

Pascal's Epistemological Critique of Early Modern Political Philosophy

by

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ABSTRACT

Blaise Pascal's critique of Descartes is in fact a critique of modern political philosophy, by virtue of modern political thought's being based on Cartesian epistemology. According to Descartes, reason acts autonomously and without reference to other belief-forming faculties, hence its designation here as autonomous reason.

Thomas Hobbes based his principles of justice on autonomous reason. The ability of reasoning that provided them was, in his system, made possible by an act of reasoning itself. This made reason autonomous by ridding it of all nonrational factors, but also made him vulnerable to Pascal's chief criticism of Descartes, which was that due to the frailties of human beings and the inherent structure of logical thought, reason ultimately depends on pre-rational intuitions and desires.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis is primarily concerned with a particular conception of rationality, what I refer to as autonomous reason. According to this conception, the activity of reasoning takes place apart from and without reference to faith, will, tradition, or any other belief-forming faculties. This conception of reason was one of the products of the age of enlightenment and was articulated in various ways by philosophers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This study will examine its manifestations in the thought of Rene Descartes (1596-1650) and Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), but will be especially interested in the contributions of its first great critic, Blaise Pascal (1623-1662).

Descartes was the first thinker to formulate and defend an account of autonomous reason over against the prevailing scholastic paradigm of knowledge; Hobbes was, likewise, the first thinker to base a comprehensive political philosophy on it. Just as unaided, or autonomous, reason was necessary and sufficient for discovering universal truths of physics and metaphysics in Descartes' system, so, too, did Hobbes argue that unaided reason was necessary and sufficient for the discovery and justification of the universal rules of nature by which states should be governed.

Pascal occupies an interesting place in the history of philosophy. He is often treated as no more than a Christian apologist and religious thinker, and remembered for his approach to religious issues and for his famous wager. Even the eminent historian of philosophy Frederick Copleston is of the mind that "[Pascal] would probably be better classified as a Christian apologist than as a philosopher" (Copleston 1960: 153). When his approach to the traditional philosophical questions is examined, he is too often dismissed as a fideist with little to no

appreciation for human reason. Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, understood Pascal in this way. In *Beyond Good and Evil* he described Pascal's faith as a "protracted suicide of reason" and a "sacrifice of the intellect" (Nietzsche 1944: #46, #229).¹ He thus occupies the role, in Nietzsche's thought, of a mere "religious man." However, Pascal has a nuanced theory of reason that accounts for the relevant human faculties and makes an important contribution to the history of political philosophy.

Although he wrote as an apologist for Christianity, he saw fit to ground his apologetic in a philosophical critique of Cartesian rationalism. This critique paid special attention to Descartes' dismissal of the role of faith in the formation of belief and responded with a lucid theory of logic that was grounded in a philosophical anthropology that drew attention to the weakness of autonomous reason. If Pascal's critique of Descartes is valid, then it cannot only be understood as a critique of Hobbes' system, but also as a critique of *every* political philosophy that relies on autonomous reason. If true, as this thesis will attempt to demonstrate, this carries significant implications for the history of modern political thought.

My argument consists primarily of fleshing out the implications of some points that are already well-established. That Descartes was one of the principle founders of modern thought is not seriously debated, nor is the fact that he argued for the conception of reason that I ascribe to him. Although Pascal is not as prominent in the western canon as the other thinkers studied here, he is generally known to be an opponent of Descartes and of modern thought in general. Finally, Hobbes is correctly read as one of the first modern political thinkers, and his influence on social contract theory is widely known. However, the philosophical dots have yet to be connected between what is "modern" in Descartes and in Hobbes, and subsequently what a refutation of

¹ All references to Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, *The Gay Science*, and Blaise Pascal's *Pensées* will refer to aphorism or fragment, as opposed to page, number.

that “modernness” in Descartes would mean for Hobbesian politics.

Here I will argue that what is essentially “modern” in Cartesian thought is a radically different understanding of human reason, one that conceives of it as being in direct opposition to faith and tradition, and acting on its own to provide truth and certainty. Hobbes’ epistemology, which undergirds and supports his political philosophy, accepts this same account of reason, which justifies our calling him modern. Since his political thought presupposes this account of reason, a refutation of it would call his political thought into question. One final implication of my argument is that both Descartes and Pascal should be thought of as political thinkers, since the conception of reason they defended and opposed, respectively, provided the foundation for modern political philosophy.

Some preliminary words should be said about autonomous reason before delving into the examination of the three philosophers themselves. In his study of Augustine, Pascal, and Hume entitled *The Logic of the Heart: Augustine, Pascal, and the Rationality of Faith*, James R. Peters describes enlightenment reason in the following manner: “the great pioneering minds of modernity...aspired to liberate human rationality by establishing reason in and of itself as a universal, dispassionate, objective, and autonomous authority” (Peters 2009: 17). The four adjectives that he uses provide an excellent starting point for our analysis, as they indicate everything that is important about autonomous reason.

Enlightenment reason is *universal*. That is to say, it is of such a nature that the truths it discovers will be true universally. It provides a way of transcending the tribal and the particular by pointing to the self-evident and necessarily true. Its proper exercise consists in eschewing all local and accidental factors and choosing instead to only accept as true statements that would be true anytime, anyplace, and for all people. By way of example, the subtext underlying the entire

Hobbesian project is that political disputes had hitherto existed primarily because polities were based on custom and other particularities rather than laws of reason. His rational laws of nature are able, he claimed, to eliminate conflict and ensure peace precisely because they are universal and will be equally effective in all times and places. “And from hence it comes,” he wrote, referring to authors who based their politics on the passions, “that they who have written of justice and policy in general do all invade each other, and themselves, with contradiction” (Hobbes 1999: 19). Although not a subject of this study, Kant exemplifies this sought-after universality of reason in his teaching that the Right takes priority over the Good, where the Good is understood to mean empirical lifestyles into which we are socialized from birth. These conceptions of the good life, which are largely the result of accidental factors like place of birth and socio-economic status, cannot have the same moral standing as actions that can be consistently universalized across time and space. One’s particular loyalty to the working class, for example, is the result of his economic position in society and cannot be universalized and thus must be rejected, or at least subordinated, in favour of a more universal principle of justice. Kant’s categorical imperative, therefore, is nothing more than the doctrine that morality must be rational, in the sense in which reason was understood by him to be universal.

Enlightenment reason is also *dispassionate*, in that it not only operates without reference to the passions but is also antithetical to them. Reason must inform the passions and arbitrate between them, if not overcome them altogether. The passions are viewed as a destabilizing force in the human psyche that can cause us to pursue ends that are harmful, useless, or at any rate irrational. Reason is required to reign in these powerful forces, which can only be done by disregarding them and acting in accordance with universal rules of conduct and justification. Descartes’ image of the disembodied mind following a chain of rational deductions is perhaps

the classic example of the dispassionate thinker coldly following his reason in a state of perfect doubt. A more recent example can be found in John Rawls' revival of social contract theory, especially his employment of the original position behind the veil of ignorance. It assumes that in order for principles of justice to be valid, they must be the result of cold, dispassionate reflection with no regard paid to one's own personal wants or desires. Only when our personal interests cannot influence our judgement are we able to determine what justice requires.

That reason is *objective* is simply a way of saying that its results or findings do not depend on the thinker for their truth but are true whether or not they are realized or discovered. They are also not mere reflections of the thinker onto the object, but correspond to the thing in itself. In other words, reason allows the thinker to rise above his time, place, and private passions and desires. This is, of course, a restatement of the previous two points about universality and dispassionateness which, together, allow reason to make the type of objective, mind-independent claims it makes.

The *autonomy* of reason means that it operates independently of all outside forces and faculties that profess to be belief-forming. The etymology of the greek *auto-nomos* as *self-law* reminds us that autonomous reason understands itself as not being subject to any rules of operation or verification other than its own. Reason operates in its own sphere and does not depend on any assistance from faith, tradition, or authority. The proponents of this understanding of reason viewed it as being in unequivocal opposition to all other belief-forming faculties and outside forces. Reason, they argued, must be the final arbiter and judge between passions, will, imagination, tradition, custom, faith, etc.

Autonomy encompasses everything that has been said about reason to this point, including everything falling under the labels of *universal*, *dispassionate*, and *objective*. These

designators are all connected to and culminate in the notion of *autonomy*. The autonomy of reason allows it to transcend local customs, faith traditions, the passions, and anything else that would prevent it from becoming a mere reflection of the individual's upbringing or psychology. James R. Peters includes autonomy as merely one adjective among four in his description of enlightenment reason, but it should be understood as the key term that encompasses the other three. For this reason I have simply used "autonomous reason" rather than his term "disembedded reason." While "disembedded" is an adequate description that calls attention to the fact that this conception of reason fails to understand humans as being necessarily embedded in a thick culture that defines them, using "autonomous" as the chief descriptor keeps in mind the central role that autonomy plays in enlightenment reason.

At this point, however, one may object to the claim that this view of reason is unique to the modern age. Even Socrates, the interlocutor might say, taught that men must use reason to control the passions, and that reason alone united the philosopher with eternal truths and allowed him to transcend the cave of received opinion and custom. The characterization of specifically modern reason as being dispassionate and universal might appear to overlook the fact that philosophers have always understood reason in this way.

Nietzsche's first major philosophical work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, portrayed Socratic rationalism as an early form of autonomous reason. Socratism, he wrote, is the belief that "thought, using the thread of causality, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being" (Nietzsche 1967: 95). Nietzsche sets this form of thought in opposition to the tragic art which Socrates followed Euripides in rejecting. From the point of view of Socratism, tragedy was "rather unreasonable, full of causes apparently without effects, and effects apparently without causes" (Nietzsche 1967: 89). This certainly gives the impression that Socrates, qua philosopher or

“theoretical man,” understood the activity of reasoning to consist of the use of logic to not only understand objective reality, but also overcome the Dionysian frenzy of human emotions and passions. It also reminds us of Socrates’ self-proclaimed goal in *The Apology* to expose those who “pretend to know, but know nothing” (23d). The charge he levelled against the supposedly wise men of Athens was that they could not give a rational account of their opinions, and were subject to the influence of myth and custom. Socrates appears, then, to hold the same conception of reason I attribute to certain modern thinkers. If this is true then Cartesian rationalism would not represent a significant development, and consequently Pascal’s refutation of Descartes and Hobbes would lose much of its importance.

A deeper reading of Socrates, however, will make it clear that his, and by extension the classical, conception of reason is far more nuanced than Nietzsche makes it out to be. While the rational part of the soul must indeed control the spirited and desiring parts, the life of reason can never be divorced from pre-rational judgements and dispositions; this understanding was anathema to the Cartesian conception of complete rational autonomy. Two Platonic allegories, the cave in *Republic* book 7, and Diotima’s ladder in the *Symposium*, combine to give the impression that both the *beginning* and the *end* of the rational life, in Socrates’ teaching, depend on factors other than reason.

Plato’s allegory of the cave plays a central role in the *Republic*, as it offers a vivid picture of the philosopher’s relationship to his community. If Allan Bloom is correct in interpreting the *Republic* as dealing primarily with the theme of the relationship between philosophy and the city, or the philosopher and his community (Plato 1991: 307), then the cave allegory is in fact the central passage of the entire dialogue. It describes the pre-philosophic state of men as being held in place by shackles, forced to stare at the back of a cave, upon which shadows are cast by

people and shapes behind him. Likewise, the only noises they hear are those which echo off the back wall and appear to be made by the shadows. Since these unfortunate prisoners have been in this condition from birth they have no knowledge of the outside world and therefore falsely believe that the shadows and echoes are truly real, and not mere reflections of real objects. The philosopher is the one who is able to break free from his shackles and gradually make his way toward the fire behind him, then to the material objects outside the cave, and finally into the light of the sun, which is the source of everything below it. The initial turning from the shadows is the inauguration of the examined life and culminates in the knowledge of the things themselves and eventually of the Good, which is the source of everything else.

Plato does not hazard an answer, however, as to how this initial turning away from the shadows is possible. The language seems to imply that the prisoner is helped by another person, likely a philosopher who has descended back into the cave to free others – “[t]ake a man who is released and suddenly *compelled to stand up...*” (515c, emphasis added) – but this does not resolve the issue, for there must have been an original philosopher who escaped his shackles with no help from anyone else. An exogenous force is required, and two possibilities present themselves: chance, and the gods. While no indication is given in the allegory itself, perhaps Socrates’ own process of becoming unshackled is instructive. In his *Apology* he attributes his philosophical activity to a god, namely Apollo via the oracle at Delphi. The cryptic message that he was the wisest man in Athens provided the impetus he needed to transcend his cave and acquire knowledge of the truly real.

One of the teachings implied by this allegory is that the activity of reasoning depends on an extra-rational factor. The pull of tradition and custom can be so strong that the individual needs an external force to liberate him and allow him to rationally examine his life. Reason

itself, in other words, is incapable of bringing about the means for its own activity, and requires recourse to something outside of itself. By way of foreshadowing, this is perhaps what Pascal was getting at when he wrote that the man who relies completely on unaided reason alone “cannot even doubt” (Pascal 1995: #75). According to the Cartesian framework he was criticizing, doubt was the first step in the correct method for acquiring truth. Not being able to doubt would mean that Descartes’ process could not even get off the ground, so to speak. The principle here, present in Socrates as well as in Pascal, is that reason alone is not sufficient to break the hold of the irrational opinions and customs into which one has been raised.

Just as the cave allegory indicates that the beginning of the rational life depends on something other than reason, Socrates’ speech in the *Symposium* indicates that the end, or purpose, of the rational life is itself the product of one of the passions, namely eros. He defines eros as desire, and ultimately as desire for the good to be one’s own (211c). Men, the argument goes, are aware of and troubled by a sense of their own mortality. Eros is therefore a desire for immortality – i.e., what we perceive to be our greatest good – and to that end it directs us along a path that culminates in philosophy. As Diotima explained to Socrates, the various types of love can be thought of as steps on a ladder gradually leading us to the form of the beautiful, which is only beheld through intellection and grants the highest type of immortality:

...using these beautiful things as steps: from [love of] one to two, and from two to all beautiful bodies; and from beautiful bodies to beautiful pursuits; and from pursuits to beautiful lessons; and from lessons to end of that lesson, which is the lesson of nothing else than the beautiful itself; and at last to know what is beauty itself (211c).

At this point “beauty itself” has already been described as “always being and neither coming to be nor perishing” (211a), or in other words as an eternal idea or form. Although some semblance of immortality may be attained by producing offspring to bear your name or great works of art by which you will be remembered, these merely offer remembrance and not real

immortality. True immortality, which eros points toward, consists of beholding the immortal forms themselves. This can only be done by intellection, which is to say by philosophizing.

All this is to say that the life of reason is the ultimate mode of erotic desire. This passage is ripe with sexual imagery, and the passion with which the philosopher longs for the forms is the very same passion that lovers feel for one another. Both are symptoms of man's mortal condition and manifestations of his search for immortality. Furthermore, reason is not derailed by the pull of passion; rather it is necessary in order to reach its end, namely knowledge of and communion with the eternal forms. Philosophy is the culmination of love, and therefore the object of knowledge must be loved before it can be known.

Since reason itself cannot provide the means for its own activity, as the cave allegory teaches, and is itself a form of passionate longing, as the *Symposium* indicates, the Socratic understanding of reason is quite different from the enlightenment account. While Socratic reason is objective and universal, in that it provides a means of transcendence, it does not operate without reference to the passions. Descartes was aware of the classical teaching on the passions and understood his thought as directly opposed to it. In the opening paragraph of *The Passions of the Soul*, he writes:

There is nothing in which the defective nature of the sciences which we have received from the ancients appears more clearly than in what they have written on the passions; for, although this is a matter which has at all times been the object of much investigation, and though it would not appear to be one of the most difficult, inasmuch as since [sic] everyone has experience of the passions within himself, there is no necessity to borrow one's observations from elsewhere in order to discover their nature; yet that which the ancients have taught regarding them is both so slight, and for the most part so far from credible, that I am unable to entertain any hope of approximating to the truth excepting by shunning the paths which they have followed (Descartes 1997: 358).

This rejection of the classical framework must not be overlooked, and indeed it was not lost on Blaise Pascal, who correctly understood its potentially revolutionary implications.

CHAPTER ONE: DESCARTES

Descartes' work, then, constitutes a watershed moment in the history of philosophy, separating all those who came after him from those before. He was born in 1596 to an aristocratic family but was raised by his maternal grandmother from 1597 until he was sent to the college of La Flèche at ten years of age. He was taught scholastic philosophy by the Jesuits at La Flèche but eventually became profoundly disillusioned with it. The scholastic tradition combined the teaching of Aristotle with the theological insights of Christianity and thus was the culmination of western thought at that point in time. In Descartes' view, however, Scholasticism was unable to provide an account for the elaborate claims it made, which relied on presuppositions that were highly doubtful and simply accepted on authority. Scholasticism did not, in other words, have any way of justifying the philosophic statements it made.

