

A Royal Ruin: Pascal's Argument from Humanity to Christianity

by Douglas Groothuis, Ph.D.

Is it possible to reconcile mankind's dueling capacities for debauchery and greatness? As Dr. Doug Groothuis explains, Pascal saw the Christian worldview as the only plausible explanation for this inner conflict that plagues the human race.

Introspection: Mankind's Specialty

The Bible is God's anthropology rather than man's theology. — Abraham Joshua Heschel¹

We humans often puzzle over our own humanity, scanning our heights and our depths, wondering about and worrying over the meaning of our good and our evil. No other animal reflects on its species like this. Here, and in so many other ways, we stand unique among living creatures. Why does a young student go on a homicidal rampage at Virginia Tech, murdering dozens of innocent people and then killing himself? Why does such evil strike so hard and so erratically?

In spite of these upsurges of human evil, we are also struck by the beauty, courage and genius wrought by human minds, hearts and hands. After every tragedy (on September 11, 2001 or at Virginia Tech), heroes emerge who rescue the living, comfort the dying, and put others above themselves in spontaneous acts of altruism.

Singer-songwriter Bruce Cockburn ponders the complexities and contradictions of humanity in "The Burden of the Angel/Beast" — the distinctively human discomfort with being human and not understanding the origin and meaning of our own humanness:

We go crying, we come laughing.
Never understanding the time we're passing.
Kill for money, die for love.
Whatever was God thinking of?

The meaning of human existence is a question as perennial as it is perplexing. It haunts our songs and our poems, it stalks our relationships, and it troubles our philosophies and religions.

In the 17th century, a young scientific and philosophical genius named Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) marveled at our enigmas and inscrutability:

What sort of freak then is man! How novel, how monstrous, how chaotic, how paradoxical, how prodigious! Judge of all things, feeble earthworm, repository of truth, sink of doubt and error, the glory and refuse of the universe!²

Yet this was no mere marveling. Any worldview worth its rational salt needs to offer a sufficient explanation for both human greatness and debauchery. Pascal goes on: "Man's greatness and wretchedness are so evident that the true religion must necessarily teach us that there is in man some great principle of greatness and some great principle of wretchedness."³

Pascal believed the answers were found in the Bible. We find greatness in humanity because we are made in the divine image (Genesis 1:27). However, that image has been defaced (but not erased) through the fall (Genesis 3; Romans 3). There is something wrong with every aspect of our being, but we remain noble in our origin. There are, to invoke Cockburn again, "rumors of glory" found in humanity.

From the greatness and wretchedness of humanity, Pascal developed an argument for the truth and rationality of Christianity. While his ingenious argument has been reconstructed in more detail elsewhere⁴, we will consider its basic structure, which provides a fruitful point of discussion with seeking and questioning people today.

Two Extremes

The genius of the Christian perspective is that it explains both greatness and misery without exalting one above the other. Our nobility, expressed in the achievements of thought, for example, is due to our divine image. Because of this, we transcend the rest of creation. Yet we abuse our greatest endowments, wasting our God-given skills on trivia and diversions, because we know we will die and do not know what to do about it. We are the corruption of a former original. Pascal says:

The point is that if man had never been corrupted, he would, in his innocence, confidently enjoy both truth and felicity, and, if man had never been anything but corrupt, he would have no idea either of truth or bliss. But unhappy as we are (and we should be less so if there were no element of greatness in our condition) we have an idea of happiness but we cannot attain it. We perceive an image of the truth and possess nothing but falsehood.⁵

In other words, we are royal ruins: We possess some truth, but we cannot rest content in what we naturally know; we feel our own corruption, and in so doing, we realize the human condition is somehow abnormal, flawed and degenerate. In the context of surveying human greatness and misery in many dimensions of life, Pascal says: "It is the wretchedness of a great lord, the wretchedness of a dispossessed king."⁶

In surveying human philosophies and non-Christian religions, Pascal notes that they either exalt humans at the expense of taking seriously their weaknesses or reduce humans to nothing at the expense of their significance. In Pascal's day, many were impressed by the philosophy of the Stoics, who asserted that humans were great in reason and courage and partook of the divine essence of the universe. Yet these Stoics made little allowance for human weakness, cruelty, uncertainty and fragility. Thus, they exalted greatness at the expense of misery.

