

# Deposed Royalty: Pascal's Anthropological Argument

June 30, 2002 by Doug Groothuis

The Bible is God's anthropology rather than man's theology—Abraham Heschel.<sup>1</sup>

Blaise Pascal's antipathy toward classical natural theology—what he called the “metaphysical proofs”—did not hinder his apologetic endeavors.<sup>2</sup> In *Pensées* and elsewhere, Pascal develops several apologetic strategies, including an argument from human nature in support of Christian revelation. He argues that the Christian doctrines of creation and the fall best explain the paradoxes of the human condition and render Christianity worthy of respect. Pascal does not restrict his apologetic endeavors to this argument, but employs it skillfully in order to attract the attention of skeptics and other unbelievers.

Pascal's apologetic orientation is instructive for Western Christians today. Starting an apologetic argument from the point of the human condition is appealing in a psychologized and individualistic culture. While there is much theological illiteracy and philosophical naiveté today, there is also great interest in the soul, human potential, and spirituality. People may doubt the existence of God, the reliability of the Bible, or the deity of Christ, but they know that they exist, and they desire to understand themselves, their pain, and their possibilities.<sup>3</sup>

By examining Pascal's treatment of the contradictions of humanity, his explanation for the human condition, and the form of argument he presents, we can discern the apologetic force of Pascal's anthropological argument for Christianity.

## Human Greatness and Misery

The true religion, Pascal argues, must be able to explain the human condition better than its rivals.

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.<sup>4</sup>

Humans are a curious mixture of widely divergent properties. Science and technology had made tremendous progress in Pascal's day, much of it at his hand; yet truth often escapes the ingenious inventors.<sup>5</sup> This causes Pascal to exclaim:

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!<sup>6</sup>

Pascal presses the incongruous juxtapositions of human life. He is not simply affirming the variety of human experiences, but underscoring the painful condition of being situated between total skepticism and dogmatic rational assurance. Many of the fragments of *Pensées* discuss the ironies and absurdities of this juxtaposition. This serves Pascal's purpose of showing from nature that nature is corrupt, as he puts it.<sup>7</sup> The word "corrupt" is a theologically charged word that implies a fall from grace, but Pascal does not merely assume the fact of human fallenness. He rather explores the human condition in such a way as to suggest that it is a flawed version of an earlier model.

Pascal does not reject reason, experimentation or observation as vain or arrogant in all cases; yet he sees human finitude and cognitive corruption as severely circumscribing the powers of autonomous reason. He affirms that thought exalts humans over nature and says that "all human dignity consists in thought."<sup>8</sup> Pascal also speaks of the fragility of reason, its lack of stamina in the face of external distractions. Though it confers dignity upon humanity, reason is easily thrown off course. We are always subject to nature's ways of disorienting and even effortlessly eradicating us: "a vapor, a drop of water is enough to kill" us.<sup>9</sup>

Pascal makes much of this in connection with his argument that humans are fallen, east of Eden. By this he means that humans were once naturally in concord with themselves, others, nature, and God. Yet through moral transgression against God, humans were banished from such harmonious arrangements and suffered a constitutional corruption that continues today.<sup>10</sup> All of our capacities are defaced, yet not erased. We can conceive of their perfection but must endure their inadequacies. Even the normal operations of human reason are easily derailed by factors beyond our control.

The mind of this supreme judge of the world is not so independent as to be impervious to whatever din may be going on near by. It does not take a cannon's roar to arrest his thoughts; the noise of a weathercock or a pulley will do. Do not be surprised if his reasoning is not too sound at the moment, there is a fly buzzing round his ears; that is enough to render him incapable of giving good advice.<sup>11</sup>

This observation does not undermine the capacity of reason to discern truth any more than inclement weather undermines the ability of a jet aircraft to fly in better conditions. It simply situates reason within the confines of human "wretchedness" and calls humans to ponder this limitation. What is dignified is also easily distracted:

*Thought.* All man's dignity consists in thought, but what is this thought? How silly it is! Thought, then, is admirable and incomparable by its very nature. It must have had such faults to have become worthy of contempt, but it does have such faults that nothing is more ridiculous. How great by its nature, how vile by its faults!<sup>12</sup>

Pascal does not explain in this fragment what these faults are, but he is probably considering the tendency of human thought toward presumption (what he calls "proud reason") and distortion through passion and imagination, as he mentions in another fragment.

Man is obviously made for thinking. Therein lies all his dignity and his merit; and his whole duty is to think as he ought. Now the order of thought is to begin with ourselves, and with our author and our end.