Descartes' goal, not surprisingly, was to provide a way to not only justify statements and propositions, but in fact to make justifiable philosophical statements possible in the first place. His objection to scholastic philosophy was made from the point of view of scepticism, in that he pointed out that the scholastics could not be sure of the claims they made; it was this very point of view, namely scepticism, that he hoped to eradicate. The sceptical rejoinder had always followed in the wake of positive claims made by philosophers, and the fact that philosophy had not yet overcome it was a disgrace. Descartes' novel approach was to face the sceptical challenge head-on, follow it through to its conclusion, and to treat whatever knowledge that remained as certain.² He allowed scepticism to run its course by methodically doubting everything he could until his *cogito ergo sum*, as the only thing that remained unscathed, could

² As we will see below, Hobbes adopted a similar approach. (See Strauss 1965: 171).

become the foundation for his post-sceptical system of knowledge.

The single most important image Descartes wished to convey was that all systems of thought were analogous to great pieces of architecture. The most important part of an edifice is its foundation, to which Descartes so often refers; without a sure foundation, a philosophical system is as vulnerable as a house built on sand. This was precisely the problem with Scholastic, and indeed all previous philosophy according to his indictment and the reason he set out to establish a secure foundation upon which he could build an elaborate system.

Discourse on Method: Descartes' Fable

No matter how thoroughly any official doctrine is promulgated and propagandized, there will always be a small number of minds that possess sufficient capacity for independent thought so as to become dissenting voices. However, they are unable to simply publish their critiques of the official position, as that would likely result in censure, imprisonment, or both. Rather, they must present their views in such a way that they will not be discovered by the average reader. Leo Strauss' *Persecution and the Art of Writing* argues that the threat of persecution³ has compelled many writers to write in such a way that their true teachings are not explicitly stated but must be found by reading between the lines. He writes:

Persecution cannot prevent even public expression of the heterodox truth, for a man of independent thought can utter his views in public and remain unharmed, provided he moves with circumspection. He can even utter them in print without incurring any danger, provided he is capable of writing between the lines (Strauss 1988: 24).

Although Strauss does not offer an exhaustive list of the writers who wrote in this way, he provides clues that make it clear whether a book warrants an esoteric reading. First, the work

³ "Persecution" here is not limited to its usual sense, but can take the form of social ostracism or even political correctness. It can be any force that silences contradiction of a certain doctrine or view that is officially or unofficially sanctioned.

under consideration must have been written at a time during which certain doctrines were enforced through either direct or indirect coercion (*Ibid.*: 32); second, the author will likely explicitly support the prevailing orthodoxy while underhandedly denying or questioning some of its presuppositions elsewhere. (*Ibid.*) If we have reason to believe that the author in question is good at what he does and that nothing was included in the work by mistake, then it is reasonable to assume that glaring contradictions are deliberate inclusions meant to make a deeper point or direct the reader to look beneath the surface.

Strauss is well aware that this can easily become a hermeneutical license to ignore real errors on the part of the author, so he stresses that a work must not be read esoterically unless certain explicit statements by the author permit us to do so. Such a statement might be Plato's notion of the noble lie, the idea that it is sometimes justifiable for philosophers to lie to non-philosophers.⁴ Another possibility would be a statement that draws a distinction between careful and careless readers and indicates that the careless will be unable to understand or replicate the author's thought process (*Ibid.*: 25).

As we will see, Descartes' work, especially his *Discourse on Method*, meets these criteria; he is aware that Galileo's scientific theories were shunned by the church, the book is littered with contradictions that only make sense when interpreted as intentional, and he explicitly refers to the work as a fable and implies that some readers are more intelligent than others. For this reason, any exposition of Descartes' work must be mindful of any esoteric teachings that may be between the lines, and be willing to treat explicit statements with a healthy amount of scepticism if they seem to contradict such esoteric teachings. *The Discourse on Method* explicitly states that men are defined by an equality of mental powers and therefore his

⁴ "For philosophic readers he would do almost more than enough by drawing their attention to the fact that he did not object to telling lies which were noble, or tales which were merely similar to the truth." (*Ibid.*: 35)

purpose in writing was only to describe his preferred method, not to prescribe its universal use. However, both of these propositions are eventually called into question by the structure and implications of his argument.

He begins with the claim that men are not separated by the amount of reason they possess, and therefore one's more complete knowledge of the truth cannot be attributed to any natural superiority. What separates men, he argues, are the rules they follow when conducting their reason: "For to be possessed of good mental powers is not sufficient; the principal matter is to apply them well" (Descartes 1997: 71). This emphasis on method sets the tone for the entire book, which goes on to offer what he takes to be the best method for conducting reason. Although he is satisfied with the method he has found, he initially insists that others need not use the same method. "My design," he writes, "is not here to teach the method which everyone should be following in order to promote the good conduct of his reason, but only to show in what manner I have endeavoured to conduct my own" (*Ibid.*: 73). The business of prescribing methods for others is best left for those who "esteem themselves more skilful," he admits (*Ibid.*). He presents his discovery of a guiding method as a fable that the reader can choose to follow or reject; "regarding this treatise simply as history, or, if you prefer it, a fable...I hope it will be of use to some without being hurtful to any" (*Ibid.*).

However, if Descartes' method has worked for him, there is no reason why it should not work for others and why he should not therefore prescribe it. He recounts his education and upbringing, reminding the reader that he was among the preeminent students attending a preeminent college at a historical moment filled with as many great minds as any other. "This," he writes, "made me take the liberty of *judging all others by myself*" (*Ibid.*, emphasis added). This effectively negates his earlier statement about not esteeming himself more skilful than

others, which in turn opens up the possibility that he *does* mean to prescribe his method.

What then does this mean for his claim that he presents the book as a fable, since the purpose for doing so was to avoid prescribing? Clarification can perhaps be found if his discussion of the nature of fables and histories is taken into account. In discussing the value of reading ancient literature he writes that “fables with their charm stimulate the mind and histories of memorable deeds exalt it” (*Ibid.*: 74). Histories and fables either tell false tales or misrepresent true events with the effect that “what is retained is not portrayed as it really is” (*Ibid.*: 75). Moreover, although they can assist in forming a sound judgment when read with discretion, an uncritical acceptance of what one reads in a fable will make one liable to fall into extravagancies and “form projects beyond their power of performance.” (*Ibid.*) Since this discussion of histories and fables takes place almost immediately after his insistence that his own book is “history, or, if you prefer it, a fable,” it is surely intentional, which would mean that his words about reading histories and fables are meant to apply to the *Discourse* as well. They are meant as a subtle but direct warning against careless reading and application of his method, since some readers may not possess the requisite capacity to follow it to the end.

Descartes explicitly claims that he does not necessarily wish for anyone to follow his method, but implicitly distinguishes between those who should follow his method and those who shouldn't. If he indeed prescribes the method but warns the careless reader not to get carried away, why would he lie about the prescriptive nature of his tale in the first place? The only way to account for this seeming contradiction is to suppose that some of his explicit statements are not meant to be taken seriously, but rather were included so as to avoid persecution. He is candidly submitting his method to be judged by the world, ready and willing to correct any errors in it, while implicitly telling his careful readers that if they seek true knowledge, his is the

method to follow. By not openly espousing the opinions expressed he is able to maintain his innocence if the church finds them heretical, as had happened to Galileo. Indeed, the text itself bears out this implicit prescription. The argument of the opening paragraphs that sets the stage for the entire book is that since men generally have the same rational capacity, the thing that separates them is the method they follow in seeking the truth, and the method he discovered is capable of providing certainty. Therefore, it naturally follows that if one wishes to achieve certainty in the sciences, one must follow his method.

Furthermore, not only does Descartes contradict his claim about not prescribing, his opening claim about equality of mental capacity is also suspect. As proof of that equality he alludes to the fact that every man is satisfied with the amount of reason he possesses, as if equal satisfaction implied equal possession. On the contrary, since one's reasoning capabilities are judged by one's own reason, everyone will necessarily be satisfied with the amount they possess regardless of whether or not it is equal to others'.⁵ We have already seen that Descartes takes the liberty of judging others by himself, which implies that he esteems himself to be more capable than others, and here we see him claiming that all men possess reason to the same extent while providing an obviously weak argument for that claim.

So despite claims to the contrary, Descartes appears to think that reason is not evenly distributed among men, and that his method may wreak havoc when improperly used by the wrong men. He was well aware that the philosophical and scientific ground he was breaking was not pleasing to ecclesiastical authority. His insistence upon the descriptive nature of the book, as well as his warnings against careless reading and application of the method, serve to distance him from any results its application may produce. He has thus placated the authority which

⁵ Compare: "How is it that a lame man does not annoy us while a lame mind does? Because a lame man recognizes that we are walking straight, while a lame mind says that it is we who are limping" (Pascal 1995: #98).

might censor his ideas while simultaneously presenting and prescribing them to the readers whom he trusts are capable of following them. As the rest of this chapter, and indeed the entire thesis, will make clear, the ideas he proposed were indeed radical and he was wise to cloak them in deference to authority.

He begins his fable with recounting his disillusionment with what he had learned from books and men, the theme being that the knowledge of both was not based solely upon reason but relied too heavily on non-rational factors such as tradition, custom, and authority. He dismisses all academic disciplines except mathematics, which he admired for the “certainty of its demonstrations and the evidence of its reasoning” (Descartes 1997: 75). His harshest criticism is reserved for philosophy, which he sarcastically praises as “[teaching] us to speak with the appearance of truth on all things” (*Ibid.*: 74). As opposed to mathematics, philosophy rests upon an insecure foundation and consequently all of its claims are a matter of dispute. Because philosophical claims had been ultimately based, he argued, on a foundation other than reason, there was no epistemologically sound method for resolving such disputes. Furthermore, since all knowledge is based on principles of philosophy, Descartes concludes that all realms of knowledge other than mathematics are dubious and must forever remain so unless some method is devised whereby philosophy can be grounded on a secure foundation. He concludes his critique by describing the work of philosophers and scientists as “the artifices or the empty boastings of...those who make a profession of knowing that of which they are ignorant” (*Ibid.*: 76). The unspoken assumption here is that an indubitable, and therefore universal, foundation like that of mathematics would necessarily resolve all such disputes.

His study of the opinions of men yielded similar results. After travelling and conversing with many people in various nations, he discovered that the state of general knowledge is

analogous to philosophy, in that there is widespread diversity of belief and no way of reaching agreement. The people he met, like the philosophers with whom he had studied under, followed example and custom rather than reason. In sum, he thought that both the philosophers and the people were unable to properly account for their claims, and were therefore susceptible to the sceptics' objection that there was no certainty.

This is not to say that there was nothing of value in philosophy. Its proper ends, namely morality and physical science, are commendable. Mathematics had never been geared toward such ends, and in using a mathematical methodology in the service of morals and physics, Descartes combined what was valuable in mathematics – the certainty of its method – with what is valuable in philosophy – its humanistic purpose. Doing this, he hoped, would ground virtue and knowledge on a secure and rational foundation.

The method aims to provide certainty by relying solely on reason and not on the vagaries of personal experience and local custom which he blamed for the difference of opinion among philosophers and commoners alike. It consisted of the following precepts:

1. To only affirm statements that are clearly and distinctly true;
2. To divide complex problems up into as many simple parts as possible;
3. To proceed in due order from the simple problems to the more complex, using prior solutions to solve the complex problems; and
4. To evaluate questions so thoroughly as to ensure not overlooking anything;

He then offers what seems to be a summary of these four precepts: “we abstain from receiving anything as true which is not so, and always retain the order which is necessary in order to deduce the one conclusion from the other” (*Ibid.*: 83). This method, it is claimed, will

bring knowledge of literally everything that can be known. “There can be,” he writes, “nothing so remote that we cannot reach to it, nor so recondite that we cannot discover it” (*Ibid.*: 83).

The first precept introduces his idea of clear and distinct judgements, which he never properly defines and actually uses in contradictory ways throughout his work. Here he equates ‘clearly and distinctly true’ with ‘indubitable’ but he elsewhere uses it to justify assumptions which might be intuitive but are certainly not indubitable in the proper sense.⁶ More will be said about this difficulty later.

His method consists in starting from first principles which are as clearly known as possible and following an orderly chain of methodical deductions. If successful, this has the obvious benefit of eliminating sources of disagreement and dispute, since the truth or falsity of any statement can be easily discerned by tracing the chain of deductions back to the first principle: if the statement in question has not been deduced from a rational first principle or if a faulty inference has been made, it is false.

According to his architectural analogy, one must at least have temporary lodging while demolishing and rebuilding one’s house. This means that throughout the process of doubt the method requires, during which he has rejected his earlier opinions but not yet established new ones, he proposes four provisional rules to live by. They are as follows:

1. To accept and obey the local political, religious, and intellectual customs;
2. To be as firm and resolute as possible in the opinions one takes up;
3. To accept the world as it is and then focus on changing oneself to fit the circumstances, not the other way around; and
4. To review the various occupations of men and choose the best life for oneself.

⁶ I.E., “[t]he things which we conceive very clearly and distinctly are all true....I saw clearly that it was a greater perfection to know than to doubt” (*Ibid.*: 92).

Descartes' philosophical project can properly be described as radical in nature. He rejects the wisdom of the people and the philosophers, and understands himself to be the first to finally move beyond the superstitions of the past and to have gone into new intellectual territory, indeed to unlock all of the mysteries of the universe. It is strange, then, that the provisional rules of conduct he proposes are quite moderate in contrast. The discussion is replete with the language of moderation and opposition to excess. His provisional ethic is in direct opposition to the letter and spirit of his project, which is geared towards a complete reformation of thought and practice.

The first rule to follow the customs of one's country and accept the received wisdom of peers, contradicts the earlier indictment of those very same peers. Book 1 tells of his disenchantment with the opinions of the learned and unlearned alike, concluding that they rely too heavily on factors other than reason and therefore cannot be trusted. What good can it then do to follow those irrational opinions, if even for a short time? Similarly, the second rule, to be as resolute as possible, is also directly at odds with his method, which is to follow where the argument leads and always be ready to change one's mind and reject one's dearly held beliefs. This rule, in contrast, commits him to "not diverging for any slight reason, even though it was possibly chance alone that first determined [him] in [his] choice" (*Ibid.*: 86). His third maxim, to try to change *oneself* rather than *the world*, is also contrary to his larger philosophical project. Once certainty is established, physical science will enable men to conquer nature to suit human ends. In book 6, he describes his reason for publishing his theories and writes that,

it is possible to attain knowledge which is very useful in life, and that, instead of that speculative philosophy which is taught in the schools, we may find a practical philosophy by means of which, knowing the force and the action of fire, water, air, the stars, heavens and all other bodies that environ us, as distinctly as we know the different crafts of the artisans, we can in the same way employ them in all those uses to which they are adapted, and thus render ourselves the masters and possessors of nature (*Ibid.*: 111).

This is not only more ambitious than his provisional rule, but is in direct opposition to it. Finally, the fourth rule is not so much a rule of morals or ethics as it is a pledge to relinquish the other three rules at the proper time. According to the method he proposes, the best form of life is the cultivation of reason; once his method has given him certain knowledge, he no longer needs provisional rules. The first three maxims were geared toward this very end and, being subservient to it, must be put aside at some point. He should not be content to accept the common wisdom unless he “had in view the employment of [his] own judgment in examining them at the proper time” (*Ibid.*: 88). Once undertaken, the philosophic life, will compel him to move beyond these moderate and provisional rules.

In sum, these maxims are antithetical to his project, and are, in fact, closer to the classical – and as we shall see, Pascalian – stance of moderation. For example, the teaching of book 5 of Plato’s *Republic*, and indeed the entire dialogue, is that the ideal of justice can never be completely realized in the tug and pull of real politics and the attempt to do so can only result in tyranny. It was this tradition of political and epistemological moderation which Descartes was trying to overcome; he hoped that his method could establish certainty and, in direct opposition to Plato’s teaching, allow man to overcome the limitations of nature. The subtext of this entire discussion is that once we possess Cartesian certainty neither moderation or provisionally following custom will be necessary or desirable.

As the title of the book indicates, method is paramount in the quest for certainty. It is only by properly applying one’s reason, or following the correct rules that truth can be found and disputes resolved. Moreover, the proper rules are those based on the universality of reason. The exposition of Descartes’ own use of the method will be based on his later book, *The Principles of Philosophy*. The *Principles* was intended as a textbook and follows a systematic, point-by-point

format that accentuates the structure of the method, especially the third precept listed above. As an added benefit, it is generally free of rhetorical posturing and can be taken at face value, thereby eliminating the need for esoteric interpretation.

