

**Blaise Pascal as a Political Thinker: *The Politics of the Knowledge of the Heart***

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Blaise Pascal takes up 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. For example, the noted historian of philosophy Frederick Copleston writes “[Pascal] would probably be better classified as a Christian apologist than as a philosopher.”<sup>1</sup> When his approach to the traditional philosophical questions is examined, he is nevertheless often dismissed as a fideist with no appreciation for human reason. Nietzsche, for example, understood Pascal in this way. In *Beyond Good and Evil* he describes Pascal’s faith as a “protracted suicide of reason”<sup>2</sup> and a “sacrifice of the intellect.”<sup>3</sup> 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.

Writing as an apologist for Christianity, he saw fit to ground his apologetic in a philosophical critique of enlightenment rationalism, which I refer to throughout this paper as “autonomous reason.” Autonomous reason is the view that reason a) operates without reference to the various non-rational influences such as will, intuition, and authority, and b) derives its authority and validity by way of an act of reasoning itself. Pascal’s critique of autonomous reason 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 unaided reason. If this critique is valid, then it can also be understood as a critique of any political philosophy that relies on such a conception of reason. If true, as this paper attempts to demonstrate, it carries significant implications for the history of modern political thought.

### **Descartes’ Autonomous Reason**

Descartes’ training was in scholastic philosophy, which he spent his adult life trying to overturn. In his view, 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 that philosophy had not yet overcome it was a disgrace. Descartes’ novel approach was to face the

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Copleston S.J., *A History of Philosophy, Volume IV: Modern Philosophy: From Descartes to Leibniz*. (New York: Doubleday, 1960) 153.

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. “Beyond Good and Evil.” In *Great Books of the Western World*, Vol. 43, edited by Mortimer J. Adler, translated by R.J. Hollingdale, 458-545. (Toronto: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc.) 1994. Aph. 46. Of course, such a “suicide of reason” was not, in itself, a negative thing, for Nietzsche. Rather, his critique of Pascal concerns the self-inflicted violence that he takes to be at the heart of belief in the supernatural.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

sceptical challenge head-on, follow it through to its conclusion, and to treat whatever knowledge that remained as certain. 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 become the foundation for his post-sceptical system of knowledge.

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, thereby providing man 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. 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, he himself suggests that this is a fair application of his method. Using an 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 the opposite, namely successive builders adding rooms and floors post hoc to an existing structure, happens, the result is a haphazard mess, the product of 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.<sup>4</sup>

This is essentially an argument against tradition, wherein principles of justice are discovered by following his method. In the same way that buildings are best constructed when built upon a

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<sup>4</sup> René Descartes. *Key Philosophical Writings*, edited by Enrique Chavez-Arviso, translated by Elizabeth S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross. (Ware, UK: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1997), 78.

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 epistemology of politics became the foundation of modern constitutionalism, as well as foreign policy objectives such as transplanting democracy and ignoring cultural histories and traditions in lieu of universal principles.

Descartes' concern, then, was the *justification*, and not fundamentally the *content*, of knowledge.<sup>5</sup> 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 without reference to church authority or scholastic philosophy, and in doing so introduced a new conception of reason as autonomous.

### **Hobbes: The Politics of Autonomous Reason**

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. While it is true that the two thinkers disagreed on the specifics of reason, there is one thing they did agree on, namely that the operation of reason – whether the rationalist or empiricist variety – does not depend on any non-rational faculties. 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 relevant similarity with Descartes was his critique of contemporary philosophy and his ensuing solution. 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. Hobbes' modern – and one could say *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.<sup>6</sup>

To philosophize, in Hobbes' view, 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 he calls “dictates of reason...Theoremes concerning what conduceth to the conservation and defence of themselves[i.e., the men who submit to

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<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that a different view of the justification of knowledge will not affect the content of knowledge, but only that Descartes' priority was not necessarily the content itself.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Hobbes. *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 19.

them].”<sup>7</sup> 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.

