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the Rule of Reason**

Edited by John C. McCarthy

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5 Pascal on Certainty and Utility¹

JOHN C. MCCARTHY

In what was to have been *An Apology for the Christian Religion*, but has come down to us as the *Pensées*, Pascal writes "Descartes: useless and uncertain."² This mordant dismissal of the father of modern philosophy is reminiscent of Descartes's treatment of his predecessors. Just as the teacher of the *cogito* rarely mentions the ancient and medieval traditions he openly seeks to replace, so Pascal leaves largely unstated the substance of his quarrel with Descartes: there are perhaps a dozen explicit references to his opponent in the entire oeuvre of Pascal. Little wonder, then, that Pascal's relation to Descartes should so frequently have been a subject of scholarly concern.

The principal reason for Descartes's hesitation to speak at length against his foes was his desire to avoid controversy, which would have impeded both his inauguration of his project and the public's acceptance and execution of it.³ The relative absence of philosophic disputation in

1. This essay is a revised version of "Pascal on Uncertainty and Utility," originally published in *Interpretation* 22 (1994-1995): 247-69.

2. *Pensées sur la religion et sur quelques autres sujets*, ed. Louis Lafuma (Paris: Editions du Luxembourg, 1951), vol. 1, *Textes*, fragment 887. All further references to the *Pensées* will employ Lafuma's enumeration, together with the corresponding fragment number in the Brunschvicg edition (in the present instance, 78). Translations of Pascal are my own.

3. See *Discours de la méthode*, 5th ed., ed. Etienne Gilson (Paris: J. Vrin, 1976), 23, 41, 60, 66, 68, and 75. For an English translation, see *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (henceforth PW), 2 vols., trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1.123, 131-32, 141-42, 144-45, 146, and 149. That Descartes adopted Ovid's motto, *Bene vixit bene qui latuit*, is sometimes noticed, but seldom brought to bear on Cartesian studies. Also suggestive is the letter to Mersenne of April 1634, in *Oeuvres* (henceforth AT), ed. C. Adam and P. Tannery (Paris: Cerf, 1897-1913), 1.286, and the letter to Regius of 1642, AT 3.491-510. For English translations, see *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 3, *The Correspondence* (henceforth PWC), trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, and A. Kenny (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 42-44, 205-9. For an iconoclastic presentation of Descartes's art of writing, consider Hiram Caton's "Analytic History of Philosophy: The Case of Descartes," *Philosophical Forum* 12 (1981): 273-94. A more scholarly assessment is provided by Louis E. Loeb's "Is There Radical Dissimulation in Descartes' *Meditations*?" in *Essays on Descartes' "Meditations"*, ed. A. O. Rorty (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of

the *Pensées* would appear to be due to more accidental considerations. As is well known, chronic illness and an untimely death prevented Pascal from realizing his designs for that work. On the other hand, we learn from his sister, Gilberte Périer, that Pascal came to distrust eristic. Despite his youthful delight in polemics, so evident in *Les provinciales*, he seems to have concluded that his talent for the art could not be made to serve his most serious dialectical intentions.⁴ There is, moreover, ample evidence from the *Pensées* itself that Pascal thought it necessary to make his case to the nonbelievers by indirection. The orderless order that has resulted (532/373) suggests the following methodological principle. The fragments he bequeathed to posterity must not be read in a fragmentary way; so far as is possible, each is to be interpreted in the light of all the rest.⁵ Accordingly, we are compelled to consult a wide range of texts should we desire to make sense of those few explicitly devoted to Descartes. A reconstruction of Pascal's brief against Cartesian philosophy is unavoidable.

No competent reader would question the necessity of approaching the various parts of the *Pensées* with an eye to the whole they mean to serve. Still, opinion is far from unanimous as to how Pascal's case against Descartes is to be understood. In the main, scholars agree that Pascal's intention was fundamentally anti-Cartesian. Some have argued, however, that Pascal was closer to Descartes than he, Pascal, may have realized; and this argument has engendered a variety of claims about the degree of their kinship. The scholarly debate, which has gone on for the better part of a century, has yielded numerous helpful precisions, but shows scant signs of resolution. One might be tempted to blame this lack of accord on the indeterminate character of the "thoughts" Pascal bequeathed to us, which would be to say that the matter is irresolvable. A safer explanation (cf. 257/684) is at hand, however: students of Pascal have often been too quick to assume familiarity with Descartes's philosophic intentions, such that the range and depth of Pascal's dispute with him could

California Press, 1986), 243-70. David R. Lachterman, *The Ethics of Geometry: A Genealogy of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 1-7, conjectures that the reasons for Descartes's reticence about his predecessors are not prudential or tactical merely, but concern the very substance of his teaching: what purports to be radically new cannot appear to constitute itself through a rejection of that which it claims to have superseded.

4. For his sister's witness, see "La vie de Monsieur Pascal," in Blaise Pascal, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Jacques Chevalier (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1954), 19; cf. 773/135. All references to writings of Pascal other than the *Pensées* will be to this edition, and will be cited by page number.

5. See 199/72, 784/23. For further clues to Pascal's art of writing, see *Pensées* 55/111, 91/336, 308/793, 529/105, 542/370, 584/15, 606/22, 701/9, 737/10, 798/41, 927/505, and 933/460; also see "Fragment d'une lettre," 525-26, and "De l'art de persuader," 594-602.

not help but be obscured. Neglect of Descartes's reflections concerning the end of his philosophy ensured that many readers of Pascal would miss much of his indictment against Cartesian "utility." Similarly, when commentators failed fully to grasp the revolutionary character of Descartes's "method," loss of precision regarding Cartesian "certainty" was inevitable, such that Pascal's objections to it would not be thoroughly considered. In short, comparisons of Pascal and Descartes have, typically, understated Descartes's disagreement with his opponents, which has meant that many fragments of the *Pensées* relevant to Pascal's stance toward his compatriot have been overlooked. In sum, the extent to which Pascal calls Descartes's philosophic revolution into question has not been sufficiently appreciated.⁶

There should never have been the least doubt about the sweep of Pascal's wry remark. "Utility" and "certainty" are the two watchwords of Descartes's most programmatic writing, the *Discourse on the Method*. Indeed, if Hegel is correct, they stamp the whole of the "Enlightenment" Descartes helps inaugurate.⁷ Surely Pascal means to condemn Cartesianism root and branch. But in order to evaluate that condemnation we must confront yet a third difficulty, one rarely broached, besides the fragmentary and indirect style of the *Pensées*, and the need for an accurate understanding of the position Pascal opposes. From first to last, the *Pensées* is stamped by Pascal's experience of Christianity, which is to say that

6. The literature on this question is too extensive to list here. Michel Le Guern, *Pascal et Descartes* (Paris: A.G. Nizet, 1971), provides a useful, albeit partial summary of the debate. Both he and E. Baudin, *Études historiques et critiques sur la philosophie de Pascal*, vol. 1, *Pascal et Descartes* (Neuchâtel, Switzerland: Editions de la Baconnière, 1946), argue that Pascal was heavily indebted to the philosophy he so openly rejects. Earlier Léon Brunschvicg had suggested that the disagreement between the two could be traced to their common debt to Montaigne; see *Descartes et Pascal: Lecteurs de Montaigne* (New York: Brentano, 1944). More recently, and in defense of the view that the two figures were antithetical, is Pierre Magnard's "Descartes inutile et incertain," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 75 (1991): 63–80. Magnard represents many others when he claims that "inutile" means essentially "inutile pour le salut." Descartes's "uncertainty" is generally thought to concern either particular errors Pascal locates in Descartes's physics, or the inability of Cartesian science to deliver the certainty, once again, of "salvation." See also Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, "Doute et certitude chez Descartes et Pascal," *Europe* 59, no. 594 (October 1978): 5–14. The failure to appreciate the scope of Descartes's revolution is not a new phenomenon. Antoine Arnauld, a colleague of Pascal's at Port Royal, and subsequently one of his editors, believed, despite Pascal's express warnings to the contrary, that Descartes's writings were "a singular effect of God's providence" serving to "stop the dreadful inclination shown by many persons of late towards irreligion and libertinage." The remark is cited by Stephen Nadler in *Arnauld and the Cartesian Philosophy of Ideas* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 30 n. 24.

7. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 349–55. For the backhanded compliment that is Hegel's assessment of Pascal, see *Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. T. M. Knox and A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 162–63.

the *Apology* of this modern Socrates (as he is sometimes called) is not perfectly Socratic. Since Descartes, on the other hand, is remarkably candid about his unwillingness to pursue properly theological investigations—they would require, he says, that he "be more than a man"⁸—it would seem obvious why Pascal should have been so hostile. As commentators could not fail to notice, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob provides for him the only adequate measure of "certainty" and "utility"; what does not fully conform to God's measure is either "figure" or "folly" (cf. 267/680). But for just this reason one is led to wonder whether Pascal meets his adamantly philosophical adversary on common ground. If the quarrel between the two thinkers turns in effect upon a common confession of fideism, if their disagreement derives from agreement that "Athens" has nothing to do with "Jerusalem," can their logomachy be of anything more than doxographical interest?

It is clear that the *Pensées* abjures any rational articulation of the traditional *praefata fidei*. "Philosophy" so conceived has ceased to be pro-treptic to theology, as it had been for the great medieval theologians. Thus the nearest literary precursor to the *Pensées* is not the *disputatio*, still less the *summa*; it is the Augustinian form of "confession."⁹ In keeping with this form, Pascal posits his own life as a clue to the whole, and so does not hesitate to lay bare his heart (418/233, 689/64); but with Augustine, he also insists that his own person be forgotten (396/471), urging instead a paradoxical esteem for hidden virtue (643/159, 719/788). Like the *Confessions*, the *Pensées* is written in and from an awareness of God's abiding presence (99/536, 931/950), and even presumes at times to speak on God's behalf (149/430, 919/553); but true to form, it also addresses itself to those who do not acknowledge his presence, much less his words. In sympathy with such readers, Pascal searches tirelessly for reasons that will make his faith more accessible to them; and yet, student of Augustine that he is, he must admit that this faith lies beyond what his or any human reason can adequately convey (308/793, 380/284, 588/279, 808/245). Precisely as confession, however, the *Pensées* speaks

8. *Discours*, 8 (PW 1.114); "Preface to the French Edition," in *Principia philosophiae*, AT 9B, 3–6, 10 (PW 1.180–81).

9. On the meaning of "confession," see Joseph Ratzinger, "Originalität und Überlieferung in Augustinus Begriff der *confessio*," *Revue des études augustiniennes* 3 (1957): 375–92; Ann Hartle, *Death and the Disinterested Spectator* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 85–87; John C. McCarthy, "Desire, Recollection, and Thought: On Augustine's *Confessions* I, 1," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 14 (1987): 146–57; Frederick J. Crosson, "Structure and Meaning in St. Augustine's *Confessions*," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, vol. 63 (Washington, D.C.: American Catholic Philosophical Association, 1990), 84–97; and especially Thomas Prufer, "Notes for a Reading of Augustine, *Confessions*, Book X," in *Recapitulations: Essays in Philosophy* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 27–32.

to all men about "the whole of man" (848/806; cf. 12/187). Because "man is obviously made to think" (620/146), and because "the science of man" should be man's proper study (687/144), Pascal invites believer and unbeliever alike to reflect upon the human experience of the human. And because the human being experiences himself as positioned between what is above him and what lies beneath, any science of the human things necessarily implicates the sub- and the superhuman as well. From the standpoint of unaided reason, then, what unifies this *Apolo-*gy is an old question, a question of intense interest to Athens and Jerusalem alike: What is man? As an astute commentator has observed, the fragments Pascal left to us provide an *anthropologia ancilla theologiae*.¹⁰ We can safely conclude, then, that Pascal does continue the line of inquiry initiated by Socrates after all.¹¹ That said, we must not permit Descartes's apparent disdain for the legacy of Socrates to blind us to the fact that the Cartesian teaching on utility and certainty also depends, finally, on a sustained meditation upon the human things. As the peculiarly autobiographical form of the *Discourse on the Method* means to indicate, Cartesian "method" derives from a comprehensive, premethodological examination of the human situation. In sum, Pascal's theological dispute with the rationalist Descartes can and indeed must be interpreted in light of a common concern.

The present essay falls into two parts. The first proposes that Descartes's doctrine of utility issues from a revision of the traditional view of the human good. Loosely speaking, that revision involves a reconsideration of the relation between mind and body, with the result that a non-teleological physics becomes the most effective instrument of human completion. Although echoes of Descartes's opposition to the tradition regarding the hendiadys of body and soul are to be found in the *Pensées*, Pascal flatly rejects the "dualism" implicit in Descartes's account of the good. As he views the matter, Cartesian utility fails to address the real split in human being, which occurs deep within "soul," and is the source of an unease without any human remedy. The second part of the essay begins by noting that Descartes's method presupposes a novel understanding of the relation between mind and world. Human intelligence as traditionally conceived is summarily displaced once Descartes casts the availability of "first principles and causes" into methodical doubt. However, method quickly recovers from this crisis of its own making by establishing "foundations," which, as the word suggests, are independent of any natural access

10. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Pascal," in *Studies in Theological Style: Lay Styles*, vol. 3 of *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, trans. Andrew Louth et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 190.

11. Cf., e.g., *Phaedrus* 230a with 130/420, 477/406.

to the being of beings. Pascal, although keenly aware of the difficulty we face in coming to know the things themselves, disavows any methodical solution to the problem of knowledge. His teaching on the "heart" is meant to indicate the way to such certainty as is humanly available. Yet the heart's prompting can only be taken seriously if the human soul is, for all its divisions, disclosive of the wholeness of the whole. In effect, Pascal offers the "heart" as refutation of the Cartesian separation of mind and nature, and therewith of the true and the good.

To sum up, the essay seeks to demonstrate that in Pascal's estimation, Descartes is useless because his conception of the good is uncertain, and uncertain because his appraisal of the true is useless.

BODY AND SOUL

No reader of Descartes could fail to observe that he proposes to replace "the speculative philosophy taught in the Schools" with a "practical one" promising to make its adherents "masters and possessors of nature." Cartesian science pledges to be useful in the highest degree, useful like no other teaching, by enabling us to put all of nature to use. This is only possible because, as Part 5 of the *Discourse* asserts, nature has no real uses of its own: as everyone knows, Cartesian physics dispenses with formal and final causality. "Utility" is ordered in turn to "the general good of all men," and this good common to all is said to be the private interest of each in a healthy, pleasant, and lengthy life.¹² At a stroke, the "common good" has ceased to be common in the old sense. This is not to say that the interest that moved Descartes to think and to publish is identical to the interest the public has or ought to have in reading him. Although he boasts that his method will relieve man's estate more quickly and effectively than Baconian method ever could, he does not think his own health will benefit much from the innovations of his science.¹³ Conversely, in announcing that the public and the philosophical uses of reason can be made mutually beneficial, Part 6 of the *Discourse* takes pains to steer the bulk of its intended readers clear of the rigors of scientific research. All the same, theory and practice also converge for Descartes. Hence, for example, the charter statement of Cartesian philosophy describes the "laws of mechanics" as the most "important" truths discovered by method, which would suggest that the very substance of Descartes's science of nature has "applications," as we would call them, ever in view.

12. *Discours*, 61–63 (PW 1.142–43). The health of the body is there said expressly to be "the first good and the foundation of all the other goods of this life."

13. *Les passions de l'âme*, AT 11.320–22, together with "Preface to the French Edition," *Principia philosophiae*, AT 9B, 20 (PW 1.189–90).

However that may be, mechanistic physics surely does not elevate the knower in the way that traditional "speculative" philosophy had claimed to do, namely, by enabling him to contemplate the first and highest things, the divine things. Quite consistently, therefore, the *Discourse* characterizes reason as a "universal instrument."¹⁴

Pascal agrees with Descartes that the Scholastic approach to nature is gravely flawed. His own scientific writings often betray his impatience with the tendency found in the Schools to substitute speculative dicta for careful observation of the phenomena. Witness his involvement in the controversy over the vacuum.¹⁵ Nevertheless, he says little about the practical potential of his own mathematical and physical pursuits. Once in passing he refers to a particular discovery as "useful," but it: utility is obviously only heuristic.¹⁶ However modern his doubts about Schoolbook physics, he nowhere associates his own contributions to science with the universal benevolence of "practical philosophy." Yet one looks in vain in Pascal for a blanket condemnation of Descartes's utilitarian turn. Indeed, he clearly approved of the application of theoretical principles to practical problems. Over the course of his short life he devoted considerable time and energy to the easing of the human estate, with his celebrated calculating machine being only the first of several practical innovations.¹⁷ In order to gain an accurate understanding of Pascal's argument against Cartesian utility, it is therefore necessary to join the issue at a deeper level. That will require in turn that we consider an important point of agreement between the two thinkers. As we shall see, Pascal accepts in large measure Descartes's rethinking of the "common good."