The Principles of Philosophy

The Principles of Philosophy is not as self-referential as the *Discourse on Method* in that it does not explain the need for a proper method, or even defend the method used. In it, rather, Descartes simply follows his method and reveals his findings. He begins with three stages of doubt and deconstruction. First, he doubts the reality of objects of sense perception and the external world. Since our senses have deceived us before, it is possible that they are deceiving us at this moment, and therefore we cannot be certain that what we perceive to exist actually exists. Second, the very fact that we are awake and not dreaming is dubious, because even when we are dreaming it seems as if we are awake. Third, and much more radical than the first two, he proposes that the demonstrations of mathematics and logic are not certain, effectively denying the validity of reason. Just as before, from the premise that we are sometimes incorrect in matters that seem self-evident to us, he infers that all seemingly self-evident demonstrations and maxims may be false. Furthermore, the rational faculty can only be trusted if it is the creation of a benevolent God; since there is no certainty in that claim either, reason itself is in jeopardy. It is conceivable that we have been created by an evil demon that deceives us in causing us to falsely believe the law of non-contradiction or $2+2=4$. He writes: “the less perfect we suppose the author to be, the more reason we have to believe that we are not so perfect that we cannot be continually deceived” (*Ibid.*: 278). This uncertainty as to his origin was the primary impetus behind Descartes’ doubt of reason.

However, even though we may be deceived in thinking that we are awake, the possessors of hands and feet, and even capable of making mundane inferences, we are not permitted to doubt the reality of our existence. Our existence cannot be dismissed as easily as mathematical demonstrations. It is at least conceivable that the 'self-evidence' of rules of logic is an illusion,⁷ but that one can doubt without existing is impossible. This insight, that thinking one is deceived implies existence, or in Descartes' famous words, "I think, therefore I am" (*Ibid.*: 279) is the first indubitable truth to survive the challenge of scepticism. He exists as thinking substance, or *res cogitans*. He faces a serious problem, however: he has finally found something that is impervious to all doubt, but at the apparent cost of losing his ability to trust his thoughts.

He must revalidate his rational faculties from the ground up, starting from the knowledge that he exists as a being that thinks. Because his ability to reason was initially called into question because of the uncertainty of his origin he first establishes the existence of an omnipotent and benevolent god. Such a god would not allow men to be led astray when they properly use reason. He employs three arguments for such a god, the first being ontological and the last two cosmological. Descartes' version of the ontological argument begins with the only thing he is sure of, namely that he exists as mind and has thoughts. One of those thoughts is of a god whose essence implies existence. Since the essence of this god is his existence, in other words, he necessarily exists. Analogously, because the essence of triangles is to have three sides, there is no possible world in which triangles have four sides, and similarly there is no possible world in which God does not exist. Furthermore, part of this idea of God is that he is

⁷ Thomas Nagel's *The Last Word*, however, argues the opposite. The argument is that even the claim that the supposed objective rules of logic are not so tacitly assumes an objective and logical framework. Nagel writes that "This thought [i.e. the evil demon hypothesis] is unintelligiblethe judgment that there are two such mutually exclusive alternatives [i.e., that Descartes believes that $2+2=4$ because it is true, or because his brain is being scrambled by a demon] and that he has no basis for deciding between them is itself an exercise of reason, and by engaging in it Descartes has already displayed his unshakeable attachment to first-order logical thought, undisturbed by the possibility that his mind is being manipulated" (Nagel 1997: 59-61)

perfect and benevolent, and would therefore not deceive us; Descartes concludes from this that there must exist a perfect, all-powerful god who can serve to validate reason.

He then buttresses this argument with two others. Any ideas we have, he argues, must be caused by something more perfect than themselves; he writes that “on considering the immensity of the perfection [our idea of God] possesses, we are constrained to admit that we can consider it only as emanating from an all-perfect Being” (*Ibid.*: 283). The third and final argument given is the standard version of the cosmological argument, reminiscent of Aquinas’ formulation: “we are not the cause of ourselves, but that God is, and that consequently there is a god” (*Ibid.*: 284). He concludes the discussion of God’s existence by emphasizing the importance of the ontological argument because it gives content to our conception of God. The cosmological arguments he uses as afterthoughts only tell us that God is a creator but,

when we reflect on the idea of him which is implanted in us, we perceive that he is eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, the source of all goodness and truth, creator of all things, and that in fine he has in himself all that in which we can clearly recognize any infinite perfection or good that is not limited by some imperfection” (*Ibid.*: 285).

In short, the god that is deduced to exist from the idea we have of him is sufficient to revalidate the faculty of reason. He created us and is not a deceiver, therefore when we correctly use the faculties he gave we can expect to be led into truth and not error. It is worth noting that here, as in the *Discourse on Method*, the emphasis is on the proper use of reason; even though reason is a God-given faculty, we must still take care to use the correct method.

If we use reason properly it will never “disclose to us any object which is not true...inasmuch as it apprehends it clearly and distinctly” (*Ibid.*: 288). Here, as in the above discussion no clear definition is given of “clear and distinct.” In fact, here he seems to contradict himself by taking it to encompass everything that had previously been doubted, even including objects of sense perception and the fact that we are not dreaming. It is hard to see how “clear

and distinct” can be of any use now that it includes such an array of judgments. The statement “I clearly and distinctly perceive that X,” appears to be synonymous with, “It seems to me that X.” It is one of philosophy’s great ironies that Descartes’ notion of clear and distinct perceptions is the most unclear and imprecise aspect of his thought.⁸ In section 45 he attempts a definition:

I term that clear which is present and apparent to an attentive mind....But the distinct is that which is so precise and different from all other objects that it contains with itself nothing but what is clear (*Ibid.*: 293).

At any rate, thanks to his innate idea of a benevolent god, everything that was previously doubted can now be reaffirmed, most importantly the faculty of reason. To further clarify this progression, it may be useful to divide his thought process into two stages. In the first stage he had not yet rationally justified his opinions, and it was by justifying his beliefs by grounding them on pure reason that he reached the second stage. Initially, he believed in the god of Christianity, in the external world, and that he was awake. After temporarily doubting those things, he reaffirmed his belief in them and studied nature in much the same way as he did before, namely by trusting his senses and his reason when their perceptions and judgements were clear and distinct. It might appear then that there has been no change and his process of methodical doubt was all for naught. On the contrary, despite the seeming similarity of the two stages, his method of getting from the first to the second was innovative. His concern throughout was the *justification*, not the *content*, of knowledge.⁹ To put it another way, he turned philosophy’s attention from metaphysics to epistemology. By doubting everything and holding out for an indubitable foundation, he could provide an account for his knowledge

⁸ The only way to make sense of Descartes’ confused use of “clear and distinct judgements or perceptions” is to assume that clear and distinct judgements are those which follow the precepts of his method. For example, prior to his process of doubt he associates clear and distinct with indubitable, and only the cogito satisfies this criteria; however, after he has revalidated reason all careful sense perceptions or logical deductions are called clear and distinct. So far as this goes, all is well. The problem is that Descartes uses this designation, which can be applied only to results of the method, as part of the criteria of the method itself.

⁹ Cf: “The *method* of philosophy changed radically as a result of Descartes’ meditations. But much of its *content* remained the same” (Scruton 1992: 14, emphasis added).

without reference to church authority or scholastic philosophy, and in doing so introduced a new conception of reason.

Descartes' Rational Foundationalism

The conception of reason he introduced is what I have referred to as Autonomous Reason. *Indubitability*, which is required for knowledge, implies *necessity*, which in turn implies *universality*. Everything in Descartes' system must either be indubitable or directly deduced from something that is. The result is a complete system of knowledge that is universal, and not the product of parochialism or irrational passions. Even first principles, he claimed, must be the product of reason. Most notably, the very existence of God, which was taken for granted and made a first principle by scholasticism, could only be assented to if reasons were given. Because this is the locus of Pascal's critique, more will be said later about the problem of rational first principles.

Much has been made of Descartes' emphasis on method. His purpose was not simply to introduce a new method, but to prove that the right use of method itself is the key to conducting reason. Committing beforehand to follow a predetermined set of rules eliminates the possibility of what Aristotle called *phronesis*, which translates as "practical wisdom" or "prudence." *Phronesis* or practical wisdom requires a prudent understanding of the situation, which is to say contextual knowledge. The classical understanding of reason stresses the importance of the individual thinker's capacity for discernment and intuition in situations which cannot be decided by predetermined rules. According to Descartes, however, what appears to be intuition can just as easily be custom and prejudice in clever disguise. The only way to guard against this is to leave no room for non-universal factors to enter the equation, so to speak. The thinker is not

allowed to follow intuition, but must rigidly adhere to the rules of method. Reason, in this view, is indubitable and universal and must therefore be followed in the same way by everybody.

Cartesian Politics

In *On Modern Origins: Essays in Early Modern Philosophy*, Richard Kennington argues for a Machiavellian-Baconian interpretation of Descartes. In a famous statement comparing fortune to a woman Machiavelli writes that “it is necessary, if one wants to hold [fortune] down, to beat her and strike her down” (Machiavelli 1998: 101). By this he meant that men must learn to control fortune and thereby take social and political life into their own hands. Following Machiavelli, Francis Bacon elaborated on this theme and argued that an empirical natural science could unlock nature’s secrets and provide the knowledge and means to harness nature’s energy for the benefit of mankind. Hugh G. Dick describes Bacon’s project with these words:

[B]efore science and its resultant technologies could be freed for their development in the modern world, a revolution in human attitudes had to be achieved, and that revolution was not accomplished solely by the continuous impact of scientific discovery. Men’s minds had to be prepared, older habits of thought challenged, and the areas of faith enlarged. The idea and ideals of science had to be brought home to the human heart and mind. The idea and ideals found their architect and their spokesman in Francis Bacon....As herald of the scientific movement, Bacon uttered three challenges to his time. He called for a total reform of human knowledge, a true advancement of learning, and a revolution in the conditions of life (cited from Bacon 1955: ix-x).

Descartes’ role in the conquest of nature, Kennington argues, was the same as Bacon’s, that is, to remove the social stigma attached to the new science, and more specifically to change the theologico-political situation in such a way as to grant philosophers and scientists the freedom to operate undisturbed. “[Descartes’] political teaching,” he writes, “is mainly concerned with the paramount political necessity, the establishment of harmonious relations between philosophy or science and society” (Kennington 2004: 187). This is a prominent theme throughout the essay, as Kennington will later write that the publication of the *Discourse on*

Method was premised on the “desirability of a permanent reform of the relations of philosophy and the public” (Kennington 2004: 192). The *Discourse on Method*, according to this interpretation, is a rally cry, an appeal to the people to understand and accept the new natural science. That is the reason for the autobiographical form that allows Descartes to demystify the new method and demonstrate its practical use.

The weakness of this interpretation is that it fails to give substantive content to the “philosophy” of which he speaks and which Descartes supposedly tried to reconcile with society. Kennington pays lip service to Cartesian rationalism, even briefly mentioning unaided reason: “...the source within the master from which perfect mastery proceeds: the unaided use of human reason” (*Ibid.*: 191). However, in Kennington’s formulation, unaided reason is only relevant insofar as it contributes to the mastery of nature. He is correct in saying that Descartes hoped that his method would allow scientists to unlock the secrets of nature and shape it to fit human needs; he misses the fact, however, that unaided reason itself constitutes an important contribution to political philosophy, regardless of its relationship to mastery. The possibility that knowledge need not rely on faith or tradition to make authoritative statements has tremendous political import. After opening up the possibility of a system of knowledge derived from rational first principles, it is a small step to a politics similarly derived from rational first principles.

Indeed, Descartes himself suggests that this is a fair application of his method. While elaborating his architectural analogy he describes the advantages of constructing a building according to a single comprehensive plan. This allows every component to contribute to the larger design and fit a common theme. When successive builders simply add rooms and floors to an existing structure, the opposite case, leads to a haphazard mess, produced by chance more than rational design.

Cities and polities should be constructed according to this same principle, Descartes writes. A constitution consisting of universal rational laws is much better than one which is the sum total of laws compiled over time. Directly contrasting a proto-Burkean organically produced constitution with a politics of first principles, he writes that,

those people who were once half-savage, and have become civilized only by slow decrees, merely forming their own laws as the disagreeable necessities of their crimes and quarrels constrained them, could not succeed in establishing so good a system of government as those who, from the time they first came together as communities, carried into effect the constitution laid down by some prudent legislator (Descartes 1997: 78).

This is essentially an argument against tradition, wherein principles of justice are discovered by following his method and embracing autonomous reason. In the above quote, the politics of autonomous reason is opposed to what appears to be something like the British common law system. In the very same way that buildings are best constructed when built upon a solid foundation and according to a single rational plan, and knowledge is certain when based on a rational foundation and pursued according to the proper method, politics must be based on an overarching plan grounded in rational first principles. This is the true political teaching of Descartes.¹⁰

Overall, Richard Kennington's interpretation of Descartes' political teaching appears to be the product of a poor application of Strauss' method of esoteric reading. He read between the lines of Descartes' explicit words and uncovered what looked like a hidden teaching or political purpose. However, in so doing, he ignored the obvious element in Cartesian thought. The lasting import of his work, as his immediate philosophical readers understood him, was a new conception of reason as autonomous. Blaise Pascal was among the brightest of these readers,

¹⁰ The unspoken assumption is that just as buildings sometimes require demolition and reconstruction, polities may often require revolution to re-ground them in proper first principles. Reformation is a key theme in the *Discourse*, in knowledge as well as politics, since both were heavily influenced by custom, tradition and authority. Pascal addresses the revolutionary implications of Cartesian politics, so this issue will be addressed in more detail in later chapters.

and it is to his critique of autonomous reason that we now turn.

CHAPTER TWO: PASCAL

To recapitulate, Descartes set out to establish certainty in philosophy and natural science, and thereby permanently defeat the sceptical rejoinder. He attempted to avoid relying on custom, faith, and tradition by situating knowledge in a foundational structure based on rational first principles. In this structure, knowledge is the result of methodological deductions from an indubitable first principle; in other words knowledge consists of reason all the way down. The *cogito ergo sum* was the one proposition that was able to survive the challenge of scepticism, and was therefore rational in the purest sense of the term. It was impossible to doubt, which meant that it was *necessarily* and *universally* true. This first principle became the data upon which his inferences based on the certain methods of mathematics could go to work. Because his foundational principle was universally and necessarily true, and his inferences likewise followed the rules of reason, everything his method reveals, he argued, could be treated with absolute certainty. He thereby claimed to be able to settle all disputes in philosophy and provide man with the means to master nature and manipulate it for his own benefit. Furthermore, this epistemology of rational first principles leads quite naturally into a politics of rational first principles. Although this theme goes largely undeveloped in his thought, it is clearly implied by his epistemology and his occasional references to politics.

It is thus possible to understand the connection that Descartes made between certainty and utility: certain knowledge can be acted on with confidence and authority. This connection, in fact, is fundamental to the Cartesian system in that the quest for utility is what led Descartes to seek certainty. Thus, when Pascal accuses Descartes of being “useless and uncertain” (Pascal 1995: #887) he is delivering a deathblow to Descartes’ *end* and *means*, simultaneously.

The Nature of *The Pensées*

Due to the condition in which Pascal's *Pensées* reaches us, the task of interpreting it is a difficult one. It was intended to be an apology for Christianity, but he died before completing it. He left behind his notes, which consisted of small fragments written on small pieces of paper, the original order of which has been lost. The careful reader, then, cannot put much stock in the current order by following the argument as it appears to us. Such an interpretation provides no way of determining how Pascal intended the ideas expressed in individual fragments to relate to each other; it would undoubtedly be more reflective of chance than Pascal's intention. For example, what philosophical import can possibly be gleaned from fragment #20: "He lives across the water," without any larger context? Or #412: "Men are so inevitably mad that not to be mad would be to give a mad twist to madness." Modern scholarship has more or less recovered the order in which Pascal left the fragments, but since that order itself was rudimentary and experimental, the first hermeneutical task must be to determine the fragments' proper logical relationship.

Rather than simply reading the fragments in the order received, one must identify certain key fragments that include and explain separate thoughts and ideas. Such fragments, by revealing the intended relationship between different ideas, give context to all the other fragments that address those ideas individually. The reader will discover that the more he studies these fragments, the easier it will be to make sense of the many seemingly trivial fragments, such as the aforementioned #20 and #412. An interpretation of Pascal must therefore be principally concerned with such key fragments, using them to identify the logic of his argument. This study will be structured around expositions of seven such fragments.

Many thinkers have attempted to reconstruct Pascal's desired finished apology.¹¹ The present task is not to add to that discussion, per se, but rather to examine the epistemology underpinning Pascal's defence of his faith. Contrary to popular belief, Pascal was a strong proponent of reason who was well aware of the benefits of clear thinking. He did not, however, accept the notion that it should operate autonomously, independent of other social and psychological factors. Rather than merely capitulating to the then-burgeoning rationalist paradigm of knowledge, he chose to attack it head-on. Not only did autonomous reason not leave any room for faith and true religion, he contended, it had significant theoretical problems of its own accord. Reason cannot, in fact, go all the way down, as it contends; on the contrary, the very structure of logical thought requires a non-rational first principle. His apology hinged on this conception of reason, and therefore any discussion of his apologetics must emphasize this aspect of his thought. Since the present discussion is primarily concerned with his conception of reason, other areas of his apology, such as his thoughts on diversion and Old Testament hermeneutics, will be largely ignored where they have no bearing on his epistemology.

