

**“UN MILIEU ENTRE RIEN ET TOUT”:
THE SELF-ALIENATION OF THE HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS
IN PASCAL’S *PENSÉES***

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In 1918 towards the end of his life, the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire wrote in a letter to Picasso: “What is there today that is newer, more modern, more denuded and more laden with riches than Pascal?”¹ What was it about this seventeenth century physicist, mathematician, inventor, moralist and religious philosopher that elicited such soaring praise from a surrealist poet over 250 years after his death at the young age of thirty-nine? Although Pascal was without a doubt a scientist of formidable genius, it was not his scientific prowess which won him the greatest admiration among the creative minds of the early twentieth century, nor which continues to feed his buoyant reputation at the beginning of the twenty-first. It was rather his profound insights into the workings of the human consciousness, his understanding in an age of humanism emerging from the Renaissance, that humans are, “un milieu entre rien et tout”, a space between nothing and everything, capable of the highest highs and the lowest lows. If Pascal lived in an age when human apprehension seemed to have reached its zenith, he did not lose sight of its inevitable nadir which did indeed make its advent in the first half of the twentieth century. It was the prophetic genius of this awareness which Apollinaire could not help but extol.

Interestingly, it is Pascal’s collection of various aphorisms and observations which he had started to jot down as notes for a grand apology of the Christian faith, his *Pensées*, or *Thoughts*, which have garnered him the most attention to this day, despite the fact that at the time of his death they remained in quite a jumbled state. Indeed much scholarship on Pascal’s *Pensées* since his death has revolved around trying to establish a coherent order to his thoughts. This has produced several different versions, the most prevalent being that established by Léon Brunschvicg in 1897 and that established by Louis Lafuma in 1962. While this adds an element of clutter to the systematic study of Pascal’s oeuvre, it has the added bonus of more closely resembling the stream of consciousness technique than perhaps any other early modern work other than Montaigne’s *Essais*. As Mary Ann Caws writes in her biography of Pascal, „Part of the fascination in the differing readings is exactly this feeling of the separate orderings and layerings [...] as if we were indeed

¹ COMPAGNON 2007, 415.

entitled to re-readings of Pascal's thoughts in whatever sequence might—at different moments of our life and reading—make most present sense to us.”²

The observations themselves stem from a period in Pascal's life when he was coming to grips with his new identity following an ecstatic religious experience in November 1654, as well as battling an acutely painful degenerative disease and facing social and political ostracism due to his sympathies for the Jansenist movement within Catholicism. The Jansenists, and Pascal along with them, had become the most vocal critics of the casuistic moralism which had come to characterize much confessional practice among the Jesuits at the time. The Jesuits had the powerful Cardinal Richelieu on their side, thus it had not taken long for their opponents to be declared heretics and forced to sign documents disavowing their stance. This touched Pascal's beloved younger sister, Jacqueline, most profoundly as a novitiate of the convent of Port-Royal, center of the Jansenist teaching. Torn in her conscience as to whether or not to bow to the casuistic arguments of her superiors and sign, Jacqueline's health also rapidly deteriorated, and she died in October 1661, one month before the abbess of Port-Royal and all the other faithful therein signed the controversial document, and ten months before her elder brother would follow her.

In January 1655 Pascal himself had taken up residence in *les granges*, a collection of farm buildings set on the top of a hill behind the convent of Port-Royal-des-Champs. Here he joined a group of noblemen known as the Solitaries who were eager to practice an ascetic lifestyle. Although already in frail physical condition, Pascal here followed a self-imposed regimen of fasting and sleeplessness.³

His main idea for the *Pensées* sprung from his intensive reading during this period of two authors, the stoic Greek philosopher Epictetus, and the *Essais* of Montaigne. This he made known to his confessor Father de Saci shortly after his arrival at Port-Royal. He imagined a grand conversation between the two thinkers and their diametrically opposed views of human nature, thus the definition of humans as a space between nothing and everything, equally capable of godlike apprehension and self-restraint, as well as the most blatant foolishness and the basest cruelty. His aim was in a sense to take his reader on a guided tour of their own consciousness, exploring metaphysical truths along the way, but making them more accessible and attractive than Saint Thomas Aquinas or Descartes had done. Pascal did not wish to theorize; he wanted to study the concrete individual in light of the Christian Scriptures.⁴ Pascal believed the reconciliation between the two paths of Epictetus and Montaigne could be found in the Bible, which he also avidly read following his “night of fire” on November 23, 1654, in which he felt certain he had encountered “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob”.