The mastery of nature teaching, addressed as it is to scientists and nonscientists alike, involves a two-pronged critique of the good as it had hitherto been conceived: a critique of conventional morality and a critique of the philosophers. Against the philosophers, the *Discourse* argues that they have never known a truly common good, because they have never been able to hold anything in common. The history of philosophy

14. *Discours*, 41, 57 (PW 1.131–32, 140); also "Conversation with Berman," AT 5.165. My argument here relies considerably upon Richard Kennington's "Descartes and Mastery of Nature," in *Organism, Medicine, and Metaphysics*, ed. S. F. Spicker (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1978), 201–23.

15. "Préface pour le traité du vide," 529–32; "Lettre à M le Pailleur," 400. Notably, Pascal regards Descartes's defense of the plenum as one more Scholastic error.

16. As A. W. S. Baird notes in his *Studies in Pascal's Ethics* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), 13. See also *De l'esprit géométrique*, 577.

17. On Pascal's interest in "practice," see 931/550. For a list of Pascal's inventions, see Pierre Humbert, *L'oeuvre scientifique de Pascal* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1947). René Taton, "Sur l'invention de la machine arithmétique," in *L'oeuvre scientifique de Pascal*, ed. P. Costabel et al. (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1964), 207–28, offers a more cautious assessment of Pascal's practical accomplishments.

is a history of endless disputation. Should one inquire into the ground of the philosophers' differences, one would find "insensibility, pride, despair, or parricide." Obviously, Descartes means this allegation to call into question the possibility of philosophic detachment, of an interest in truth for its own sake. But does not such suspicion poison the well for his own philosophizing? Not necessarily. The scientific pursuit of utility suggests, if not the coincidence, then at least the intersection of the Cartesian philosopher's self-interest and his interest in the "truth." By the same token, "what works" promises to overcome the contention attending the old speculative claims by providing an indisputable measure of scientific "success."¹⁸

Descartes's argument against common life proceeds along similar lines. According to the self-understanding of all premodern regimes, not narrow self-interest, the pursuit of honor or external goods, say, but some understanding of justice is the proper judge of a city and its citizens. Even if a given polity were never altogether just, its origin and continuance were acknowledged by all but the most wicked and self-indulgent citizens to depend upon some divination of and commitment to a good beyond individual self-assertion. The philosophically minded within a city's walls certainly have had reason to doubt the impartiality of its civic justice, but at least for those of the Socratic school, the city's openness to, and limited apprehension of, the just "in itself" meant that the city could never be wholly reduced to its subcivic parts.¹⁹ The effect of Descartes's hyperbolic doubts, which fix upon the variety of existing moral and political arrangements, is to intimate that such differing conceptions of the good are purely arbitrary, having no real relation to anything true or just. Hence he particularly esteems Sparta, not because it more closely approximates a just civic arrangement than any other regime, but because it enjoyed the greatest unity of purpose, thanks to the unity of its origin in the will of the founder. On the basis of his unmasking of received opinion, Descartes believes himself free to set aside the old Socratic question about justice, and to ignore all common talk about morality. As already the opening sentence of the *Discourse* wryly insinuates, the natural equality of human egoism entails that men by nature show scant desire to know.²⁰ Yet the outcome of this argument is not, as may appear, Descartes's complete withdrawal from public life. To the contrary, having dispatched prescientific opinion about the good, he goes on to announce, if only in barest detail, his ideal republic, the polity informed by,

18. *Discours*, 8–10 (PW 1.114–15).

19. See, e.g., *Politics* 1280a10, 1283a24.

20. *Discours*, 1–2, with 15, 59, 61 (PW 1.111 with 1.118, 141, 142).

and supportive of, his science. In short, Cartesian science will be useful to the ordinary citizen not despite but precisely because of its rejection of the ordinary citizen's understanding of the good.²¹

Pascal is close to Descartes on both counts. As regards ordinary morality, he professes, like Descartes, to be struck by the sheer number of moral codes found in the world; and like Descartes, he takes this variety to be a sign of the arbitrariness of political authority. "[W]e see nothing just or unjust that does not change in character with a change in climate. Three degrees of latitude reverses all jurisprudence; a meridian decides the truth." He mentions the view that common or natural laws underlie such differences only to reject it: the range of actions deemed just by the world is too extreme (60/294). With a candor his Port Royal editors found shocking, he concludes that the sole warrant for obedience to the law is, paradoxically, its customary origin, and "not because it is reasonable or just."²² He hereby announces for all to hear what Descartes utters only guardedly. And this difference is instructive. For while Descartes is

21. *Discours*, 2, 10, 13, 16, 23 (PW 1.112, 115–16, 117, 122–23).

22. 60/294, 525/325; cf. 9/29, 25/308, 51/293, 61/309, 828/304. See Mara Vamos, "Pascal's *Pensées* and the Enlightenment: The Roots of a Misunderstanding," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 97 (1972): 7–145, for a valuable study of the editorial work done on the first edition by Pascal's friends at Port Royal, of the deficiencies of their edition, and of the influence of its defects on the Enlightenment reading of Pascal. Notwithstanding his seeming indiscretion about the conventional basis of political life, Pascal certainly does not intend to preach subversion. He admits that if the truth about politics were made widely known, the existence of all regimes would be imperiled (60/294, 66/326). Drawing a conclusion reminiscent of Hobbes, he claims that precisely because convention, sustained by force, is the sole source of law, we can have no reason either to contest the laws or to incite the many to disobedience (103/298, 525/325). But even if reason's relation to the law has been simplified in this way, it is unlikely to prevail over subrational inclinations to violate the law, which is why force, fortified by the imagination (25/308, 60/294, 87/307), must lend support to the law (81/290, 85/878, 828/304). Yet Pascal also avows that a merely conventional grounding of law is manifestly *faute de mieux* (103/298), and that no amount of force suffices to shore up conventions if men do not somehow believe those conventions to be in some way reasonable or just (525/325), which is to say that the irrational foundations of political life are not indifferent to the demands of reason after all. For Pascal, the hard truth about politics needs the flimsy protection of a lie, the ghostly shade of the truth (60/294). It is therefore hard to escape the conclusion that Pascal himself would have been forced to trim the sheets of his *Apology* had he seen it into print. How he would have done so is unclear, however. For while he acknowledges the necessity of political lies, and is aware of the uses made of irony in other contexts (265/677, 276/671, 279/690, 533/331), his censure of the Jesuit practice of equivocation is severe (cf. *Lettres provinciales*, no. 9, 760–61). The squeamishness of Pascal's Port-Royal editors was surely not unreasonable. We hasten to add that the rhetorical or political problem Pascal managed accidentally to avoid need not point to an inconsistency in his understanding of moral and political life. Even granted that his observations about the inconsistencies of existing conventions are unguarded, he might well argue that prudent reserve would not alter the fundamental truth about politics, namely, that it is not fully rational. In addition, he does advert to a positive reason for deferring to the moral and political authorities of one's age. This argument for obedience, which is perfectly traditional, i.e., quite un-Hobbesian, does

prepared provisionally to accept the strictures of conventional morality until his scientific reform is fully in place,²³ Pascal appears unwilling to see in any customary human practice even an instrumental value in the realization of the human good.²⁴

Pascal is also more forthcoming than Descartes about the failure of philosophy to identify the good, although his argument is, again, much the same. He repeatedly observes that "the philosophers split themselves

after all look for reasons within political life that are not wholly visible in, but still underlie, the conventionalism of ordinary politics (cf. 14/138, 90/337 with Romans 13.2).

23. *Discours*, 22–28, 60 (PW 1.122–26).