Pascal's Anthropology

There are two successive steps to Pascal's epistemology. The first is his anthropology, and the second is the epistemology that follows from it. His *normative* epistemology, that is, his teaching about how one ought to conduct one's reason, follows from, and depends on, a *descriptive* account of the way things are. This speaks to the larger point that values are not as divorced from facts as many modern thinkers have supposed. This theme will be picked up again in chapter four's discussion of Nietzsche's critique of autonomous reason.

¹¹ For example see Kreeft (1993) and Krailsheimer (1980).

*Fragment #199*¹²

Fragment #199 introduces these two steps and more importantly, demonstrates how his epistemology follows from his anthropology. It is written from the perspective of “unaided knowledge,” by which he means Cartesian reason and the new secular cosmology that had given man a profound sense of alienation. Anticipating the existentialist critique of modernity by centuries, Pascal compares man’s state in this universe to “a man transported in his sleep to some terrifying desert island, who wakes up quite lost and with no means of escape” (Pascal 1995: #198).¹³ He elaborates on this picture, which is reminiscent of Heideggerian thrown-ness and Kierkegaardian anxiety, with an examination of the precise nature of man’s relationship to the universe. There is, he writes, a disproportion between man and nature. Nature is defined by infinities: she is infinitely *large* and infinitely *minute*. Compared to the vastness of space, man is incomparably small, but compared to the infinite divisibility of nature’s smallest elements, man is incomparably large. This is reflective of man’s general state of dual wretchedness and greatness, a recurring theme in the *Pensées* and the key to Pascal’s anthropology.

It is worth quoting the relevant passage at length, as Pascal’s point is not merely to inform the reader but rather to invoke the aforementioned feelings of anxiety.

The whole visible world is only an imperceptible dot in nature’s ample bosom. No idea comes near it; it is no good inflating our conceptions beyond imaginable space, we only bring forth atoms compared to the reality of things.

[....]

But to offer him another prodigy equally astounding, let him look into the tiniest things he knows.... I want to show him a new abyss. I want to depict to him not only the visible universe, but all the conceivable immensity of nature enclosed in this minute atom. Let him see there an infinity of universes, each with its firmament, its planets, its earth, in the same proportions as in the visible world, and on that earth animals, and finally mites, in which he will find again the same results as in the first....

¹² Unless otherwise noted, all quotations in this section are from Fragment #199. The same goes for the sections dealing with fragments 44, 131, 149, 110, and 512.

¹³ Fragments #198-200 were composed as a complete essay on man, entitled *Homme*.

For, after all, what is man in nature? A nothing compared to the infinite, a whole compared to the nothing, a middle point between all and nothing.

Pascal's point is not that there are literal universes enclosed in every atom, but that nature's tiniest parts are so inconceivably small that our imagination cannot fully come to grips with them. As far as we are aware, even the smallest point in nature is infinitely divisible.¹⁴ This inability to know the extremes leaves us feeling disoriented, struggling to find a stable point upon which to ground our experience of the whole. That is to say, the double infinity of the material world is reflected in all things including principles of truth and knowledge. The sciences are infinitely vast in the range of their knowledge, while also resting on principles that are infinitely precise and beyond human intellectual grasp.

In the same way that our senses cannot perceive the minute particles contained in a mite, our intellectual powers are too blunt to locate first principles, and we merely "treat as ultimate those which seem so to our reason." We follow the chain of logical deductions as far back as we can until we run up against one for which no further proofs can be given. Pascal's argument is that first principles are infinitely removed from the finite capacity of unaided reason. This theme will return in the discussion of fragment #110, in which Pascal gives a theory of logic. Suffice to say that from the standpoint of unaided knowledge, man can have no knowledge of first principles, and is equally removed from the opposite infinity of universal knowledge. Fragment #199 thus culminates in Pascal's assertion that "[w]e burn with desire to find a firm footing, an ultimate, lasting base on which to build a tower rising up to infinity, but our whole foundation cracks and the earth opens up into the depths of the abyss."

In such a world, men cannot help but be stricken by an existential angst, arising from the aforementioned disproportion between themselves and the world. In some respects, man is

¹⁴ It is worth noting, as Peter Kreeft does, that Pascal was centuries ahead of his time in predicting that atoms could be split (Kreeft 1993: 128).

infinitely great but in other respects he is infinitely small and insignificant. These phenomena can only be accounted for, Pascal argues, in terms of the Christian doctrine of the fall. We feel lost in the cosmos because we were not made for it as it currently exists. As Peter Kreeft writes, “[t]he key to all anthropology, for Christianity, is the sentence: ‘You are no longer in the state in which I made you’” (*Ibid.*: 70).

Post-fall man is plagued by a sense of his wretchedness which manifests itself as moral and epistemological failure, as well as the aforementioned anxiety. Our wretchedness, however, is met with an equal sense of greatness, without which we would not recognize our wretchedness. We only know our failings as failings because we have ideas of truth and goodness that go unfulfilled. Pascal puts it this way in fragment #116: “All these examples of wretchedness prove his greatness. It is the wretchedness of a great lord, the wretchedness of a dispossessed king.” We lament our current condition, in other words, because we know that it is not our natural one.

Fragment #44

Fragment #44 is a thorough examination of the epistemological expression of human wretchedness, our “constant state of deception.” This fragment relies heavily on observation and interpretation of mundane events and behaviours. This approach is a common one for Pascal, and can be described without too much anachronism as a phenomenology of the everyday.¹⁵ He begins with the brash assertion that imagination is “the dominant faculty in man, master of error and falsehood.” He then gives a number of examples that prove the ability of imagination to

¹⁵ Kreeft writes: “No other philosopher has ever so pointedly *noticed* this common truth: that enormous things constantly depend on tiny things. Perhaps this is because most philosophers seldom get their heads out of the comfortable clouds of thought and ideology and look at life as it really is. Cleopatra’s nose, Cromwell’s kidney stones, flies, the heel of a shoe – what philosopher takes these as his data?” (*Ibid.*: 83).

overpower the reason of even the most reasonable men: the world's greatest philosopher will break into a sweat if placed on a sufficiently wide plank suspended over a precipice, and a wise judge can be influenced by the tone of voice and appearance of the speaker, although the words remain the same. Imagination "makes us believe, doubt, deny reason; it deadens the senses, it arouses them." Pascal summarizes the implications of imagination's powers of deception in fragment #45: "Man is nothing but a subject full of natural error that cannot be eradicated except through grace. Nothing shows him the truth, everything deceives him." In fact, its domination is so complete that it has established what Pascal calls a "second nature in man."

According to this notion of two natures in man, the first generally corresponds to pre-fall man, and the second to post-fall man. The moral that Pascal draws from this domination of reason by imagination – which is to say, our fallenness – is that we should live according to the second nature for prudential reasons. We ought to harness the power of imagination for good and reasonable ends. If we are more inclined to listen favourably to men whose appearance impresses us then judges and professors are right to wear elaborate gowns; "we only have to see a lawyer in cap and gown to form a favourable opinion of his competence." This attitude is also expressed in fragments #92-95, in which he points out that the supposed folly of the people's emphasis on such imaginary shows of power and authority is not as wrong as it seems.¹⁶ They are mistaken, of course, in confusing images with reality, or the second nature with the first, but there is nonetheless a certain wisdom in living by the second nature of imagination and custom. Pascal treats of this paradox by writing that, "it is still true that the people are vain, although their opinions are sound" (Pascal 1995: #93). Analogously, it is beneficial to use imagination in tandem with reason but we must not forget that doing so is in accord with our second, fallen,

¹⁶ "The people," in Pascal's vernacular, are contrasted with "the philosophers," and represent the unreflective outlook towards life. See Rogers (1998).

nature. Imagination still deceives reason and masters it at every turn.

Corresponding to the concept of first and second natures are the philosophical interpretations of them. Pascal's reading of the history of philosophy places thinkers into either of two camps, dogmatism and scepticism, according to the nature they emphasize. Fragment #127 makes the point that man may be understood according to his end, or first nature, in which case he is great, or according to "the masses," or our second nature, in which case he is vile and deserving of contempt. The first group are the dogmatists, who emphasize our ideals of truth and justice and therefore conclude that man is capable of such knowledge; sceptics, on the other hand, focus on the relativity of human justice and our fleeting grasp of truth and conclude that man is incapable of such knowledge. Pascal brings these philosophical schools into dialogue with each other and relates his findings to the fall in fragment #131.

Fragment #131

The strongest argument in favour of scepticism, Pascal writes, is that because we are uncertain whether we were created by a good god, an evil demon, or chance we have no proof that intuitive first principles, on which reason depends, are true. This is a clear allusion to Descartes' process of methodical doubt in the *Principles of Philosophy*, which Pascal builds on by discussing how dreams are indistinguishable from wakefulness. The dogmatists respond to this argument by claiming that "we cannot doubt natural principles if we speak sincerely and in all good faith," which is to say that scepticism is a form of intellectual dishonesty that denies what is obvious to everyone, namely that the world exists and we are awake when we think we are awake. Although this claim speaks from the perspective of common sense and is thus quite persuasive, it does not refute the ever-present sceptical rejoinder of which Descartes had grown

wary: “uncertainty as to our origin entails uncertainty as to our nature.” This drives home the sceptics’ point that intuitively being sure of something is of no use if our faculty of intuition is possibly untrustworthy. “The dogmatists,” Pascal continues, “have been trying to answer that ever since the world began.”

Because both schools begin from a sound premise, they are at an impasse. The dogmatists are correct to suppose that man is created for lofty goals, but the sceptics are also correct in observing that man is failing miserably in reaching those goals. Neither group can account for the whole truth of man, nor gain the upper hand. Together, scepticism and dogmatism represent the whole of all human philosophy, and yet neither has the whole truth about who or what man is.¹⁷ “Who will unravel such a tangle?” Pascal asks. “This is certainly beyond dogmatism and scepticism, beyond all human philosophy.” By “all human philosophy” Pascal means all attempts to understand the human condition using reason alone. The sceptics are right to say that we cannot know foundational principles with rational certainty, but they falsely conclude that we therefore cannot know foundational principles at all by assuming that reason is the only way we can learn. Conversely, the dogmatists correctly believe that one should not doubt first principles, but they then falsely conclude that our knowledge of said principles can only be the result of reason. Since each assumes that reason is the only valid mode of belief, each argument is refuted by the other.

The solution is to be found in affirming the insights of both and accounting for these two seemingly contradictory claims by supposing that man was originally great and is not so anymore. Recalling the earlier statement comparing man to a dispossessed king, Pascal writes that “if man had never been anything but corrupt, he would have no idea either of truth or bliss.”

¹⁷ This, we will see, is that to which Pascal’s first principle pertains. Faith, via divine revelation, provides the principle of fallenness, which is necessary for the life of reason.

The fact that we have ideas of truth and bliss which go largely unfulfilled teaches us that we have in fact been corrupted from a previous higher state. Conceding the inherent logical and moral difficulties involved in the idea of original sin and its transmission among generations, Pascal maintains that “nothing jolts us more rudely than this doctrine, and yet, but for this mystery, the most incomprehensible of all, we remain incomprehensible to ourselves.”

The epistemological implication of the above, as the next section will illustrate, is that reason must recognize that it must know when to submit. There are certain things that are beyond its ability to learn.¹⁸

Pascal's Epistemology

To summarize the key points of Pascal's teaching on human nature, it is defined by a duality that affects all spheres of life including the moral, epistemological, and emotional. We have feelings of anxiety and wretchedness that are offset by intimations of greatness that Pascal phenomenologically interprets as memories of a former condition from which we have fallen. Wretchedness, our second nature, itself implies a former greatness, which was our first nature: “man's greatness is so obvious that it can even be deduced from his wretchedness, for what is nature in animals we call wretchedness in man, thus recognizing that, if his nature is today like that of the animals, he must have fallen from some better state which was once his own” (Pascal 1995: #117).

¹⁸ Compare #170 and #188: “*Submission*. One must know when it is right to doubt, to affirm, to submit. Anyone who does otherwise does not understand the force of reason. Some men run counter to these principles, either affirming that everything can be proved [i.e. Descartes], because they know nothing about proof, or doubting everything, because they do not know when to submit, or always submitting, because they do not know when judgement is called for.”; “Reason's last step is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it. It is merely feeble if it does not go as far as to realize that.”

Fragment #149

Fragment #149 serves a transition from Pascal's anthropology to his epistemology. It is meant to be a summary and review of the argument up to that point in the work, and discusses the paradox of greatness and wretchedness, the corresponding two natures, and how the best explanation for these phenomena is the doctrine of the fall. It concludes by discussing various issues associated with belief in Christianity and its god. Of interest to the present discussion is the argument that God only provided enough evidence of his existence to convince those who desire him, but not so much that those who do not desire Him would be forced to assent. The underlying assumption is that true faith requires assent of the *will* as well as the *intellect*. The point is that overpowering evidence in favour of Christianity would violate man's freedom of will. Taking note of the role of desire and the will in belief formation, the last sentence of the fragment concludes: "there is enough light for those who desire only to see, and enough darkness for those of a contrary disposition." This sentiment is elaborated in fragment #539, where Pascal explains how the heart influences the intellect's reasoning process:

[t]he will is one of the chief organs of belief, not because it creates belief, but because things are true or false according to the aspect by which we judge them. When the will likes one aspect more than another, it deflects the mind from considering the qualities of the one it does not care to see.

This process is not unlike the one preferred in fragment #44, namely using imagination in tandem with reason towards rational ends. In order to come to a belief, the heart must have already given its assent; therefore, the heart must be influenced just as much as reason. This is the purpose of his infamous wager, that is, to lead the reader to belief by making him realize that doing so is in his best interest. Right dispositions and actions, therefore, precede right belief.

Fragment #110

His theory of reason is most comprehensively given in fragments #110 and #512. #110 engages Descartes directly by attacking his methodological doubt and its rejection of commonsense knowledge. Descartes initially rejects, among other things, our wakefulness and the reality of the external world as being dubitable and therefore not rational. This assumes that reason is the only means to knowledge, an assumption that Descartes was well aware of. Here, Pascal makes a distinction between *propositions*, which are in the domain of reason, and *principles*, which are in the domain of the heart. This distinction is necessary for two reasons; first, the very structure of logical thinking necessitates pre-rational¹⁹ first principles and second, there are many things that reason cannot prove but which are nevertheless obviously true. The first reason might be called the *logical* necessity and the second can be called the *experiential* necessity.

The act of reasoning consists of making logical deductions from known premises which are themselves inferred from prior premises, and so on. This chain of deductions must necessarily come to an end at some point. There must be a premise which is not deduced from another premise and as soon as this happens reason, by definition, has come to an end. These initial premises are what Pascal calls *principles*; *propositions*, by contrast, are those beliefs which are known on the basis of others. These pre-rational first principles are necessary in order to avoid either begging the question, or assuming an infinite regress of propositions. Begging the question, more commonly known as circular reasoning, must be avoided as a logical fallacy and an infinite regress of deductions is clearly impossible.

As for the experiential necessity of principles outside the domain of reason, there are

¹⁹ Here I have used the designation “pre-rational.” In other contexts, “supra-rational” or “non-rational” may be fitting descriptions.

many beliefs of which we can be sure even in the absence of arguments in their favour. The aforementioned cases of the reality of the external world and our waking state are two examples, to which Pascal adds space, time and motion. Recalling fragment #131, Pascal here sides with the dogmatists in their response to the sceptics that “we cannot doubt natural principles if we speak sincerely and in all good faith” (*Ibid*: #131). In other words, there are no proper logical arguments for them but denying them would be absurd.

These non-rational principles, being directly known through the heart rather than reason, become the aforementioned first principles, and the data upon which reason works and makes its deductions. There is a division of intellectual labour, in which the heart provides principles and reason discovers new propositions based on these principles. Moreover, neither faculty is equipped to judge the work of the other; “[i]t is just as pointless and absurd for reason to demand proof of first principles from the heart before agreeing to accept them as it would be absurd for the heart to demand an intuition of all the propositions demonstrated by reason before agreeing to accept them.”

Descartes’ error was that he only had propositions – that is, he only allowed for statements that could be arrived at through reasoning. Even his supposed first principle, the thinking subject, was only believed as the result of a strict logical process. After discarding all knowledge and arriving at the indubitable self, he revalidated reason by way of a truthful God who gave us our faculty of reasoning which can “never disclose to us any object which is not true...inasmuch as it apprehends it clearly and distinctively” (Descartes 1997: 288). That is to say, he affirmed the existence of God as a result of our faculty of reason, which faculty is only to be trusted because God is not a deceiver. In his effort to find a secure foundation he thus fell into the question-begging trap described above. This is all because, fragment #110 reminds us,

Descartes thought he could do away with intuitive first principles which alone can provide the ground for a coherent system of knowledge.