In his commentary on the *Pensées*, Peter Kreeft points out that “Pascal made quite clear in his notes that his book was to begin [...] with [...] death [...] an ex-

² CAWS 2017, 130.

³ O'CONNELL 1997, 108–109.

⁴ ROMEYER 1923, 33.

cellent beginning for his apologetic [...] it slaps us in the face with our own wretchedness, our utter helplessness before the loss of everything”.⁵ Yet Pascal did not content himself with preaching the threat of fire and brimstone in the spirit of a medieval morality play, nor yet did he confine his terrifying description to the inevitability of physical death. For Pascal there existed a hell much more menacing and a death much more final, namely the power of the imagination to blind us to that which is truly good. According to Pascal’s definition of the imagination, it is “that dominant part in humans, the master of error and falsity, and all the more so since it is not always deceitful; for it would be an infallible measure of truth if it were an infallible measure of falsehood. However, since it is more often false, it gives no reliable measure of its quality, affording the same evaluation of truth and falsity”.⁶ The imagination, therefore, is in the pascalian scheme of things rather a faculty of conscience than a neutral faculty of conception.

As William D. Wood writes in his article “Axiology, Self-Deception, and Moral Wrongdoing in Blaise Pascal’s *Pensées*”, „According to Pascal, the central threat to the moral life is neither ignorance of the moral law nor moral weakness. Rather, the central threat to the moral life is self-deception”.⁷ Nothing could be more frightening than this inability to “perceive and respond appropriately to the true value of moral goods”.⁸

The human imagination, with its tendency to be motivated by its own self-serving fantasies, can all too easily dream up reasons to justify the fulfillment of these same fantasies. In his contemplation of this meandering state of the human imagination, Pascal confesses that it leaves him with the terrifying impression of one who has been transported in his sleep to a remote desert island where he “awakes not knowing where he is and without any way of escape”.⁹ Here we recognize an imagination akin to that of Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, an imagination which induces such a degree of self-deception that in the end it leads to horror and alienation from society and from the self. In its ability to substitute a false, self-serving idea of the good for the supreme absolute good, human consciousness carries the potential to exacerbate the breach between reality and bliss. Pascal writes that “...humans want to be happy, only want to be happy, and cannot help wanting to be happy. But how shall they go about it? The best thing would be to make themselves immortal, but as they cannot do that, they have decided to stop themselves thinking about it”.¹⁰

In his perception that the imagination can temporarily satisfy the human desire for power, knowledge and pleasure, Pascal understood what lies at the root of our

⁵ KREEFT 1993, 25, 141.

⁶ PASCAL 1984, 74 (40), 52.

⁷ WOOD 2009, 357.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ PASCAL 1984, 693 (389), 202.

¹⁰ KREEFT 1993, 134 (168), 171.

failure to live up to our ethical intuitions.¹¹ While he praises the nobility of human thought, most notably in his passage about humans being “thinking reeds”, he also reminds his readers of the fallibility of thought. Human thought, or imagination, at the same moment that it leads us to recognize our superiority over inanimate objects, also leads us to recognize our limitations. We can respond to this latter recognition in one of three ways: humility leading to faith, despair leading to alienation, or indifference and diversion, ultimately also leading to alienation.

Pascal writes that, “our intelligence holds the same place in the order of the intelligible as our body does in the expanse of nature”.¹² Our imagination is pregnant with possibility, a world unto itself, and yet at the same time devoid of meaningful content. Our bodies are wonderfully complex, and yet at the same time mere specks of dust in the universe. Our imagination can either lead us to indulge in any means presenting itself to us for the expedient attainment of power, knowledge or pleasure, blinding us to their illusory nature, or it can lead us to the “certitude, certitude, joy and peace” which Pascal experienced on his “night of fire”, as he described it in his *Memorial*.