24. A. J. Beitzinger, "Pascal on Justice, Force, and Law," *Review of Politics* 46 (1984): 212–43, provides a summary of Pascal's political thought that negotiates fairly successfully through many of its perplexing features. Among other things, he answers the charge made by Jacques Maritain, in "The Political Ideas of Pascal," in *Ransoming the Time*, trans. H. L. Binsse (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), that Pascal was a "Christian cynic." A more serious difficulty is raised by Leo Strauss, in *The City and Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964), 18, when, in light of such fragments as 60/294, he claims that Pascal "while admitting that there are things which are by nature just . . . denies that they can be known to unassisted man owing to original sin." By directing our attention in a footnote to *Laws* 804b3–c1, Strauss effectively restates Nietzsche's judgment of Pascal, as outlined, e.g., in *The Antichrist*, §5 (*The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. W. Kaufmann [New York: Viking Press, 1978], 571–72). While it is not to our purpose to explore Pascal's political science in detail, reasons can be offered for doubting the adequacy of Strauss's (and Nietzsche's) reading. It can safely be said that Pascal's leading political thesis derives from the precept of Saint Paul: "here we have no lasting city" (Hebrews 13.14). Nevertheless, Pascal defends that thesis in a way congruent with Aristotle's political analysis. According to his argument, there is indeed no single just principle of political rule available to "unassisted man." Reason would be the most likely candidate for principled rule, were the rule of reason not faced by insurmountable obstacles. The impediments to the direct rule of reason derive not only, or even primarily, from its fallibility and its allegiance to a suprapolitical order; they are owing especially to the inability of the unwise to recognize wise rule, and to their unwillingness to submit to it (60/294, 85/878, 360/482, 530/274, 533/331). A second best, or rather a better, principle of rule would be the ordering of all possible principles of rule, rational and subrational, i.e., the giving to each its due. However, just as the imputation of any one partial principle as the single true, or just title to rule would be indistinguishable from tyranny (21/381, 540/380; cf. 58/332, 569/872, 905/385, 977/320), so a political harmonization of all politically relevant natural principles is not presently conceivable because they are, on their own understanding, heterogeneous, at odds with one another (44/82, 372/483, 374/475, 421/477). Hence the inevitability of the distortion of the political truth (60/294) considered in the preceding note. Pascal avers that partial knowledge of what is just by nature is available, and not merely to the prudent few (81/299, 148/425, 421/477, 797/316). Indeed, only such partial knowledge can explain our present political confusion and dissatisfaction. Furthermore, or to state the same thought in positive terms, Pascal's rational apology for the Christian religion depends in part on the claim that a sense of the naturally just allows men to glimpse both in the Old Testament and in the New a fulfillment of the universal human longing for justice (cf. 85/878, 149/430, 280/614, 402/290, 421/606, 454/619, 482/289, 925/520). To conclude, while Strauss may be correct in claiming that Pascal's political reflections go "much beyond Aristotle," his belief in "original sin" cannot justly be imputed as the cause of political obscurantism or as an enfeebling disdain for the conditions of decent politics. For further indications about Pascal's politics, see Philippe Sellier, *Pascal et Saint Augustin* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1970), 98–103.

into a thousand different sects" (281/613; cf. 76/73, 456/618, 479/746, 507/363). Unlike Descartes, he sometimes attributes the philosophers' inability to reach accord to the tendency of every "sect" to emphasize some aspect of reality at the expense of others (127/415, 131/434, 398/525, 449/556), a second point of divergence, having the same root as the first, as we shall see. In the end, however, Pascal appears to accept the Cartesian reduction of philosophical differences to the "vanity" of the philosophers (142/463, 627/150). Those who profess a noble love for wisdom are as driven by base interests as is the most ordinary human being (145/461).

Still more striking is another point of convergence between the two thinkers. Cartesian utility means, to repeat, the pledge made by Cartesian science to promote bodily well-being rather than disinterested theorizing or civic virtue. Hence in the good it means to serve, as in the moral critique that prepares the way for its public service, the *Discourse* encourages a liberation of self-interest from traditional self-restraints. For according to Descartes's predecessors, the "common good" requires that human beings be educated in a kind of self-forgetting, so that we might learn to take an interest in both the political and the suprapolitical whole of which we are members, even or especially when such interest is at the expense of our private or bodily well-being. What is novel about the Cartesian doctrine of the good, therefore, is not so much its hedonism (to invoke an older and here somewhat inaccurate vocabulary), but that Descartes should identify the body's good both as "common" and as amenable to rational ordering: underlying Cartesian utility is the hypothesis that the interest of the human whole can be furthered by advancing precisely those interests of the human parts indifferent to the whole. As Leo Strauss describes this dramatic peripety in the career of self-interest, the good or rational political order is now to be brought about by forces that do not themselves tend toward the good or the rational.²⁵

Remarkably, Pascal seems to endorse this novel idea. "All men naturally hate one another," he observes quite serenely. He then adds, apparently accepting the leading principle of Cartesian utility as an accomplished fact, "[w]e have used concupiscence as best we could to make it serve the public good." The effect of this "use" of concupiscence is not, as the ancients may have supposed, political fragmentation and intellectual degeneration, but rather "an image of charity."²⁶ Indeed, Pascal is so far

25. *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 315. Strauss calls this idea "the principle of modern political economy."

26. 210/451; cf. 106/403, 118/402, 211/453, 674/359. The *Discourse* does not quite arrogate the Christian virtue to itself, but it comes remarkably close: see *Discours*, 61, 66 (PW 1.142, 145).

from being scandalized by such arrant Machiavellianism that he points calmly to its workings in the Jansenist community at Port Royal (63/151). Nowhere else does the *Pensées* come so close to approving the core of Descartes's doctrine of the good, and therewith Cartesian utility. Yet it is precisely at this juncture that Pascal's opposition to Descartes comes into sight. Enlightened concupiscence may well be an image of charity, but it is, manifestly, a "false image" (210/451). We must now begin to consider why Pascal should have thought it false, and why he thought that mattered.

As the textbooks instruct us, Cartesian mind is strangely disembodied, not other-worldly certainly, but still somehow "above" the world. On closer inspection, the separation of mind from body, never satisfactorily defended by Descartes in metaphysical terms,²⁷ proves to be exactly what is required by mathematical physics, which can explain body or nature only apart from soul and its purposiveness (the dismissal of formal and final cause is thus a presupposition, not a fruit, of Cartesian science). By virtue of its rational conquest of nature, the new physics is able to effect in turn a reunion of sorts between human body and mind through its service to our bodily needs and desires (which could never be persuaded to abandon their teleological viewpoint). Prompted by what the *Meditations on First Philosophy* will call the "teaching of nature," set forth in the language of pleasures and pains, Cartesian physics thus dissects the human whole in order to benefit the human composite. Soul takes leave of body so as to manipulate the order of bodies, thereby bringing body and soul more closely into line.²⁸ To speak somewhat hyperbolically, then, Descartes radicalizes the duality of body and soul in order to overcome it. It is this understanding of the "mind-body problem" that may be said to be the crux of his teaching on utility.

The *Pensées* here moves in precisely the opposite direction. It goes without saying that Pascal never confuses soul and body (108/339, 115/349, 161/221, 418/233, 809/230). But he is also emphatic about their inseparability. There is for him no escaping our embodiment, not even conceptually. "The nature of man is entirely natural, *omne animal*" (630/94, 664/94b; cf. 795/160). Even at its purest, reason should defer to the "body [*corps*]" (cf. 372/483). This does not mean, however, that human rationality is simply subjugated to bodily necessities. To the

27. See Pamela A Kraus, "Mens humana: res cogitans and the Doctrine of Faculties in Descartes' *Meditations*," *International Studies in Philosophy* 18 (1986): 1-18.

28. See Jacob Klein, "Modern Rationalism," in *Lectures and Essays*, ed. Robert B. Williamson and Elliot Zuckermann (Annapolis, Md.: St. John's College Press, 1985), 58-59; and Richard Kennington, "The 'Teaching of Nature' in Descartes' Soul Doctrine," *Review of Metaphysics* 26 (1972): 86-117.

contrary, incarnate reason elevates bodiliness, according it an unprecedented dignity. Hence the memorable remarks about the "thinking reed" (200/347). The human being is a being between, a worldly being not explicable in worldly terms. "Man must not believe that he is equal to the brutes or to the angels, nor be ignorant of either, but he must know both" (121/498; cf. 522/140). A properly human life is to be lived in tension, in the stretch between what lies above us and what lies beneath (678/358). Any attempt to overcome or even reduce this tension will result in the distortion or destruction of the human: "To depart from the middle is to depart from humanity" (518/378; cf. 678/358). Descartes's supremely pragmatic reconfiguration of the goal of science must, for Pascal, be just such a departure, aiming at once too high and too low. It is on this basis, and not owing to ad hoc theologizing, that he judges Descartes's best efforts as "useless."

