



# A Pascalian Critique of Rene Descartes:

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## A PASCALIAN CRITIQUE OF RENE DESCARTES:

“Descartes was “useless and uncertain” *Pensees*, 445, 671.

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 three principles, either affirming that everything can be proved, 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 judgment is called for. ~ Pascal’s *Pensees* # 170.

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### I. Introduction:

Blaise Pascal and Rene Descartes were contemporaries, though Pascal was younger than Descartes. In fact, at one point Descartes provided medical care to Pascal.

This set of notes is primarily derived from Roger Hazelton’s *Blaise Pascal: The Genius of His Thought* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974).

### II. Summary of Contrasts:

1. Geometrical Mind of Pascal (problems solved by a construction) versus Algebraic mind of Descartes (problems solved by a system of equations). Instead of Descartes’ clear and distinct ideas, Pascal proposes the use of distinguishing and clarifying ideas, which can be brought to bear not only upon science or verified knowledge but upon the whole of man’s experience.
2. Pascal judges Descartes to be an unreliable guide in human affairs; if Descartes is the man of one method, applicable to everything everywhere and always, Pascal is the man of many methods, each appropriate and dependable with reference to whatever is before it.
3. In reversal of Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum*; Pascal holds that I do not constitute myself by my thought alone since my thinking self is basically the same as my desiring, willing, acting self. My thought, like everything else I am or do, has its secret springs in my interior me. It is Pascal’s emphasis upon the heart that keeps him from the anti-rationalism with which he is sometimes unfairly charged. Pascal directs attention to the fact that man is more than he knows, or permits others to know; the gull human character of reason in its diverse forms needs to be recognized and appreciated. “*For what a man thinks within his heart, so is he.*” Man is made to think, but he should be warned against thinking that his thought somehow exempts him from having to struggle with

his own all-too-human nature. Man's dignity as a thinking being is not lessened but celebrated in this idea: "*Out of the heart are the issues of life.*"

4. In view of "**We know truth not by reason only, but by the heart**" (P 110):

Pascal contends that all demonstrative or analytical knowledge rests back upon the direct apprehension, feeling, and intellect involved together in what he calls "first principles." First principles: space, time, number, and the like-are intuited or felt-seen by the heart, there can be nothing at all to think about. These intuited principles, which Immanuel Kant was to later call "categories", are what all rational knowledge must assume but cannot prove. Pascal's concern was not only to show that understanding begins necessarily with principles or forms of which we are immediately aware; he points out that we must trust our fundamental intuitions, put ourselves at their disposal for the sake of truth. Really to know something is to give oneself to it, follow its lead, let it shape and guide one's thought. Only so can man ever hope to remove sterile dualisms contrived by reason alone in order to excuse its failure to arrive at truth-those between object and subject, reality and appearance, world and self. Something like sympathy or rapport is at the core of every act of knowing the truth, and the word *coeur* is therefore appropriate for describing it. Whereas Descartes held our existence is defined as rational, Pascal's view is that our reason is through and through existential. Saint Augustine made the same point long before Pascal. Man is a truth-seeking being. Man needs truth in order to be himself, that is, to live humanely-honestly, fulfilling, reasonably. But the attainment of truth depends upon that double movement of self-awareness and self-giving which for a Christian thinker is the inner rhythm of a fully human existence. Pascal's word 'heart' signifies that rhythm, beating in harmony with the nature of things, which Augustine had expressed in the phrase, "There is no entering into truth except by way of love."

5. To Pascal, thought is not so much the dignifying element in human nature as compared to Descartes' "I think, therefore I am." Rather, Pascal regards thought more as a capacity to be exercised and fulfilled than an innate faculty that is self-intuited and self-possessed. In fact, its worth depends entirely on what use is made of it, what its objects and intentions are. This is clearly stated when Pascal asserts, "All our dignity consists in thought... Let us labor then to think well.... It is thought which constitutes the greatness of man" (P 756).
6. Pascal wishes to rid faith of superstition as well as to purge science of pseudo-theological assumptions. Pascal agrees with Aquinas about the distinction between faith and reason: Faith is above reason but not contrary to reason. But a problem arises: How can Pascal accept the view that faith