Pascal knew well the illusory nature of an imagination which whispered of the supreme good of knowledge. Having written a treatise on conics at the age of sixteen, designed and constructed the world’s first calculator by the time he was nineteen, as well as formulating probability theory, he was without a doubt a genius of monumental proportions. Still, it was not in such breadth of knowledge that he found ultimate certitude, joy and peace. In the months leading up to his awe-inspiring religious experience of November 1654, Pascal regularly visited his sister Jacqueline at the gates of Port-Royal and would pour out his heart to her, speaking of the deep longing he felt to attain a satisfaction which knowledge could not afford him. Although he had not been irreligious up to that point in his life, Jacqueline wrote in a letter to their elder sister Gilberte: “...he understands that, although he entertained the same feelings about God as before, he also believed himself capable of accomplishing everything on his own”.¹³ In this period Pascal begins to realize that, whether consciously or not, he has been pursuing a path of diversion from the recognition of his own limitations, driven in his passion for knowledge to attempt to postpone complete surrender to the God he professed to believe in. This is not to say that he desisted from all scientific and mathematical pursuits following his conversion experience, but he no longer imagined that they could give him something which they were ultimately incapable of providing.

If in Pascal’s order of human consciousness the imagination fills the role normally assigned to the heart, namely that of being the source of desire and sentiment, then the heart is, as William Wood phrases it, „a cognitive faculty that unifies key operations of the will and the intellect [...] it is the heart that furnishes us

¹¹ WOOD 2009, 362.

¹² PASCAL 1984, 72 (390), 48.

¹³ O’CONNELL 1993, 94.

with the knowledge of first principles that cannot be demonstrated”.¹⁴ In this new conception of the heart, as well as in his description of “nature as an infinite sphere whose centre is everywhere and circumference is nowhere” (Thought 72, according to Brunschvicg numbering), Pascal perspicaciously bridged the gap that had opened between reason and faith, science and the supernatural. This description which Pascal applied to nature in his 72nd thought had previously been used to describe God and to inspire awe in humankind. As knowledge of the natural world advanced, Pascal pointed to its unfathomable vastness as a cause for abject humility rather than reckless pride. As the dualism between reason and sentiment became ever more entrenched, Pascal pointed to the irrefutable interdependence between the will and the emotional faculty. It is insights such as these which ultimately drew the admiration of Apollinaire and others. In his article “Le Funeste Pascal” (The Disastrous Pascal) Antoine Compagnon writes, “Pascal incarnates the modern illness: this Blaise Pascal...carried in himself the seed of the incurable sicknesses which distress us”.¹⁵ Of course Pascal was not the source of these sicknesses, he only diagnosed them well before others. In his Thought no. 437 (Brunschvicg) he wrote, “We wish for the truth, and we find only uncertainty in ourselves. We look for happiness, and we find only misery and death. We are incapable of not desiring the truth and happiness, and yet are capable of neither certainty nor of happiness.”¹⁶ The heart is the location of this awareness of both our desire for truth and happiness and our inability to attain them, thus prompting us to make choices.

William Wood writes of how Pascal portrays the will as being „buffeted by an unceasing stream of desire [...] an endless series of plastic, unstable desires that, when satisfied, immediately produce further desires”.¹⁷ In Thought no. 72 Pascal characterizes our natural state as being one of constant movement: “...we glide and run away in an endless attempt to escape [...] and yet this is the state most contrary to our inclination: we burn with the desire to find a firm place and a final constant base where we might erect a tower which rises to infinity, but our entire foundation cracks, and the earth opens into a great abyss”.¹⁸ Elsewhere he even goes so far as

¹⁴ WOOD 2009, 358, 359.

¹⁵ COMPAGNON 2007, 430. “Car Pascal incarne la mal moderne: Pascal, ce Blaise Pascal qui a vécu de notre âme deux siècles avant nous, portait en lui le germe des incurables maladies qui nous désolent! Voilà ce que j’appelle la mauvaise partie de Pascal [...]” (translation mine).

¹⁶ PASCAL 1984, 437 (125), 145. “Nous souhaitons la vérité, et ne trouvons en nous qu’incertitude. Nous cherchons le bonheur, et ne trouvons que misère et mort. Nous sommes incapables de ne pas souhaiter la vérité et le bonheur, et sommes incapables ni de certitude ni de bonheur” (translation mine).

¹⁷ WOOD 2009, 377.