Not that Pascal advocates a full-scale restoration of the theoretical life. For reasons we have already indicated, he doubts whether philosophy in the ancient sense can do much to improve our situation (cf. 926/582, 545/458). Still, what he sees to be the limits of human rationality never prompt him to reduce reason to something merely instrumental. As he says repeatedly, it is reason that "constitutes man's greatness" (759/346; cf. 111/339, 756/365). Indeed, not even the most unseemly possibilities of our nature compromise that greatness. Because it is only in the light of the high that the low can be understood as such, awareness of how low we can sink only underscores our inherent grandeur (53/429, 117/409, 470/404, 526/408). Against both "angelism" and "bestialism," Pascal insists that every human deed, no matter how base or sublime, expresses the essential unity of soul and body. But this is to say that soul, and not bodily appetite or the pineal gland, not the scientific domination of nature or mathematical transcendence of body, is the principle of human "health" or wholeness (cf. 686/336, 957/512, 958/75).

Consequently, Pascal, following his master Augustine, refuses to blame body for our woes. Again contrary to Descartes, it is for him a division within soul that is the origin of the human problem.²⁹ When he asserts that human nature is irreducibly dual, he is not referring to a split between soul and body. He has in view the ambiguity between "nature" in the sense of the end or perfection of the human being, and "nature" as that which holds true for human beings always and everywhere, the lowest common denominator. Unlike any other "nature" known to us (117/409, 149/430, 685/401), there is in us a terrible gap between what we are and what we ought to be (127/415, 131/434, 616/660).

29. Cf. *Les passions de l'âme* 3.47, AT 11.364-66 (PW 1.345-47).

Some have attempted to explain this division within us by alleging that the exceptional nature simply proves the common rule: "This duplicity of the human being is so visible that there are those who have thought we have two souls" (629/417). Pascal, immune to the opposing charms of Platonism and nominalism, agrees with a long-standing tradition in supposing that the fissure within human being is as manifest in the few as it is in the many. By nature, we are all of us at odds with our nature, both drawn to and repulsed by the human good.

Of course, Descartes does not for a minute believe that his "common good" can be attained by physics alone, as though the problem were merely technological. Arguably no philosopher before him has offered so little in the way of an "ethics," but as we have seen, a primary purpose of his first publication is to teach readers not to blush in identifying the "first good" with the privacy of bodily health. The methodological mastery of nonhuman nature depends therefore upon premethodological self-mastery of a sort: those passions that naturally favor Descartes's project must be taught to prevail over any that are ill-disposed to it. The abiding duality of the human being leads Pascal to doubt whether appetites most amenable to Descartes's philosophic polity could ever truly dominate our more volatile urges. "The sweetness of fame is so great that, to whatever object we join it, even death, we love it" (37/158; cf. 44/82). In fact, "[a]ny opinion may be preferable to life, the love of which appears so strong and so natural" (29/156). Observations such as these do not entitle us to conclude that Descartes was naive about the obstacles posed by the passions to the indirect rule of his reason. Not for nothing does his final publication, *The Passions of the Soul*, take up at length the possibility of a sentimental education, of the correction of passion by passion, posed implicitly in his first published work.³⁰ Nevertheless, Pascal remains far less sanguine about the chances for a long-term reform of our more truculent impulses. Having conceded that society may well be founded upon asocial "concupiscence," he insists that human life both individually and communally will always be feverish, alternating between sweats and chills (27/354; cf. 56/181, 621/412, 805/106). As regards our natural inclinations, the only thing one may rely upon is that they are not reliable.

The "reason for this effect" surfaces with Pascal's remarks on "distraction" or "diversion." Descartes's rejection of Scholastic "speculative phi-

30. Cf. *Les passions de l'âme*, §§ 48-50, AT 11.366-70; §§144-48, AT 11.436-42; §§153-61, AT 11.445-47 (PW 1.347-48, 379-82, 384-88, respectively), with the seemingly coincidental foreshadowing of themes in the anonymous first letter introducing the work, AT 11.301-23: passionate self-mastery is both the cause and effect of Cartesian science in the full sense.

losophy" for the sake of utilitarian "practice" echoes Machiavelli's "realistic" correction to the "idealism" of ancient and medieval thought, which Machiavelli had faulted for what he took to be its exaggerated and impotent esteem for the highest human possibilities. In a like manner, Descartes claims that the ancient writings on morals are like "proud and magnificent palaces built upon sand and mud."³¹ Indeed, he outdoes Machiavelli in this regard insofar as the self-interested pursuit of health, when directed and abetted by Cartesian reason, looks as though it anchors thinking in something still lower, but even more solid, than the Machiavellian quest for "glory," to say nothing of ancient and medieval high-mindedness. What Pascal's account of "diversion" may be said to show is that it is modern "realism" that suffers from "idealism." Precisely because they are so low, the human foundations of Descartes's scientific polity lack human solidity.

The teaching on diversion begins by reminding us that human desire is restless or insatiable. "[A]ll the unhappiness of men stems from a single thing, namely, not to know how to remain quietly in one's room" (136/139; cf. 362/472). One might counter that Descartes was also aware of the stubbornly indeterminate and restless character of human willing. After all, he promises not only cures for an "infinity of maladies," but also an "infinity of contrivances" to generate pleasures sufficient to occupy our increasingly long lives.³² To this Pascal would reply that human restlessness is only aggravated by subordinating science to desire in this way: because our passions are passions of rational soul, any bid to satisfy them in the terms they themselves dictate must abstract from their real significance.³³ What they ultimately seek, or avoid, is not some thing or other. At bottom they are all driven by an unsettling emptiness no worldly object could ever fill. Whatever the object of a given passion, that passion is, as in some way rational, haunted by the awareness of the inadequacy of its object. "[R]emove [men's] distraction and you will see them dry up with boredom. They will then feel their nothingness without knowing it" (36/164; cf. 70/165b, 136/139, 137/142, 139/143, 414/171, 622/131). It is just this awareness of our nothingness that lends to human passions their peculiarly evanescent urgency. Catching a glimpse of man's radical inability to make himself whole, and divining the horror of this

31. *Discours*, 7–8 (PW 1.114).

32. *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, 4, AT 756–62 (PW 2.39–43); *Discours*, 62, together with 25–28 (PW 1.142–43 with 1.123–25).

33. Cf. 470/404. Descartes does caution against allowing the passions free reign to determine their proper objects, but Cartesian reason only corrects the course of the passions, it does not call their fundamental orientation into question. See *Meditationes* 6, AT 7.84–90 (PW 2.58–62); *Les passions de l'âme* §§ 138–48, AT 11.430–43 (PW 1.376–78).

(our "nothingness"), the passions steer us madly toward one temporary refuge after another.

But might it not be that Descartes's "contrivances" were intended, at least in part, precisely as distractions in Pascal's sense? It is a historical commonplace that the Enlightenment that looked back to Descartes actively sought to keep at bay all theological questions, and the bloody controversies that seemed to ensue from them. If the overcoming of distraction was a central aim of Pascal's religious apology, then surely his foes might wish to heap ever more of them upon us. Certainly there is nothing to stop Cartesian philosophy from being "useful" to us in ways that it would not be useful to discuss openly.³⁴ On Pascal's view, however, enlightened hedonism might win a battle or two, but it could never win the war. Even the most consuming diversions become tiresome, and unease breaks in upon us once again. Worse still, it is by no means clear that peaceful distractions can always successfully compete with the diversionary charms of violent combat, for example, as Nietzsche, here in sympathy with Pascal, would observe retrospectively of the Enlightenment's hope for nonsectarian peace. "Careless we run to the brink, having put something before us to prevent our seeing it," and by "something" Pascal means almost anything whatsoever.³⁵ Descartes was wrong to suppose bodily health to be the "first" because the most basic or indisputable human good. Good though it is, it cannot be counted upon to keep other candidates for "first" out of mind (21/381, 138/166, 638/109).

That said, the argument still leaves untouched the most recondite meaning of "utility" in Descartes's philosophy. It was observed above that the practical benefits of his public works project can provide no satisfactory explanation for his personal commitment to "do good to others." For that we must look to *The Passions of the Soul*, wherein Descartes announces his doctrine of *generosité*, foreshadowed in the *Discourse* and elsewhere, but set forth in detail only there.³⁶ The passion of *generosité* is the

34. *Discours*, 8, 11–12, 31, 39 (PW 1.114, 116–17, 126–27, 141); "Conversations with Berman," AT 5.176; "Preface to the French Edition," *Principia philosophiae*, AT 9B.18 (PW 1.204–5); *Passions de l'âme*, §§ 76–78, 83, 145, together with §§ 48–50, AT 11.385–86, 390–91, 437–39, 366–70 (cf. PW 1.355–56, 357–58, 379–80, with 347–48). The political theology of the Enlightenment has been treated at length by Robert P. Kraynak in *History and Modernity in the Thought of Thomas Hobbes* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990).

