For most readers the two principal achievements of Pascal are the Lettres provinciales and the fragments we call the Pensées. Neither of these works can be considered as purely literary in the sense of having within itself its end and justification. Pascal created them as means of persuasion and their essential characteristics derive from this overriding aim. In trying to interpret them, we find ourselves pushed back inevitably to questions of rhetorical technique; we are obliged to make explicit conceptions of method that we have either brought to the works or discovered in Pascal. If we take the latter choice, we look for signs of method in the texts and, in the Pensées at least, we soon note many useful indications. The Lettres provinciales offer fewer guidelines; in regard to this work especially, we turn with interest to other writings of Pascal and, in particular, to the two important fragments on method usually published under the general title De l'esprit géométrique, the second one usually being referred to as “L’Art de persuader,” the subtitle that Desmolets gave it in 1728.¹

If we are to see the relationship between these two fragments and the Provinciales (without forgetting, of course, the Pensées), we must face at once three questions: (1) What is
the relationship between the documents? (2) On what principles are they based? (3) What are their practical implications? I intend to deal here with all of these, but mainly with the second and third, since the answer to the first, though hard to give circumstantially in terms of dates and external events, becomes fairly easy when one passes to the second problem, that of analyzing the texts.

According to Brunschvicg, the probable story runs as follows: we know from Nicole's preface to Arnauld's *Nouveaux éléments de géométrie* (published in 1667, but the preparation of it goes back to 1660) that Pascal had composed an "Essai d'éléments de géométrie," which he later abandoned apparently because Arnauld objected to the order of the demonstrations. The two fragments we are concerned with here seem to have been written as a preface to this discarded work or, better, were drafts ("deux ébauches successives") of what was to be its preface. Brunschvicg dates it—the date is "tout à fait approximative," he says—as belonging to the winter of 1658-59. Chevalier follows this account, but tends to move the date further back. In his chronological table at the entry for 1657, he says that "vers cette époque" *De l'esprit géométrique* was composed as a preface to a treatise; and, emphasizing the theme of the double infini, which figures importantly in the first fragment, he relates the contents of the piece to problems with which Pascal was preoccupied as early as 1654. There is then a somewhat shaky case for believing that Pascal composed the two pieces for a single occasion—that is, as the preface for a geometry textbook.

However, since the discussion is not continuous, since the "first" fragment—on the esprit géométrique or the spirit of geometry—does not lead directly into the "second"—on the art of persuading—there is further need to justify the usual practice of printing the two texts side by side, or the more radical solution of Chevalier, who prints them as a single
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text divisible, after a short introductory paragraph, into a Section I and a Section II. A very useful hint comes from the Port-Royal Logique. In the “Discours sur le dessein de cette logique,” which appears at the beginning of the first edition (1662), one reads:

On a aussi tiré quelques autres réflexions d’un petit écrit non imprimé, qui avait été fait par un excellent esprit et qu’il avait intitulé, de l’Esprit Géométrique, et c’est ce qui est dit dans le chapitre X de la première partie, de la différence des définitions de nom et des définitions de chose, et les cinq règles, qui sont expliquées dans la quatrième partie, que l’on y a beaucoup plus étendues qu’elles ne le sont dans cet écrit.2

In the second edition of 1664, the “excellent esprit” is identified as “Feu Monsieur Paschal.” The first fragment contains a long treatment of two kinds of definitions—“de nom” and “de chose”—and many references to rules of demonstration, but nothing is said about any particular number of rules. In the other fragment, much is made again of rules for solid and invariable proofs; Pascal lists eight of them, of which three are not, strictly speaking, essential, which leaves five that are “d’une nécessité absolue”;3 but nothing is said here about the distinction that one may make in the kinds of definitions.

One must conclude from the foregoing, I think, (1) that we have in these documents the écrit of which the Port-Royalists speak, and (2) that we have a strong precedent for putting them together: men who knew Pascal and what he intended thought of them as somehow unified, as part of the same discussion.4

Taken together the two texts do outline and, to some extent, expound a position that is entirely coherent. Both of them are focussed primarily on truth, and on method as the way of stating truth “invincibly” once it is known (rather than as the way of discovering truth). Both of them quickly identify this method with that of geometry, and this step

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leads in both to a statement of the conditions of proof expressed in terms of definitions, axioms, propositions, and arrangement of these elements. The differences one notes in passing from one document to another are such as to make them complementary rather than opposed. At bottom they represent two angles or approaches to the same situation, the situation in which a truth already possessed by one party (whom I shall call X) is to be stated cogently to someone else (for convenience's sake, Y). The first fragment begins from the point of view of X, moves into a treatment of the quasi-geometrical form in which knowledge must be cast if it is to be demonstrable, and ends just after Pascal has dealt with a hypothetical Y, who cannot see that the infinite divisibility of space or étendue is self-evident. The second fragment begins with an analysis of the psychological conditions under which consent to a proposition takes place—in other words, it starts with Y—moves on to a statement of the rules of demonstration, and breaks off in the midst of a defense of this geometrical procedure that a hypothetical X might use. Although these contrasting summaries oversimplify two very dense texts, they will serve to underline the fact that Pascal examines the same process of demonstration or persuasion primarily from the point of view of X in the first fragment, and primarily from that of Y in the second.

As a matter of fact, since the method is the same in either case, whether the aim be demonstration or persuasion, one can only conclude that to demonstrate and to persuade are for Pascal one and the same thing, and that he intends to have geometry—or more precisely, its method or esprit—replace rhetoric as the discipline of persuasive speech. Interpersonal discourse has a new and different set of norms by which it will be measured. They are not the norms of logic; that term means first and foremost to Pascal the rules of the syllogism, which he thinks are so much a matter of nature that no one
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can be ignorant of them (so natural, indeed, that without the art of the geometrician, they are inadequate!); and even in those parts of their treatises where logicians have spoken of the demonstrative rules favored by Pascal, they have failed to see how important they are and how they have consequences for all kinds of orderly thinking. What Pascal does in the second fragment is, I think, to show how the new method dominates the field formerly left to eloquence. The art de persuader becomes the art de démontrer, and rhetoric apart from geometry is a misleading waste of time. Thus we see exactly what was meant by the word véritable in the compliment recorded in the second edition of the Logique: "Feu M. Pascal qui savait autant de véritable rhétorique, que personne avait jamais su . . ." (p. 341).

