

All too often, the quest for truth which admittedly can only yield a qualified success in the best case scenario is tainted with laxity and fancifulness, and hence is doomed to a pitiable result, not to say failure.

Strangely enough, Blaise Pascal, a famous mathematician and philosopher, is also the eccentric author of a wager according to which the belief in God (or more precisely in heaven as a divine reward for virtue) is defensible to the extent that it is desirable, even though it cannot be proven. Actually, it is supposedly defensible because not only cannot it be proven, it also cannot be disproven. So desirableness is considered a valid foundation for belief, absent provableness and disprovableness! The door is open to every wild fancy, as long as we lack the empirical means of discrediting it.

Who have you invited to dinner, dear?

Some fabulous folks, my love.

Great! And who exactly are these folks?

I don't know, but they're fabulous.

Hum! How can you say they're fabulous if you don't know them?

Our neighbor across the road told me so.

Forgive me for asking, dear, but isn't that neighbor somewhat loopy? The story about angels watching over us sounds like wishful thinking to me.

This loopy neighbor, as you say, is more fun to listen to than your professor friends, with all due respect.

But don't you think

Forget about thinking; I'm in the mood for a dinner with some fabulous folks.

(If you feel this is a bit of sexist humor, note that I have made no mention of genders. The prejudices that offend us are sometimes very much our own. Remember also that Blaise Pascal was a man.)

Personally, I am not willing to forget about thinking. However attractive a claim may be, this attractiveness must be accompanied by credibleness which is a function of provableness and trustworthiness before I let it shape my view and govern my life. When credibleness is wanting, I reserve judgment until further notice and meanwhile accept reality as it appears to be, judging from facts and solid arguments, even if this appearance is not consistent with a so-called ideal world. Call me austere (not ready to indulge in the luxury of extravagant beliefs), a man of reason who associates his intellectual austerity with intellectual integrity.

Having said this, the reverse attitude is common, especially in matters that are beyond the realm of experience and hence can neither be proven nor disproven. For example, as regards their future here below or in the hereafter many do not reserve judgment or keep their minds open to all possibilities, ranging from disastrous to glorious. Instead they believe a heavenly tale because they fancy believing it and often also because a charismatic fortuneteller or spiritual leader, allegedly endowed with supernatural powers, is the originator of this tale.

In its wildest and blindest form, optimism coupled with faith is illustrative of this attitude. Is it fanciful and naive, or even foolish? I am tempted to say yes, and yet I will resist this temptation. There is no denying that the inveterate optimists-believers derive significant enjoyment from seeing their future through rose-colored spectacles. In view

of this enjoyment, a sophisticated better like Blaise Pascal will argue that these spectacles are worth wearing, at the risk of laboring under a delusion. I myself lack the grace or the guile of innocent or calculating souls to whom ignorance is bliss.

I am all the stauncher as a committed realist since life in itself without fables and despite the adversities that are part and parcel of it has meaning to my mind. Furthermore, I contend that religion (as a provider of a questionable but meaningful myth that makes a blissful afterlife the purpose of life) is often a poor substitute for wisdom. It is designed to offset the sinhly16.net/ feeling of dissatisfaction that shadows the foolish if often profound concept of existential absurdity. The more deficient in wisdom, the more avid for religion (as defined above) one is.

Now, what is the content of this wisdom, or what is the meaning of life within the limits of life? I have answered this question to the best of my ability in my book *A REASON FOR LIVING*; and my answer like any answer to this question is sure to be both at odds and in keeping with yours. But then, the antithesis of statements and disagreements can usefully stimulate the intellect to resolve the oppositions and achieve a new and superior synthesis.

Be that as it may, this antithesis betrays the imperfection of individual wisdoms. At best, they are true up to a point, and we can persistently overpass this point while the complete truth indefinitely recedes like the horizon as we advance toward it. There are as many wisdoms as there are individuals; nevertheless their subjectiveness admits of much intersubjectiveness or deep intellectual kinship.

Let us explore a number of cardinal facts and logical assumptions based on facts.

1) The observable universe is the obvious manifestation of a tendency toward order. Ordered things and beings (that show their attraction for a particular inert or living state), ordered behaviors and thoughts (that aim at specific achievements and feelings in preference to others), all this testifies to the tendency in question, which can be called the principle of universal order. The oneness of this principle is not merely nominal. It is fundamental, as demonstrated by the unitary if complex human nature, which comprises every physical and nonphysical aspect of the observable universe.

2) The observation of the universe relates to observers: humans, in the present instance. It is limited to the observable manifestations of this universe, or provides a basis for knowledge only within the limits of these manifestations. Everything beyond these limits that is, everything that is not observably manifest transcends our ability to know it. Nevertheless, as Kant pointed out, our inability to know it does not suppress our curiosity. Whereas some accept the limits of knowledge, many don't. Their effort to penetrate the transcendental mystery ought to yield nothing except fancy.

3) There are, however, various degrees of fancy. At one extreme, fancy is grossly unfounded or rests on the highly suspicious claims of inspired visionaries regarding the great beyond. At the other extreme, fancy is very much tempered with reason. It is reminiscent of poetry, which assimilates certain things to kindred things through metaphors and similes.

Take for example the predictions of learned and intuitive futurists about the distant future of humanity. They clearly overstep the limits of knowledge, and yet they are believable to the extent that they are conceivable, given the way this knowledge represents humans and the world they inhabit. Take also for example the conjectures of learned and intuitive philosophers about the intimate nature of nonhuman beings or things beyond their observable characteristics. Like the above-mentioned predictions, they clearly overstep the limits of knowledge, and yet they are believable to the extent that they are conceivable, given the way this knowledge represents humans and nonhuman beings or things.

4) With respect to our human nature, observations include introspections and reveal both the spiritual and material aspects of this nature. Since we measure the value of life in terms of pleasure (sensual, intellectual, or

moral), it is safe to say that the spiritual aspect is preeminent.

By underscoring the pleasure principle in moral matters, I imply that even the most edifying proof of nobility comprises an element of self-interest. Indeed, nobility is an ideal in the pursuit of which the noble soul takes pleasure not the low sort of pleasure that one derives from such activities as feasting on a palatable dish or having intercourse with a seductive lover, but the most elevated sort. Therefore, self-interest and nobility are not mutually exclusive. When they come together, the former is exalted by the latter.

5) As we fathom our human nature, we ultimately acknowledge the principle of universal order as the essence of our being, which can normally acquire habits of thought or behavior that are conducive to well-being. And so gratitude adds to the acknowledgment, though misery may reverse this attitude when it plagues us despite ourselves.

Why such misery? There is no answer to this question. We can ascertain the possibility of misery; we cannot explain it. Saying that the principle of universal order is such as to permit the occurrence of misery is like saying that misery is because it can be, which is no explanation. In short, misery is a mystery; and the best we can do is fight and overcome it, or resign ourselves to it when it is insuperable.

Actually, we can do better. We can regard misery as a precious opportunity for courage and merit, whereas an absolutely blissful and effortless life would require no courage and hence afford no merit.

But what about extreme cases where we are truly miserable and helpless? We can then take comfort from the knowledge that the principle of universal order is the essence of our being. Each of us is a single human incarnation of this principle among countless other like incarnations, which offer the prospect of a meritorious happiness through considerable effort.