. Might it not be argued, with equal or greater plausibility, that the supreme manifestation of divine omnipotence consists in acts of love and in a loving, abundant generosity rather than total control? While Griffiths would likely demur at such a counterproposal, there is one issue on which he parts ways with Pascal. It concerns the latter's account of election (substantially congruent with Calvin's), which Griffiths's "revised Pascalianism" (155) overturns by positing that "God, because of the universal salvific will, never deserts any of us; and [that] our desertions of God, though real and commonplace, are always temporary" (155). However one feels about the universalist position, it not only is not congruent with Pascal's theology but, if accepted, would remove the very foundation of his theology of grace—viz., the premise of radical soteriological uncertainty.

In the end, readers of Pascal, and of Griffiths's bracing, unfailingly lucid, and overwhelmingly affirmative summation of the *Écrits*, will have to decide whether the position set forth with such adamantine logic might not end up suffocating rather than inspiring the human beings whom it seeks to enlighten on one of the central mysteries of Christian thought.

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