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21L.017 The Art of the Probable: Literature and Probability  
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Excerpts from Pascal, *The Provincial Letters* (1660)

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## LETTER V ("Doctrine of Probability")

Paris, March 20, 1656

..."Even that is occasionally permitted," added he; "the celebrated casuist, Basil Ponce, has said so, and Father Bauny quotes his sentiment with approbation in his Treatise on Penance, as follows: 'We may seek an occasion of sin directly and designedly- primo et per se- when our own or our neighbour's spiritual or temporal advantage induces us to do so.'"

"Truly," said I, "it appears to be all a dream to me, when I hear grave divines talking in this manner! Come now, my dear father, tell me conscientiously, do you hold such a sentiment as that?"

"No, indeed," said he, "I do not."

"You are speaking, then, against your conscience," continued I.

"Not at all," he replied; "I was speaking on that point not according to my own conscience, but according to that of Ponce and Father Bauny, and them you may follow with the utmost safety, for I assure you that they are able men."

"What, father! because they have put down these three lines in their books, will it therefore become allowable to court the occasions of sin? I always thought that we were bound to take the Scripture and the tradition of the Church as our only rule, and not your casuists."

"Goodness!" cried the monk, "I declare you put me in mind of these Jansenists. Think you that Father Bauny and Basil Ponce are not able to render their opinion probable?"

"Probable won't do for me," said I; "I must have certainty."

"I can easily see," replied the good father, "that you know nothing about our doctrine of probable opinions. If you did, you would speak in another strain. Ah! my dear sir, I must really give you some instructions on this point; without knowing this, positively you can understand nothing at all. It is the foundation- the very A, B, C, of our whole moral philosophy."

Glad to see him come to the point to which I had been drawing him on, I expressed my satisfaction and requested him to explain what was meant by a probable opinion?

"That," he replied, "our authors will answer better than I can do. The generality of them, and, among others, our four-and-twenty elders, describe it thus: 'An opinion is called probable when it is founded upon reasons of some consideration. Hence it may sometimes happen that a single very grave doctor may render an opinion probable.' The reason is added: 'For a man particularly given to study would not adhere to an opinion unless he was drawn to it by a good and sufficient reason.'"

"So it would appear," I observed, with a smile, "that a single doctor may turn consciences round about and upside down as he pleases, and yet always land them in a safe position."

"You must not laugh at it, sir," returned the monk; "nor need you attempt to combat the doctrine. The Jansenists tried this; but they might have saved themselves the trouble- it is too firmly established. Hear Sanchez, one of the most famous of our fathers: 'You may doubt, perhaps, whether the authority of a single good and learned doctor renders an opinion probable. I answer that it does; and this is confirmed by Angelus, Sylvester, Navarre, Emanuel Sa, &c. It is proved thus: A probable opinion is one that has a considerable foundation. Now the authority of a learned and pious man is entitled to very great consideration; because (mark the reason), if the testimony of such a man has great influence in convincing us that such and such an event occurred, say at Rome, for example, why should it not have the same weight in the case of a question in morals?'"

"An odd comparison this," interrupted I, "between the concerns of the world and those of conscience!"

"Have a little patience," rejoined the monk; "Sanchez answers that in the very next sentence: 'Nor can I assent to the qualification made here by some writers, namely, that the authority of such a doctor, though sufficient in matters of human right, is not so in those of divine right. It is of vast weight in both cases.'"

"Well, father," said I, frankly, "I really cannot admire that rule. Who can assure me, considering the freedom your doctors claim to examine everything by reason, that what appears safe to one may seem so to all the rest? The diversity of judgements is so great"-

"You don't understand it," said he, 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. And hence Diana says on a certain subject: 'Ponce and Sanchez hold opposite views of it; but, as they are both learned men, each renders his own opinion probable.'"

"But, father," I remarked, "a person must be sadly embarrassed in choosing between them!" "Not at all," he rejoined; "he has only to follow the opinion which suits him best." "What! if the other is more probable?" "It does not signify," "And if the other is the safer?" "It does not signify," repeated the monk; "this is made quite plain by Emanuel Sa, of our Society, in his Aphorisms: 'A person may do what he considers allowable according to a probable opinion, though the contrary may be the safer one. The opinion of a single grave doctor is all that is requisite.'"

"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?"

"Well, reverend father," said I, "you have given us elbowroom, at all events! Thanks to your probable opinions, we have got liberty of conscience with a witness!..."

## LETTER VI

Paris, April 10, 1656

SIR,

I mentioned, at the close of my last letter, that my good friend, the Jesuit, had promised to show me how the casuists reconcile the contrarieties between their opinions and the decisions of the popes, the councils, and the Scripture. This promise he fulfilled at our last interview, of which I shall now give you an account.

"One of the methods," resumed the monk, "in which we reconcile these apparent contradictions, is by the interpretation of some phrase. Thus, Pope Gregory XIV decided that assassins are not worthy to enjoy the benefit of sanctuary in churches and ought to be dragged out of them; and yet our four-and-twenty elders affirm that 'the penalty of this bull is not incurred by all those that kill in treachery.' This may appear to you a contradiction; but we get over this by interpreting the word assassin as follows: 'Are assassins unworthy of sanctuary in churches? Yes, by the bull of Gregory XIV they are. But by the word assassins we understand those that have received money to murder one; and, accordingly, such as kill without taking any reward for the deed, but merely to oblige their friends, do not come under the category of assassins.'"