35. 166/183; cf. 36/139, 414/171, 622/131. Pascal's analysis of the human confrontation with nothingness does much to garner Nietzsche's respect. See, e.g., *Unmodern Observations*, part 1, *David Strauss: Writer and Confessor*, ed. William Smith (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990), 46.

36. For the *Discourse's* suggestions as to how Descartes himself regards the good of the method, see his discussion of the relative perfection of human "works," *Discours* 11–13, with the correction he provides of the culminating work at 72 (PW 1.116–17, 148). See also

real origin of Descartes's rational conquest of nature. Combining Aristotelian, Stoic, and Epicurean elements in an audacious new whole, this distinctively Cartesian virtue names the self-regarding, self-controlled, and self-gratifying excellence of one who esteems the freedom, resolution, and power of his "will," whether in action or at rest. Viewed from its heights, Cartesian method may be said to be a manifestation of Descartes's self-satisfaction in being "beyond the power of fortune." As the most radical and far-reaching expression of rational human autonomy, *generosité* is both the sign and the seal of the attempt to master non-thinking nature. It is the most powerful embodiment of Cartesian "wisdom," whose principal "use" is said in *The Passions of the Soul* to be "that it teaches us to render ourselves master of our passions to such a degree, and to manage them with such adroitness, that the evils they cause are quite bearable, and even that we derive joy from them all."³⁷ So sublime is the passion or virtue of *generosité* that it "renders us in a way like God." Here lies the deepest and most provocative stratum of Cartesian "utility."

What reasons might the *Pensées* offer for applying the tag "useless" even here? Pascal readily acknowledges the pleasure to be had from overcoming this or that aspect of our "fortune" (552/107): despite his esteem for Epictetus, he was no Stoic. He even professes admiration for the "extraordinary greatness of soul" necessary to perform rare deeds of good and evil (526/408; cf. 157/225). Yet he cannot approve of the magnanimous bid to put all of nature to use (788/486). Such ambition does not reckon sufficiently with the contingency of the human being. But while Pascal often points to the body as proof of our lack of real autonomy, the core of his argument again concerns the limits of human soul.³⁸ Hence, in the first place, his insistence that "it is not in our power to control our heart" (100/467). The primary thrust of this remark is not that our desires take us places we would not go (149/430). More fundamentally, he means that human beings are born into, or constituted by, an

Richard Kennington, "Descartes," *History of Political Philosophy*, 3d ed., eds. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1987), 421-39.

37. *Les passions de l'âme*, §§ 152, 187, 212, AT 11445, 470, 488 (PW 1.384, 395, 404). On *generosité*, see G. Krüger, "Die Herkunft des philosophischen Selbstbewusstseins," *Logos: Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie der Kultur* 22 (1933): 225-72, and esp. 251-61; reprint, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1962. See also Kennington, "Descartes," 432-35.

38. His restatement of the doctrine of a cyclical fortune (27/354, 705/180) is not enough to command acquiescence, of course, because as Descartes had observed, it is surely unwise to submit to unhappy circumstances before we have made a rational determination of what is in our power (*Discours*, 27-28; PW 1.124-25). Similarly, Cromwell's kidney stones (750/176) and Cleopatra's nose (413/162) prove only that traditional political action is particularly susceptible to accidental reversal; they do not prove the fragility of the new, practical philosophy.

unalterable longing: the heart we have we did not choose. This longing would lead us beyond ourselves, to transcend ourselves, to leave the "hateful me" behind (597/455). And although its existence will prove to be a sign or trace of that which would satisfy us, the heart cannot on its own quite know what it wants, much less can it assure our satisfaction. In short, the "heart" spells our essential dependence upon something "outside" of us to complete us (136/139, 143/464, 407/465, 564/485).

A second reason for supposing that the bid for rational self-mastery is a delusion is this: even our thoughts are more adventitious than is acknowledged by Descartes. "What an absurd god," he says of the creature whose thinking may be disturbed by a fly buzzing round his ears (48/366; cf. 829/351). Less egregious but no less indicative of our humble state is the fact that even our best thoughts come to us largely unbidden, and, owing to the fallibility of memory, are likely so to depart, our artful efforts notwithstanding (542/370, 656/372). Pascal surely would not dismiss out of hand Descartes's distinction between "weak" and "strong" minds,³⁹ but the distinction is here immaterial. Strong or weak, reason is ineluctably discursive, which is to say that the human mind can never come fully into possession of its thoughts, and so of itself, or of its substance (cf. 821/252).

Finally, and most decisively, Pascal would have us ponder the radically contingent character of our very existence. The rhetoric of his argument can be misleading, however. Consider Fragment 135 (206): "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces unnerves me." One might be forgiven for regarding this celebrated phrase, and others akin to it (cf. 68/205, 135/469, 154/237, 194/208, 198/693), as a neurotic's *cri de coeur*. On closer inspection it becomes clear that Pascal's intention here is dialectical: he seeks to awaken in distracted readers questions that follow naturally from a confrontation with their finitude.⁴⁰ Here we would do well to recall Descartes's most memorable lesson. Thought's availability to itself, the evidence of my being a thinking being, is so manifest or indisputable that mind almost appears to itself as existing necessarily. From this commonplace of the philosophical tradition, Descartes derives an entirely new sort of "first principle," the "I think."⁴¹ Pascal's most

39. *Discours*, 24, 59; cf. 510/7, 512/1 (PW 1.123, 141).

40. Thus the long fragment 427/194 puts similar words in the mouth of an interlocutor. See also 958/75: "What is there about the vacuum that could make them fear? What could be baser and more ridiculous?" On the histrionic character of Pascal's argument, consider P. Topliss, *The Rhetoric of Pascal: A Study of His Art of Persuasion in the "Provinciales" and the "Pensées"* (Leicester, U.K.: Leicester University Press, 1966), esp. 274-304. Balthasar, in *The Glory of the Lord*, 2.94-95, observes that "[t]he spatially infinite is for him a pointer (which even the dim-witted can grasp)."

41. *Discours*, 32 (PW 1.127); *Méditations* 2, AT 7.25 (PW 2.17); *Principia philosophiae* 1 §§ 7-13, AT 8A.6-11 (PW 1.194-96).

poignant formulations mean to stress, contrarily, the uncanniness of the "I" who thinks, the strange incongruity between our spatial and temporal situation, and the mind's self-givenness. Cartesian mastery of self and world, no matter how successful in the short term, simply cannot overcome the obscurities attending reason's self-discovery, which always occurs in a particular place at a particular time. The "thinking reed" knows himself to be superior to, and in that sense prior to, the whole of the visible universe; but "reed" that he is, he is also aware that he did not make himself, and so can never fully recoup his origins or fend off his expiration. To sum up, the *Pensées* suggests that by virtue of its directedness, its operation, and its situation, human reason, no matter how exemplary, is unable to achieve autonomous or fully rational rule over itself and its circumstances. From Pascal's perspective, there can be little to admire about Cartesian *generosité*.

Why is Descartes useless? Pascal does not oppose the Cartesian teaching on the good with an alternate theory. He simply insists that while an adequate understanding of the good is the one thing needful, we lack such an understanding. The problem is twofold, involving a failure both of intellect and of will. We do not know what is truly in our interest, and we do not make much of an effort to find out.⁴² Thus the difficulty is not, as the moralist mistakenly interprets Pascal's "hateful me" (597/455), that human beings are excessively self-interested. To the contrary, we are obstinately deficient in self-interest (119/423, 383/147, 418/233, 427/194, 428/195, 450/494, 823/217). Should it be objected that some human beings at least have caught a glimmer of the good, and do strive to attain it, Pascal would reply that it is still not in their power to secure it for themselves (141/509, 148/425, 269/692). The evidence he adduces for his claim that we cannot secure our own happiness falls under the rubric of "misery," aspects of which we have already discussed. Human misery provides in turn a *ratio dubitandi* for the goodness of the Cartesian project. For if Pascal's analysis of the human condition is plausible, then Descartes's doctrine of utility, which was never shown to be "certain" in strictly mathematical terms, imperils Cartesian philosophy as a whole: a science whose purpose is uncertain is unscientific in a decisive sense.