Now what does the world think about? Never about that, but about dancing, playing the lute, singing, writing verse, tilting at the ring, etc., and fighting, becoming king, without thinking what it means to be a king or to be a man.<sup>13</sup>

Those crowned with dignity and honor misuse the very faculty that dignifies them; they divert their attention from ultimate matters through an infatuation with the mundane and the trivial. The greatness is abused, yet still in evidence. The very awareness of wretchedness bespeaks greatness.

Man's greatness comes from knowing he is wretched: a tree does not know it is wretched. Thus it is wretched to know that one is wretched, but there is a greatness in knowing one is wretched.<sup>14</sup>

For Pascal, the recognition of human limitation is a sign of excellence because it reveals a self-consciousness unknown in the nonhuman realm. Even some moral failings reveal a kind of ingenuity that inspires admiration:

*Greatness.* Causes and effects show the greatness of man in producing such excellent order from his own concupiscence.<sup>15</sup>

Man's greatness even in his concupiscence. He has managed to produce such a remarkable system from it and make it the image of true charity.<sup>16</sup>

Pascal does not in these fragments give any examples of what he means, but some come to mind. By "system" Pascal most likely means a culture in which avarice often masquerades as altruism. For instance, a large company may trumpet its contributions to charities (and thus its own virtue), not in order to lift up the poor, but to exalt its own media image for the purpose of maximizing sales. The marketing (propaganda) plan may be ingenious, but the intention is ignoble. Greatness is used for a wretched purpose. An example from the incorrigible Rousseau is also apropos. Historian Paul Johnson notes that

Jean Jacques Rousseau's rhetorical prowess was often employed deceitfully for self-justifying endeavors. Rousseau believed that his level of genius demanded that the world provide him a living. To this end, he would sponge off various wealthy patrons until they found him intolerable and sent the pouting philosopher packing.

Rousseau marked most of his major quarrels by composing a gigantic letter of remonstrance. These documents are among his most brilliant works, miracles of forensic skill in which evidence is cunningly fabricated, history rewritten and chronology confused with superb ingenuity in order to prove that the recipient is a monster.<sup>17</sup>

Rousseau showed intellectual greatness even in his concupiscence. He would have made a superb manager for political campaigns and administrations today.

Despite the greatness of human reason, the opportunities and modalities for deception are legion. Reason is both intrinsically debilitated through the fall and hindered by extrinsic factors that frustrate its aims.<sup>18</sup> Reason can be adversely affected by imagination, illness, self-interest, diversion, misperception, custom, pride, vanity, contrariety (conflicting propensities), the follies of science and philosophy, and human injustice.

Human reason, according to Pascal, has always been limited in that humans are incorrigibly finite knowers who must depend upon God's revelation for knowledge concerning matters of ultimate concern. This was true even in humanity's unfallen estate. However, since the fall, humans do not naturally position themselves as finite knowers epistemically dependent on God as revelator. Rather, they confidently attempt to know the universe autonomously, or—realizing the vanity of this quest—they pessimistically succumb to utter skepticism.

Pascal's reflections on greatness and wretchedness (whether epistemic or otherwise) form an anthropology that appeals to the common facts of human experience, not to the Christian Scriptures. This anthropology does not yield a systematic and scientific assessment of the human species. What Pascal intends to do is to force an anthropological crisis, to point out that humans, when carefully considered, are mysteries even to themselves. Pascal outlines how he desires to foment an anthropological crisis in this fragment.

If he exalts himself, I humble him. If he humbles himself, I exalt him. And I go on contradicting him Until he understands That he is a monster that passes all understanding.<sup>19</sup>

Pascal argues that the mystery of human nature can only be explained if one appeals to the Christian Scriptures, which are to be esteemed as propositional revelation from a personal God.

### **No Consolation from Philosophy**

Pascal claims that merely human philosophies are unable to tell us who we are because they fall into two equal and opposite errors concerning humanity. They either exalt greatness at the expense of wretchedness or they exalt wretchedness at the expense of greatness. This is brought out clearly in a document called “Conversation on Epictetus and Montaigne” that narrates a conversation in which Pascal and a spiritual leader at Port-Royal named M. De Saci discuss the uses of philosophy in the service of Christian faith.