On most of the essential points there is no need to add here to what I have already said in the preceding chapter on the difference between logic as the Port-Royalists understood it and the traditional rhetoric. Pascal, too, wishes to remove what would now be called subjective factors from knowing and judging. Instruction easily takes precedence over pleasing and moving as aims of discourse. The rhetoricians prefer to fit their arguments into a loose structure or plan, the parts of which may be moved about or even omitted sometimes. Pascal's idea of order calls for a strict and invariable sequence of proofs where everything (definitions and propositions) depends on everything else and where every element is in its appropriate place, for each piece has the role either of antecedent or consequent with regard to its neighbor. Furthermore, he tends in these fragments to treat language and thought without distinction; he has no interest, if one may judge from his conclusions here, in elocution, that art of adding successive layers of ornament (tropes, figures of speech
and thought, rhythms) to the bare expression of truth. In the Pensées there is no doubt of his opinion: "Toutes les fausses beautés que nous blâmons en Cicéron ont des admirateurs, et en grand nombre." Or, again, and even more to the point: "L’éloquence est une peinture de la pensée, et ainsi, ceux qui après avoir peint, ajoutent encore, font un tableau au lieu d’un portrait." 5

In any art or method having to do with language or discourse addressed to an unspecialized listener, the nature of the person spoken to forms an important part of the analysis: he is the one who decides and by deciding fixes the value of the argument. For Quintilian, as for Aristotle, characteristics of age, passions, standing in society, and the like are factors that no orator dares neglect. They affect—in some cases provide—proofs that bring adherence, at least in the particular circumstances and for the time being. More systematic in his procedure, Pascal divides his listener’s act of consent into two aspects or, rather, into the acts of two powers: esprit and volonté. Each of these has its principles or moteurs:

Ceux de l’esprit sont des vérités naturelles et connues à tout le monde, comme que le tout est plus grand que sa partie, outre plusieurs axiomes particuliers que les uns reçoivent et non pas d’autres, mais qui, dès qu’ils sont admis, sont aussi puissants, quoique faux, pour emporter la créance, que les plus véritables. [Oeuvres, p. 593.]

There is a similar distinction for the will: certain fixed and natural desires, common to all men, like the desire for happiness, as opposed to variable desires for objects or goods that are in fact effective in their appeal though pernicious (at least when taken as ultimate goods).

Pascal believes that demonstration of the kind described in “De l’esprit géométrique” must attach itself, not to the opin-
ions and desires that vary from person to person, but to *moteurs* invariably and universally present in men. After all, what he wants to bring about through persuasion is a lasting disposition, a permanent conversion; such a commitment calls for an unshakable basis in some truth or aspiration that everyone sees or feels. The orator of Quintilian, attentive to circumstances and *bienséances*, and ready to turn to use the possibilities, temporary or not, in a situation, is likely to be satisfied with any workable starting point; whether that basis will last—because of some universal significance it may have—need not really concern him.

Thus Pascal, like his friends at Port-Royal, felt a tension between genuine rhetoric and that of Cicero and his admirers. It arose from a different attitude toward elocution, the expressive phase of rhetoric, but it goes much deeper than that, to the technique of demonstration and to the mechanism of consent.

We must now attempt to describe in a summary way what might be called the dynamic scheme that underlies Pascal’s *art de persuader* or *art de démontrer*. One has only to run through the five rules—eight, in his more fully worked-out version—to locate the elements with which Pascal deals. As I have already said, he takes demonstration to be a process involving definitions, axioms, and propositions. It is the business of the definitions to be explicit and univocal, and of the axioms to be self-evident. In demonstrating, one moves through the steps necessary for seeing the dependence of the propositions on the axioms and definitions. Pascal adds, however, a further and essential step; he indicates what it is but never carries out his intention to treat it fully. “Je passe maintenant à celle [*la règle*, presumably] de l’ordre dans lequel on doit disposer
les propositions pour être dans une suite excellente et géométrique . . .” (Oeuvres, p. 598). The picture is something like this: definitions and axioms combined with propositions make demonstrations, which are in turn arranged into an order of demonstrations (that is, of propositions with their attendant demonstrations) so that a coherent suite is formed. Truths are sequential and systematic; one attains them by composition; they rest on intuitive bases. (Note that in a deductive procedure of this kind one naturally speaks of “truths” rather than of the “truth.”)

It is very important to realize that for Pascal this scheme is a mold into which anything truly known will fit. It is dynamic in that it may be extended to all fields of knowledge. In Pascal’s mind it assumes the form of an active tendency that seeks further applications. “Il n’y a rien de plus utile et de plus universel,” he says (Oeuvres, p. 598). I believe that if Pascal had completed these fragments and made of them a truly unified exposition, the result would have been his Discours de la méthode. It would have occupied in his thought the moment or stage that precedes certain knowledge of particular matters in just the way that the Discours of Descartes precedes his specialized inquiries.

The similarity between the four rules of Descartes and the three phases I have defined above is striking. Descartes’ first rule establishes the intuitive bases of knowledge; his second and third rules are focussed on the analysis and solution of problems, that is, with demonstrations; his third and fourth rules, which insist on a smooth passage from the simple to the complex and on the need for completeness, suggest Pascal’s interest in an ordre that will result in an “excellent and geometrical sequence.” But the Cartesian rules are intended both for the discovery and for the exposition of truth—or so they seemed to the logicians of Port-Royal. Pascal’s method, as
he here describes it, is clearly intended as a way of exposition. The first fragment begins thus:

I. On peut avoir trois principaux objets dans l'étude de la vérité: l'un de la découvrir quand on la cherche; l'autre de la démontrer quand on la possède; le dernier, de la discerner d'avec le faux quand on l'examine.

Je ne parle point du premier: je traite particulièrement du second, et il enferme le troisième. [Oeuvres, p. 575.]

Moreover, in one way Pascal outdoes Descartes; his terms, definitions, axioms, propositions, demonstrations, and suites géométriques are much nearer to geometry than the more generalized language of Descartes: jugements, difficultés, objets, dénombrements.

Pascal's scheme or method is first characterized, therefore, by its claim to universality in application. The next thing to note about it is that it alone truly demonstrates.