In sum, the implication of the argument of this fragment is to limit the scope of reason, recognizing that there are truths that it a) cannot know, and b) depends on for its own activity. Pascal wants to “humble reason, which would like to be the judge of everything, but not to confute our certainty.” He continues: “[a]s if reason were the only way we could learn!”

Fragment #512

Fragment #512 deals with the same theme as #110, namely the distinction between principles and propositions, and emphasizes the intellectual faculties appropriate to both, and calls them mathematical and intuitive mind. It is arranged as a fairly systematic catalogue of the characteristics of both in a way that compares and contrasts their uses and weaknesses. The intuitive mind is such that the principles proper to it are, as Pascal puts it, “in ordinary usage” and there for all to see. They are immediately accessible to the attentive thinker, and discovering them is simply a matter of “good sight, but it must be good.” Intuitive mind perceives principles instinctively, and not as a result of progressive reasoning. The propositions of mathematical mind, in contrast, are obvious but removed from ordinary usage, by which Pascal means that they are not immediately accessible, but must be reached through a series of logical steps. Such deductions do not require especially good sight or intuitiveness, but they nevertheless provide us with new knowledge – this realm of new knowledge is what Pascal means by “remote from ordinary usage.” This particular fact must be emphasized in order to defeat the notion that Pascal has no use for reason. On the contrary, he here gives reason a vital role in the acquisition of knowledge.

However, because intuitive mind does not reach its principles by way of deductive reasoning, it also cannot demonstrate its principles deductively to others who have not intuited them for themselves. This reinforces the division of intellectual labour proposed in #110. Each type of mind has a method proper to it that conforms to the type of beliefs it deals with, and it would be a form of tyranny to demand that they apply themselves to that for which they are not suited.²⁰

The epistemology that emerges from fragments #110 and #512 is firmly in the classical tradition expressed by Augustine as “faith seeking understanding” and typified by Plato’s allegories of the cave and Diotima’s ladder. That is to say, the life of reason depends on pre-rational judgements, intuitions, and attitudes, without which reason can do nothing.

“Mathematicians who are merely mathematicians,” Pascal writes, “reason soundly as long as everything is explained to them by definitions and principles” (*Ibid.*: #512), which is to say that they reason soundly as long as the initial premises are provided by intuitive mind.

These pre-rational judgments are described in various manners in the *Pensées*, but they fall into two categories: desires and preferences, which influence the direction of reason, and the intuitive discernment of first principles. These are ultimately related, as one must desire to see first principles or wilfully ignore them. The will, for example, is one of the faculties that affect the heart’s intellectual journey, while being influenced in return. The most important pre-rational faculty for Pascal, faith, typifies this duality perfectly. True faith, for Pascal, does not consist merely in knowing God, but in loving him also: “[w]hat a long way it is between knowing God and loving him!” (Pascal, 1995: #377). This love, which is really the desire to

²⁰ I.E., “Tyranny is wanting to have by one means what can only be had by another. We pay different dues to different kinds of merit” (*Ibid.*: #58).

know God, is a common thread from his opening remarks²¹ to the crux of his argument.²² The life of reason, accordingly, depends on truths that can only be had by intuition and can be influenced by the thinker's conscious and subconscious desires and inclinations. Recalling fragment #131, we see that revelation provides the ultimate first principle of fallenness. The understanding of human nature as fallen not only best explains our experience, but is able to resolve the contradiction between dogmatism and scepticism and thereby allow reason to trust all of its intuitive first principles.

There appears to be, however, a tension, if not an outright contradiction, in this theory of reason. According to fragments #110 and #512, reason inherently requires the non-rational, but the doctrine of the fall seems to imply that there once was a time when reason was sufficient for knowledge. In fragment #60 he writes that "once this fine reason of ours was corrupted, it corrupted everything," and the very state of wretchedness that currently defines us, as we have seen, implies a former state of greatness during which, presumably, our reason was not as weak as it is now. Put simply, it appears that Pascal is saying two contradictory things about reason: 1) that it inherently requires assistance from non-rational factors, and 2) that it once was in possession of universal truth but now is led astray by human weakness and vanity. This potential inconsistency can be resolved once we understand that the weakness particular to fallen reason is not that first principles are outside its domain, but rather its inability to even demonstrate and deduce propositions accurately. Human vanity and pride affect reason not by somehow changing the necessary structure of rational thought, but by allowing for the possibility of miscalculations and faulty deductions of mathematical mind.

²¹ "Next make [Christianity] attractive, make good men wish it were true, and then show that it is" (*Ibid.*: #12).

²² "There is enough light for those who desire only to see, and enough darkness for those of a contrary disposition" (*Ibid.*: #149).

One could say that the pre-rational intuitive mind is affected by the fall, however. The fall did not change the structure of reason, but the resulting pride too often makes reason believe it is autonomous and need not rely on faith and intuition. In any case, there is no contradiction between reason's inherent reliance on the heart and the fact that reason is weaker than it once was.

In the interest of corroborating the present interpretation of the *Pensées*, it is worth pointing out that an earlier essay of Pascal entitled "The Art of Persuasion" outlines, in an earlier form, a similar picture of reason and belief. A distinction is made between axioms and demonstrations in which axioms are roughly analogous to principles and demonstrations to propositions. Axioms, in "The Art of Persuasion," must be "perfectly self-evident," which is to say, not inferred on the basis of anything else (Pascal 1948: 206). There is also the complementary distinction between the heart and the mind, as the faculties proper to each type of truth; "[e]ach of these faculties," he writes, referring to mind and heart, "has its principles and the first motivating force of its actions" (Ibid.: 203). In addition, the problem of the will discouraging and encouraging belief in certain propositions, in the manner of the aforementioned fragment #539, is also discussed:

there are two gateways through which opinions are received by the soul; these are the two principle faculties, namely the understanding and the will. The more natural of these is the understanding, for we should agree with only those verities which have been demonstrated; but the more common of these, though it be contrary to nature, is the will, for all men are almost always led to believe not by proof but by sentiment (Ibid.: 202).

This is not to say that everything in this essay is identical to his mature epistemology in the *Pensées*, or that the various ideas fit together in the same way, but only that my interpretation of the *Pensées* is in line with some early themes in his thought.

Pascal's Politics

Just as Descartes' epistemology of autonomous reason flowed naturally into a politics of rational first principles, one would expect Pascal's critique of autonomous reason to extend toward the analogous politics of unaided reason. Not surprisingly then, Pascal left a number of fragments devoted to the theme of justice and fallen human nature, the most comprehensive of which is #60. It follows the familiar pattern of examining our first and second natures and proposes that we provisionally conduct our lives according to the second. The state of natural justice, he writes, is so pitiful and confused that there are no universally accepted tenets of justice, despite claims to the contrary.²³ He observes that there is no action so horrendous to never be called virtuous. In truth, there is no such thing as true justice;²⁴ we are left instead with the effects of local custom and the assertion of power.

Moreover, according to the wisdom of living according to the second nature, he argues against the attempt to implement true justice, that is, Descartes' politics of rational first principles. Men are ruled by custom and imagination so any form of political authority that is not based on these will be unable to command respect and obedience. Instituting justice based on rational first principles, in other words, will rob the law of its ability to maintain order. He writes, "[c]ustom is the whole of equity for the sole reason that it is accepted. That is the mystic basis of its authority. Anyone who tries to bring it back to its first principles destroys it" (Pascal 1995: #60).

Whereas Descartes celebrates the revolutionary implications of his notion of reason, Pascal is wary of the potential for lawlessness that might arise when people lose reverence for

²³ Note the subtle critique of Thomistic Natural Law theory. Pascal's Jansenist-Augustinianism put him at odds with the Ecclesiastical establishment of the day, which was Thomistic at heart. Pascal's other religious book, *The Provincial Letters*, arose out of his quarrel with the Jesuits.

²⁴ True justice does of course exist, just not in our second nature. "There no doubt exist natural laws, but once this fine reason of ours was corrupted, it corrupted everything" (*Ibid.*: #60).

established law. In fact, Pascal goes as far as to encourage lying to the people to maintain social order.²⁵ There is thus a strong conservative tendency in Pascal, in that he understands the present weaknesses of human nature and prefers a politics that also recognizes them. Those weaknesses make it impossible to 1) determine what true justice is, and 2) enforce it if we did know what it was. The only effect will be to plunge society into revolution and civil war, which is “the greatest of all evils.”²⁶ In sum, Pascal’s critique of Cartesian politics is analogous, and flows out of, his critique of Cartesian reason, for the reason that they are intimately related. For prudential reasons, we are better off accepting the moral and epistemological limitations of our second nature, using imagination and the heart to find truth and established custom and tradition to maintain social order.²⁷

²⁵ He writes, likely referring to Plato, that “[t]his is why the wisest of legislators used to say that men must often be deceived for their own good” (*Ibid.*: #60).

²⁶ #94.

²⁷ Of course, Pascal urges the reader to accept God’s grace, which alone is able to transform us and restore our first nature, but in the meantime we must not seek to bring about an epistemological or political utopia. See #678: “Man is neither angel nor beast, and it is unfortunately the case that anyone trying to act the angel acts the beast.”

CHAPTER THREE: HOBBS

The first impression Thomas Hobbes gives to his readers is that he has very little in common with René Descartes. Descartes is understood as the founder of the rationalist tradition in modern epistemology, and Hobbes is taken to be part of the rival empiricist school. The rationalists argue that knowledge begins from *a priori* rational propositions against the empiricists' claim that the human mind is a blank slate – *tabula rasa*, in Locke's famous formulation – until it receives sensory data. In fact, Hobbes' writings are littered with refutations of Descartes' distrust of the senses,²⁸ and he was one of a few public intellectuals who published a set of objections to Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

While it is true that the two thinkers disagreed on the specifics of reason, there is one thing they did agree on, that the operation of reason – whether the rationalist or empiricist variety – does not depend on any non-rational faculties. The argument of this chapter is that this principle, which I have referred to as autonomous reason, is present in Hobbes. Therefore, as with Descartes, the specifically modern element in Hobbes' philosophy is not the content of his thought, but rather the manner in which he grounds and justifies his philosophic statements. He joined Descartes, in other words, in attempting to validate the deductions of reason on the basis of reason itself.

Another similarity with Descartes was his critique of contemporary philosophy and his ensuing solution. We have seen that Descartes blamed the inability of scholastic philosophy to

²⁸ For example: "And hence it cometh to passe, that it is a hard matter, and by many thought to be impossible to distinguish exactly between Sense and Dreaming. For my part, when I consider, that in Dreames, I do not often, nor constantly think of the same Persons, Places, Objects, and Actions that I do waking; nor remember so long a trayne of coherent thoughts, Dreaming, as at other times; And because waking I often observe the absurdity of Dreames, but never dream of the absurdities of my waking Thoughts; I am well satisfied, that being awake, I know I dreame not; though when I dreame, I think my selfe awake" (Hobbes 1987: 90).

reach agreement on its ignorance of rational first principles. It relied too heavily, in other words, on authority and tradition rather than reason. Similarly for Hobbes, the inability of all previous political writers to reach agreement and ensure peace and order was due to their grounding of political law on non-rational, and therefore particularistic, factors. In the Epistle Dedicatory to his *Elements of Law*, he distinguishes between two types of learning, mathematical and dogmatic, which are products of reason and passion, respectively. Mathematical learning, which is rational, deals only with comparing figures and motion and therefore does not involve men's particular interests. This disinterestedness allows it to be free from controversy and simply examine the world as it really is.²⁹ On the other hand, with dogmatic learning "there is nothing not disputable, because it compareth men, and meddleth with their right and profit" (Hobbes 1999: 19). The passions, in other words, are inherently private and particularistic forces which make men seek the benefit of themselves and the harm of others. All previous political writers, Hobbes argued, had used dogmatic thinking and were therefore unable to reach consensus. Hobbes' modern, and Cartesian, solution was to apply the rational method of mathematics to the study of political right. In his words,

To reduce this doctrine to the rules of infallibility of reason, there is no way, but first, to put such principles down for a foundation, as passion not mistrusting may not seek to displace: And afterward to build thereon the truth of cases in the law of nature (which hitherto have been built in the air) by degrees, till the whole be inexpugnable (Ibid.).

The similarities with Descartes are obvious, and very much outweigh their empiricist-rationalist disagreement.

Hobbes' Political Doctrine

Before getting into the specifics of Hobbes' theory of reason, it will be necessary to

²⁹ As we will see, Hobbesian reason does not, strictly speaking, examine the world itself, but only its representation in the human world of names and definitions. We will return to this later.

briefly discuss the conclusions of his philosophy, that is, his political teaching. The argument of this thesis does not depend on a novel interpretation of Hobbesian politics – or any particular interpretation, for that matter – so a simple restatement of the generally accepted interpretation is all that is necessary.³⁰

His explicit thoughts on civil society begin with the state of nature, which is the natural pre-political condition of mankind. In this natural state all men are effectively equal in both mental and physical powers, making everyone vulnerable to attack by everyone else. No one is clever enough to permanently outwit his peers or strong enough to subdue them by force, so there henceforth arise two causes of perpetual strife, *competition* and *war*. All men desire roughly the same things, and since there is a limited supply of goods men will constantly be clamoring and fighting to acquire what they individually perceive to be necessary for survival. Because there is no common power to ensure a just distribution of goods every man has the right to whatever he thinks necessary for his own survival. This state of *competition* becomes a state of *war* when the only way to secure the goods one has attained is to pre-emptively attack others. A third cause of strife is that men are naturally vain, and desire to be recognized and praised by others. Hobbes writes that,

upon all signes of contempt, or undervaluing [every man] naturally endeavours, so far as he dares (which amongst them that have no common power, to keep them quiet, is far enough to make them destroy each other), to extort a greater value from his contemners, by domage; and from others, by the example (Hobbes 1987: 185).

From these three causes of quarrel, which proceed from men's equality, Hobbes concludes that "during the time men live without a common power...they are in that condition which is called warre" (*Ibid.*: 185). This unpalatable conclusion is not only drawn from his study

³⁰ Of course, the question as to whether there is a single "generally accepted" view is an interesting one, and should probably be answered in the negative. However, what follows is broad enough so as to make it acceptable to most scholars.

of the passions, but is also evidenced by the fact that, even in civil society, we lock our doors and take the necessary precautions to protect ourselves and our property. By doing these things we implicitly affirm Hobbes' teaching on human nature, or so he argues.

The state of nature is defined by a lack of security, of both life and property, and men are unlikely to labour if they do not think they will benefit from it. There will therefore be very little industry, agriculture, commerce, art, science, or technology. The very words justice and injustice will have no meaning, because no man owes any other man anything whatsoever; one's only responsibility is to preserve life as long as possible. In his famous words, such a life is "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short" (*Ibid.*: 186). As harsh as this condition is, however, both passion and reason have the power to bring men out of it; the *fear* of death and *desire* for comfortable self-preservation incline men to lay down their aforementioned right to whatever they deem necessary, and reason provides universal laws of conduct, or "articles of peace" (*Ibid.*: 188).

There is then the *right* of nature, i.e. the aforementioned right to whatever a man deems necessary for survival, and the *laws* of nature, namely the aforementioned "articles of peace." The right of nature is an all-encompassing right of sovereignty over everything, even other men's bodies, and the laws of nature are universal rules which, if followed by everybody, would be conducive to peace and order. The first law of nature is to seek peace by all means necessary insofar as there is a reasonable expectation of achieving it and, if no such expectation exists, to freely exercise the right of sovereignty. The second law is to lay down the right of nature as long as others are willing, and to be content with only as much liberty for oneself as one is willing to grant others. This laying down of the "right to all things" (Hobbes 1987: 190) takes the form of

a contract in which every individual's sovereignty is transferred to a single person.³¹ This, and only this, Hobbes argues, allows men to transcend the natural state of war and misery, since the principle cause of the conflict therein is that every man has the right to do what he thinks is required for survival. Once that right is replaced by limited freedom under the sovereignty of a monarch, the primary cause of quarrel is eliminated.

Now, the state of nature is not completely lawless. In it, men are capable of communicating via language, which assumes agreed upon rules of meaning. What *is* lacking, as Michael Oakeshott notes, are “exactly specified rules, a procedure of adjudication, and the assurance that rules cannot be breached with impunity” (Oakeshott 1975: 49). These conditions are products of civil society, which can only be originated and sustained by following this second law.