The two representative philosophers are Epictetus and Montaigne, both of whom are admirable in one dimension but imbalanced overall. Epictetus, the Stoic, understands the duties of human beings, the importance of obedience to God, and the virtue of humility. Nevertheless, Epictetus errs in thinking that people can live up to the standards he lays down, and so falls into “diabolic pride” that leads him into such errors as thinking the soul is divine and suicide is permissible.<sup>20</sup>

Montaigne, on the other hand, is a skeptic and a tonic for “proud reason.” His extended reflections on human ignorance and the quandaries of reason serve to deflate the hollow rationalism of the excessively confident. Pascal confesses his joy that Montaigne uses “proud reason” against itself to reveal its own insufficiencies.<sup>21</sup> Yet Montaigne, like the complacent Stoic, advises that, in the face of skeptical considerations, we remain uncommitted and not search for an unattainable truth or good. He thus exalts human wretchedness by opting for unassailable skepticism.

Each system of thought contains a truth negated by the other. Stoicism conserves greatness and rejects wretchedness, thus lapsing into presumption and pride. Skepticism conserves wretchedness and rejects greatness, thus lapsing into despondency. Even though it appears that “there would be formed from their alliance a perfect system of morals,”<sup>22</sup> the two systems of thought cannot be synthesized by selecting compatible elements from each system. This is because Stoicism promotes certainty, while skepticism promotes doubt; Stoicism argues for the greatness of humanity, and skepticism argues for the weakness of humanity. Given this incompatibility, each system “would destroy the truths as well as the falsehoods of each other.”<sup>23</sup> Neither system can stand alone because of its one-sidedness, nor can the two systems unite because of their mutually exclusive presuppositions. Each view contradicts the other while, nevertheless, offering partial truths reconcilable only through another anthropology entirely: that provided by the

Christian doctrine of creation and the fall. “Thus they break and destroy each other to give place to the truth of the Gospel.”<sup>24</sup>

Pascal does not exhaust the philosophical options for anthropology, but calls into question two views that were very appealing to those in seventeenth century France who were rediscovering pagan philosophy; variations of these views are with us today. Pascal’s argument is twofold. First, neither view fully accounts for the human condition as one of both misery and greatness in both the ethical and epistemic dimensions. Second, a synthesis of the pagan views is not possible either, thus excluding another purely philosophical move. Pascal offers a *tertium quid*. He wants to open up the discourse to an explanation that transcends any human philosophical system--one that is beyond, but not against, unaided reason.<sup>25</sup>

### **Transcending Human Philosophy**

Pascal believes the Gospel harmonizes the contradictions “by a wholly divine act”<sup>26</sup> that unites the respective truths and expels all falsehood; it thus creates “a truly celestial wisdom in which these opposites” are brought together conceptually in a way unknown to merely “human doctrines.”<sup>27</sup> The problem with the philosophers is that they placed contrary descriptions on the same subject; one said human nature was great, the other that it was wretched. However, both predicates cannot obtain of the same subject universally. Yet biblical revelation (and not unaided reason) tells us that we should attribute all wretchedness to our fallen nature and all that is great to grace, which Pascal says in *Pensées* is dimly felt as our original nature. This is the innovation that only God could teach. We need not attribute contradictory predicates to the same subject. Humans have a *dual nature* of a kind not proposed by the philosophers. Human nature has fallen from a previous state that is now unattainable, but which is yet recognizable even in the ruins of humanity. We are not completely corrupted; we are not purely great. Neither do we have two souls: one good, one evil. Pascal observes:

Man’s dualism is so obvious that some people have thought he had two souls:  
Because a simple being seemed to them incapable of such great and sudden variations, from  
boundless presumption to appalling dejection.<sup>28</sup>

This contradictory state of affairs has “amazed all mankind, and split them into such different schools of thought.”<sup>29</sup> There is something deeply mysterious about human nature if it is capable of generating so many diverse--and sometimes logically incompatible--interpretations by philosophers. Although we seldom puzzle over the behavior of pets, though they might amuse us, we often find other people’s actions to be

unexpected if not indecipherable. A best friend may risk his life for you only to betray you for personal advantage at a later time. What accounts for such “contradictions”?