and reason do not have the same object, when he holds that it would destroy faith if doubt were cast on the evidences of the senses? When a test for possible heresy is examined, the criteria of factual observation, rational consistency, and doctrinal correctness all come into play. Thus, faith does not determine its own truth by a method peculiar to itself, even though Pascal insists upon its right to do so. The faith-reason problem is the problem of relationship, not of sheer difference. Just like Aquinas stated, there can be no final opposition between truths of the natural intelligible and supernatural-revealed kind, though in practice they should be distinct. However, Descartes antagonizes this view by arguing that while he agrees that with the scholastic formulas distinguishing three kinds of questions: (1) Those things believed by faith because of revelation (Trinity); (2) Those which pertain to faith but are also open to rational confirmation (existence of God); (3) Those belonging to determination by reason alone (such as squaring the circle or the chemical formula for producing gold).

DESCARTES EMPHASIZES THE POWER OF REASON BOTH AS LEADING TO FAITH AND AS RECOGNIZING ITS SUPPLEMENTATION BY FAITH.

In contrast, Pascal finds no such compatibility based on rational continuity possible. Though he also uses the traditional distinctions he adds the level of observed fact to the others and regards it as fundamental to both faith and reason.

7. Pascal's criticism of Descartes is that he reduces philosophy to a single model; it is not worth the labor such a reduction costs (Ibid., 176-7); introducing God merely to give a 'little push' in order to the world stated (claiming this is no real God at all); claimed too much for human reason and even went further to say that it offers nothing to man in view of his deepest need and highest hope; it is uncertain because it speaks too confidently of matters that are only hypothetical to reason. A philosopher is a man not a thinking machine. But also, Pascal rejected Descartes' certainty, the intuition of himself and his thoughts, from which the external world is to be inferred.
8. Pascal's Critical Response to Skepticism: It is contradictory as a philosophy but helpful as a tool. Moreover, *isolating human reason from the rest of man, and then relying on it exclusively, these philosophies fail to reckon with the whole truth about truth.*

### III. A Closer Look:

#### 1. For the geometrician every problem is to be solved by a construction, for the algebraist, every problem is solved by a system of equations.

- A. For the geometrist, a conic section is a happening in space vs. an equation is only an abstract and far-off representation.

- B. The essence of a curve is just the equation it suggests and its spatial figure is only a quite secondary and even at times useless projection.
- C. Pascal says that space is a stimulus to the mathematical imagination and was therefore able to trace a multitude of lines whose spatial relationships, no matter how intricate, could be discerned without confusion.
- D. Descartes found such efforts of the imagination tiresome and preferred the conceptual simplicity of abstract formulas.'
- E. Pascal's thought is marked by the refusal of all formulas; if he did not find the binomial formula that was because he was not looking for it.
- F. Pascal's mathematical genius is expressed not in the invention of new principles so much as in the skill with which he discovered and made clear his rules or methods.
- G. Pascal: there was no absolutely first principles, no pure beginnings on which a chain of reasoning can be built in order to draw out a consistent system of consequences. No, we must stated, in medias res, in the thick of facts themselves as they appear, holding practically and tentatively to those principles which at first seem solid enough, but remain unsatisfied until patient, critical exploration yields hypotheses that progressively measure up to the realities they seek to explain. This whole process of inquiry is one that takes place only by degrees. It includes intermittent insights, brusque leaps, crucial experiments, repeated questioning; and if it should succeed, it is solely by virtue of the clarity it brings to what was originally doubted or obscure.
- H. Instead of Descartes' clear and distinct ideas Pascal proposes the use of distinguishing and clarifying ideas, which can be brought to bear not only upon science or verified knowledge but upon the whole of man's experience.
- I. In sum, what we see in Pascal's thinking is the geometrical mind trying to surpass itself.

### **TWO BASIC USES OF INTELLIGENCE:**

In *Pensees* Pascal discriminates between two basic uses of intelligence:

### esprit geometrique (analytical mind)

- Clear & consistent thinking from a few principles of which most people are not normally aware

### esprit de finesse (penetrative mind)

- Thinking on the basis of many maxims known to everybody but which are so numerous and conflicting that they tend to cancel each other out, yielding only confusing and error in the long run.