Being faced with the problem – familiar to Descartes – of gaining reliable knowledge of the external world, and specifically of universal categories, he had to ground his ability to reason in the doctrine of nominalism with respect to universals. However, nominalism is itself an *effect* of his rejection of Aristotelian cosmology, and therefore a product of reason. This means that Hobbesian reason, understood as the faculty of deducing causes and effects, is made possible by his deduction of an effect from a prior cause; it is in this sense that Hobbes adopts a conception of reason as self-verifying.

Knowledge, in his cosmology, begins with sensation. External objects apply pressure to our sense organs, causing them in turn to apply “counter-pressure”<sup>8</sup> 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. “[T]he thing we see,” he writes, “is in one place; the appearance, in another.”<sup>9</sup> 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*, he 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.”<sup>10</sup>

The external object, and indeed the entire universe, no longer contains the proper understanding of itself that 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 objects based on characteristics they share, although there is a subjective element in that men choose which 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.”<sup>11</sup> The study of the effects of motion undermines Aristotelian 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.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, nominalism is also a

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Hobbes. *Leviathan*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 216-217.

<sup>8</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 85.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>10</sup> Hobbes, *Elements of Law*, 23.

<sup>11</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 102.

<sup>12</sup> Hobbes frequently uses effect, result, consequence, and other similar words interchangeably, thus justifying my – albeit crucial – conflation of implication and effect.

cause, bringing about the necessary conditions for reasoning itself. Without his doctrine of nominalism, Hobbes would have no way of deducing the universal laws of nature that are necessary for his political system, since he would have no universal categories to be the subjects of universal laws. With nominalism, however, he can attribute the following power to reasoning:

And thus the consequence found in one particular, comes to be registred and remembred, as an Universall rule; and discharges our mentall reckoning, of time and place; and delivers us from all labour of the mind, saving the first; and makes that which was found true *here*, and *now*, to be true in *all times and places*.<sup>13</sup>

The effect of nominalism is that Hobbesian politics are as universal and inimical of particularities as Cartesian politics. 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, "in all times and places," is such that all men wish to avoid violent death and ensure comfortable self-preservation, so he deduces eighteen laws of nature that, if followed, 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 the *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.

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.

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, with the implication that a critique of Cartesian autonomous reason would be relevant to Hobbes as well.

### **Pascal's Critique of Autonomous Reason**

Many thinkers have attempted to reconstruct Pascal's desired finished apology. The present task is not to add to that discussion, per se, but rather to examine the epistemology

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<sup>13</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 104; his emphasis.

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 reason can or 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 or 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 exegesis, will be largely ignored where they have no bearing on his epistemology.

### **Anthropology**

There are two successive steps in Pascal's argument. The first is his anthropology, and the second is the epistemology that follows from it. 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."<sup>14</sup> 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 his anthropology.

He writes:

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.

[...]

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.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Blaise Pascal. *Pensées*, translated by A.J. Krailsheimer. (London: Penguin Books, 1995), #198; Fragments #198-200 were composed as a complete essay on man, entitled *Homme*. All references to Pascal's *Pensées* will refer to fragment, rather than page, number.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, #199.

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.”<sup>16</sup> 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. 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.”<sup>17</sup>

In such a world, men cannot help but be stricken with existential angst, arising from the aforementioned disproportion between themselves and the world. In some respects, man is 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 is. Peter Kreeft sums this up in his book on Pascal: “[t]he key to all anthropology, for Christianity, is the sentence: ‘You are no longer in the state in which I made you.’”<sup>18</sup>

Post-fall man is plagued by a sense of his wretchedness that manifests itself morally, psychologically, and epistemologically. Of importance here is the epistemological effect of wretchedness, which puts us in a “constant state of deception,”<sup>19</sup> in which imagination deceives reason and masters it at every turn. 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.

This duality of greatness and wretchedness is dealt with by Pascal’s notion of the two natures of man, according to which 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

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Kreeft. *Christianity for Modern Pagans*. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 70.