Pascal is offering a revelatory solution to this anthropological crisis. It is an answer that invokes ideas alien to autonomous thought; yet Pascal believes that these concepts better explain the human condition than do competing views. If we grant the theological concepts of creation and fall, the human landscape is illuminated to a greater degree than if we deny them. To delineate the theological notion of the fall, Pascal narrates from God’s perspective:

But you are no longer in the state in which I made you. I created man holy, innocent, perfect, I filled him with light and understanding, I showed him my glory and my wondrous works. Man’s eye then beheld the majesty of God. He was not then in the darkness that now blinds his sight, nor subject to death and the miseries that afflict him. But he could not bear such great glory without falling to presumption. He wanted to make himself his own centre and do without my help. He withdrew himself from my rule, setting himself up as my equal in his desire to find happiness in himself, and I abandoned him to himself. The creatures who were subject to him I incited to revolt and made his enemies, so that today man has become like the beasts, and is so far apart from me that a barely glimmering idea of his author alone remains of all his dead or flickering knowledge.<sup>30</sup>

Pascal then speaks of humans retaining some “feeble instinct from the happiness of their first nature” despite the “the wretchedness and concupiscence, which has become their second nature.”<sup>31</sup> This dual nature explains the contradictions that the philosophers could not reconcile.

We can liken this condition to the batting swing of a fifty-year-old Reggie Jackson. The odds are that even years after retiring from baseball, his swing is still smooth and crisp--although probably incapable of hitting a pitch by a major league pitcher. There are “rumors of glory”<sup>32</sup> even today; for Reggie was not always fifty years old. To say that he was always in his present state is to emphasize misery at the expense of greatness; to say that he is not now far beyond his prime is to emphasize greatness at the expense of misery.

Of course, in the case of a Reggie Jackson we have more than a dim recollection of former greatness; it is a matter of uncontroversial, historically verifiable fact. The case for human fallenness is not this kind of claim; it cannot be verified historically (apart from the biblical texts). It is, rather, a theological postulate used to explain historical phenomena. Pascal stipulates that the true religion must explain human nature if it is to be credible. The principle of greatness is the original, unfallen state; the principle of wretchedness is the fall into sin and away from God. Pagan philosophies, Pascal proposes, founder at this point--and offer us no hope for a solution, either philosophically or existentially.

In advancing the fall as an explanation for a perplexing situation, Pascal enlists a principle that accords with his notion of humans having lost a former glory: namely, the principle that we cannot miss what we never had. Our present state of corruption is only miserable because of a previous incorruption enjoyed by the species. He 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.<sup>33</sup>

All these examples of wretchedness prove his greatness. It is the wretchedness of a great lord, the wretchedness of a dispossessed king.<sup>34</sup>

Pascal further asks, “Who would indeed think himself unhappy not to be king except one who had been dispossessed?”<sup>35</sup> No one, avers Pascal, is unhappy because he has but one mouth; but someone with only one eye is unhappy. No one is distressed at not having three eyes, but those with none suffer greatly. In other words, unhappiness comes from being deprived of what we are accustomed to having or what is natural to possess.

However, people do complain about the lack of faculties that no human now possesses and which are not a part of Pascal’s understanding of unfallen human nature. Consider the wish to fly or the yearning to have political power that one has never lost. Pascal might respond that the longing for what one never had is not as acute as the suffering associated with deprivation. But whether this is so may differ from person to person. One person may suffer for years because he lacks the athletic prowess to become a professional basketball player while a professional basketball player may suffer for only a short time after having to retire early because of a serious injury. One person could suffer badly over what he never had, and another suffer less severely over what he lost.

Pascal might also respond that the grandiose wish to fly or have other powers not possessed even by our first parents before the fall is generated precisely because we are not content with the diminished capacities of our fallen nature. Adam and Eve in paradise were content not to fly because the pre-fallen earth was not so inhospitable. Pascal might credibly argue that if one’s natural capacities are functioning without defect, there would be no yearning for the extra-normal. In this case, the seemingly extravagant desires for superhuman powers can be seen as issuing from the loss of our original nature that did not involve superhuman powers at all.

What, then, is the force of Pascal's case? Pascal's observations concerning the reason for human misery should not be isolated from his total apologetic on human nature. He is merely emphasizing that people often suffer more acutely from goods lost than from the lack of goods never possessed. He then uses this as an illustration of the truth of his postulate about human fallenness: we retain some inkling of a former state of incorruption and we suffer over the loss of using our powers perfectly, even if we do not necessarily identify that situation in this manner.

### **Pursuing the Best Explanation**

To further defend his anthropological argument, Pascal must defend three claims: (1) that the construal of humanity as having a "dual nature" is intellectually cogent; (2) that the human condition even needs to be explained; (3) that the answer provided by the doctrines of humans being made God's image and of original sin are convincing.