After the first two laws of nature, there are sixteen more that are largely subservient to the first two. They include the obligation to keep covenants,³² pardon the repentant, and injunctions against arrogance and pride. Taken together, these laws make up a legal framework, according to which the monarch must govern. They are, in other words, Hobbes' universal principles of justice. Although there can be no justice without compact, any compact and resulting civil society must obey the first law of nature, which obliges men to seek peace. These laws are deductions from this law, and are thus all aimed at peace. This language raises the question of what Hobbes means by deduction, and thereby invites us to examine his conception of reason, upon which these deductions are based.

³¹ Because the monarch possesses his right of sovereignty by convention and not nature, which is to say that he acts as a guarantor of others' rights, he must be understood as the carrying out, by proxy, of their pursuit of self-preservation. Hence his use of the latin *persona*, in the sense of actor: “A person, is he whose words or actions are considered, either as his own, or as representing the words or actions of another man” (Hobbes 1987: 217).

³² Keeping covenants, it should be noted, is the origin of justice itself. According to Hobbes' contractual conception of justice, where there is no agreement with another, there can be no personal injury or, therefore, injustice.

Hobbes' Conception of Philosophy

As with the discussions of Descartes and Pascal, the focus of this chapter is not the *content* of Hobbes' philosophy, but rather its *justification* and, more specifically, his method of making justifiable philosophic statements. Two thinkers in particular, Michael Oakeshott and Leo Strauss, have contributed much to the current understanding of Hobbes, each offering an illuminating interpretation of this his objective.

Oakeshott argues that Hobbes' system is unified by a "single passionate thought" (Oakeshott 1975: 17), rather than by conforming to an architectural analogue consisting of "a foundation and a superstructure planned as a single whole, with civil philosophy as the top storey" (*Ibid.*: 16). That is, he argues, Hobbes does not posit a foundational principle from which the rest of his philosophy follows; rather, the Hobbesian system is unified by being a "continuous application" of a particular conception of philosophy as *reasoning*. Philosophy is reasoning, and to reason is to "determine the conditional causes of given effects, or to determine the conditional effects of given causes" (*Ibid.*: 17-18). Oakeshott elaborates on this conception of philosophy by discussing three Hobbesian contrasts: philosophy and theology, philosophy and science, and philosophy and experience. Theology deals with the eternal and immutable, and therefore uncaused, which places it outside the domain of reason. Reason deals with things that have causes so there can be, by definition, no rational knowledge of God.³³ The second contrast, between philosophy and science, is an early form of what we now know of as the distinction between empirical science and philosophy, as opposed to the earlier taxonomy in which philosophy and science were synonymous. Hobbes was here distinguishing between knowledge

³³ Although Oakeshott is not incorrect in pointing out this contrast, he does not appear to recognize its implication. This is a typical rhetorical ploy used by many early modern thinkers; they pay lip service to theology while subtly undermining its authority. Hobbes does not explicitly say that theology is false or useless, but he banishes it from the sphere of reason, and then later asserts that reason is the only source of true knowledge.

of the phenomenal world and a theory of knowledge itself. Lastly, reason is different from mere experience in that reason studies experience and uses it as data, but cannot be reduced to it; mere experience, in other words, is not the same as philosophical knowledge of the causes and effects of certain experiences. Sensations and experiences are private knowledge of fact whereas reason makes public, universal deductions from said private facts.

Animals, at least the more complex ones, have experiences and sensations, but are not by that fact alone capable of reason. What is required, Oakeshott insists, is the consciousness of having sensations and the capacity for introspection. Language fulfills this requirement by allowing us to mentally process our different sensations and study their causes and effects. Furthermore, by attaching names to things we make it possible to treat them as universals. Nominalism is the foundation of Hobbesian epistemology, and allows us to make sense of our sensations by way of arbitrary definitions.

This interpretation accounts for many of the phenomena, yet misses some important facts about Hobbes. Oakeshott's fundamental statement about Hobbes' system, namely that it does not conform to an "architectural analogue," is at odds with Hobbes' words as well as his own. Hobbes' nominalism was a product of his metaphysical rejection of Aristotle's teleological cosmology and its realism with respect to universals. Scientific knowledge of cause and effect is impossible without universal categories, so insofar as he wanted such knowledge he had no choice but to become a nominalist. His system, therefore, is not merely unified by a common method; his metaphysical position required him to take the epistemological positions he did, which in turn grounded his political teaching. There is, in other words, a causal relationship between the different parts of his system that makes it useful to describe it as conforming to an architectural analogue. Oakeshott's statement that the *Leviathan* "is not the last chapter in a

philosophy of materialism, but the reflection of civil association in the mirror of a rationalistic philosophy” (Oakeshott 1975: 27-28), while technically true, ignores the fact that his materialism – i.e. his rejection of Aristotelian formal cause and subsequent nominalism – undergirds and makes his rationalist philosophy possible.

Leo Strauss’ discussion of Hobbes in *Natural Right and History* recognizes the effects of Hobbes’ metaphysical position, namely that reality is such that no scientific knowledge of it can be had. The epistemological difficulty with this metaphysical position is the main problem to be solved, and is the reason for the introduction of nominalism. Objective knowledge of reality is not possible, but knowledge of what men create *is* possible. The external world is nothing but a “flux of mechanical causation” (Strauss 1965: 172) but nominalism creates an island of knowable constructs that can be incorporated into scientific knowledge of cause and effect.

Although Strauss here acknowledges the causal link between Hobbes’ metaphysical position and his epistemology, he fails to understand the true benefit of nominalism. He believes that the universe is unintelligible because it is not of our own making, assuming that “we understand only what we make” (*Ibid.*: 174) But why should we grant him this assumption? And even if we do grant it, the connection between self-created and knowable is unclear. On the contrary, Hobbes’ universe is not unintelligible because it is other, it is unintelligible because there are no universals. Such a universe of unrelated singulars does not allow for generalizable deductions of cause and effect. Therefore, the goal need not be to create the object of knowledge, but rather to give it universal categories. In the end, Strauss is correct to interpret nominalism as the solution to the unintelligibility of the universe, but not for the reason he supposes.

It is clear that nominalism is a vital component of Hobbes’ system, since both Oakeshott

and Strauss stress its importance. Both, however, overlook important factors; Oakeshott fails to understand the causal relationship between Hobbes' metaphysical positions and his epistemology, while Strauss understands that relationship but fails to address the root cause of unintelligibility. A correct understanding of the way in which Hobbes' validated his ability to make philosophical statements must account for the foundational structure of his system while simultaneously focussing on the real epistemological problem.

Oakeshott is surely correct in pointing out that Hobbes understood philosophy to be the act of determining the possible causes and effects of phenomena; in *De Corpore* Hobbes clearly defines philosophy as "such knowledge of effects or appearances, as we acquire by true ratiocination from the knowledge we have first of their causes or generation: And again, of such causes or generations as may be from knowing first their effects" (Hobbes 1999: 186). To philosophize, then, is to establish laws of cause and effect, and to determine which causes will produce the desired effects. This is consistent with his understanding of the laws of nature which, we recall, are called "dictates of reason...Theoremes concerning what conduceth to the conservation and defence of themselves [i.e., the men who submit to them]" (Hobbes 1987: 216-217). They are laws of cause and effect which, if they are to be laws and not mere coincidences, must necessarily pertain to universals. For example, the observation, "this particular man fears violent death," is not a law until it is generalized to say, "all men fear violent death." Hobbes' understanding of human nature, from which his laws of nature are deduced, contains many such law-like generalizations and universal categories.

The scholastic universe, based primarily on the teachings of Aristotle, took universals for granted. The doctrine of hylomorphism stated that objects were constituted by form as well as matter, which is to say that each individual tree, for example, possessed the universal form of

“tree-ness” that made it what it was. Hobbes refers to form as an “intelligible being-seen”³⁴ that emanates from the object, containing the correct understanding of itself. In other words, in order to have true knowledge of a tree, one must recognize the tree-ness that is inherent to it and makes it what it is.

According to Hobbes’ new model, knowledge begins with sensation. External objects apply pressure to our sense organs, causing them to apply “counter-pressure” (Hobbes, 1987: 85) which is subjectively experienced as sensation. Because our sense organs’ counter-pressure is directed outwards towards the external object, it seems like the cause of the sensation is likewise external to us, although in actuality it resides within us. There is thus a difference between object and sensation, or between object and representation. “[T]he thing we see,” he writes, “is in one place; the apparence, in another” (*Ibid.*: 86). By implication, there is no necessary connection between the nature of the object and how it appears to the senses; there is no “intelligible being-seen,” no inherently correct perception of the object. In *The Elements of Law*, Hobbes writes that “the introduction of species visible and intelligible...passing to and fro from the object, is worse than any paradox, as being a plain impossibility” (Hobbes 1999: 23). The external object, and indeed the entire universe, no longer contains the proper understanding of itself which was implied in Aristotle’s teleological cosmos. In the very first pages of his *Leviathan*, Hobbes has thus overturned the scholastic world picture, and with it, realism with respect to universals and the ability to make scientific generalizations. Universals, insofar as they exist, are simply arbitrary designations given by men to singular objects that share similar characteristics. We ascribe universal names to groups of particular things based on characteristics they share, although there is a subjective element in that men choose which

³⁴ “[t]hey say the thing Understood sendeth forth *intelligible species*, that is, an *intelligible being seen*; which coming into the understanding, makes us Understand” (Hobbes 1987: 87).

similarities and differences are emphasized or ignored. Later on, in chapter 4, he states explicitly what he had been implying since the opening paragraphs: "...there being nothing in the world universal but names; for the things named, are every one of them Individuall and Singular" (*Ibid.*: 102).

In thus rejecting *formal* cause and restricting philosophy to the study of *efficient* causes, Hobbes has reduced the knowable universe to a world of matter in motion. Knowledge begins with motions in the brain – i.e., sensations – which are themselves caused by motion from without. Read in light of the previously-mentioned quote from *De Corpore*,³⁵ Hobbes' system traces the chain of material causes and effects from either the *first cause* (motion) or the *passions*, which are the de facto cause of human actions,³⁶ to their end result. This is a civil philosophy based on the peaceful preservation of life, which peace then becomes his political first principle, i.e., that on the basis of which all natural laws are determined. In the fifteenth chapter of *Leviathan*, he argues that the laws of nature are eternal and immutable because "it can never be that Warre shall preserve life, and Peace destroy it" (*Ibid.*, 215). That is to say, his laws are only so because of their contribution to the preservation of life and peace, and preservation is, after all, the first law of nature.

We have seen how the study of the effects of motion undermines the scholastic teleological cosmology, and implies that universals exist in name only. That is to say, nominalism is a consequence – i.e. effect – of the way in which we gain knowledge of the external world. Furthermore, nominalism is also a cause, bringing about the necessary conditions for reasoning itself. Without his doctrine of nominalism, Hobbes would have no way

³⁵ I.e. "Philosophy is such knowledge of effects or appearances, as we acquire by true ratiocination from the knowledge we have first of their causes or generation: And again, of such causes or generations as may be from knowing first their effects."

³⁶ Motion is always and everywhere the first cause, but since the passions are obvious to everyone who examines himself they may be treated as the effectual first cause of moral and political matters.

of deducing the universal laws of nature that are necessary for his political system.

The effect of nominalism is that Hobbesian politics are as universal and inimical of particularities as Cartesian politics; everything that can be said about Descartes' politics of rational first principles can also be said about the teaching of the *Leviathan*. The rules of justice can only be found by starting from universal first principles and making the necessary inferences and deductions. Hobbes' political first principle, for all intents and purposes, is the preservation of peace. Human nature is such that all men wish to avoid violent death and ensure comfortable self-preservation, so he deduces eighteen laws of nature which will ensure peace among men by creating and maintaining a stable civil society. As long as human nature is as described in Part One of *Leviathan*, these same laws can be relied upon to prevent men from killing each other in the state of nature. All other legislators, Hobbes argues, have been unable to secure peace and social order because they did not follow the rational method of studying universal causes and effects. Because the principles of justice are dictates of reason that pertain to universals, they can be implemented in any culture, time, or place to bring about peace.

This eschewing of particularistic exigencies is both a consequence of autonomous reason and a recurring theme in modern political thought. Plato, in comparison, did not think that true justice could be actualized *anywhere*, let alone *everywhere*, as opposed to Hobbes, Locke, Kant, and many others who envisioned a peaceful world governed by universal rules of justice originating in human reason.

Hobbes' Autonomous Reason and Pascal's Critique

Hobbes grounds his ability to reason on reason itself, or more accurately, on the basis of a result of his reason. The practice of making universal deductions of cause and effect is made

possible by nominalism, which is itself an effect of a previous cause. Analogously, René Descartes grounded his ability to make trustworthy statements on the basis of the indubitability of his thinking self. Each of these two thinkers attempted to set reason on a foundation consisting of nothing but reason itself. They were each faced with the prospect of radical skepticism and attempted to overcome it without reference to faith, tradition, or authority. Descartes invoked the existence of a truthful god to re-justify reason whereas Hobbes relied on nominalism which allowed him to make universal scientific deductions. Moreover, Descartes' god and Hobbes' nominalism were arrived at rationally, rather than arbitrarily posited, with the result that each of them grounded the act of reasoning on a foundation of reason alone.

There remain some minor differences, including the not unimportant fact that Hobbes was able to ground knowledge in a secure foundation without any reference to God, although at the expense of being unable to attain precise knowledge of the natural world itself. By contrast, Descartes' system made use of God to validate knowledge of actual external objects. Even still, the fundamentals of autonomous reason are in both systems, meaning that Pascal's critique of Cartesian autonomous reason is relevant to Hobbes as well.

Pascal's distinction, in Fragment #110, between principles and propositions directly pertains to Hobbes' and Descartes' autonomous reason. Propositions – i.e. reason – cannot go all the way down. Reason must come to an end at some point, if circular reasoning and an infinite regress of propositions are to be avoided. We have already seen that Descartes committed the fallacy of begging the question in his attempt to validate reason by way of a rational argument for the existence of God. Moreover, we find Hobbes committing the same mistake. In his chain of causes and effects, beginning with motion and culminating in the natural laws conducive to peace, nominalism arises as a consequence – read effect – of his rejection of

realism with respect to universals. He then uses nominalism to validate his ability to study cause and effect. That is to say, he used reason, or the study of cause and effect, to validate that same ability to study cause and effect. His introduction of nominalism presupposed the very it was supposed to support, which is to say that he argues in a circle.

This directly mirrors Descartes' use of reason to validate his faculty of reason, and indicates that Descartes' lapse into circular reasoning was no accident, but rather appears to have been a necessary consequence of autonomous reason. Just as Descartes was unable to find a logical first principle without invalidating reason, Hobbes is unable to find a first cause without similarly invalidating reason. Both thinkers had no choice but to employ circular reasoning to validate reason. This fallacy will be committed, Pascal's argument maintains, wherever reason is made out to be its own foundation, or when propositions are assumed to go all the way down. This is a logical impossibility, and can only be avoided by grounding reason in a non-rational foundation, be it Pascal's knowledge of the heart, Socrates' mysterious exogenous force in the cave, or Diotima's passionate longing for immortality. Moreover, the specific nature of the non-rational ground can have significant metaphysical and political implications, as a comparison with the Nietzschean doctrine of the will to power will make clear.

CHAPTER FOUR: NIETZSCHE

George Grant once wrote that “there is no escape from reading Nietzsche if one would understand modernity” (Grant 1986: 89). Since the subject of this thesis is autonomous reason – a thoroughly, if not the defining, modern idea – it follows that the present discussion will benefit from an examination of Nietzsche’s thought, at least if Grant is to be believed. An examination of the most comprehensive critique of modernity will necessarily shed light on modernity itself.

Descartes’ doctrine of autonomous reason contradicted earlier thinkers and in turn was called into question by later thinkers, including Hume, Rousseau and, most radically, Nietzsche. A common theme in Nietzsche’s writings is the relationship between the rational and non-rational,³⁷ and many of the fundamental concepts that came to fruition in his later thought are best understood in relation, and indeed opposition, to autonomous reason and the politics thereof. In his critique, the will to power is the non-rational force that prompts and shapes the activity of reason, leading to moral and political teachings quite different than those of Descartes and Pascal.

Nietzsche’s Non-Rational Ground: The Will to Power

His 1886 work, *Beyond Good and Evil*, is an excellent starting point for the present discussion, since it contains his most comprehensive critique of autonomous reason and points the way to the politics that arise out of it. The first nine aphorisms set the stage for the entire book, introduce his critique of Cartesianism, and culminate in a discussion of the Will to Power.

The term by which he designates the life of reason, “will to truth,” is telling, as it indicates that even reason is the result of willing, that is to say, non-rational factors. His position

³⁷ I.e., as early as *The Birth of Tragedy*, which explores the Apollonian-Dionysian tension in classical Greece.

can be summarized with the following two propositions: *reason is not its own foundation*, and *reason does not operate autonomously*.