- A. While Pascal did not believe one triumphed over the other, as the years went by he developed greater sympathies for esprit de finesse since he himself personally felt the crudity and sterility of analytical constructions where human values were not concerned.
- B. However, his concern for human values does not mean that he was ever ready to abandon utterly the search for viable, illuminating principles regarding man-quite the opposite. He never said, like Emerson, "Damn consistency!" However, he discovered for himself that in characteristically human situations, unlike mathematical and physical problems, one must "see the thing all at once with a single glance," and not by rational progression, at least to a certain degree.
- C. Therefore, this is why he judges Descartes to be an unreliable guide in human affairs; if Descartes is the man of one method, applicable to everything everywhere and always, Pascal is the man of many methods, each appropriate and dependable with reference to whatever is before it.
- D. Two years before he died he came to a deep conviction that the truths of mathematics do not console us in time of affliction. Truths of another, a higher order of truths, are needed for that.
- E. Pascal never withdrew from scientific work until he had satisfied himself that he knew personally what it was about and could attain.

- G. In sum, Pascal was both a man of science and a man of faith: two parts that made a whole man, reinforcing each part in a remarkable way.
- H. One reason why Pascal favors *esprit de finesse* in view of Pascal's thoughts on man is the word "*couer*" (heart). What does Pascal mean when he uses this French word?
- 1) He does not mean what the Romantic writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century have taught us to mean by it. We misread him if we take "*couer*" as a synonym for "*instinct over intelligence or emotion as opposed to reason.*"
  - 2) While Pascal clearly means to convey 'the feeling side of life' he does not use it or exclude or disparage something called 'the mind.
  - 3) To Pascal, the heart has much to do with mental effort and intellectual discovery. It is more like Cardinal Newman's definition of "*intimate understanding.*"
  - 4) The heart is "what makes man tick"; it is the control center of the personality; it is where man lives although it may not be where man is most at home.
- I. **"The heart has its reasons which reason cannot know"** (P 423).
- 1) It is not an opinion but an observation.
  - 2) Pascal observed that "reasons" which are given for behavior are usually not the "reasons" which in fact produce it.

Hazelton writes:

"As it stands, the sentence makes the obvious, but easily overlooked, point that the explanations people advance for what they do are often at variance with the motives by which they are actually controlled....

He is saying that the heart, namely, one's inmost self, precedes and determines every kind of reason" (Ibid., 101).

Anthony Kenny offers this interpretation:

His best-known aphorism, of course, is 'the heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing'. But if we study his use of the word 'heart we can see that he is not placing feeling above rationality, but contrasting intuitive with deductive reasoning-rather as we speak of learning mathematical tables 'by heart.' We can see this when he tells us that it is the heart that teaches us the

foundations of geometry. IN this he was not at all at odds with Cartesian rationalism [*The Rise of Modern Philosophy*, 3:75].

On the other hand Hazelton observes:

- J. This is the precise reversal of Descartes' cogito ergo sum; Pascal holds that I do not constitute myself by my thought alone since my thinking self is basically the same as my desiring, willing, acting self. My thought, like everything else I am or do, has its secret springs in my interior me.
- 1) It is Pascal's emphasis upon the heart that keeps him from the anti-rationalism with which he is sometimes unfairly charged.
  - 2) Pascal directs attention to the fact that man is more than he knows, or permits others to know; the gull human character of reason in its diverse forms needs to be recognized and appreciated.
  - 3) "For what a man thinks within his heart, so is he."
  - 4) Man is made to think, but he should be warned against thinking that his thought somehow exempts him from having to struggle with his own all-too-human nature. Man's dignity as a thinking being is not lessened but celebrated in this idea: "out of the heart are the issues of life."
- K. "We know truth not by reason only, but by the heart" (P 110):
- 1) Pascal contends that all demonstrative or analytical knowledge rests back upon the direct apprehension, feeling, and intellect involved together in what he calls "first principles."
    - a. First principles: space, time, number, and the like-are intuited or felt-seen by the heart, there can be nothing at all to think about. These intuited principles, which Immanuel Kant was to later call "categories" are what all rational knowledge must assume but cannot prove.
    - b. Pascal's concern was not only to show that understanding begins necessarily with principles or forms of which we are immediately aware; he points out that we must trust our fundamental intuitions, put ourselves at their disposal for the sake of truth. Really to know something is to give oneself to it, follow its lead, let it shape and guide one's thought. Only so can man ever hope to remove sterile dualisms contrived by reason alone in order to excuse its failure to arrive at truth-those between object and subject, reality and appearance, world and self. Something like