First, in order for his argument to get off the ground, Pascal needs to describe the human condition in a way that makes sense. I suggest that his analysis of the greatness and wretchedness of humanity rings true, and that this, at least in part, explains the continuing interest in Pascal. He holds before us a mirror that reflects the whole person in its bewildering contrariety and in a wide range of circumstances. Martin Warner notes that the power of Pascal's

fragments on the human condition lies partly in the precision of observation and partly in their range and scope that provide a cumulative effect. In epistemology, psychology, ethics, politics, the law, and even such matters as choice of career, Pascal attempts to show that an honest and accurate account of the facts requires concepts which invite interpretation in terms of man's "wretchedness" ("misere") or "greatness" ("grandeur") or, more often, of the tension between the two.<sup>36</sup>

Pascal strikes several nerves that combine to register uncommon insights into human nature. These varied observations and judgments have a cumulative effect. No one reflection demonstrates the Christian position; but many mutually reinforcing reflections suggest a reevaluation of one's non-Christian perspective.

Second, even if we grant that Pascal's description of the human condition is poignant and rings true to experience, the intractable skeptic could simply grant that human life is full of contradictions and conundra that transcend our rational ability to explain them. Why do we need to explain them at all, especially when

this involves unverifiable metaphysics? Why should we force an anthropological crisis when life is difficult enough already?

Pascal wants to go beyond the nonchalant skepticism that is content to chronicle human folly and leave it at that. He wants to offer a compelling explanation that is both existentially appealing and rationally credible. Pascal asks if the subject matter at hand is worthy of reflection. It is the very marrow of our existence, as is highlighted when Socrates queries in the *Phaedrus*: “Am I a monster more complicated and swollen with passion than the serpent Typho, or a creature of simpler, gentler nature, partaking of something divine?”<sup>37</sup> Philosophers and sages throughout the ages have counseled us to know ourselves, and while their answers to the question of human nature have drastically differed, the question remains.

In evaluating “the philosophers,” Pascal says that because they “do not know what your true good is, nor what your true state is,” they could not “provide cures for ills which they did not even know.”<sup>38</sup> Ignorance or misunderstanding of one’s condition can easily result in poor or even tragic advice, as when a doctor advises the wrong treatment for a serious disease. Pascal may in some sense agree with the skeptic that humans are great and miserable. The skeptic wants to end the discussion at this point. To this, Pascal argues that a mere survey of the anthropological and psychological facts is not sufficient. We need to push beyond this and seek to know something of our origin and nature if we are to have any hope of self-understanding, religious insight, spiritual renewal, or moral improvement.

Pascal can also argue on the skeptic’s grounds that the diversions into which he would flee are ultimately unsatisfying. They may temporarily distract one from grim realities, but the “hollow darkness”<sup>39</sup> that remains cannot be healed on its own terms or according to its own resources. This is why diversion never finally delivers peace. Furthermore, Pascal is not describing the human situation as fallen without remedy; his analysis anticipates a solution to the problem through the Incarnation, a doctrine that presupposes and addresses humanity’s dual nature. Pascal’s aphorism captures this: “Jesus is a God we can approach without pride and before whom we can humble ourselves without despair.”<sup>40</sup>

This prospect of life and hope should further spark one’s prudential interest in the issue. There may be hope for restoration. But one must flee diversion to investigate that possibility. Diversion

prevents us from thinking about ourselves and leads us imperceptibly to destruction. But for that we should be bored, and boredom would drive us to seek some more solid means of escape, but diversion passes our time and brings us imperceptibly to our death.<sup>41</sup>

Put metaphorically, “We run heedlessly into the abyss after putting something in front of us to stop us seeing it.”<sup>42</sup>

Pascal cannot force someone to seek an explanation for the human condition anymore than the most zealous political activist can force an apolitical friend to join the cause or register to vote. But he can ask the skeptic to view the world from a different angle in order to see if that view is better able to reconcile conflicting descriptions and illuminate the human landscape. If it does make sense, Pascal argues, this is only because the answer comes from beyond the scope of unaided reason.

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.<sup>43</sup>

By speaking of the indications of human greatness and misery in a number of contexts, Pascal is inducing us to understand human nature from a different vantage point, to interpret it in a novel way. Through these ruminations he hopes that a new insight will flash upon us: that we are deposed royalty. This perspective does not force itself on us; it emerges through reflection. Pascal urges us to look into ourselves to observe the greatness and the misery: “Follow your own impulses. Observe yourself, and see if you do not find the living characteristics of these two natures.”<sup>44</sup>