¹⁸ PASCAL 1984, 72 (390), 49. “...nous glisse et fuit d’une fuite éternelle. Rien ne s’arrête pour nous. C’est l’état qui nous est naturel, et toutefois le plus contraire à notre inclination; nous brûlons du désir de trouver une assiette ferme, et une dernière base

to say that the source of all human evil stems from an inability to remain at rest in a room.¹⁹ Our fertile imagination constantly generates some probable scheme for achieving happiness or finding the truth, and the heart can either temper the speed of production or accelerate it.

The tool which Pascal recommends for tempering the speed of production is contemplation of the unfathomable microcosm within, a world no less awe-inspiring than the far reaches of the universe. In one very famous passage in *Thought 72*, Pascal declares that he wishes to:

paint not only the visible universe but also the immensity of nature which can be conceived in the miniscule atom [...] an infinity of universes, each of which has its own firmament, planets, earth, in the same proportion as the visible world, on this earth animals, and finally even mites, in which one will find the source of the visible mites; and finding in those again the same thing without end and without rest, that one might lose oneself in these marvels, as stunning in their minutia as others in their expanse [...] whoever contemplates themselves in this way will be astounded [...] they will tremble at the sight of these marvels [...] they will be rather disposed to ponder them in silence than to study them with presumption.²⁰

Such a prolonged contemplation of the mysterious and wonderful world which remains invisible to the naked eye serves as an emergency break for the heart to deploy in its efforts to halt the imagination's production of self-serving fantasies. As the heart wields these complexities in the face of the imagination's smoke-screens, the smoke begins to dissipate revealing the void beneath. Pascal is in no way disparaging scientific exploration of the natural world, rather as Kreeft writes, "The essential point here is not the scientific speculation but the human consequence, the abyss, the bottomless hole into which our thought falls when contemplating these wonders".²¹ The final end is again humility. Just as Pascal hoped to expose the futility and deception of human imagination which attempts to generate schemes for happiness through the attainment of power, knowledge and pleasure, he also hoped to disarm any notions that the heart might have about discerning truth unaided. The self-deception of the imagination is exposed in the face of the vastness of the cosmos, and the independence of the heart is brought into submission using the boundless detail of which it itself is made but cannot comprehend.

constante pour y édifier une tour qui s'élève à l'infini, mais tout notre fondament craque, et la terre s'ouvre jusqu'aux abîmes." translation mine

¹⁹ Pascal 139 (269), 65. "j'ai dit souvent que tout le malheur des hommes vient d'une seule chose, qui est de ne savoir pas demeurer en repos, dans une chambre." (translation mine)

²⁰ PASCAL 1984, 72 (390), 45–46.

²¹ KREEFT 1993, 129.

Pascal concludes by asking: „Who can follow these astounding processes? The author of these marvels understands them. No one else can.”²²

Antoine Compagnon writes of how Bergson’s reading of Pascal made a profound impression on him and shaped his understanding of the heart as an organ of knowledge, a knowledge that was so immediate and so instinctive that it coincided with its object, uniting knowledge and love.²³ One of Pascal’s most famous and yet most misunderstood sayings from the *Pensées* is Thought 277 (Brunschvicg): “The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of; we recognize it in a thousand ways. I say that the heart naturally loves universal being and naturally loves itself [...] and it hardens itself against one or the other, at its whim [...] is it according to reason that you love?”²⁴ As O’Connell points out, Pascal is not asserting some emotional drive independent of and superior to rationality here but rather highlighting „the mysterious presence in every human being of an experiential faculty competent to furnish those first principles from which all reasoning necessarily derives”.²⁵ The heart is a place where God’s grace is not only understood and known but experienced. It is the site where the vertical meets the horizontal plane, sending forth light into the imagination from the nexus of their union. It is only this light which is able to dispel the fog of narcissism generated by the self-serving fantasies of the imagination, and to nourish the beauty which had been overshadowed by the fog as well as to enhance its true worth.

Although Pascal remained true to the Augustinian roots of Jansenism in its doctrine of original sin and clearly condemned “imaginatively investing the self with excessive value”,²⁶ he wrote in his Thought 423 (Brunschvicg) that humans “should love themselves for there is in us a nature capable of good”. He only hastens to warn that loving oneself should not be equated with loving one’s baseness; this should be despised because it is hollow.²⁷ Here we are reminded of T.S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men”, and it is yet again evident how relevant Pascal’s insights were at the beginning of the twentieth century and at the beginning of our own.