<sup>19</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, #44.

a lawyer in cap and gown to form a favourable opinion of his competence.”<sup>20</sup> 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 completely misguided. 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.”<sup>21</sup> 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, 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. The strongest argument in favour of scepticism, he 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. The dogmatists respond to this argument by claiming that “we cannot doubt natural principles if we speak sincerely and in all good faith,”<sup>22</sup> 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 weary, namely that “uncertainty as to our origin entails uncertainty as to our nature.”<sup>23</sup> 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.”<sup>24</sup>

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

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<sup>20</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, #44.

<sup>21</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, #93.

<sup>22</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, #131.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

dogmatism represent the whole of all human philosophy, and yet neither has the whole truth about who or what man is.<sup>25</sup> “Who will unravel such a tangle?” Pascal asks. “This is certainly beyond dogmatism and scepticism, beyond all human philosophy.”<sup>26</sup> 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 by affirming the insights of both, and accounting for these two seemingly contradictory claims by supposing that man was originally great but 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.”<sup>27</sup> The fact that we have ideas of truth and bliss that 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.”<sup>28</sup>

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 comprehend.

## Epistemology

The epistemology that follows from all this is given most comprehensively in fragment #110, which engages Descartes directly by attacking his methodological doubt and its rejection of commonsense knowledge. Descartes decision to reject everything that could not be given rational certainty assumes that reason is the only means to knowledge. 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-rational<sup>29</sup> 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

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<sup>25</sup> 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.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Here I have used the designation “pre-rational.” In other contexts, “supra-rational” or “non-rational” may be fitting descriptions.

necessarily end at some point. There must be a premise that is not deduced from another premise; 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 inferred from others. These pre-rational first principles are necessary in order to avoid either begging the question, or assuming an infinite regress of propositions.

As for the experiential necessity of principles outside the domain of reason, there are 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. Harkening back to 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.”<sup>30</sup> 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.”<sup>31</sup>

The error of Descartes and Hobbes was that they only had propositions – that is, they only allowed for statements that could be arrived at through reasoning. Even Descartes’ supposed first principle, the thinking subject, was only accepted 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 him his faculty of reasoning which can “never disclose to us any object which is not true...inasmuch as it apprehends it clearly and distinctively.”<sup>32</sup> That is to say, he affirmed the existence of God as a result of his 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.

Accordingly, the life of reason 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; an 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 allows reason to trust all of its intuitive first principles.

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<sup>30</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, #131

<sup>31</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, #110.

<sup>32</sup> Descartes, *Key Philosophical Writings*, 288.

Just as Descartes' epistemology of autonomous reason flowed naturally into a politics of rational first principles, and Hobbes' universal political principles depend on autonomous reason, 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. He observes that there is no action so horrendous as to never be called virtuous. In truth, there is no such thing as true justice;<sup>33</sup> 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, Cartesian and Hobbesian 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."<sup>34</sup>

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 established law. In fact, Pascal goes as far as to encourage lying to the people to maintain social order.<sup>35</sup> There is 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."<sup>36</sup> In sum, Pascal's critique of rationalist 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.<sup>37</sup>

The argument of this paper has been that Pascal's critique of Descartes is in fact a critique of modern political philosophy, by virtue of its' being based on Cartesian epistemology. Reason, as the early moderns understood it, produces universal and necessary truths, which

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<sup>33</sup> 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." (#60)

<sup>34</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, #60.

<sup>35</sup> 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." (#60)

<sup>36</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, #94.

<sup>37</sup> 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."

naturally lead to a conception of politics in which the same principles of order are equally applicable in all times and places. Whether in the form of Descartes' mathematical deductions from the *cogito*, or Hobbes' "articles of peace" deduced from the nature of man qua man, unaided reason is necessary and sufficient for establishing universal peace and concord among men.

