

# PAUL J. GRIFFITHS WHY READ PASCAL?

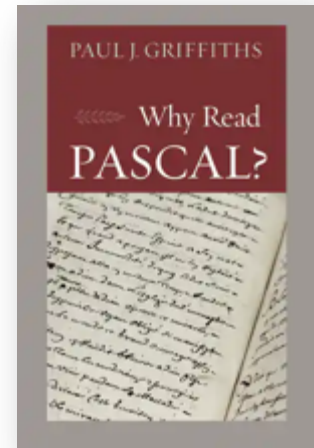
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Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) is known in the English-speaking world principally for the wager (an argument that it is rational to do what will affect belief in God and irrational not to), and, more generally, for the *Pensées*, a collection of philosophical and theological fragments of unusual emotional and intellectual intensity collected and published after his death. He thought and wrote, however, about much more than this: mathematics; physics; grace, freedom, and predestination; the nature of the church; the Christian life; what it is to write and read; the order of things; the nature and purpose of human life; and more. He was among the polymaths of the seventeenth century, and among the principal apologists of his time for the Catholic faith, against both its Protestant opponents and its secular critics.

*Why Read Pascal?* engages all the major topics of Pascal's theological and philosophical writing. It provides discussion of Pascal's literary style, his linked understandings of knowledge and of the various orders of things, his anthropology (with special attention to his presentation of affliction, death, and boredom), his politics, and his understanding of the relation between Christianity and Judaism. Pascal emerges as a literary stylist of a high order, a witty and polemical writer (never have the Jesuits been more thoroughly eviscerated), and, perhaps above all else, as someone concerned to show to Christianity's cultured despisers that the fabric of their own lives implies the truth of Christianity if only they can be brought to look at what their lives are like.

*Why Read Pascal?* is the first book in English in a generation to engage all the principal themes in Pascal's theology and philosophy. The book takes Pascal seriously as an interlocutor and as a contributor of continuing relevance to Catholic thought; but it also offers criticisms of some among the positions he takes, showing, in doing so, how lively his writing remains for us now.

**PAUL J. GRIFFITHS** is the author of *Intellectual Appetite: A Theological Grammar* and *The Practice of Catholic Theology: A Modest Proposal* (both CUA Press).

## PRAISE

"Paul Griffiths has made himself an interlocutor with Pascal in order to make Pascal an interlocutor with us. In so doing, Pascal comes alive as a thinker ardently engaged with, and responsive to, what he reads and to the strangeness of the world he sees. In these estranging

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times, when discourse is uncivil, reading Pascal provides us with a thought-provoking conversation partner on topics keenly pertinent to people today: the order (and disorder) of things, anthropology, grace, politics, Jews and Judaism, and (perhaps most strangely of all) Christian revelation."

*~Ann Astell, University of Notre Dame*

"Paul Griffiths begins his discussion of Pascal by exploring the distinctive 'style' of his writings - encompassing dialectic, polemic, aphorism, and irony - and ends by commending those writings, not because they are always correct, but because they show us the strangeness both of the afflicted human condition and of the Christian remedy for that affliction. Griffiths own style - eloquent, lucid, playful, fearless - is a perfect tool for opening up Pascal for readers. One learns much from this book, both about Pascal and about how to read a text with charity and rigor. Perhaps most important, Griffiths writes in a way that welcomes disagreement so that, as Griffiths says of Pascal, we might say of Griffiths. Even when one disagrees with him, one comes away edified by being made to think rigorously about matters that matter."

*~Frederick Bauerschmidt, Loyola University*

"Paul J. Griffiths gives us the complete Pascal: Augustinian anthropologist, rhetorician, political theorist, and - always, from beginning to end - faithful Catholic Christian. We should read Pascal because Pascal helps us understand what matters most. We should read Griffiths because Griffiths helps us understand Pascal. *Why Read Pascal?* is now the best short introduction to Pascal's philosophical and religious thought that I know."

*~William Wood, Oriel College, University of Oxford*