In his Thought 476 Pascal wrote that, “No one should be loved except God and no one hated but the self [...] for every part should want to perish for the body, which is the only reason for the existence of everything”.²⁸ In his longer essay entitled “Self-love” he clarifies what he means by this self who should be hated. It is the self who loves and considers only themselves,²⁹ who hides behind lies and dis-

²² PASCAL 1984, 72 (390), 45–46.

²³ COMPAGNON 2007, 423.

²⁴ PASCAL 1984, 277 (224), 102.

²⁵ O’CONNELL 1997, 168–169.

²⁶ WOOD 2009, 364.

²⁷ PASCAL 1984, 423 (234), 130.

²⁸ PASCAL 1984, 476 (689), 153. “Il faut n’aimer que Dieu et ne haïr que soi [...] car il faut que tout membre veuille bien périr pour le corps, qui est le seul pour qui tout est.”

²⁹ PASCAL 1984, 100 (99), 59.

guises, and, as William Wood puts it, “takes the imagination for the heart, mistaking fantasy for sentiment”.³⁰ He later accurately points out that “when we love something [...] we also invest it with value”.³¹ For Pascal the problem with narcissistic self-love was our fundamental inability to invest ourselves with value. This could only be accomplished by the grace of the Christian God who, according to mathematician Pascal, was not “simply the author of truths and geometry and of the order of the elements; this was the divinity of the pagans and the Epicurians. Pascal was eager to arrive at [...] the God of love and of consolation [...] the God who fills the soul and the heart of those he possesses [...] who makes them feel at once their misery and his infinite mercy”.³²

In his article concerning Pascal’s controversial final conversation with his confessor Father Beurrier, Robert Leuenberger takes up the question of whether or not Pascal did indeed renounce Jansenism at the end of his life. Father Beurrier had been called upon to give an account of Pascal’s last words in order to determine whether or not he had died a faithful Catholic or a heretic, thus sealing the fate of his epitaph in the church of Saint-Étienne-du-Mont. Leuenberger notes how Beurrier tactfully avoided giving any definitive answer as to Pascal’s renunciation of Jansenism, emphasizing instead his profound piety and patience in suffering. Christ had become his true confessor, his true “maître spirituel”, enabling Pascal to share in Christ’s loneliness, “not only in the world, but if needs be in the midst of the community of saints as well”.³³ His identification with the loneliness of Christ was an experience vastly different from the alienation which Pascal had lived through in his years of pursuing knowledge in search of happiness. It was also different from the solitude he sought at Port-Royal when he desperately longed for an encounter with God. Nor was it the same as the isolation he felt within the Catholic community due to his and his sister’s Jansenist convictions. It was a loneliness which propelled him to further scientific discoveries with his treatise on the mathematical puzzle of the cycloid in 1658; to civic action with the launch of the world’s first public transportation system, the *Carrosses à cinq sols*, in Paris in early 1662; as well as to monumental acts of charity, inviting a homeless family to live with him in the spring of 1662. All of this was done while Pascal himself was rapidly succumbing to a debilitating degenerative disease. Yet, as Mary Ann Caws notes, “He never completely separated himself from the outside world, of science

³⁰ WOOD 2009, 371.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 378.

³² Quoted in ROMEYER 1923, 35–36, p. 581. In the original Brunschvicg edition: “Le Dieu des chrétiens ne consiste pas en un Dieu simplement auteur des vérités géométriques et de l’ordre des éléments; c’est la part des païens et des épicuriens.” Pascal a hâte d’en venir au “Dieu des chrétiens [...] Dieu d’amour et de consolation [...] Dieu qui remplit l’âme et le coeur de ceux qu’il possède [...] qui leur fait sentir intérieurement leur misère, et sa miséricorde infinie [.]”

³³ LEUENBERGER 1993, 154–155.

or of commerce [...] upon nothing else, but his intimate knowingness, did he depend.”³⁴ Pascal rested in one who inspired his imagination to worship and his heart to service through his self-sacrificial love by becoming “un pont entre rien et tout”, a bridge between nothing and everything.

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³⁴ CAWS 2017, 140.