"Take another instance: It is said in the Gospel, 'Give alms of your superfluity.' Several casuists, however, have contrived to discharge the wealthiest from the obligation of alms-giving. This may appear another paradox, but the matter is easily put to rights by giving such an interpretation to the word superfluity that it will seldom or never happen that any one is troubled with such an article. This feat has been accomplished by the learned Vasquez, in his Treatise on Alms, c. 4: 'What men of the world lay up to improve their circumstances, or those of their relatives, cannot be termed superfluity, and accordingly, such a thing as superfluity is seldom to be found among men of the world, not even excepting kings.' Diana, too, who generally founds on our fathers, having quoted these words of Vasquez, justly concludes, 'that as to the question whether the rich are bound to give alms of their superfluity, even though the affirmative were true, it will seldom or never happen to be obligatory in practice.'"

"I see very well how that follows from the doctrine of Vasquez," said I. "But how would you answer this objection, that, in working out one's salvation, it would be as safe, according to Vasquez, to give no alms, provided one can muster as much ambition as to have no superfluity; as it is safe, according to the Gospel, to have no ambition at all, in order to have some superfluity for the purpose of alms-giving?"

"Why," returned he, "the answer would be that both of these ways are safe according to the Gospel; the one according to the Gospel in its more literal and obvious sense, and the other according to the same Gospel as interpreted by Vasquez. There you see the utility of interpretations. When the

terms are so clear, however," he continued, "as not to admit of an interpretation, we have recourse to the observation of favourable circumstances. A single example will illustrate this. The popes have denounced excommunication on monks who lay aside their canonicals; our casuists, notwithstanding, put it as a question, 'On what occasions may a monk lay aside his religious habits without incurring excommunication?' They mention a number of cases in which they may, and among others the following: 'If he has laid it aside for an infamous purpose, such as to pick pockets or to go incognito into haunts of profligacy, meaning shortly after to resume it.' It is evident the bulls have no reference to cases of that description."

[several paragraphs skipped...]

The good father then went on to say: "You now understand what use we make of favourable circumstances. Sometimes, however, obstinate cases will occur, which will not admit of this mode of adjustment; so much so, indeed, that you would almost suppose they involved flat contradictions. For example, three popes have decided that monks who are bound by a particular vow to a Lenten life cannot be absolved from it even though they should become bishops. And yet Diana avers that notwithstanding this decision they are absolved.

"And how does he reconcile that?" said I.

"By the most subtle of all the modern methods, and by the nicest possible application of probability," replied the monk. "You may recollect you were told the other day that the affirmative and negative of most opinions have each, according to our doctors, some probability enough, at least, to be followed with a safe conscience. Not that the pro and con are both true in the same sense- that is impossible- but only they are both probable and, therefore, safe, as a matter of course. On this principle our worthy friend Diana remarks: 'To the decision of these three popes, which is contrary to my opinion, I answer that they spoke in this way by adhering to the affirmative side- which, in fact, even in my judgement, is probable; but it does not follow from this that the negative may not have its probability too.' And in the same treatise, speaking of another subject on which he again differs from a pope, he says: 'The pope, I grant, has said it as the head of the Church; but his decision does not extend beyond the sphere of the probability of his own opinion.' Now you perceive this is not doing any harm to the opinions of the popes; such a thing would never be tolerated at Rome, where Diana is in high repute. For he does not say that what the popes have decided is not probable; but leaving their opinion within the sphere of probability, he merely says that the contrary is also probable."

"That is very respectful," said I.

"Yes," added the monk, "and rather more ingenious than the reply made by Father Bauny, when his books were censured at Rome; for, when pushed very hard on this point by M. Hallier, he made bold to write: 'What has the censure of Rome to do with that of France?' You now see how, either by the

interpretation of terms, by the observation of favourable circumstances, or by the aid of the double probability of pro and con, we always contrive to reconcile those seeming contradictions which occasioned you so much surprise, without ever touching on the decisions of Scripture, councils, or popes."

"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 regulation of manners."

"What you have now said," rejoined the father, "would require to be modified a little. Pay attention now, while I explain our method, and you will observe the progress of a new opinion, from its birth to its maturity. First, the grave doctor who invented it exhibits it to the world, casting it abroad like seed, that it may take root. In this state it is very feeble; it requires time gradually to ripen. This accounts for Diana, who has introduced a great many of these opinions, saying: 'I advance this opinion; but as it is new, I give it time to come to maturity- *relinquo temporis maturandum.*' Thus in a few years it becomes insensibly consolidated; and, after a considerable time, it is sanctioned by the tacit approbation of the Church, according to the grand maxim of Father Bauny, 'that if an opinion has been advanced by some casuist, and has not been impugned by the Church, it is a sign that she approves of it.' And, in fact, on this principle he authenticates one of his own principles in his sixth treatise, p. 312."

"Indeed, father! " cried I, "why, on this principle the Church would approve of all the abuses which she tolerates, and all the errors in all the books which she does not censure!"

"Dispute the point with Father Bauny," he replied. "I am merely quoting his words, and you begin to quarrel with me. There is no disputing with facts, sir. Well, as I was saying, when time has thus matured an opinion, it thenceforth becomes completely probable and safe. Hence the learned Caramuel, in dedicating his *Fundamental Theology* to Diana, declares that this great Diana has rendered many opinions probable which were not so before- *quae antea non erant*, and that, therefore, in following them, persons do not sin now, though they would have sinned formerly- *jam non peccant, licet ante peccaverint.*"

"Truly, father," I observed, "it must be worth one's while living in the neighbourhood of your doctors. Why, of two individuals who do the same actions, he that knows nothing about their doctrine sins, while he that knows it does no sin. It seems, then, that their doctrine possesses at once an edifying and a justifying virtue! The law of God, according to St. Paul, made transgressors; but this law of yours makes nearly all of us innocent."