Celui [i.e., l'art] de démontrer les vérités déjà trouvées, et de les éclaircir de telle sorte que la preuve en soit invincible, est le seul que je veux donner; et je n'ai pour cela qu'à expliquer la méthode que la géométrie y observe: car elle l'enseigne parfaitement. . . . [Oeuvres, p. 576.]

And a few lines below, Pascal adds, still speaking of geometry, "... elle seule sait les véritables règles du raisonnement..." (Oeuvres, p. 576). It alone reasons infallibly; the slight hesitation of the "presque" in the following text is corrected in the rest of the sentence:

Je veux donc faire entendre ce que c'est que démonstration par l'exemple de celles de géométrie, qui est presque la seule des sciences humaines qui en produise d'infaillibles, parce qu'elle seule observe la véritable méthode, au lieu que toutes les autres sont par une nécessité naturelle dans quelque sorte de confusion que les seules géomètres savent extrêmement connaître. [Oeuvres, pp. 576-77.]
The claims of uniqueness and of unlimited usefulness that Pascal makes for his favorite technique are certainly strong enough to make us wonder whether he worked from this Euclidean idée de derrière la tête in the Lettres provinciales and in the Pensées. This line of thought leads us away from purely literary considerations, but properly so, I think. Whatever their aesthetic values may be, these works reach out finally beyond themselves. Their underlying principles of construction and order cannot be reduced to poetic forms, since this is literature written in the service of Christian truth as Pascal understands it.

We can say at once that in neither work is he attempting to discover the truth (the first of the objets mentioned above), but the essential phrase defining the second aim has a singularly profound echo: "... la démontrer quand on la possède." That is, in fact, precisely what Pascal undertakes to do in the Pensées. And the second aim includes a third: "... la discerner d'avec le faux quand on l'examine," and what is that if not the basic task of the Lettres provinciales? In the case of the letters, the correspondence is so close that I should like to point it out in more detail. Pascal's reasoning emerges clearly from this sentence: "Car, si l'on sait la méthode de prouver la vérité, on aura en même temps celle de la discerner, puisqu'en examinant si la preuve qu'on en donne est conforme aux règles qu'on connaît, on saura si elle est exactement démontrée" (Oeuvres, p. 575). The Lettres provinciales are designed to locate errors, those of Port-Royal's enemies, and they do so in the light of a body of truth that Pascal takes as already known and in the light of a method that he has accepted as valid. In this polemic it is, of course, important to know what the Jesuits have to say on this or that point of doctrine, but it is even more important to examine their way of justifying their views. Since truth depends
on method, deficiencies in method become decisive signs of inadequacy or falsity.

What is implied here? Something like this, I believe: Christian truth or truths may be conceived as entering into a sort of *axiomatic system*, characterized by scriptural starting points, by creedal assumptions, by subordinate theorems or positions that come into being as church fathers and theologians apply and elaborate the undisputed *données*, and, finally, by an aspiration to consistency that asserts itself from the outset and makes itself felt through all the later developments. That this or something comparable to it was Pascal's view or criterion can be shown, I think, at many points in the *Lettres provinciales*. What Pascal is doing, as he gives grounds for his own theses or refutes those of his opponents, seems to me to become particularly clear if we refer his procedure to such a model.

This way of looking at the letters obliges us to set aside for a while attention to the things that we usually and rightly admire in them—satire, drama, strong feeling, seemingly effort­less control of ideas and means of expression—and to concen­trate on the secret working of a factor that, logically speak­ing, is prior to those qualities. I mean, of course, Pascal's dynamic intuition of method, for this is what generates, as it turns from geometry to the confusion of a theological dispute, the list of topics to be treated; and, at the same time, it defines, broadly and yet decisively, the manner in which they will be treated.

The subject of six of the letters (Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, 17, 18) is obviously grace, and the sense of that term must be fixed if the discussion is to make any headway. In other words, six letters turn explicitly or implicitly on a problem of definition:
hence the usefulness of putting together what Pascal says about this important matter in the two fragments concerning l'esprit géométrique. In the first place, he insists on qualities like clarity and intelligibility in definitions. But that is too vague; what he really wants (and he thinks of this as typically and essentially geometrical) is univocity, singleness of meaning for each term, with each meaning made explicit in a single definition, so that whenever in the flow of thought one becomes doubtful or confused, this clarifying formula—agreed upon at the outset—may be substituted for the term. "Voilà une définition géométrique," he writes, after defining an even number as one divisible by two into two equal parts, "parce qu'après avoir clairement désigné une chose, savoir tout nombre divisible en deux également, on lui donne un nom que l'on destitue de tout autre sens, s'il en a, pour lui donner celui de la chose désignée" (Oeuvres, p. 577). In a geometrical method one must, therefore, avoid equivocation above all; as the sin in logic, it ruins the foundation of any discourse.

What I have said so far suggests such complete liberty on the part of the thinker and places in his hands such complete control of definition that the meanings of words tend to become a matter of private convention. Pascal qualifies this authority. Some terms (as examples: time, movement, number, space) are indefinable; in fact, they become less intelligible when one tries to define them. They have the privilege of being grasped by a lumière naturelle common to all men. The resulting clarity surpasses anything that might be achieved even by the geometrician. He would find himself making definitions out of terms that would require further definitions, stated in still other terms, and so on, ad infinitum.

On voit assez de là qu'il y a des mots incapables d'être définis; et si la nature n'avait suppléée à ce défaut par une idée pareille qu'elle a donnée à tous les hommes, toutes nos expressions seraient confuses; au lieu qu'on en use avec la même assurance et la même certitude que s'ils étaient expliqués d'une manière
parfaitement exempt d’équivoques; parce que la nature nous en a elle-même donné, sans paroles, une intelligence plus nette que celle que l’art nous acquiert par nos explications. [Oeuvres, p. 580.]

In any case, where definitions are concerned, Pascal thinks we should seek fixity and perfect intelligibility, either through the help of art (that is, method) or through assent to natural insight.

In what follows I want to stress certain phases of the argument in the first letter, in order to show the role of Pascal’s doctrine of definition as an underlying factor in his defense of the Jansenists. It would be possible to make similar points in connection with other letters in this group.

Pascal moves quickly past the question de fait (whether the five heretical propositions are in fact in Jansenius’ book) to the essential topic, the question de droit (whether Arnauld has been understanding the term “grace” improperly). All sides agree that grace confers on the righteous a power that is relevant to and prior to action. However, the Jesuits want to introduce at this point the formula pouvoir prochain.