sympathy or rapport is at the core of every act of knowing the truth, and the word *coeur* is therefore appropriate for describing it.

**2. Whereas Descartes held our existence is defined as rational, Pascal's view is that our reason is through and through existential.**

- A. Saint Augustine made the same point long before Pascal.
- B. Man is a truth-seeking being.
- C. Man needs truth in order to be himself, that is, to live humanely-honestly, fulfillingly, reasonably.
- D. But the attainment of truth depends upon that double movement of self-awareness and self-giving which for a Christian thinker is the inner rhythm of a fully human existence.
- E. Pascal's word 'heart' signifies that rhythm, beating in harmony with the nature of things, which Augustine had expressed in the phrase, "There is no entering into truth except by way of love."
- F. Pascal warns not to think too highly of the heart:  
  
**"How hollow and full of trash is the heart of man!"** P 139.
- G. "The most 'real' thing about man may turn out to be his unreality, his heart's devious and self-deceiving way of fooling him about his actual goals, needs, powers, limitations. Do I love someone else chiefly because I love myself more, because I love being loved? Or when engaged in study and reflection is it really knowledge and learning I am after, or only status and security? The answer lies only within the heart of man, and since the heart is an inveterate trickster it must be laid bare and tested in the searching gaze of God" [Ibid., 103].
- H. If man's heart is to be rescued from illusion and grasped by liberating truth, a structure of meaning and value capable of illuminating and enabling life from within will have to be found. The heart must be humbled, gentled, and opened by faith. Thus the misery of man without God will make way for the greatness of man with God:  
  
"It is the heart which feels God, not the reason. This then is faith: God felt by the heart, not by the reason (P 424).

**3. To Pascal, thought is not so much the dignifying element in human nature as compared to Descartes' "I think, therefore I am." Rather, Pascal regards thought more as a capacity to be exercised and fulfilled than an innate faculty that is self-intuited and self-possessed. In fact, its worth depends entirely on what use is made of it, what its objects and intentions are. This is clearly stated when Pascal asserts, "All our dignity consists in thought... Let us labor then to think well.... It is thought which constitutes the greatness of man" (P 756).**

- A. Pascal does not have utter confidence in reason, if this means relying upon logical methods and intellectual resources alone for reaching the whole truth about human life.
- B. Pascal knew that that reasoning may easily become mere rationalizing, making the worse appear the better. Nevertheless, he insists on giving thought its due as the best instrument man has for seeking truth.
- C. Pascal's position on the use of reason is not irrationalism.
- D. Though while we are made to think, we have no guarantee of immunity from the ills that mortal flesh is heir to, it does mean that the human situation is dynamically if ambiguously open.
  - 1) Just how open may be judged from Pascal's statement that we are not made but for infinity.
  - 2) There is a natural affinity between thinking and the infinite, 'natural' in the sense that thought, with all its built-in liabilities, is still the human point of contact with whatever is beyond or above the human.
  - 3) Our greatness is real and not illusionary, but it consists in a direction of his existence rather than in anything he can be said to possess and control.

*George Herbert once said, "Unless he can above himself erect himself  
How poor a thing is man!"*

- 4) To Pascal, man's greatness is undeniable, and it consists in the fact that man is made for infinity. Hazelton asserts that this is the *idée maitresse* (main idea) of all Pascalian thought.
  - a. Man's misery "proves" his grandeur, since it is the sign of self-transcending openness that only the infinite can satisfy.