An example might clarify his project. Suppose you come across a perplexing painting in an art gallery. It is difficult to evaluate aesthetically because it shows marks of brilliance as well as serious defects. As long as you study the painting strictly according to appearances, you remain stymied. Why is there both brilliance and defect? Why would the painter combine such features so oddly? Later a guide in the art gallery informs you that this was painted by a great master, but that it suffered corruption through mistreatment by thieves. You then begin to see the same painting from a new vantage point. The greatness of the original creation is now clearly revealed (even though you cannot see its original greatness), as is the corruption. The background information, not deducible from the painting alone, explains the mystery of the painting. One can now see the same picture with new insight, with a fuller awareness. Pascal is making a similar claim. To truly understand human nature, humans must see themselves in an ultimately theological framework.<sup>45</sup>

Pascal faces a third challenge to his anthropological argument. He is not unaware of the difficulties with the doctrines of the fall and of original sin. He embraces these difficulties in an interesting fragment that describes his anthropological angle quite clearly.

Original sin is folly in the eyes of men, but it is put forward as such. You should not reproach me for the unreasonable nature of this doctrine, because I put it forward as being unreasonable. But the folly is wiser than all men's wisdom, it is wiser than men 1 Cor. 1:25. For without it, what are we to say man is? His whole state depends on this imperceptible point. How could he have become aware of it through his reason, seeing that it is something contrary to reason and that his reason, far from discovering it by its own methods, draws away when presented with it?<sup>46</sup>

Despite the "offensive" quality of this doctrine, Pascal embraces it because of its explanatory power.

Certainly nothing jolts us more rudely than this doctrine, and yet, but for this mystery, the most incomprehensible of all, we remain incomprehensible to ourselves. The knot of our condition was twisted and turned in that abyss, so that it is harder to conceive of man without this mystery than for man to conceive of it himself.<sup>47</sup>

By "incomprehensible to ourselves," Pascal has in mind the "contradictions" of humanity, the strange juxtapositions and conflicts of greatness and misery. The doctrine of sin may leave us with unanswered questions about why God allowed corruption to enter his creation, but it nevertheless fits the facts as we observe them: humans show signs of being both royal and wretched. In light of this, the doctrine is not intrinsically unreasonable, but is the most reasonable way to explain the human condition.

A critic may suggest that one mystery can never explain another; it only multiplies the confusion. To answer this complaint, we can compare Pascal's argument with certain kinds of explanatory hypotheses. Consider criminal detective work. Many seemingly inexplicable factors in crimes can be understood by granting that the agent of these acts was a deranged murderer. For instance, when Ted Bundy was found to be guilty of numerous homicides, these homicides were explained. A pattern could be detected in his evil actions. It may be mysterious why Ted Bundy--an intelligent, attractive, and capable person--would become a mass murderer (the greatness and misery issue is also writ large); but many facts can be explained after he is identified as the murderer. Mysteries remain, but mysteries also explain.

Pascal himself calls the doctrine of original sin "an offense to reason." Yet he deems it a mystery that explains the puzzle of the human condition, because without this mystery we remain incomprehensible to ourselves. If we want to decrease the mystery, explain our lot, and find hope for redemption, Pascal claims that we should invoke the theological categories of creation, fall, and Incarnation.

This argumentative strategy chimes in with an observation by G.K. Chesterton that "the whole secret of mysticism is this: that man can understand everything by the help of what he does not understand."<sup>48</sup> (By "mysticism" Chesterton means Christian theism, not mystical experience in any technical sense.) His point,

although made in another connection, is that the mysterious can have great explanatory power. He goes on to state that the Christian “put the seed of dogma in a central darkness; but it branches forth in all directions with abounding natural heath.”<sup>49</sup> The fall of humanity is admittedly difficult to fathom; however, once it is admitted into one’s worldview, the enigmas of the human condition are explained and the human landscape is illuminated as never before. Chesterton compares this explanatory situation to our vision in relation to the sun:

The one created thing which we cannot look at is the one thing in the light of which we look at everything. Like the sun at noonday, mysticism explains everything else by the blaze of its own victorious invisibility.<sup>50</sup>

### **The Abductive Argument: The Best Explanation**

We have discussed Pascal’s reflections as an incentive to view the human condition from a different perspective. These reflections employ a particular logical form of argument. His argumentation is neither inductive nor deductive, nor is it merely a fideistic theological assertion. Rather, it is an appeal to a compelling explanation, a postulate that illuminates material not otherwise as intelligible or significant. This is called abduction. C.S. Peirce, following a lead given by Aristotle, explained it this way:

The surprising fact, C, is observed. But if A were true, C would be a matter of course. Hence, there is reason to suspect that A is true.<sup>51</sup>

A deductive argument proceeds from the general to the particular; its conclusion must be true if its premises are true. The conclusion of an inductive argument is probable given proper inductive procedures that proceed from the particular to the general. An abductive argument, according to Peirce, “merely suggests that something may be.”<sup>52</sup> In the case of Pascal’s argument, the “surprising fact” is the contradictory nature of humanity. What renders this condition a “matter of course” is human fallenness; we are deposed royalty vainly questing after a lost throne beyond our mortal grasp.