Je chargeai ma mémoire de ce terme, car mon intelligence n’y avait aucune part. Et de peur d’oublier, je fus promptement retrouver mon Janséniste, à qui je dis incontinent, après les premières civilités: Dites-moi, je vous prie, si vous admettez le pouvoir prochain? Il se mit à rire et me dit froidement: Dites-moi vous-même en quel sens vous l’entendez, et alors je vous dirai ce que j’en crois. [Oeuvres, p. 671.]

The narrator tells him that he understands the term in the sense of the Molinists. But just at this point we note the existence of a confusion that arises because the important term here is used in more than one sense:

Auxquels des Molinistes, me dit-il, me renvoyez-vous?—Je les lui offris tous ensemble, comme ne faisant qu’un seul corps et n’agissant que par un même esprit.
Mais il me dit: vous êtes bien peu instruit. Ils sont si peu dans les mêmes sentiments qu’ils en ont de tout contraires. [Oeuvres, p. 671.]

Two things are interesting here. In the first place, the natural assumption of an esprit géométrique like that of the inquirer is that the Molinists would as a group be unified in the way that a consistent doctrine would be; they would, in fact, form a group or body because of a body of beliefs or doctrines animated by a single spirit. Pascal writes with an undertone of irony, but he is referring to a genuine ideal of knowledge and understanding. In the second place, the truth of the situation turns out to be just the opposite: a collection of inconsistent and contradictory opinions. Clearly the speakers owe it to themselves and to all interested parties to make explicit the opposed senses and to reduce them to one that is acceptable to both sides if possible.

The narrator goes first to a disciple of M. Le Moine who tells him that, in the case of the justes, pouvoir prochain means (1) not to lack anything necessary for action, and then goes on to some Jacobins or neo-Thomists who tell him that having the pouvoir prochain means (2) not having all that is required for action (that is, action in accomplishing God’s commandments), since a final touch of grace must be added: "... il leur faut de plus [aux justes] une grâce efficace qui n’est pas donné à tous, et qui détermine leur volonté à prier; et c’est une hérésie de nier la nécessité de cette grâce pour prier" (Oeuvres, p. 673). At once the narrator realizes that the Jansenists are, after all, orthodox, because they hold position (2) and hence the neo-Thomist wing of the Molinists should not be persecuting the Jansenists; it is the allies of the Thomists who are heretical, because they assert position (1). How can these two factions, joined against the Port-Royalists, co-operate when their views are opposed?
The explanation is simple: both groups are out to ruin M. Arnauld; they do not care about consistency of definitions. As the disciple of M. Le Moine says to one of the Thomist fathers who is about to re-affirm view (2): "Voulez-vous re-commencer nos brouilleries? ne sommes-nous pas demeurés d'accord de ne point expliquer ce mot de prochain, et de le dire de part et d'autre sans dire ce qu'il signifie? A quoi le Jacobin consentit" (Oeuvres, p. 673–74). The narrator declares the whole affair to be pure chicanery, for there can be no serious discussion without a willingness to consider terms and to come to agreement on the senses they carry. Instead of this logical bona fides, the opponents of M. Arnauld have agreed on nothing except a plot against him. "Pouvoir prochain" is not a very dangerous expression if it consists merely of syllables without sense, though one should not stoop to use a device so unworthy: "Mais ce serait une chose indignes de la Sorbonne et de la théologie d'user de mots équivoques sans les expliquer" (Oeuvres, p. 674). The Molinists are denying the essential nature of words as carriers of meaning; they tell the narrator, that, in order to avoid heresy, one must assert that all just people have the pouvoir prochain, but abstrahendo a sensu Thomistarum et a sensu aliorum theologorum!

The last word is said on the matter when Pascal, through his porte-parole, indicates the way out of the confusion. He has him ask if one finds the expression in Scripture or in the Fathers or in the Councils or in papal usage; and since the answer is "no" each time, we have no need to use it. I believe that Pascal reveals here the key to the problem of definition in religious matters, as he asks: "Quelle nécessité y a-t-il donc de le dire, puisqu'il n'a ni autorité ni aucun sens de lui-même?" (Oeuvres, p. 674). The term might have had a single sense by definition, but that possibility is ruled out by the Molinist disputants; and it might have been similar to words like
“time,” “movement,” “extent”—that is, it might have had a sense in itself, naturally accessible to all, but that possibility is contradicted by the very fact of the dispute. One other possibility remains: the lumière naturelle might have given way to supernatural insight coming from authoritative sources, but there is nothing in the genuine supports of the tradition for the term. This is something new. In De l'esprit géométrique, Pascal had said nothing about the Bible and the church fathers in connection with definition. From the point of view of function, however, it is clear that the meaning of a word like grâce has in theology a place like that of “time” or “motion” in geometry (as Pascal understands that discipline): it is a given from which one works. It must be precisely understood, that is, in a single sense, and for that understanding one looks to divine sources.

The geometric method—or the general approach to knowledge derived from it—draws the attention of a thinker to his definitions, first, and then to the demonstrations by which he validates propositions. In letters Nos. 5 through 10, Pascal shifts, as one might expect, to propositions and proofs. Here he analyzes la morale des jésuites, and the key word is maxime: over and over again, this or some equivalent expression appears. There can be no doubt that Pascal is now working on a different level, for maxims are principles or propositions having to do with conscience and conduct. The inevitable question soon emerges. What warrant can the Jesuits give for the principles according to which they guide consciences?

We note in the two answers that are given a sharp opposition between a quasi-geometrical guarantee and something much more personal offered by the casuists. As the narrator goes from point to point, the criterion he expects to see and
use is that every maxime must be drawn from (or at least consistent with) some prior truth taken as axiomatic. To him, certainty and truth are guaranteed only by clear dependence on what has been stated in the Bible, in articles of faith, or in a continuous tradition of the church fathers, popes, and councils. The model of this procedure is one that we have met before: demonstration moves in a tight sequence, starting from things that cannot be doubted and working toward a coherent ensemble of doctrine. However, the narrator comes to the conclusion that the Jesuit fathers have broken with the tradition and have, as a result, removed all possibility of certainty in what they propose as guides in conduct.