Reason is not its own foundation

This statement agrees with Pascal's epistemology in form, if not in content. Both thinkers agree that reason – or the will to truth – requires a foundation of a different type. Pascal, as we have seen, grounds reason on an anthropology of the fall which is given to him by revelation and allows him to trust his intuitive beliefs; Nietzsche argues that the will to truth rests on assumptions that are not themselves results of that will. These “foreground valuations,” as he calls them, have been present but unnoticed in all hitherto western philosophy.

Beyond Good and Evil begins with the question, “What really is it in us that wants ‘the truth’?” (Nietzsche 1994: #1). This radical question raises the possibility that truth is not the only goal of thinking, and to search for the truth is to make an assumption regarding its value, an assumption that has gone unquestioned ever since Socrates received his oracle at Delphi. “Why not rather untruth?” is a question that has been ignored and treated as nonsensical, and Nietzsche's purpose here is to bring it back into the open. So far, the purpose is merely to point to the possibility of alternative answers and not necessarily to prove the falsehood of the prevailing one. This is because the very possibility of alternatives proves his point that the will to truth rests on prior assumptions and valuations.

However, he goes further and gives content to this “fundamental faith of the metaphysicians” (*Ibid.*: #2). He calls it the faith in antithetical values, and summarizes his description of it as the belief that “the things of the highest value must have another origin *of their own*” (*Ibid.*). This is the familiar Cartesian and Hobbesian belief that reason must be its

own foundation, and cannot arise out of faith, intuition, or other parochial influences. Nietzsche correctly points out that this is itself a judgement, and its presence is the criteria by which “metaphysicians of all ages can be recognized” (*Ibid.*). As noted previously, his point has already been proved by the very existence of alternative valuations and perspectives, but he nevertheless goes on to hint at another possibility. Valuable as the truth may be, he writes, “it could be possible that a higher and more fundamental value for all life might have to be ascribed to appearance, to the will to deception, to selfishness and to appetite” (*Ibid.*). He will eventually reveal that this is his position, although he here merely proposes it as a “dangerous perhaps.”

Reason does not operate autonomously

Nietzsche does not only argue that the will to truth rests upon foreground valuations, he goes even further and claims that the *operation of the will to truth*, or rational deductions themselves, are influenced by non-rational forces. Using Pascal’s terminology, we could say that even propositions are not arrived at by pure reason. In this, Nietzsche makes a qualitative departure from Pascal.

So-called conscious thinking, he writes, is driven by instinct, with the consequence that seemingly logical deductions are not necessarily true, but only life-affirming. “Behind all logic too and its apparent autonomy there stand evaluations” (*Ibid.*: #3). This is all to say that “logical thinking” and the practice of making deductions is not truth-conducive, because our instinct for life affirms or rejects propositions solely on the basis of their value for life. The axioms of logic, therefore, are useful fictions “necessary precisely for the preservation of beings such as us” (*Ibid.*).

It follows from this that the falsity of a judgement is no reason to reject it. Rather, the question that should be asked is, “to what extent is it life-advancing, life-preserving, perhaps even species-breeding?” (*Ibid.*: #4). Acknowledging what he had previously been hinting at, he writes that although the axioms of logic are fictions, they are indispensable insofar as they allow us, together with social science – “falsification of the world by means of numbers,” as he puts it – to make sense of the world around us and live in it. Untruth, therefore, is a condition of life and a philosophy which recognizes this “places itself, by that act alone, beyond good and evil” (*Ibid.*). This important phrase, *beyond good and evil*, is a reference to the master morality of good and bad that is the subject of part one of *The Genealogy of Morals*, of which more will be said later. The fact that it is the title of this book indicates that his deconstruction of autonomous reason is fundamentally connected to the politics of *The Genealogy of Morals*. Indeed, Nietzsche concludes the first book of the *Genealogy* with these words: “what I exactly *mean* by that dangerous motto which is inscribed on the body of my last book: *Beyond Good and Evil* – at any rate that is not the same as ‘Beyond Good and Bad’” (Nietzsche 2003: 33).

Aphorisms five and six primarily serve to summarize what has been said thus far. That is to say, philosophers are just as irrational as mystics, and the only difference between them is that mystics recognise their sources of irrational inspiration rather than rationalizing their prejudices and baptizing them as eternal truths. Every philosophy, therefore, is a confession on the part of its author, revealing his moral intentions; “[i]n every philosophy there is a point at which the philosopher’s ‘conviction’ appears on the scene” (Nietzsche 1994: #8).

The heretofore nebulous notion of *conviction* or *instinct* is given content in aphorism nine, which introduces the Will to Power. The philosophic desire to live “according to nature” (Nietzsche, 1994: #9) – or according to truth, for what is nature but “the way things are in

themselves” – masks the desire to make nature fit our subjective purposes. Nature, he writes, is prodigal and indifferent and any values we supposedly derive from it are necessarily those which we have first imposed upon it. Philosophy, he concludes, “always creates the world in its own image, it cannot do otherwise; philosophy is this tyrannical drive itself, the most spiritual will to power, to ‘creation of the world’” (*Ibid.*). He further defines the Will to Power in aphorism thirteen: “[a] living thing desires above all to vent its strength—life as such is will to power.”

From this one may conclude that the Will to Power, as the instinct to preserve and increase life itself, imposes itself on the world and indeed creates the world in its own image by affirming as true those ideas that are useful and denying those that are harmful. An adequate paraphrase, in relation to Descartes, might be, *human thinking is not constituted by reason all the way down. Rather, it is based on and driven forward by a more fundamental force, the will to power.* Compare this conception of reasoning as willful assertion of “truth” with Pascal’s model:

The will is one of the chief organs of belief, not because it creates belief but because things are true according to the aspect by which we judge them. When the will likes one aspect more than another, it deflects the mind from considering the qualities of the one it does not care to see. Thus the mind, keeping in step with the will, remains looking at the aspect preferred by the will and so judges by what it sees there (Pascal 1995: #539).

For Pascal, the will can influence the aspect by which we judge something, but after framing the issue in a desirable light, it steps back and allows reason to act; there is no purposeful affirmation of falsehood. The propositions reached by mathematical mind do indeed make a claim to objective truth.

There is a crucial philosophical difficulty that plagues any attempt to make sense of Nietzsche’s doctrine. It is that if reason is dominated by the will to power, and not the will to truth, how could we ever know it? That is to say, if the will to power prevents us from coming to actual first-order knowledge of the world, by what epistemological right does Nietzsche affirm as true his doctrine of the will to power? A possible response to this objection is given in aphorism

thirty-six, in which he muses about the possibility of extending his thesis to all of nature. He concludes by arguing that even if one succeeded in explaining all instinctual life in terms of will to power, such an explanation would only be of “the world seen from within, the world described and defined according to its ‘intelligible character’” (Nietzsche 1994: #36). In other words, his argument is that his explanation is not actually a first-order description of the cosmos as it is in itself. All we have access to, he claims, is a particular perspective, the internal perspective. The world as it appears to us, and nothing else, is a world of competing drives and instincts.

This response is valid if, and only if, it avoids the status of a first-order description, only, in other words, if it does not purport to be a true description of anything. But is such a thing possible? On the contrary, it appears that even Nietzsche’s so-called description of the “world seen from within” makes objective claims about the nature of the world, claims that, if true, do not allow him to trust them. For instance, his argument assumes that the world is such that it can only be seen from within. The world, as it is in itself, is such that no objective knowledge of it is possible. Perspectivism, then, appears to be self-referentially incoherent; if true, we could never know that it is true.³⁸ This logical difficulty, however, is largely irrelevant for the present purpose, which is merely to examine the political effects of this later critique of autonomous reason.

The Politics of the Will to Power

The will to truth is a manifestation of the will to power and provides us with useful fictions and the recognition of this fact places one “beyond good and evil” and into the realm of master morality. Nietzsche’s doctrine of the two contrasting moralities is inherited, with some modifications, from Hegel’s doctrine of master and slave morality: the master morality is the

³⁸ A similar argument against all forms of anti-realism can be found in Nagel (1997).

morality of good and bad, and the slave morality is of good and evil. The master morality arises when the “aristocratic man” affirms his natural qualities and endowments as “good” and takes their opposites as “bad.” His values will then be the values of strength, honor, power, and the like, and he will look down upon the attributes of meekness and humility as being expressions of weakness. Slave morality, in comparison, takes shape when those who are oppressed by the strong label their oppressors “evil,” and naturally enough, call the opposite attributes – *their own* attributes – good.

There are a number of important differences between the two. The first is that what is called good in each is not the same, indeed what is called good by the masters is called evil by the slaves. The values of strength and power that the masters celebrate amongst themselves are precisely what the slaves designate as evil. Second, the attitudes the masters hold towards the slaves are different than the attitudes the slaves hold in regard to the “evil-doers.” Masters look down on the slaves with a sense of pity; “almost all the words which are applied to the vulgar man survive finally as expressions for ‘unhappy,’ ‘worthy of pity,’” Nietzsche writes (Nietzsche 2003: 20). This is contrasted with the moralising of the slaves, borne of resentment, that hates the evil of the masters: “but you,” they say, “you aristocrats, you men of power, you are to all eternity the evil, the horrible, the covetous, the insatiate, the godless; eternally also shall you be the unblessed, the cursed, the damned!” (*Ibid.*: 17). This intense hatred is simply not felt by the masters, who do not concern themselves very much with anything other than themselves. The reason for the lack of concern, as well as the intense concern on the part of the slaves, is that master morality derives from within the masters, whereas the slaves depend on an external source for their morality. The masters simply affirm what they are, and have no need for

external validation or points of reference.³⁹ Slave morality begins from resentment of an oppressor – the *evil one* – and can only arrive at the good after orientating itself in relation to the other. The supposed altruism of slave morality, then, depends on an intense hatred of the strong.

This provides a clue as to what is meant by Nietzsche's famous phrase, "God is dead." In the famous 125th aphorism of *The Gay Science*, the disorientation following God's death is due to the fact that He served as an external foundation, an anchor around which man could make sense of his experience. God became the external source of truth and value required by the slaves, the death of Whom has given western man a profound sense of alienation:

Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Where is it moving to now? Where are we moving to? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling? And backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an up and a down? Aren't we straying as though through an infinite nothing? (Nietzsche 2008: #125).

This is quite pessimistic, although as Nietzsche writes in *Beyond Good and Evil* aphorism fifty-six, the one who is able to,

think pessimism [which, in light of the previous aphorism, means the consequences of the death of God] through to the bottom...may have had his eyes opened to the opposite ideal: to the ideal of the most exuberant, most living and most world affirming man, who has not only learned to get on and treat with all that was and is but who wants to have it again as it was and is to all eternity (Nietzsche 1994: #56).

All this is to say that the death of God and the resulting disorientation and despair need not be overly pessimistic. What has been lost is the external source of meaning that was created by the slaves in their rebellion against the strong; however, those possessing the requisite strength of soul will recognize this situation as an opportunity to explicitly affirm the will to power and create their own values.

This is fundamentally connected to his critique of autonomous reason. His claim that the

³⁹ This is arguably the most noticeable point of divergence from the Hegelian conception of master morality. Hegel thought that the masters required the slaves as much as the slaves required the masters. In Nietzsche's formulation, this requirement is dropped.

will to power dominated conscious thought leads to the recognition that untruth is a condition of life; which recognition, we remember, puts one “beyond good and evil.” That is to say, autonomous reason is bound up with slave morality and its external reference point. In moving beyond it, one moves into the realm of master morality and the self-assertion of one’s own qualities as values. Without God and an external source of morality, the nature of the world becomes apparent as will to power, which as we have seen, strives to posit its own life-affirming truths and values.

Book 7 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, entitled “Our Virtues,” focuses on the virtue of creativity, which is set in opposition to those who take their values from an external source. Aphorism #214 argues that the values posited must come from within man in keeping with “our most secret and heartfelt inclinations, with our most fervent needs,” and aphorism #223 talks about “the realm of our *invention*, that realm where we too can still be original.” #229 discusses the self-cruelty of both religious asceticism and traditional philosophy, which both deny the “fundamental will of the spirit.” He mentions Pascal’s asceticism, his “dangerous thrills of cruelty directed *against himself*,” as well as the “man of knowledge” who “compels his spirit to knowledge [which] is *counter* to the inclination of his spirit and frequently also to the desires of his heart.” Such practices deny what is fundamental about man, i.e. that he is will to power. The will to power expresses itself, among other ways, as a will to ignorance, domination, and simplification; religious and philosophical men make men out to be seekers of truth and justice, and thereby deny the fundamental nature of man. These forms of cruelty are abstractions from nature, from man as he truly is. Nietzsche’s task, or more specifically, the task of the “free spirits” that he hopes will arise and posit new values, must first be to “translate man back into nature,” that is, to embrace his nature as will to power and the creative animal who posits his

own values.

In book 9 he takes up the specific theme of the values that should be posited, the obvious answer being that they must be the values of nobility as discussed in *The Genealogy of Morals*.

Egoism and self-certainty are here embraced:

At the risk of annoying innocent ears I set it down that egoism pertains to the essence of the noble soul, I mean the immovable faith that to a being such as “we are” other beings have to be subordinate by their nature, and sacrifice themselves to us (*Ibid.*: #265).

“It is not the works, it is the faith which is decisive here, which determines the order of rank here, to employ an old religious formula in a new and deeper sense: some fundamental certainty which a noble soul possesses in regard to itself, something which may not be sought or found and perhaps may not be lost either. – The noble soul has reverence for itself (*Ibid.*: #287).

These aphorisms make it clear that the most important thing is the honesty to embrace the nature of the world as will to power. In fact, any honest embracing of the will to power by noble masters is to be encouraged; the prospect thus seems to be fairly open-ended. Furthermore, this embracing of nobility goes hand in hand with an aristocratic social order. A social order that recognizes the different ranks and orders of men will tend to internalize this “pathos of distance” in the best men therein. Society, therefore, must exist solely for the creation and strengthening of these higher types alone (*Ibid.*: #258).

In addition to being necessarily aristocratic and oppressive, his political thought has strong nationalist, and possibly racist, undertones. Nobility and plebianism are hereditary, Nietzsche claims, giving him “the problem of race” (*Ibid.* #264). Needless to say, the liberal democratic values of “general welfare” and pity for the less fortunate are dismissed as products of the slave morality which must be rejected. Nietzsche was not a friend of democracy, which he disdainfully describes as “resentment’s lying war-cry of *the prerogative of the most...the will to lowliness, abasement, and equalisation*” (Nietzsche 2003: 32). It is fair to characterize Nietzsche’s politics as aristocratic, tyrannical, nationalist if not racist, and categorically

unequalitarian in its singular emphasis on the will of the psychologically and physically strong to create their own values to the detriment of the weak.

Nietzsche's Legacy of Decisionism

Nietzsche's critique, as we have seen, denied the possibility of any objective ground for knowledge and justice, and instead left open-ended willing in its place. This is paradigmatic of much post-enlightenment thought in general, in that principles of justice and ethics are thought of as results of private willing or as mere individual preference. This has the unfortunate result of what Alisdair MacIntyre calls the "interminable character" of moral disagreement. Rival moral beliefs can be traced back to mutually exclusive foundational premises, between which there seems to be no way of rationally deciding. Hence, debates between the left and right are often reduced to liberty being pitted against equality, and because these ideals are incommensurate – in their absolute form, at least – with each other, moral and political debate comes down to "pure assertion and counter assertion" (MacIntyre 1984: 8). Moral debates, then, cannot be settled rationally but become a matter of personal preference, decisionism or, if you prefer, willing. Morals ultimately come down to private values, in the modern vernacular, as opposed to public facts.

It should be noted, parenthetically, that Nietzsche was not the first thinker in this vein; Soren Kierkegaard's anti-Hegelian fideism had strong decisionist implications. Once there can be no reasons for deciding between atheism and religion, the individual must simply choose one or the other. He writes:

An objective uncertainty held fast in the approximation- process of the most passionate inwardness is the truth, the highest truth attainable for an existing individual....The truth is precisely the venture which chooses an objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite....If I wish to preserve myself in faith I must constantly be intent upon holding fast

the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water, still preserving my faith (Kierkegaard 1999: 128-129).

One observes the same pattern here: the rejection of rationalism, this time of the Hegelian variety, going so far as to reduce belief to a matter of subjective will. At any rate, the phenomenon that MacIntyre describes and which can be attributed, in large part, to Nietzsche's emphasis on the will to power, is that principles of justice have no substantive ground, that is, no reason for accepting their truth aside from personal preference. A contemporary example of this approach to justice can be found in the work of John Rawls. He attempts to discover objective principles of justice via his thought experiment of the original position behind the veil of ignorance. Stripped of any and all knowledge of their status in life, all "rational persons" would agree, he believes, to the following two principles:

1. *The Equality Principle*: Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for all.
2. *The Difference Principle*: Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both:
 - a. reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage, and
 - b. attached to positions and offices open to all (Rawls 1971: 61).