- b. A person's very humanity is constituted by his accessibility to the infinite for which he is created.
- c. Man is great enough to be called God's image, but has faults enough to be reminded that he is only God's image, neither more nor less.
- d. Man is great not because of something that belongs to him but by virtue of something to which he belongs can be recognized as directly dependent on the Biblical and Christian belief that man is created in the image of God.

Hazelton notes:

Granted, this is a strange kind of greatness....it is defined not in terms of prestige bestowed by one's fellows, nor even in terms of an honor earned by one's own efforts; it has to do, rather, with man's nature as such. And yet man's greatness consists less in possession than in orientation; it is signaled by the presence of an absence, by a consciousness of what he lacks and needs to realize his own humanity. Man is great not in spite of the predicament and pathos that mark his existence but precisely by virtue of them. By thought he encompasses the universe that sounds him, and he persists in his attempt to think what is unthinkable. He cannot recognize his liabilities without regretting them and wishing to surpass them. Thus he is always more than the mere sum of his experiences and relationships, more than he can ever know himself to be. He is great because his very humanity cannot be accounted for in terms of itself but fronts upon the infinite, as the shore both receives and holds back the ocean [Blaise Pascal: *The Genius of His Thought*, 106].

- E. Pascal's understanding of what it means to be human may be compared to the writings of Albert Camus.
  - 1) Camus acknowledged Pascal's influence on his view.
  - 2) Both clearly saw the tragic dimensions of man's existence and made no effort to explain away the facts of moral and natural evil.
  - 3) Camus denied the charges of pessimism and defeatism leveled by critics against his work, holding up the possibility of heroic human effort in the face of what termed the absurdity of existence. Man can like Sisyphus in the ancient myth, keep on performing a frustrating and meaningless task.
  - 4) Camus and Pascal are in remarkable agreement that man's absurd or self-contradictory state need not immobilize him on a dead center of despair.

- 5) The differences between them are great:
- a. Camus was convinced that while Christianity promises a way out of human meaninglessness, it cannot produce victory now or hereafter.
  - b. Pascal, on the other hand, believes that man's extremity is God's opportunity.
  - c. For Pascal, self-fulfillment is not a simple human possibility; and to know this is enough to make man miserable-without God (pg. 107).
  - d. What makes misery really miserable is that it is a deprivation, a felt absence or an aching void:

"For who is unhappy over not being king, except a dethroned king" P 117

Hazelton unpacks Pascal's statement this way:

"Here of course, another Christian theme comes to the fore, that of the fall of man from an original wholeness and the blessedness. But this means again, that man's wretchedness is the sign of his authentic greatness. This is so in the same sense that darkness has no meaning except in terms of light, or evil except in terms of good, or error except in terms of truth. Since man's behavior does not exemplify his God-given being, he must be remade in the likeness of the infinite for which he has been made.

- e. For Pascal, man is always a creature named desire; he is made for infinity and cannot come to rest in anything less (Ibid., 111).

#### 4. Pascal's concept of reason:

- A. In Pascal's treatise on the Vacuum, he objects the frequent use by scientists of appeals to authority and antiquity.
- B. In science Pascal believes that method of exact observation and controlled experiment should be the only court of appeal. Scientific questions must have scientific answers, not metaphysical or theological ones.
- C. Questions of Christian truth are to be dealt with by the canons of the historic faith; hence one has every right to appeal to established tradition and the testimony of its authoritative witnesses.
- D. Whether dogmatism in science or irrationalism in religion, Pascal rejects both.

- E. Both realms of truth must be treated separately.
- F. Pascal wishes to rid faith of superstition as well as to purge science of pseudo-theological assumptions.
- G. Pascal agrees with Aquinas about the distinction between faith and reason: Faith is above reason but not contrary to reason. But a problem arises: How can Pascal accept the view that faith and reason do not have the same object, when he holds that it would destroy faith if doubt were cast on the evidences of the senses? When a test for possible heresy is examined, the criteria of factual observation, rational consistency, and doctrinal correctness all come into play. Thus, faith does not determine its own truth by a method peculiar to itself, even though Pascal insists upon its right to do so.
- H. The faith-reason problem is the problem of relationship, not of sheer difference. Just like Aquinas stated, there can be no final opposition between truths of the natural intelligible and supernatural-revealed kind, though in practice they should be distinct.
- I. However, Descartes antagonizes this view by arguing that while he agrees that with the scholastic formulas distinguishing three kinds of questions:
  - 1) Those things believed by faith because of revelation (Trinity);
  - 2) Those which pertain to faith but are also open to rational confirmation (existence of God);
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DESCARTES EMPHASIZES THE POWER OF REASON BOTH AS LEADING TO FAITH AND AS RECOGNIZING ITS SUPPLEMENTATION BY FAITH.