Je ne sais comment vous pouvez faire, quand les Pères de l'Eglise sont contraires au sentiment de quelqu'un de vos casuistes. Vous l'entendez bien peu, me dit-il. Les Pères étaient bons pour la morale de leur temps; mais ils sont trop éloignés pour celle du nôtre. Ce ne sont plus eux qui la règlent, ce sont les nouveaux casuistes. [Oeuvres, p. 713.]

And Pascal has the “Père” go on to cite the “fameux Père Reginaldus”: “Dans les questions de morale, les nouveaux casuistes sont préférables aux anciens Pères, quoiqu’ils fussent plus proches des Apôtres” (Oeuvres, p. 713).

Eventually we understand that this rupture has not taken place in an arbitrary way; the trouble simply is that the casuists do not begin with an ideal of certainty and in contradiction as they bring forth their maxims. Theirs is the method of “opinions probables,” described at the opening of the fifth letter as “la source et la base de tout ce dérèglement” (Oeuvres, p. 706). “C’est le fondement et l’a b c de toute notre morale,” says the Jesuit father, and he quotes from his authorities:

Une opinion est appelée probable lorsqu’elle est fondée sur des raisons de quelque considération. D’où il arrive quelquefois qu’un seul docteur fort grave peut rendre une opinion probable.
Car un homme adonné particulièrement à l'étude ne s'attacherait pas à une opinion s'il n'y était attiré par une raison bonne et suffisante. [Oeuvres, p. 710.]

The Jesuits find thus their moral principles in the minds of men rather than in the scriptures or in the tradition. From the viewpoint of the narrator and of Pascal, new principles of conduct must be established in the light of things already firmly known, if they are to be certain; but the casuists content themselves with probabilities based on the experiences and reflections of particular men.

The problem of contradiction forces itself upon the narrator:

Qui m'a assuré que dans la liberté que vos docteurs se donnent d'examiner les choses par la raison, ce qui paraîtra sûr à l'un le paraîsse à tous les autres? La diversité des jugements est si grande. . . Vous ne l'entendez pas, dit le Père en m'interrompant; aussi sont-ils fort souvent de différents avis; mais cela n'y fait rien; chacun rend le sien probable et sûr. [Oeuvres, p. 711.]

The “Père” is ready for the objection, and we can see why. The presence of contradictions does not shock or offend in the method of the casuists. It will not do in geometry, of course, because geometry requires orderly progress from impersonal and axiomatic truths; it is not a method that encourages or tolerates diversity of opinion; as one of its deepest aspirations, it strives to bring about unanimity.

I do not mean to imply that the Jesuits break completely with proved tradition. When the narrator objects that the Bible, the popes, and the councils, who are in the direct line of the Gospel (“la voie unique de l'Evangile” [Oeuvres, p. 714]), cannot be renounced and that they form barriers to the free invention of probable opinions, the Jesuit father undertakes to show that there is no difficulty from that side. In fact, approximately the first half of the sixth letter sum-
marizes precisely those methods by which contradictions between such opinions and dogmatic decisions may be reconciled. There are three techniques: to introduce a distinction in interpreting a word or phrase; if that fails, to appeal to particular circumstances which support the opinion that is or seems to be contradictory; and, as a last resort, to use a subtle new method. The example here is a casuist’s rule opposed to a decision in which three popes concur. Nevertheless, one of the Jesuits, Diana, affirms that the dispensation allowed in the rule may be made:

Et comment accorde-t-il cela? lui dis-je. C’est, répliqua le père, par la plus subtile de toutes les nouvelles méthodes, et par le plus fin de la probabilité . . . C’est que, comme vous le vîtes l’autre jour, l’affirmative et la négative de la plupart des opinions ont chacune quelque probabilité, au jugement de nos docteurs, et assez pour être suivies avec sûreté de conscience [Oeuvres, pp. 717-18.]

The formula used for this is the “double probability” of the *pour* and the *contre*: on one of the sides of the argument, we have a decision or principle advanced by the popes, with all the authority inherent in their pronouncement, and, on the other side, the casuist’s opinion; but there is no need to decide between them; since both have “probability,” one may follow either with security. What happens is not the accommodation of new opinions to authoritative doctrine (which Pascal could not object to); instead, that doctrine is subordinated to the basically skeptical devices of the new probabilities.

There is actually a deeper level of analysis possible here. Why this innovation of method on the part of the casuists? Why adopt a technique of demonstration that produces contradictory opinions as the guiding rules of Christian consciences?
Pascal (in the person of his narrator) is sure that he knows the answer. He imagines a difficulty for the person being guided in the face of the contradictions:

Mais mon Père, lui dis-je, on doit être embarrassé à choisir alors! Point du tout, dit-il, il n'y a qu'à suivre l'avis qui agrée le plus. Eh quoi! si l'autre est plus probable? Il n'importe, me dit-il. Et si l'autre est plus sûr? Il n'importe, me dit encore le Père; le voici bien expliqué. [Oeuvres, p. 711.]

He goes on to explain that probability is enough; there is no need to go into questions of degree of probability. The person seeking help may choose, of the pour and the contre, the more pleasing alternative, even though he does not believe it to be the more probable; and he may do so with complete confidence. A confessor who refused absolution in such a case would be "en état de damnation" (Oeuvres, p. 718). The man who consults the casuist determines by a free choice, along the line of least resistance, if he wishes, which of the alternatives is actually true. The priest merely sets up the terms of the choice. That is what dams the method of the casuists in Pascal’s eyes: they are not working to produce conversion or moral renewal by means of these probable maximes. The effect is to allow the Christian to continue as he is with the added security of a quiet conscience.