This kind of argument is often used in scientific theorizing and in courts of law. If astrophysicists are attempting to explain the origin of the moon or some other satellite or planet, they cannot conduct inductive experimentation to repeat the original process. Neither is deduction available. Instead, they attempt to survey the available data about the moon and its surroundings and postulate an explanation for its existence and nature. In court cases, various kinds of evidence are arrayed in support of a judgment concerning the guilt or innocence of the party on trial. One accused of larceny must give a better explanation of his whereabouts during the crime in question than does the prosecutor.

If this kind of reasoning is common, useful, and acceptable in other contexts, its use in the philosophy of religion should not be excluded. In the claim about human fallenness, Pascal adduces a wide array of factors that he argues are best explained by the postulate of original sin. This approach helps him avoid the fallacy of affirming the consequent, which states:

1. If A, then B
2. B is true
3. Therefore, A is true.

The following illustrates this fallacy:

1. If it rains, the grass will be wet.
2. The grass is wet.
3. Therefore, it rained.

Of course, the grass might have gotten wet in a number of other ways, such as the morning dew, a water sprinkler, a fire hose, etc. It may have rained, but other explanations are also readily available. This error lies in failing to recognize a possible plurality of causes for one effect.

The logical situation changes, however, when a postulate helps explain a broad variety of relevant phenomena. If we say that A implies B1, B2, B3, etc., and we find B1, B2, B3, etc. to obtain, then A becomes quite plausible. In other words, if we say that if it rains: (1) the grass will be wet, (2) the sidewalk will be wet, and (3) the roads will be slippery, and we can verify these conditions, then the rain-explanation becomes more tenable than if, say, only one possible implication of rain were to occur.<sup>53</sup> The explanation is not impregnable, because falsifying instances are imaginable and other explanations might claim to better account for the facts more fully.

Rendering an explanation cogent through abductive reasoning and defending it against the fallacy of affirming the consequent is not a simple matter of multiplying the *quantity* of confirming instances. If this were so, we could argue:

1. If it rains, blades of grass 1 through 10,000 on my lawn will be wet.
2. Blades 1 through 10,000 are wet.
3. Therefore, it rained.

This argument is hardly convincing because the items in the consequent (wet blades of grass) are not extensively distributed over a *relevant range* of confirmatory phenomena, as was the case in the earlier example of diverse data confirming the occurrence of rain. In making the abductive argument that his rendering of the human condition is the best explanation for the phenomena at hand, Pascal appeals to a wide and diverse variety of relevant anthropological confirmations.

## **Conclusion: A Treatment for Unbelief**

Pascal argues that the claim of divine revelation solves the riddle of the human condition by providing a compelling theological explanation to a philosophical and existential conundrum. It states that humans are: (1) wretched because fallen; (2) great because of their unfallen origin and the vestiges of it; and (3) redeemable through the Incarnation. Pascal observes the human condition from a number of angles, crafts a cumulative and abductive case for his revelational anthropology, and challenges any other worldview to better explain the human condition. In a long fragment focused on the anthropological argument, Pascal throws down the gauntlet after specifying the need to explain the human condition and supply a concrete hope: “Let us examine all the religions of the world on that point and let us see whether any but the Christian religion meets it.”<sup>54</sup> This paper has not attempted such a systematic and comprehensive exercise in comparative anthropology (although mention was made of the problems of autonomous philosophy in this regard), but the rudiments of the Christian case can be applied to any potential rival on a case-by-case basis.

Pascal never systematically formulated his anthropological argument, given the fragmentary nature of *Pensées* and the brevity of his treatment of the subject elsewhere. However, the materials bequeathed to us should challenge Christian apologists to develop and apply this creative and fruitful argument in defense of the Christian faith. Pascal observes that sinful people “despise religion” and “are afraid it may be true.”

The cure for this is first to show that religion is not contrary to reason, but worthy of reverence and respect. Next make it attractive, make good men wish it were true, and then show that it is. Worthy of reverence because it really understands human nature. Attractive because it promises true good.<sup>55</sup>

The task of the Christian apologist is to argue effectively that the good, the true, and the attractive uniquely cohere in the Christian worldview. Pascal’s anthropological argument is a pertinent means to that noble end.<sup>56</sup>

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Abraham Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Girox, 1976), 412.