To conclude, Pascal would seem to have shown that the mastery of na-

42. 2/227, 28/436, 75/389, 76/73, 119/423, 149/430, 401/437, 905/385. Cf. J. H. Broome, *Pascal* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1965), 76-77. Descartes seems to agree with Pascal when he writes, concerning desire, that "the error that one is accustomed to commit here, is never that one desires too much, it is only that one too little desires." The essential point of difference is that Descartes, as opposed to Pascal, has in mind desire "whose outcome depends only on us"; see *Les passions de l'âme* § 144, AT 11.436-37; cf. §§ 139, 145, 146, AT 11.432, 437-40 (PW 1.379; cf. 1.377, 379-81).

ture is useless because it is uncertain.⁴³ "Useless" is hardly a neutral epithet, however. In the guise of furthering our well-being, Descartes's science diverts us from the urgent task of discovering and pursuing the good. We begin to see that Pascal's resolution "to write against those who deepen the sciences unduly" was anything but obscurantist (553/76; cf. 23/67, 164/218, 496/714, 687/144).

HEART AND MIND

Pascal provides reasons for doubting whether Cartesian science truly serves man as he is, to say nothing of man as he ought to be. But the charge of uncertainty is meant not only to impugn the goal or goals of Descartes's project; it also expresses Pascal's dissatisfaction with his means. In a word, Pascal questions the worth of Cartesian "method." What is at stake here, however, is much greater than the proper technique to be employed by the sciences: for neither Pascal nor Descartes is method itself to be understood methodologically. Because Descartes's doctrine of method, and the certainly it is to provide, issues from a sustained meditation on the relation between the knower and the world, Pascal's disagreement with him proves once again to concern the Socratic question of the nature and place of the human being.

It is in Descartes's *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*, unpublished during his lifetime, that we find some of his most suggestive remarks about the meaning of his new method. The first several of the "rules" explain why methodical direction of the mind should be required at all. Descartes proposes that while the "natural light" of the mind is able to attain simple and certain truths, as is shown paradigmatically by mathematics, nevertheless the "intuitive" power of the mind is naturally hobbled by our manner of proceeding. Instead of moving patiently and assuredly from truth to truth, "blind curiosity" prompts us to venture too quickly into obscure matters; in the absence of methodical discipline, we set our course by vague "experience" and hasty "conjectures"; such is our respect for authority that we rely excessively on "the writings of the ancients" despite their manifest failure to advance systematically. For these and other reasons such discoveries as have been made to date must be deemed a matter of dumb luck. Method will therefore take command of the mind's native ability to grasp truth, chasten its naive trust in its powers and in the world's self-display, and impose its own order upon mind. In this way, it aims to eliminate science's regrettable dependence upon fortune. As we

43. Kennington "The 'Teaching of Nature' in Descartes' Soul Doctrine," 116; "Descartes and Mastery of Nature," 212.

have already indicated, the mastery of nature doctrine looks both outward and inward.⁴⁴

The most startling premise of Cartesian method is the claim, evident already in the first "rule," and operative ever thereafter, that thinking may rightly be ordered independently of its objects. In likening the mind to the sun, the *Regulae* upends the traditional solar metaphor for knowledge: not being or the good beyond being, but human intelligence alone lights up the way to the truth of the things known. By supposing that the mind can lay siege to what is without recourse to the world's self-disclosure, the method may bypass what had hitherto seemed the world's self-evident self-articulation into kinds. This means in turn that method can claim to be universal, the same for all "objects" of study: the interest in "certainty" coincides with the interest in "utility" in favoring the mathematical reductionism of Cartesian physics. Descartes is thus able, almost miraculously it must have appeared, to establish method on a scientific footing wholly in advance of any scientific encounter with the world; self-certifying method is to certify all future claims about the world even as it decertifies all prior convictions about it.⁴⁵ Not for nothing will the *Discourse* propose Descartes himself initially in the guise of an anonymous "I," as "the first principle of philosophy."⁴⁶

A reader of Pascal who confined himself to *De l'esprit géométrique* might be pardoned for believing that Pascal accepted the notion of a universal method modeled upon the protocols of mathematical demonstration, what the *Regulae* calls "mathesis universalis."⁴⁷ The *Pensées* compels a different conclusion, however. To the extent that the literary character of that work embodies Pascal's intentions, a more anti-Cartesian style of writing could not be imagined (532/372). Specific fragments confirm the point. Consider the claim that there is no "art" available either to acquire or to conserve our thoughts (542/370); or note that the "ethics [morale] of the mind" is "without rules."⁴⁸ Still more emphatic is Pascal's insistence that an act of intellectual "submission," far from being a sign of weakness, may well be required by reason: submissiveness, needless to

44. *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*, AT 10.359-71 (PW 1.9-10); also *Discours*, 18-22 (PW 1.183-84); and see Pamela A. Kraus, "'Whole Method': The Thematic Unity of Descartes' *Regulae*," *Modern Schoolman* 63 (1986): 83-109.

45. AT 10.359-61 (PW 1.9-10).

46. *Discours*, 31-32 (PW 1.127); "Preface to the French Edition," *Principia philosophiae* AT 9B.9-10 (PW 1.183-84).

47. *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*, AT 10.378 (PW 1.19).

48. 513/4. On this fragment, see Buford Norman, "L'idée de règle chez Pascal," in *Méthodes chez Pascal: Actes du colloque tenu à Clermont-Ferrand 10-13 juin 1976* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1979), 87-99; also see Thomas More Harrington, *Vérité et méthode dans le "Pensées" de Pascal* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1972), 82.

say, is not prominent among Cartesian virtues.⁴⁹ It comes as no surprise, then, that the *Pensées* flatly rejects the conceit of a single method suited to each and every object of study (511/2, 512/1), and advises us "not judge nature in accordance with us but in accordance with it" (668/457).

Pascal's willingness to be guided by nature's self-presentation by no means heralds a return to prescientific naïveté. He himself warns that "nature often deceives us and does not obey its own rules" (660/91). Or, as he puts it in the *Préface pour le traité du vide*, "the secrets of nature are hidden" (532). Moreover, he so frequently asserts that human nature itself impedes discovery of the nature of things that one cannot read the *Pensées* without thinking of the critiques of natural consciousness advanced not only by Descartes but by all the great early modern philosophers. Not the least of our troubles, Pascal notes, is our blindness to our deficiencies. As he writes in *De l'esprit géométrique*, "It is a natural malady of man to believe that he possesses the truth directly" (585). What, then, can he mean by "judging in accordance with nature"? And how would such a judgment be possible?

Among the most important of the statements on "nature" in the *Pensées* is Fragment 199 (72), entitled "Disproportion of Man." In that fragment Pascal effectively opposes Cartesian method for the very reason that could be said to have motivated it, namely, the fact that we do not possess knowledge of the whole, or more precisely, knowledge of the principles of the whole, and indeed that such knowledge scarcely even seems within our power. Pascal puts the difficulty in the following way:

Since all things are caused and causing, supported and supporting, mediate and immediate, and since everything is mutually sustaining by a natural and imperceptible chain that joins the most distant and the most different things, I hold it impossible to know the parts without knowing the whole, or to know the whole without knowing the parts in detail. (199/72; cf. 927/505)

He is scarcely the first to have stated the problem in these terms, of course. As it happens, an analogous statement is to be found in Descartes, although he puts it to a very different purpose.⁵⁰ Fragment 199, in any case, goes a long way toward explaining Pascal's doubts about Cartesian "certainty."

As is clear from the context in which the *aporia* appears, Pascal's purpose is not skeptical in the strict sense. He uses the *aporia* to awaken self-

49. 167/269, 170/268, 173/273, 174/270, 182/272, 188/267. Pascal is careful to distinguish "submission" from that bane of the Enlightenment, "superstition," which is for him as much as for any of the philosophes a serious not to say sinful corruption of reason (187/254). Hence his insistence that one demand reasons for one's submission (149/430, 184/811).