But the problem remains: why would the Jesuits permit such relaxation? "Voici quelle est leur pensée" says a Jansenist friend of the narrator:

Ils ont assez bonne opinion d'eux-mêmes pour croire qu'il est utile et comme nécessaire au bien de la religion que leur crédit s'étende partout, et qu'ils gouvernent toutes les consciences. Et parce que les maximes évangéliques et sévères sont propres pour gouverner quelques sortes de personnes, ils s'en servent dans ces occasions où elles leur sont favorables. Mais comme ces mêmes maximes ne s'accordent pas au dessein de la plupart des gens, ils les laissent à l'égard de ceux-là, afin d'avoir de quoi satisfaire tout le monde. [Oeuvres, pp. 704-5.]
The casuists thus fall into two groups. There are severe ones for the few who are truly devout, and lax ones (the great majority) for the many Christians who seek laxity. Priests belonging to the second group accept the doctrine of the *opinions probables* as a pragmatic device for gaining public support. Their rules come into being inductively, so to speak, as a result of situations or moral dispositions that exist in fact; they are designed to gain favor and influence rather than to improve lives and souls. The geometrically-minded Christian, like Pascal, starts with the idea that he knows the truth and that he is going to demonstrate it to someone who does not yet know that truth. The casuist of the more typical kind talks or behaves as if the customer were always right, when his real function is to convince himself first of the truth of his maxims and then to show them, with the force of proof behind them, to the people he advises: this is something quite different from offering two or more contrasting formulas to someone who will make up his mind according to his own disposition. Such "truths" arise out of particular circumstances and personal relationships. Their value is determined by what is applicable and effective or what is thought to be probably so.

The *esprit de géométrie* leads one to be especially careful about terms or definitions, about the status of propositions, and about the sequence or order of propositions. We have now seen a reflection of the first two of these topics in several of the letters. What of the concept of an ensemble of doctrine? Does it have a role in the work? I think that the answer must be yes; and the unity in question is easily shown if one follows out two lines of thought, basing the first on the idea of historical sequence and the second on that of systematic wholesness or consistency, although both turn out to be essentially the same thing.

As Pascal approaches his polemic tasks in the *Provinciales,*
as he distinguishes the true from the false—one of the uses of the geometrical method, it will be recalled—a continuous historical account is present in his mind. He expresses it or indicates it most simply when he refers to “l'écriture et la tradition de l'Eglise” (Oeuvres, p. 709). The latter obviously depends on the former and grows out of it in an organic way. Pascal sometimes analyzes further each of these two great factors: The Bible may appear as containing a sequence from the patriarchs to the prophets to Christ to St. Paul and the apostles; and the succeeding part of the story may be traced in links provided by the church fathers (with special mention for St. Augustine and for the last of the fathers, St. Bernard), by St. Thomas, and, finally, by the judgments of popes and councils (see, e.g., Oeuvres, p. 683). At any point along this line, Pascal may point out conflicts involving the “new” Thomists and the casuists. We may have the Gospel versus the casuists (p. 772), or the fathers versus the casuists (p. 713), or St. Paul versus the casuists (p. 777); and sometimes the line as a whole stands against them, as when one tries by various devices to make certain opinions probables acceptable. Without attempting anything like a detailed history of beliefs—to do so would spoil the plan of the letters and lose readers as well—Pascal gives us to understand that an unbroken sequence does exist in the background of the present dispute.

In the first letter and in the seventeenth and eighteenth, that is, at the beginning and at the end of the Provinciales, Pascal insists on the difference between a question de fait and a question de droit ou de foi. The second line of thought that I have proposed, since it turns on coherence rather than on historical elaboration, is closely tied to this distinction. The question de droit ou de foi belongs, I believe, on the plane of the geometrical spirit, of that tendency that assumes and provides a structure into which knowledge must fit. And so this overarching antithesis, which to my mind serves as the
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key to the whole undertaking of the Provinciales, takes on its typically Pascalian nuance in the light of his fondness for the esprit géométrique. A question de fait has nothing to do with geometry; it asks, did X say what he is alleged to have said? The question and the answer to it involve the senses and, insofar as method is concerned, call for canons based on the conditions of accurate observation. A question de droit, however, is quite independent of operations of sense; it asks, does what X said or is alleged to have said square with what we already know to be true?

In letters Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, 17 and 18, where the discussions turn on opposed notions of grâce and its effects, and in letters Nos. 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10, where Pascal attacks the moral maxims of the Jesuits, he places himself on the terrain of droit or foi: he is asserting the incompatibility between what they say and what must be taken as truth, given the Bible and the Christian tradition. Even letter No. 11, in which he defends irony and satire as justifiable in his campaign, contains an appeal to orthodox sources:

Ne prétendez pas, mes Pères, de faire accroire au monde que ce soit une chose indigne d'un Chrétien de traiter les erreurs avec moquerie, puisqu'il est aisé de faire connaître à ceux qui ne le sauraient pas que cette pratique est juste, qu'elle est commune aux Pères de l'Eglise, et qu'elle est autorisée par l'Ecriture, par l'exemple des plus grands saints, et par celui de Dieu même. [Oeuvres, p. 780.]

The remaining letters (Nos. 12, 13, 14, 15, 16) involve mainly questions de fait: did particular casuists and others make the statements and argue for the principles that Pascal had criticized in letters Nos. 5 through 10?

When Pascal returns, in the last two complete letters, to the five propositions and to the issue of heresy, he uses both arguments de facto and arguments de jure. In terms of the former he challenges once again Père Annat to locate verbatim
the propositions in Jansenius' book. But this challenge, which Pascal takes as unanswerable, is less decisive than the turn he gives to the controversy by reasoning in the perspective de jure. If the propositions are in the book and have the sense condemned by the Jesuits (that is, the "sens de Calvin"), all parties to the dispute, Port-Royalists as well as everyone else, reject them as inconsistent with sound doctrine concerning grace and the freedom of will to resist it. As soon as he realized, says Pascal, that the dispute was not about possibly heretical tenets, he began to lose interest in it:

Dès lors votre dispute commença à me devenir indifférente. Quand je croyais que vous disputiez de la vérité ou de la fausseté des propositions, je vous écoutais avec attention; car cela touchait la foi; mais quand je vis que vous ne disputiez plus que pour savoir si elles étaient mot à mot dans Jansenius ou non, comme la religion n'était plus intéressée, je ne m'y intéressai plus aussi. [Oeuvres, p. 872.]

Pascal does not give up on the factual question; he thinks that it is possible to disagree—in the line of fact—on what the "sens de Jansenius" is and that it is possible, consequently, to understand him in a way that does not contradict in the least the position of St. Augustine and St. Thomas on grace and its operation. Naturally this is the way in which Pascal and those with whom he sympathizes do understand Jansenius. It is nonetheless true that the discussion in the letters does not move toward an effort to state differing interpretations of what Jansenius said in fact; it suffices that all hands agree on the central doctrines. Pascal emphasizes one question only: whether or not the propositions in dispute are equivalent to ones that are already received as valid within the system of beliefs.