<sup>2</sup> On Pascal’s rejection of natural theology see Douglas Groothuis, “Are Theistic Arguments Religiously Useless? A Pascalian Objection Examined,” *Trinity Journal* 15 NS, no 2 (Fall 1994):147-161; Douglas Groothuis, “Proofs, Pride, and Incarnation: Is Natural Theology Theologically Taboo?” *Journal of the*

*Evangelical Theological Society*, March 1995, 67-76; and Douglas Groothuis, "Pascal's Biblical Omission Argument Against Natural Theology," *Asbury Theological Journal* 52, no.2 (Fall 1997):17-26.

<sup>3</sup> On this, see Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983-85), 457-58.

<sup>4</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. with an introduction by A.J. Krailshaimer (New York: Penguin, 1966), 149/430. The first number refers to the Lafuma enumeration; the second number to the older Brunschvicg system.

<sup>5</sup> For more on this see, Douglas Groothuis, "Bacon and Pascal on Mastery Over Nature," *Research in Philosophy and Technology* 14 (1994): 191-203.

<sup>6</sup> Pascal, 131/434.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 6/60.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 200/347.

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

<sup>10</sup> Although Pascal undoubtedly believed in a literal first human couple specially created by God by a direct supernatural act, his insights about the fall of humans can be accommodated by less literal interpretations. All that one needs to conserve Pascal's point is that the first humans (however they came about) in the distant past transgressed God's way of life, fell from grace into corruption, and that this corruption has been passed down to successive generations who experience the same alienation and disharmony recorded in Genesis chapter 3. For a modern theistic evolutionary understanding of the fall which is conversant with and appreciative of modern science see Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1954), 214-242. For the progressive creationist (old earth) view see Hugh Ross, *Creation and Time* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1994); and Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987-1994) 2:17-68. I favor the latter view, which should not be confused with theistic evolution or Deism.

<sup>11</sup> Pascal, 48/366.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 756/365.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 620/146.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 114/397

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 106/403.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 118/402.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Johnson, *Intellectuals* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 14.

<sup>18</sup> To explore Pascal's understanding of the corruption of reason, see Terence D. Cuneo, "Combating the Noetic Effects of Sin: Pascal's Strategy For Natural Theology," *Faith and Philosophy* 11, no. 4 (October 1994), especially, 645-47.

<sup>19</sup> *Pascal*, 130/420.

<sup>20</sup> Blaise Pascal, "Conversation with M. De Saci on Epictetus and Montaigne," in *Blaise Pascal, Thoughts*, ed. Charles W. Eliot (New York: P.F. Collier and Son Company, 1910), 392.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 400.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 403.

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

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

<sup>25</sup> See *Pascal, Pensées*, 173/273; 174/270; 185/265; 188/267.

<sup>26</sup> *Pascal*, "Conversation," 403.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Pascal, Pensées*, 629/417.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 149/430.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *This phrase is taken from Bruce Cockburn's song "Rumors of Glory" from the album, Humans (1980).*

<sup>33</sup> *Pascal, Pensées, 131/434.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 116/398.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 117/409.

<sup>36</sup> *Martin Warner, Philosophical Finesse (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 176.*

<sup>37</sup> *Plato, Phaedrus, 230a.*

<sup>38</sup> *Pascal, Pensées, 149/430.*

<sup>39</sup> *This phrase is taken from a song by Bruce Cockburn called "Justice" from the album Inner City Front (1981).*

<sup>40</sup> *Pascal, Pensées, 212/528.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 414/171.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 166/183.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 131/434.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 149/430.

<sup>45</sup> *See Geddes MacGregor, Introduction to Religious Philosophy (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959), 142-43. I have adapted his illustration somewhat.*

<sup>46</sup> *Pascal, Pensées, 695/445.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 131/434.

<sup>48</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1959), 28.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>51</sup> Charles Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss, 6 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-35), B, 69a; quoted in Warner, 25. This abductive method was employed by the evangelical apologist Edward John Carnell throughout his writings. Gordon R. Lewis refers to this strategy as “verificationism.” See his *Testing Christianity’s Truth Claims* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1976), 176-284.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> See D. Elton Trueblood, *Philosophy of Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1957), 63-64.

<sup>54</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, 149/430.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 12/187.

<sup>56</sup> My appreciation goes to David Werther and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis for their helpful comments on this paper.

(Originally published in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41, no. 2 (June 1998): 297-312.)