The great irony is that the proponents of the politics of unaided reason themselves could not agree upon the precise character of universal justice. Their inability to reach agreement despite speaking on behalf of universal reason, Pascal's argument maintains, is precisely because they were not actually speaking purely on behalf of universal reason. The philosophers are as subject to human wretchedness and vanity as are the common people, and therefore just as subject to the non-rational influence of desire, habit, and tradition. In fragment #199 Pascal writes, "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' – and, by extension, Hobbes' – claim to have reached pure rational principles; what has actually happened, Pascal reminds us, is that Descartes has 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. In other words, their conviction that they had overcome such dogmatic modes of thought, in which "there is nothing not disputable,"<sup>38</sup> had the tragi-comic effect of leading them to baptize their knowledge of the heart as universal rational truth. Rather than proclaiming their teachings with the wisdom and moderation of Socrates, who was certain only of his own uncertainty, they mistook their *uncertain* and *conditional* knowledge for *certain* and *universal* political principles.

To briefly conclude, it might be useful to anticipate an objection that could plausibly be made against the argument of this paper. It has been argued that Pascal's defense of knowledge of the heart rests on the Christian-Augustinian doctrine of original sin, which doctrine is likely suspect in the eyes of many moderns. The objection could be made that since Pascal's epistemology flows out of his conception of human nature, it is of no use it for those who do not accept that conception. This is not an unfair response, but it nevertheless neglects the fact that Pascal's most concise presentation of his critique of autonomous reason, namely fragment #110, makes no mention of the doctrine of the fall, and only briefly discusses God as the provider of beliefs near the end, and even then only as a *conclusion of* rather than a *premise to* his epistemology. Thus, if one desired, one could conceivably make use of a demythologized Pascal by divorcing his epistemology from his anthropology, while retaining a valuable critique of autonomous reason. Such a critique would start from the fact that logic, by definition, requires a pre-rational first principle – i.e. the knowledge of the heart – and conclude from this that reason is not autonomous, or self-validating, but is in fact inextricably linked to intuition, custom, and other sources of belief.

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<sup>38</sup> Hobbes, *Elements of Law*, 19.

Of course, this account would be significantly weakened – as is any demythologized interpretation of a thinker – in the absence of a metaphysical and historical account of why reason is dependent upon other factors, but it would nevertheless provide a sound defense and vindication of the knowledge of the heart. This should not be taken as a concession of Pascal's phenomenological interpretation of human nature as fallen, which I happen to find quite convincing, but rather as an admonition against the possible temptation to throw the epistemological baby out with the anthropological bathwater.

## Appendix I

*Pensées*, Fragment #110

We know truth, not only by the reason, but also by the heart, and it is in this last way that we know first principles; and reason, which has no part in it, tries in vain to impugn them. The sceptics, who have only this for their object, labour to no purpose. We know that we do not dream, and, however impossible it is for us to prove it by reason, this inability demonstrates only the weakness of our reason, but not, as they affirm, the uncertainty of all our knowledge. For the knowledge of first principles, as space, time, motion, number, is as sure as any of those which we get from reasoning. And reason must trust these intuitions of the heart, and must base them on every argument. (We have intuitive knowledge of the tri-dimensional nature of space and of the infinity of number, and reason then shows that there are no two square numbers one of which is double of the other. Principles are intuited, propositions are inferred, all with certainty, though in different ways.) And it is as useless and absurd for reason to demand from the heart proofs of her first principles, before admitting them, as it would be for the heart to demand from reason an intuition of all demonstrated propositions before accepting them.

This inability ought, then, to serve only to humble reason, which would judge all, but not to impugn our certainty, as if only reason were capable of instructing us. Would to God, on the contrary, that we had never need of it, and that we knew everything by instinct and intuition! But nature has refused us this boon. On the contrary, she has given us but very little knowledge of this kind; and all the rest can be acquired only by reasoning. Therefore, those to whom God has imparted religion by intuition are very fortunate and justly convinced. But to those who do not have it, we can give it only by reasoning, waiting for God to give them spiritual insight, without which faith is only human and useless for salvation.