As expressed in the eighteenth letter, Pascal's views include in reality a third sort of question. Starting with a refer-
ence to questions of fact, he goes on to show the rest of his hand:

D'où apprendrons-nous donc la vérité des faits? Ce sera des yeux, mon Père, qui en sont les légitimes juges, comme la raison l'est des choses naturelles et intelligibles, et la foi des choses surnaturelles et révélées. Car, puisque vous m'y obligez, mon Père, je vous dirai que, selon les sentiments de deux des plus grands docteurs de l'Eglise, saint Augustin et St. Thomas, ces trois principes de nos connaissances, les sens, la raison et la foi, ont chacun leurs objets séparés, et leur certitude dans cette étendue. [Oeuvres, p. 897.]

The statement of the relations of these étendues and principles, as they emerge in the Provinciales, will serve to summarize the main points of my analysis. Questions de fait have to be judged in the light of sense experience: for example, did Jansenius actually affirm the five propositions in so many words, *iisdem verbis*, so that all may see the truth of the allegations? Questions de foi have to be decided, not by reference to sensation—although Pascal points out that by the principle of *fides ex auditu*, faith is based on sense experience in an important sense—but in the light of Scripture and of decisions handed down by the Church. The intermediate order of raison seems to have no relevance to the problems of the Provinciales, and we know from the famous passage in the Pensées on the three orders, which corresponds so closely to what Pascal says in this eighteenth letter, that the realms of corps, esprit, and charité are infinitely distant from one another. And yet, is it not clear that Pascal has transposed the geometrical ideal and technique into the uppermost of his orders? When the time comes for faith to examine and justify itself, and to assert itself against the intrusion of error, it reverts for its mode of analysis and for its criterion of validity to the method of reason. Pascal has chosen to deal with Jesuits and other opponents of Port-Royal (1) by asking for definitions with clear and single meanings; (2) by isolating state-
ments, maxims, and propositions in the moral theory of the Jesuits and in the views of Jansenius; and (3) by sketching a line of theological demonstrations that arise from axiomatic beginnings and eventually group themselves into a system, such being the aim toward which faith, like geometry, inevitably moves.

Perhaps the fairest way to judge what has happened is to say, not that Pascal has applied the method of geometry to a religious controversy, but something subtler. I mean, that geometry itself is merely the application of a general methodological insight; its method is the particular technique inspired by that insight when someone makes it relevant to mouvement, nombre, espace, temps; and thus the appearance of "geometrical" schemes in the Lettres provinciales, rather than being a transfer, is, instead, another incarnation of a tendency that stands above any one of its scientific or polemic uses.

Such transposition or re-use is not feasible when the character of the reader changes, as it does in a very significant way when Pascal begins to plan his apology of the Christian religion and to write the Pensées. For him the two factors of method and audience vary together; changes in one imply changes in the other. The Provinciales owe an important part of their persuasiveness to the fact that the reader, the "provincial," and those like him, are men of good sense, of good senses, and of faith (to mention all three of the means to knowledge) and the quasi-geometrical substructure of the work is well attuned to the members of such an audience. They share the premises from which Pascal begins; he is showing them how what they already know and accept makes possible, when it is used in an orderly manner, the detection of error and malice in the doctrines and attitudes held by
the enemies of Port-Royal. It is not for such believers that he writes in the Pensées. There he wishes to attract the attention of readers who feel indifferent to religion or even hostile to it.

His problem is, as usual, to find something on which to build. He cannot start with religious beliefs, but he must locate something equally firm; and we know that he eventually finds it in the instabilities and contradictions of human nature, in the everlasting conflict between what man wants and thinks he is entitled to—truth and happiness—and what he can actually have. These contradictions he cannot eliminate by a drive toward simplicity and faultless demonstrations, in other words, by applying the genius of the geometrical method. And so he adopts a procedure that is Augustinian (eventually Platonic) in origin, the method of dialectical harmonization. The conflicts that lead to the logical style of the Provinciales come mainly from errors of definition and reasoning and represent impurities in a body of doctrine and practice; hence they may be corrected by the application of the esprit de géométrie. The Pensées begin with something more fundamental; human nature in its fallen state. The contradictions found there do not arise from the misuse of words and from non sequiturs in reasoning. They inhere in a subject and they require for their proper treatment a technique that will, in its first phase, make the contrarieties pitilessly clear and then, in its second phase, show how one may harmonize the opposed traits or tendencies by subordinating them to God. I have shown elsewhere that one may classify many of the Pensées under headings corresponding either to those two phases or to aspects of them: the recognition of psychological and moral conflicts; the emphasis on their real or "existential" character; the resulting perplexity as one faces them; the search for a solution; the discovery of the simultaneous truth of the opposites when a compre-
hensive principle harmonizes them; the self-validating feature of the whole process, since it results in unity (an important sign of truth) and since those who contest it may be relegated to the stage that precedes the dialectical resolution.

I do not wish to separate entirely the working of the esprit de géométrie and that of the dialectical spirit in Pascal's thought. Remnants of the one turn up in the other, as Pascal modulates from one perspective to the other. In the first section of "De l'esprit géométrique," where he illustrates the method of geometry by going briefly into the notions premières of that science, he lists, as the common properties of things, movement, number, and space or extent. Actually there is a scriptural source for these terms, and Pascal cites it: "Deus fecit omnia in pondere, in numero et in mensura" (Sap., XI, 21). These three properties serve respectively as starting points for the three branches of géométrie (in its generic sense) which are mécanique, arithmétique, and géométrie (in its specific sense).

Ainsi il y a des propriétés communes à toutes choses, dont la connaissance ouvre l'esprit aux plus grandes merveilles de la nature.

La principale comprend les deux infinités qui se rencontrent dans toutes: l'une de grandeur, l'autre de petitesse. [Oeuvres, p. 583-84.]

As a consequence, any movement, number or space or time (associated with movement by Pascal), is always situated between something quantitatively larger and something quantitatively smaller, and one is ultimately justified in saying that "... ils se soutiennent tous entre le néant et l'infini" (Oeuvres, p. 584).