On the other hand, various skeptics, such as Michel Montaigne (1533-1592), delighted in showing the weakness of human reason and the arrogance of our pretensions. Yet the skeptics downplayed our ability to reason properly and the significance of human achievements in science, art and elsewhere. As Pascal said, they should have been more skeptical of their skepticism.⁷

The New Spirituality, India's Caste System

While the specific writers that Pascal addressed are not commonly discussed today, the tendency either to overrate or underrate humanity is still with us. Many examples abound, but I will briefly inspect one worldview that overrates humanity: the New Spirituality.⁸

The New Spirituality is an amalgamation of ideas drawn from many sources. But whether it is the best-selling book, *The Secret* (hawked by Oprah Winfrey), or the movie, *What the Bleep Do We (K)now!?*, the New Spirituality claims we are divine beings who can tap into unlimited potential through a change in consciousness. (In this way, it is similar to Stoicism.) We are limited not by our sinful condition, but only by negative thought patterns. The "secret" of *The Secret* is "the law of attraction" — we attract good things to ourselves through positive thoughts and negative things to ourselves through negative thoughts.

This blind optimism and inflation of human abilities appeals to our pride and the American "can-do" attitude, but it is radically out of alignment with reality. Yes, humans achieve much of what they conceive, but there are limits. Thought does not create reality *ex nihilo*. Moreover, humans inflict evil on others willfully and repeatedly. We cannot explain this away on the basis of the negative thoughts of those who are victimized.

Consider the untouchables (or Dalits) of India. Their 3,000 years of subjugation by the upper Hindu castes cannot be explained on the basis of low self-esteem among the Dalits. That would be to blame the victim unjustly. Rather, human beings, given their fallen propensity to exalt themselves over others artificially, have unjustly oppressed fellow image-bearers of God for three millennia. "Man's inhumanity to man" is a fact of human history, in India and everywhere else under the sun. Even a "royal ruin" should be able to see that and search for an answer.

Finding a Balance: The Christian Perspective

But the Christian worldview conserves both our greatness and our wretchedness in a profound revelation, something not available to unaided human reason, as Pascal points out:

Know then, proud man, what a paradox you are to yourself. Be humble, impotent reason! Be silent, feeble nature! Learn that man infinitely transcends man, hear from your master your true condition, which is unknown to you. Listen to God.⁹

The biblical account of our creation and fall best fits the facts of human reality. However, we must "listen to God" — that is, attend to what God has spoken in the Bible — to discover this liberating truth.

Pascal further counsels us that the biblical account reveals that there is a Redeemer for royal ruins — Himself, a King, who became a man in order to rescue those who are "east of Eden" and standing at the brink of eternity. Pascal says that in Him we find hope for our deposed condition: "Jesus is a God whom we can approach without pride and before whom we can humble ourselves without despair."¹⁰

Though we are royal ruins, we can find total forgiveness, redemption and eternal life through the one who truly understands our condition. (See John 3:16-18; 10:10; and Romans 5:1-8.)¹¹



Notes

1. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Girox, 1976), p. 412. [Back^](#)
2. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*. Trans. A. J. Krailsheimer. (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 34. [Back^](#)
3. Pascal, p. 46. [Back^](#)
4. See Douglas Groothuis, *On Pascal* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2003), Chapter 8. For a more in-depth treatment, see Douglas Groothuis, "[Deposed Royalty: Pascal's Anthropological Argument](#)," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41/2 (June 1998), pp. 297-313. [Back^](#)
5. Pascal, p. 35. [Back^](#)
6. Pascal, p. 29. For more on Pascal's canvassing of the human condition, see Groothuis, *On Pascal*, Chapter 8. [Back^](#)
7. See Groothuis, *On Pascal*, pp. 65-66. [Back^](#)
8. See my *TrueU.org* article, "[The New Age Worldview: Is It Believable?](#)" [Back^](#)
9. Pascal, p. 35. [Back^](#)
10. Pascal, p. 69; see also Groothuis, *On Pascal*, pp. 90-93. [Back^](#)
11. Pascal's argument summarized in this essay is brilliant and essentially biblical. But for a more balanced and biblical understanding of Christianity as a whole, see John Stott's classic, *Basic Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007). [Back^](#)

About the author

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