- 4) In contrast, Pascal finds no such compatibility based on rational continuity possible. Though he also uses the traditional distinctions he adds the level of observed fact to the others and regards it as fundamental to both faith and reason.
- 5) Faith-reason problem is posed for Pascal in a variety of ways:
  - a. Authority versus freedom in both science and religion;
  - b. Dogmatism versus empiricism (whether in theology masquerading as science or in so-called science presuming to define or limit the truth of faith.
  - c. In each case he chooses to be a believing thinker, or thinking believer-to be faithful and reasonable, both at once, not one at the expense of the other. But he would be the last to say

that such an aim can be pursued without real strain and conflict that may seriously impair man's whole vision of the truth.

6) Pascal writes in *Pensees* 170:

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 three principles, either affirming that everything can be proved, 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 judgment is called for.

5. **Pascal's criticism of Descartes is that he reduces philosophy to a single model; it is not worth the labor such a reduction costs (*Ibid.*, 176-7); introducing God merely to give a 'little push' in order to the world stated (claiming this is no real God at all); claimed too much for human reason and even went further to say that it offers nothing to man in view of his deepest need and highest hope; it is uncertain because it speaks too confidently of matters that are only hypothetical to reason. A philosopher is a man not a thinking machine. But also, Pascal rejected Descartes' certainty, the intuition of himself and his thoughts, from which the external world is to be inferred.**

A. Pascal writes of Descartes in P # 84:

Descartes. In general, one must say, 'That is constituted by figure and motion,' because it is true; but then to say what these are and to make up a mechanistic model (*comper la machine*) is ridiculous, for it is useless, uncertain, and difficult. Even if that were true, we do not think that all of philosophy would be an hours' trouble.

- 1) It is Descartes competence and caution as a scientist that prevented him from following Descartes' mechanism in philosophy.
- 2) Descartes, as Pascal understands him, is committed to a single method developed from a single *point de depart*: Man is because he thinks, and thinking rightly is a process of logical deduction using "innate ideas" to arrive at "clear and distinct ideas" which in themselves assure one's progress toward ultimate or absolute truth.
- 3) Pascal objects that the self-intuited 'I' of the Cartesian axiom, 'I think, therefore I am' is the wrong place to begin, since the self which Descartes wants to make the foundation of all reasoning is actually a mystery to itself, not a self-sufficient entity capable of explaining itself and all reality as well.

- 4) Pascal is convinced that Descartes' philosophy, wrong in its starting point, cannot provide the security or progress in thinking, which he claims for it.
  - 5) Pascal begins with man thinking, but does not share Descartes' confidence in the power of deductive reasoning to control, retain, and organize whatever thoughts come into our mind.
    - a. Logic is but one of several avenues to the truth. Logic is not on that account to be despised; but it is misused when it is made the sole, sufficient method for obtaining truth. Moreover, logic lacks the pliable and persuasive quality, in short the finesse, needed to get at the most vital matters awaiting human decision here and now.
    - b. In fact, no one model will do, since all human minds do not think in the same way and there is more than one approved path to certainty of knowledge and truth.
  - 6) By attempting to generate a metaphysics out of a method, Descartes does violence not only to philosophy but to Christianity.
  - 7) Why Descartes' philosophy does violence to Christianity is in view of the "little push" in order to get the world started. This is perhaps not a fair criticism of Descartes because God is involved in other ways in his system but Pascal is right to say that Descartes claimed too much for human reason and would not admit its actual illusions and perversions.
  - 8) Pascal went further and said that philosophy is useless because it offers nothing to man at the point of his deepest need and highest hope, and that it is uncertain because it speaks too confidently of matters that are only hypothetical to reason (Kant would share this criticism in view of dogmatism and lack of practical value).
- B. Both agreed on the following issues:
- 1) Philosophy should offer practical guidance in the business of life;
  - 2) Rejection of skepticism;
  - 3) Strong reaction to traditionalism in the sciences.