Mais ceux qui verront clairement ces vérités pourront admirer la grandeur et la puissance de la nature dans cette double infinité qui nous environne de toutes parts, et apprendre par cette considération merveilleuse à se connaître eux-mêmes, en se regardant
placed entre une infinité et un néant d'étendue, entre une infinité et un néant de nombre, entre une infinité et un néant de mouvement, entre une infinité et un néant de temps. Sur quoi on peut apprendre à s'estimer à son juste prix, et former des réflexions qui valent mieux que tout le reste de la géométrie même. [Œuvres, p. 591.]

This is but a step from the great passages on the “Disproportion de l’homme” of the Pensées. There man stands as a whole, as a colossus, in respect to the small infinite and as a néant in respect to the opposed infinite; and there the physical paradox opens up an unending series of simultaneously present contraries in man. We recognize in him knowledge of middle things but not of extremes, that is, knowledge that is also ignorance; spirit that is attached to body; aspirations to truth and felicity attached to knowing powers that are inadequate and objects of desire that are elusive; and so on, as we move through the dialectical paths of the Pensées.

If we turn now to the Pensées for echoes and vestiges of the geometrical mind, we first recognize that Pascal foresees there two main possibilities, after he has brought about a favorable disposition in his reader by argumentation (such as that of the parti). One may become the Christian who knows and judges by the heart or one may in addition know by reasoning, with the aid of prophecies and proofs. In either case one is persuaded:

Ceux que nous voyons chrétiens sans la connaissance des prophéties et des preuves ne laissent pas d’en juger aussi bien que ceux qui ont cette connaissance. Ils en jugent par le coeur comme les autres en jugent par l’esprit. C’est Dieu qui les incline à croire et ainsi ils sont très efficacement persuadés. [Œuvres, pp. 1344–45.]

The reappearance of the word preuves is significant; it occurs many times, of course, in “De l’esprit géométrique.” We must note, however, its ambiguity in the Pensées:
Car il ne faut pas se méconnaître: nous sommes automate autant qu'esprit; et de là vient que l'instrument par lequel la persuasion se fait n’est pas la seule démonstration. Combien y a-t-il peu de choses démontrées! Les preuves ne convainquent que l’esprit. La coutume fait nos preuves les plus fortes et les plus crues; elle incline l’automate, qui entraîne l’esprit sans qu’il y pense. [Oeuvres, p. 1219.]

Of the two sorts of proofs—reasons and custom or habit—the former are provided for, even though they have an inferior place in Pascal’s apologetics. That they are associated with geometry is shown by the return of the notion of demonstration. It is the same with other elements of the earlier and more technical vocabulary. After the passage cited above, “Ceux que nous voyons chrétiens . . . ,” Pascal first wrote, and then crossed out, a few lines in defense of those who know by and are guided by the heart. He thinks of an objection to this effect, that heretics and infidèles go astray precisely because their faith centers in the heart; here is his answer:

... Je réponds à cela que nous avons des preuves . . . et que les infidèles n’ont aucune preuve de ce qu’ils disent et ainsi nos propositions étant semblables dans les termes elles diffèrent en ce que l’une est sans aucune preuve et l’autre très solidement prouvée.8

Pascal’s attitude toward the infidels and the heretics reminds us of the one he assumes toward his opponents in the Provinciales: to combat error he instinctively falls back on terms and propositions duly expressed and ordered.

In an interesting fragment he ties the idea of proof to twelve subordinate topics:

PREUVE. — 1 ° La religion chrétienne, par son établissement: par elle-même établie si fortement, si doucement, étant si contraire à la nature. — 2 ° La sainteté, la hauteur et l’humilité d’une âme chrétienne. — 3 ° Les merveilles de l’Ecriture sainte.
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No one can say exactly what Pascal would have done with this list of topics had he finished the project. What he did do, for example, in connection with the history of the Jews, prophecies, and the question of perpétuité in other fragments makes it plausible for one to conclude that each of these headings implied in his mind a proposition or a small group of propositions which he intended to prove. The list suggests, thus, a series—or perhaps a vaguer word would be safer here—a group of demonstrations. It reminds us of that order (in Pascal's terms, "... l'ordre dans lequel on doit disposer les proposition pour être dans une suite excellente et géométrique," Oeuvres, p. 598) toward which the geometrical spirit aspires in its second phase, after particular points have been established. In any case, the preuve resulting from this twelve-fold demonstration has for him a definite unity. He sees it as a whole that carries his reader with certainty to his general conclusion:

Il est indubitable qu'après cela on ne doit pas refuser, en considérant ce que c'est que la vie, et que cette religion, de suivre l'inclination de la suivre, si elle nous vient dans le cœur; et il est certain qu'il n'y a nul lieu de se moquer de ceux qui la suivent. [Oeuvres, pp. 1228-29.]

It would be wrong, therefore, to think of geometry and dialectic as mutually exclusive in Pascal's mind. One leads to the other, as when the properties of things bring us to the play of the infinities; and one makes use of the other, as when we see that the Christian religion, though a matter of conversion and of the heart at first, may become proven
knowledge. Nevertheless, our final statement must be, I think, that each of these *esprits* has its own framework and technique in science and in morality. We can see one art of persuasion first treated theoretically in the unfinished texts with which we began and then put to practical use in the *Lettres provinciales*; and we can see in the *Pensées* how a different problem, aim, and audience led Pascal to develop another way to the truth.


2. See Brunschvicg, *Oeuvres*, IX, 231, where this paragraph is reprinted from the *Logique*.

3. Page 597 in the Chevalier edition (see note 1, above). All further quotations from Pascal cited in this chapter are taken from this edition.

4. I should also mention, as part of the history of the association of these texts, that they were together in a manuscript once in the possession of Sainte-Beuve, used by Faugère, but now lost.

5. Pages 1096 and 1099, respectively; fragments 33 and 48. The analogy drawn between thought and ornamented expression, on one side, and portraits and pictures, on the other, reminds one of the relation of man to author in another fragment: "Quand on voit le style naturel, on est tout étonné et ravi, car on s'attendait à voir un auteur, et on trouve un homme" (p. 1096, no. 36). The theme of the author as decorator (stylistically speaking) is further emphasized elsewhere: "Tout ce qui n'est que pour l'auteur ne vaut rien. Ambitiosa recidet ornamenta" (p. 1096, no. 34). That snippet from Horace is an ornament of sorts!

6. See the *Logique*, IV° partie, chap. ii.