The equality principle guarantees the basic rights of citizenship that are enshrined in most modern democracies: the right to vote, run for and hold public office, freedom of speech, conscience and association, etc. The difference principle applies more specifically to the distribution of wealth, benefits, and social goods. There need not be an absolute equality of social goods, Rawls argues, but whatever inequalities do exist must be to everyone's advantage. Progressive taxation is an example of a social policy adhering to the second principle; the lower and middle class, although not as wealthy as the upper class, nevertheless benefit, presumably at least, from social programs funded primarily by the tax dollars of the rich.

This is by no means a harsh or indecent social vision, and it does not appear to have anything at all in common with Nietzsche's ruthless politics of the will to power. Indeed, it is

fundamentally opposed to such a vision, at least in content. Rawls heartily affirms the political principles dear to the heart of modern western liberal democracies. However, he fails to ground them in anything substantive. In pure decisionist fashion, his two principles of justice are whatever rational subjects decide – or would decide, as his argument goes – that they are. In *English-Speaking Justice*, Grant compares Rawls' liberalism with that of Locke and Kant, pointing out that while Locke and Kant grounded justice in ontological foundations – the state of nature for Locke and the rational nature of man for Kant – Rawls has no such foundation. There is no real reason, in other words, why liberty and equality are man's due. The role of political philosophy, he writes elsewhere, is not necessarily to provide us with fundamental truths, but merely to help us “clarify our judgments about the institutions and policies of a democratic regime” (Rawls 2008: 1). As to the question of whether our newly-clarified judgments ought to be revised or rejected, Rawlsian political philosophy remains silent.

Part of the problem of technology, of which Grant was very aware, is the proliferation of instrumental reason and the importance of convenience and efficiency. When, as will likely happen someday,⁴⁰ our commitment to Rawls' two principles comes into conflict with the imperatives of technology, what will stop us from casting them aside in favour of something more conducive to the imperatives of convenience? Grant, at any rate, is unaware of any such reason. Once ontological concerns, that is to say, objective doctrines that can ground principles of justice, are ignored, “why should [the strong] not seek a ‘justice’ which is congruent with those conveniences [i.e. of technology], and gradually sacrifice the principles of liberty and equality when they conflict with the greater conveniences?” The central question that goes unanswered is: “What is it about human beings that should stand in the way of such convenience?” (Grant 1985: 83).

⁴⁰ Indeed Grant argued that it was already happening, as his provided example of abortion indicates.

To put the problem in Nietzsche's words, "The masses blink and say: 'We are all equal. – Man is but man, before God – we are all equal.' Before God! But now this God has died" (quoted in Grant 1985: 77). Remember that for Nietzsche, "God" referred to external – i.e. objective – sources of morality, the death of whom opens up the possibility, and indeed the necessity, of moving beyond the democratic politics of slave morality. This assessment may seem harsh, but there are no obvious flaws in Grant's logic. Freedom and equality are easier to maintain in the light of a substantive reason why they are the right of every man; when that reason is removed, it becomes much harder, if not impossible, to maintain them, which at least allows for the possibility of Nietzsche's master morality.

Pascal's Conservative Anti-Cartesianism

In Nietzsche's work, autonomous reason is an external reference point and thus part and parcel of slave morality; once it is abandoned in favour of the will to power, the task must be to posit life-affirming values. Recall his words in *Beyond good and Evil* aphorism #9: "It [philosophy] always creates the world in its own image, it cannot do otherwise; philosophy is this tyrannical drive itself, the most spiritual will to power, to 'creation of the world,' to *causa prima*." A Pascalian response to this might begin with the fact that Nietzsche describes the world exclusively according to man's second nature while ignoring the offsetting and balancing influence of his first nature. Reason is weak, but not completely faulty or reducible to will. However, even this description rests on an account of the way things are, something that Nietzsche regards as impossible.

One of the assumptions of postmodernism is that the only alternative to autonomous reason is to reject the possibility that reason has access to the truth at all. As Pascal has shown,

there is another option, one that recognizes the real problems with autonomous reason but avoids the extreme view that objective reality is unknowable. The pre-rational judgments on which Pascal's reason depends are not entirely subjective; rather, they are intuitive knowledge of the way things actually are. Similarly, as aphorism #539⁴¹ makes clear, the will influences the mode of judgment but ultimately stops short of creating beliefs themselves. The result is that reason works in conjunction with various non-rational faculties with the aim of discovering the truth about man. Reason, although not sufficient unto itself to discover truth, is nevertheless based on an objective ground that prevents it from becoming the instrument of mere willing. Pascal's political teaching, therefore, emphasizes order and stability, not as mere values to be posited, but as social goals that, given the nature of things, ought to be pursued.

⁴¹ I.e. "The will is one of the chief organs of belief, not because it creates belief, but because things are true or false according to the aspect by which we judge them. When the will likes one aspect more than another, it deflects the mind from considering the qualities of the one it does not care to see."

CONCLUSION

The argument of this thesis has been that Blaise Pascal's critique of Descartes is in fact a critique of modern political philosophy, by virtue of its' being based on Cartesian epistemology. Descartes' conception of reason has been referred to as autonomous reason, and was introduced by way of James R. Peters' words as a "universal, dispassionate, objective, and autonomous authority" (Peters 2009: 17). It states that reason goes all the way down and does not arise out of or depend on any other faculties. There is no element of knowledge, in other words, that is not rational. Chapter 1 retraced Descartes' steps, from his initial critique of scholastic philosophy to his triumphant claim that "there can be nothing so remote that we cannot reach to it, nor so recondite that we cannot discover it" (Descartes 1997: 43). His guiding purpose was to discover a universal method for resolving disputes, and he went about it by ridding knowledge of all nonrational factors, choosing to accept as authoritative only statements that are correct inferences from an indubitable first principle. All knowledge would then, he claimed, transcend custom and parochialism.

Chapter 2 studied some important fragments from Pascal's *Pensées* and arrived at a coherent theory of knowledge based on his understanding of humanity as fallen. Because of the frailties of human beings and the inherent structure of logical thought, reason depends on and derives its vitality from pre-rational intuitions and desires. Unaided reason, strictly speaking, is logically and psychologically impossible.

Chapter 3 connected Pascal's critique of Descartes to political philosophy by way of Thomas Hobbes who, it was demonstrated, based his political teaching on autonomous reason. The ability of reasoning was, in his system, made possible by the act of reasoning itself. This

made reason autonomous by ridding it of all nonrational factors, but it also opened him up to Pascal's chief criticism of Descartes, which was that autonomous reason involves a fatal case of circular reasoning.

Chapter 4 added historical depth by comparing Pascal's critique of autonomous reason to that of Nietzsche. It was argued that Nietzsche's critique goes much further than Pascal's, to the point of reducing everything to will, decisionism and, in the final analysis, relativism. Rather than simply questioning the view that reason is its own foundation, he replaced both reason *and* its foundation with the will to power. Finally, Nietzsche's legacy of decisionism was noted in the work of Alisdair MacIntyre and John Rawls.

While at first glance it appears that the theme has been the relation between reason and politics, such a characterization is slightly misleading due to the fact that every political philosophy, by definition, is based on reason. The more pertinent questions are, "How does each political philosophy validate reason?" and "What is the precise nature of the conception of reason which grounds any given political philosophy?" The real theme, then, is the genesis, or foundation, of human reason. Through the many turns of this thesis and the various thinkers studied, the final argument can be stated thusly: because Thomas Hobbes based his politics on autonomous reason, Pascal's critique of autonomous reason is also a critique Hobbesian politics. Furthermore, because Hobbes stands at the outset of modernity, Pascal's critique carries significant weight for the entire tradition of modern political thought, insofar as it accepts or rejects autonomous reason.

In closing, it may be beneficial to produce a brief taxonomy of the various conceptions of reason that have been discussed here. The primary theory under consideration, autonomous

reason, can also be called Modern Rationalism, since it typifies the modern attitude towards reason. Because it maintains that reason goes all the way down, it leaves no room for emotions or the effects of custom. Statements of reason are necessarily universal. This would, it was believed, usher in a new era of universal truth and justice, centred around the mastery of human and non-human nature.⁴² Hobbes, we have seen, argued that peace and stability can only be had by basing politics on mathematical, rather than dogmatic, learning. He then used said mathematical learning to deduce universal laws of nature that would bring about peace in any setting. This political tradition was taken up by most modern political thinkers but its most blatant expression can perhaps be found in Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy and its resulting cosmopolitan political ideals. The right action, according to his categorical imperative, is the action that can be consistently universalized across space and time. This universal morality naturally led Kant to endorse an international theory that sought to ensure just treatment of all people in all states. War, being the cause of so many deaths, can hardly be seen to fulfill the demands of the categorical imperative, so his primary aim was to bring about perpetual peace between and among nations.

In short, Modern Rationalism makes two claims. First, it asserts that the claims of reason are of a universal nature. Thomas Nagel, a contemporary modern rationalist, puts it this way: “[w]hoever appeals to reason purports to discover a source of authority within himself that is not merely personal, or societal, but universal – and that should also persuade others who are willing to listen to it” (Nagel 1997: 3-4). Secondly, it asserts that the right use of reason is to use reason alone and eschew any nonrational elements in human thought, hence my designation of it as

⁴² For an interesting take on the supposed expansion of human autonomy resulting from the mastery of nature, see Lewis (1974). Lewis argues that because human nature is, by definition, part of nature, the mastery of nature necessarily involves the mastery, and therefore the loss, of human nature itself. I.e. “Man’s conquest of Nature turns out, in the moment of its consummation, to be Nature’s conquest of Man” (68).

autonomous. There are only two categories of beliefs: those based entirely on reason, and those that have been tainted by superstition and prejudice. Because reason is universal, the reliance on it alone will result in knowledge of the universal truth of things.

The successor to Modern Rationalism has been the postmodern rejection of reason, or Irrationalism, and the fideism which is related to it. This position arose out of the recognition that the seemingly indubitable truths of autonomous reason are indeed no more than “foreground valuations,” and holds the view that there is no such thing as pure reason. Rather, all thinking is driven by the drive to power and domination. What is expressed in seemingly innocuous propositions is not the will to truth, but assertions of power. Therefore, to understand politics one need not examine the arguments given by each side in their own right, but to study the way in which power configurations have shaped and determined the course of events.⁴³ The possibility of relativism and tyranny opened up by Irrationalism has been discussed above.

However, the postmodern rejection of reason is not the only possible alternative to Modern Rationalism. As hinted at in the introduction, there was a form of rationalism before the enlightenment that did not immoderately eschew all nonrational factors. This can be called Classical Rationalism, and it is to this conception which Pascal’s epistemology belongs. According to it, reason depends on other non-rational factors. Human life is necessarily embedded in a social context that determines the available data of which to make rational sense, and therefore the project of making knowledge perfectly universal is flawed from the start.

There are certain limits with regards to human nature and the nature of the material world that impose limits on the extent to which the rational concepts can be implemented in social and political life. For Plato, the nature of matter as coming-into-being and passing-away was at odds

⁴³ For a contemporary example, see Fish (1989), specifically the chapter entitled “Rhetoric,” in which he argues that all philosophy is mere rhetoric.

with the nature of the immutable forms. This disparity is to blame for the disastrous results of Adeimantus' desire to see what a polis would look like if governed by the form of justice (Plato 1991: Book 5). Pascal, meanwhile, points to the wretchedness and vanity of the human condition as the reasons why personal interest and other factors will always play a role in the thought process. Classical Rationalism has historically been conducive to a moderate politics that recognized that limits of politics and its inability to completely eradicate suffering and injustice without introducing new problems related to tyranny and revolution.⁴⁴

Two questions remain:

1. Is Classical Rationalism more desirable than Modern Rationalism?
2. If so, what does Pascal offer that earlier classical rationalists did not?

Both Classical and Modern Rationalism aim at avoiding irrational political regimes and tyrannies, so the relevant question that must be asked in deciding between them is “which one is better equipped to stave off irrationalism and tyranny?”

In fragment #199 Pascal writes that “we treat as ultimate those [principles] which seem so to our reason...although by its nature it is infinitely divisible.” This is an indictment of Descartes' claim that he had reached pure rational principles. What actually happened, Pascal reminds us, is that Descartes merely found the most fundamental principles that he could, intuitive though they may be, and mistakenly thought that they were those beyond which none could exist. His so-called universal first principles were in fact the very thing he wished to avoid, namely nonrational assertions of intuitive opinion as universal truth.

This, in and of itself, would not have been a big problem, had he not staked his entire system on the fact that he had risen above assertion of nonrational principles. He claimed that the very same universal reason that makes deductions also establishes first principles, so as soon

⁴⁴ I.e.: “Anyone who tries to bring [law] back to its first principles destroys it” (Pascal 1995: #60).

as first principles are exposed as the result of nonrational factors, the deductive power of reason is inevitably called into question as well. In other words, if what is called reason in one area – first principles – is nothing but will, then what is called reason in another area – deducing propositions – is similarly nothing but will. Classical Reason, on the other hand, maintained a separation between reason and intuition such that the intuitive nature of first principles leaves reason itself unscathed.

With regards to the question of what Pascal has to offer, there are two related answers. The first is simply that as a contemporary of modern rationalists he was able to articulate his conception of Classical Rationalism with reference to the modern variant. By explicitly bringing the two rationalisms into dialogue, he visibly demonstrates the difference between them and what a classical critique of the modern looks like. By being aware of the character of modern rationalism, in other words, he can articulate his conception in a way that emphasized their differences.⁴⁵

The second response is also a product of Pascal's historical position. He lived in the middle of the scientific revolution and was an important contributor to empirical science and therefore challenges the belief that modern science makes classical thought untenable. Although not explicitly articulated, the assumption is often made that the scientific understanding of nature is at odds with classical cosmology and philosophy. Ian Barbour notes that,

[t]he new cosmology was resisted, then, not only because it challenged the authority of Aristotle and scripture, but because it threatened the whole Aristotelian scheme of purpose and meaning in which man's spatial location was correlated with his status in the cosmic hierarchy" (Barbour 1971: 33).

In summarizing the effects of modern science, Bertrand Russell discusses a particular

⁴⁵ This is perhaps part of the reason that Socrates and Plato are often mistakenly thought to have more in common with the moderns than they really do: because they defined themselves in opposition to the irrationalism of Greek mythic culture, they sometimes come across as proto-moderns. Pascal, on the other hand, is free to define himself in opposition to Descartes and can emphasize the pre-rational element of knowledge.

effect that has particular relevance for the study of Pascal. The scholastic view of man was obsessed, he writes, with original sin, but the scientific picture largely eliminated the concept of sin from the general consciousness. He notes that the “triumphs of science revived human pride” (Russell 1975: 523). Men, in general, felt much better about themselves and their cognitive faculties. In addition, the new cosmology was not geo- or anthro-centric. The Christian doctrine of the fall, it seemed to most, was predicated on a universe existing for the use, purposes, and stewardship of man. When “man’s spatial location,” to borrow Barbour’s words, was modified, so was “his status in the cosmic hierarchy,” namely as the fallen pinnacle of creation.

This does not, at first blush, seem to have any immediate relevance to epistemology. However, it has been argued throughout these pages that epistemology depends on metaphysics and anthropology; the character of reason depends on the nature of man and the world. Pascal grounds his epistemology on original sin and the doctrine of the fall; if original sin was in fact disproved by modern science then Pascal would not be able to hold it in conjunction with his confidence in science.

He was, however, able to do just that, with no apparent evidence of tension or cognitive dissonance. That is, he was able to embrace the insights of modern science without accepting the reductionist metaphysics that were so often derived from it. Although he did not put much effort into refuting this alleged contradiction between science and classical thought, a contemporary scholar of Pascal⁴⁶ has shown how this is possible. All of the supposed effects of modern science given by Russell are metaphysical deductions that were assumed to follow from the new physics. In *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction*, Diogenes

⁴⁶ Namely Diogenes Allen, whose *Three Outsiders: Pascal, Kierkegaard, Simone Weil* contains an extensive study of Pascal’s religious thought. His argument, summarized below, in *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World* also takes up Pascal’s interest in the relation between religion and Modern Rationalism.

Allen argues against such metaphysical inferences. He distinguishes between two types of explanations: causal and intentional (Allen 1989: 169). Causal explanations reveal the “how” of a given effect whereas intentional explanations offer the “why” of the effect. That is to say, scientific explanation describes *what* happens when a ball falls to the ground, not *why* it was dropped or *why* the universe is such that objects move towards the ground. Metaphysical explanations and deductions are of a different category than causal explanations, and therefore the metaphysical and theological conclusions drawn from modern science do not automatically follow.

It is altogether impossible to know what Pascal would make of such an argument, but it is clear that Pascal at least agreed with its conclusion, namely that the rise of science did not render metaphysical and theological explanations, and specifically original sin, untenable. Furthermore, because original sin was the basis for Pascal’s articulation of Classical Rationalism, it seems that such a conception of reason was not proved untenable by modern science, despite its’ seeming to do so.

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