C. Pascal's habit of thinking in order to do his best in protecting himself against bias or narrow-mindedness is placing alongside one opinion or idea the opposed claim to truth.

- 1) This approach sets up a back-and-forth movement;
- 2) This approach strives for equilibrium, balancing between extremes.
- 3) He is noted to be the first dialectical thinker of the modern period.

"He has what can only be termed a philosopher's faith that whole and unimpaired truth may at least be glimpsed provided we allow part truths, mixed as they are with error, to be brought into critical and complementary relation with each other" (Ibid., 185).

- 4) The underlying Pascalian dialectic is to move the mind beyond mere opposition toward unity. By making philosophical virtue out of commonsense necessity, it brings reason to an impasse out of which there can be no purely rational escape.
- 5) Thought is not only objective but reflexive.
- 6) The presence of the self is in all its thinking; it is inescapable.
- 7) The reflexive process in thought is potentially unlimited.
- 8) Reflection is always mobile and open.
- 9) Reason's last step is to acknowledge that an infinity of truth lies beyond it. Nothing can be more reasonable, therefore, than this disavowal by reason of its own supposed self-sufficiency in relation to truth.
- 10) Pascal believes that reason, like man himself is something, and neither everything nor nothing.
- 11) Pascal does not destroy reason in order to make room for faith, but utilizes reason to prepare for the not unreasonable step of faith.

6. **Pascal's Critical Response to Skepticism: It is contradictory as a philosophy but helpful as a tool. Moreover, *isolating human reason from the rest of man, and then relying on it exclusively, these philosophies fail to reckon with the whole truth about truth.***



- A. He fights Montaigne on this issue because he recognizes its presence in himself.
- B. What he rejects in skepticism is its pretension to finality-denying in advance the possibility of arriving at any truth at all, suspending all judgment indefinitely, making a philosophical virtue out of firm, unyielding doubt.
  - 1) Skepticism becomes a necessary truth is contradictory.
  - 2) One must not simply prove one's proof, one must also doubt one's doubt.

"What amazes me most is that everyone is not amazed at his own weakness.... Nothing strengthens the case for skepticism more than the fact that some are not skeptics; if all were skeptics, skepticism would be wrong" (P. 33).

Peter Kreeft comments:

"If there were no dogmatists, skepticism would have no balloons to stick its pins into and would win no arguments. Only the folly of dogmatism makes for the truth in skepticism. Skepticism of reason de jure is self-contradictory and absurd, for it is a piece of the very thing it destroys: reasoning. But skepticism of reason de facto, that is, skepticism of dogmatic confidence in our reason, is true and right and necessary" [*Christianity for Modern Pagans, Pascal's Pensees: Edited, Outlined, and Explained*, 107].

- C. In order for skepticism to be true at all, skepticism cannot be solely or universally true, for then it would not case to make against reason for engendering contradictions and falsifying reality. Why should he want to make an unjustified position out of clearly justifiable procedure?
  - 1) What is most true about truth is that it infinitely surpasses human instruments and ingenuity for obtaining it [*Blaise Pascal, The Genius of His Thought*, 190].
  - 2) Truth is a matter of order and degree:
  - 3) What is true from one point of view is not so from another.
  - 4) The cause of error lies in not recognizing the order to which a particular truth belongs.
  - 5) The greatness of truth is measured by orders or magnitudes of reality, but still more by the fact that man is infected with untruth.

- 6) Secular philosophies are unable or unwilling to discern the depths of untruth in man's heart.
- a. Isolating human reason from the rest of man, and then relying on it exclusively, these philosophies fail to reckon with the whole truth about truth.*

#### IV. OTHER INSIGHTS:

In his article, "The Inheritance of Montaigne and Descartes," in the *Cambridge Companion to Pascal*, edited by Nicholas Hammond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), Henry Phillips offers the following insights:

- A. Where they most diverge is in their respective positions as religious apologists (*Cambridge Companion to Pascal*, 33).
- B. Though apologetics were not Descartes' prime issue, he did claim to offer, as a philosopher, proofs of God's existence and of the immortality of the soul that would, by their clarity, convince the unbeliever.
- 1) By means of the cogito, Descartes believed that he had defeated skeptics in discovering an idea resistant to doubt, since doubting is a form of thinking which, in the moment even of doubt, proves the existence of the thinking being, and, on the other, that he had proved the immateriality of the soul, since it could not be confused with the extension of things in the material world.
- a. A direct consequence of immateriality was immortality, and argument that seems to respond to Pascal's own thinking.
- 2) Descartes goes further in establishing the existence of God on the basis of the rigorous application of the principles of clearness and distinctness emerging from the cogito, which determines whether an idea is certain and true.
- C. Upshot for Descartes:
- 1) All that be known of God can be shown by reasons drawn from nowhere but ourselves.
- 2) Philosophers are better at demonstrating matters of God and the soul than theologians.

- 3) For Descartes, the clarity and incontrovertible nature of his idea of God stands as a guarantee of the truth of all ideas clearly and distinctly conceived. A clear idea of God is therefore accessible to the human mind and, while revealed truth states as the ultimate authority, can be proved by human reason unaided by divine agency.

**D. Pascal's response:**

- 1. Pensées as a whole can be used to represent a monumental objection.**
- 2. Reason as an instrument in understanding faith is acceptable, but faith in reason is not.**
  - a. Philosophy is a failure, resulting from the false pretension of reason to possess anything like the fixed point Descartes locates in the cogito.**
  - b. In "Disproportion of Man", this fragment demonstrates the inherent incapacity of human reason ever to encompass what there is to know of the universe, and the incapacity of the finite to contain the idea of the infinite.**
  - c. Pascal uses Descartes' concept of the indivisibility of matter as part of a moral lesson against the Cartesian assertion that, through the use of reason, man can reach constancy in the sciences. If man's mind is limited, how can it come to an idea of the nature of God? Descartes bases his confidence in the certainty of human reason on the rigorous application of the right criteria to the construction of our knowledge. For Pascal, competing forces within the moral composition of man put many obstacles in its way: 'Reason never wholly overcomes imagination, while the contrary is quite common'; or, since imagination is the dominant faculty in man, it is 'the master of error and falsehood'. Hence, 'man has no exact principle of truth (Ibid., 35).**
  - d. 'Reasons' 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.'**
  - e. Pascal also states, 'If natural things are beyond it, what are we to say about supernatural things?'**

- f. **Thus, Pascal denies the validity of what Descartes claims to know about God through the agency of human reason.**
4. **Pascal is skeptical that a human level, there are such things as true proofs: 'It is not certain that everything is uncertain.'**
  5. **Whereas Descartes' principles aim has been to defeat, through the cogito, the skeptics' assertion of the impossibility of indubitable knowledge, Pascal asserts in Pensees that we are 'incapable of certain knowledge or absolute ignorance', possessing no fixed point.'**
  6. **For Pascal, Descartes committed a category mistake for putting "I know" for "I believe." This was condemned by St. Augustine.**
  7. **Pascal also claims that we are naturally and immoveably incapable of dealing with any form of knowledge 'in an absolutely accomplished order.'**
  8. **In the end, Descartes' construction are ultimately 'pointless, uncertain, and arduous.'**
  9. **Metaphysical proofs are most harmful for what they omit. When dependent upon philosophical principles and not revealed history. The Christian God is not therefore the God of mathematical truths (for Descartes, God guarantees the truth and certainty of mathematics), but 'the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.'**
  10. **The utter clarity that Descartes claims to place at the heart of his metaphysical proofs runs completely counter to the notion of the Hidden God, that is to say a God who reveals himself only to those who prepared to seek him.**
  11. **"Pascal believed that Cartesian proofs could be held to lead away from rather than back to God" (Ibid., 37). Descartes' proofs encourage people to ignore God. Thus, science is vain.**