50. See *Regulae* 1, AT 10.361 (PW 1.10).

knowledge. More specifically, he would have us see the paradoxical limits of our ability to know. Those limits are paradoxical, of course, because they come into view only to the extent that we have in some measure overcome them. We can know that our knowledge of the whole is fragmentary only because, part though we are, knowledge of the whole is in some way available to us. And since nature is "an infinite sphere whose center is everywhere, and circumference nowhere," the human being must be said to be "disproportionate," a finite being aware of, and so desirous of completion by, the infinite, even though the infinite as such cannot ever complete anything finite, as we in our finite awareness are also aware. The uncanniness of mind is its unsteady grasp of its excessive reach.

Easily overlooked in Pascal's analysis of the problem of knowledge is the conception of the universe correlative to it. In the *Pensées* nature is neither monolithic, nor is it a heap of shards, a "bad tragedy." One might say that the work depends upon a divination of the wholeness of the whole, were it not clear that Pascal is writing as a scientist, for whom it is necessary to suppose that diverse beings exist in their diversity as constitutive of a causally unified world order (65/115, 541/120, 698/119). But precisely because our grasp of nature's wholeness is tenuous, Pascal also takes seriously the self-presentation of the parts, namely, the fact that particular beings themselves show up as relative wholes not reducible to a vaguely perceived whole beyond them.

Consequently, the way a part appears can on inspection be reason for revising one's initial formulation of the wholeness of the whole. Yet just because each part must be understood in terms of every other part, and of the whole that subsumes them all, one's apprehension of the whole must both guide and correct one's initial formulation of the wholeness of any whole part. Pascal's *aporia* in Fragment 199 thereby leads to a vindication of "experience," where "experience" signifies both the determining and the determined ground of all understanding.⁵¹

One aspect of this defense of experience, rarely discussed, is his assessment of opinion. Earlier we noted Pascal's affinity to Descartes in his

51. On "experience," see 111/339, 125/92, 128/396, 365/496, 403/174, 427/194, and esp. "Préface pour le traité du vide," 530, 535. Baird, who provides an otherwise excellent discussion of Pascal's views on nature, overstates the tension between Pascal's experimentalism and his desire for demonstrative arguments. Consider his "Inconsistencies in Pascal's Conception of Scientific Knowledge," *Aumla* 24 (1965): 220-38; and "Pascal's Idea of Nature," *Isis* 61 (1970): 297-320. In fact, it is clear even from *De l'esprit géométrique* that Pascal's science is hypothetical through and through (cf., e.g., 578). For an invaluable treatment of this and related themes, see Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, 3, 188-95. See also Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 122-26, for a discussion of the Socratic approach to parts and wholes, the approach Pascal here emulates.

repudiation of both conventional morality and the moral ambitions of the philosophers. We must now call attention, contrarily, to Pascal's conviction that prephilosophic opinion, faulty though it is, does express a genuine apprehension of the truth, a conviction that leads him to mount a qualified rescue of it. Similarly, although he venerates no philosopher as wise, he is much more willing than Descartes to give the philosophers their due, appealing as he does now to one, now to another, in support of his position.⁵² Whereas Cartesian method proposes to set aside all received opinion in order to proceed in a quasi-linear manner, building certainty upon certainty, Pascal holds that understanding can only advance in a "zigzag" fashion, moving dialectically from simplicity to sophistication to knowing simplicity, as partial truths are embraced, subsequently abandoned in light of a fuller understanding, and then appreciated anew in their partial truthfulness (90/337, 91/336, 92/335, 93/328). It is in such terms that we should interpret his by no means Pyrrhonian aphorism, "To mock philosophy is truly to philosophize" (513/4).

The preceding contrast could be put in another way. As is generally accepted, Descartes's method involves a curious amalgamation of skepticism and dogmatism. Experience is subjected to the severest skeptical scruples; what emerges unscathed from even "extravagant doubts," namely, "clear and distinct ideas," are to provide the "foundations" for a true or certain advancement in learning. According to Pascal, this procedure does both too much and too little. Too much, because we know enough to realize that hyperbolic skepticism is unreasonable; too little, because we know that nothing we know can be stated with dogmatic assurance (109/392, 131/434, 170/268, 406/395, 655/377). In his view there are no "simple" certainties, only innumerable partial truths. "Here each thing is true in part and false in part," which entails that all demonstrations involve some degree of circularity.⁵³ It is Pascal's unswerving adherence to the twilight state between dogmatism and skepticism that explains his derisive tone when adverting explicitly to Descartes. The title of Descartes's 1644 manual, *The Principles of Philosophy*, is called "ostentatious"; Descartes's opinions on matter and space are a "reverie . . . approved by pigheadedness [*entêtement*]"; the Cartesian philosophy as a

52. 94/313, 101/324, 520/375; 100/467, 109/392, 131/434, 140/466, 142/463, 449/556, 507/363, 533/331, 649/65, 691/432, and "L'entretien avec M. de Saci," 573-74.

53. 905/385; 527/40. On Pascal's reckoning, the mitigation of our certainties perdures even in the life of faith; cf. 926/582. Had Erich Przywara considered that fragment, he might not have described Pascal's theological position as "epistemological [i.e., Cartesian] Jansenism" in his otherwise suggestive "St. Augustine and the Modern World," in M. C. D'Arcy et al., *A Monument to Saint Augustine* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1945), 249-58.

whole is a "romance of nature, quite like the story of Don Quixote."⁵⁴ As these fragments indicate, it is not particular errors in Descartes's physics that vex him most. What chiefly perturbs him is the imperiousness of the method: That nature supplies reasons to question elements of Cartesian science is damning only upon the supposition of hyperbolic certainty, and the categorical dismissal of all that preceded it.⁵⁵

But is it not true that Pascal accepts the notion of a mathematicized physics? Although he distinguishes physics from geometry (376), he clearly joins with Descartes in treating space as something homogeneous or absolute, indifferent to the kind of being moving through it (603ff.). And when he writes "Our soul is cast into a body where it finds number, time, dimensions; it reasons thereupon and calls this nature, necessity, and can believe nothing else" (418/233; cf. 420/419, 110/282, 583), it is impossible not to think of his opponent. He also seems to have entertained Descartes's notorious animal-machine hypothesis (105/342, 107/343, 738/341). Nevertheless, the evidence that Pascal rejected mechanistic physics is in plain view: the most apt contemporary example of an automaton available to Pascal was his own calculating machine, but the only time the *Pensées* mentions it, it is by way of contrasting animal volition with the performance of machines.⁵⁶ Of course, the logic of parts and wholes highlighted by Pascal in Fragment 199 alone suffices to show that he could never have accepted the science fiction Descartes advances in *Discourse 5*. While Pascal agreed with Descartes that Scholasticism had overlooked the promise mathematics held for the investigation of nature, he did not believe that Descartes's mathematicized physics would succeed in saving the appearances (cf. 84/79, 686/368, 958/75).

Although he does not say as much on the subject as one might wish, Pascal's own application of mathematics to the domain of nature would have proceeded along rather classical lines, as is suggested by a remark made in a short mathematical treatise entitled *Polestatum numericarum summa*. At the conclusion of that work he writes:

[I]n a continuous quantity, whatever quantities of some kind are added to a quantity of a higher kind add nothing to it. Thus points add nothing to lines, lines nothing to surfaces, surfaces nothing to solids; nor in the case of numbers

54. 199/72; 1005; 1008. Regarding the last comment, and as scholars have occasionally noticed, Descartes himself advises his readers to read his work, at least on one level, as a piece of fiction. See *Discours*, 4, 7, 42 (PW 1.112, 114, 132); and "Preface to the French Edition," *Principia philosophiae*, AT 9B.12 (PW 1.185).

55. See the "Réponse au très bon révérend père Noël," 373-76; "Lettre à M. Le Pailleur," 387; also 161/221.

56. 741/340. On Pascal's objections to mechanism, see Baird, "Pascal's Idea of Nature," 313-16; also see Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, 3.190n55.

... are roots commensurate with squares, squares with cubes, cubes with numbers of the fourth power, etc. Hence, inferior grades are not to be considered, since they are beings of no significance.

A lesser order of mathematical "being" prefigures but never itself yields, and so explains, the greater order, which may be said to contain it. Pascal goes on to say that he has subjoined this remark, which should be "familiar to those who are students of indivisibles," in order that "the connection never sufficiently admired, by which nature, lover of unity, assigns to a one those things that seem most remote" be better appreciated.⁵⁷ The reference to "nature" is crucial, for it suggests that Pascal's understanding of number points in the direction of what has been called the "arithmos structure of being," and away from mechanism.⁵⁸ According to such an understanding, it is impossible to investigate what is distinctive about a given being merely through analysis into its elements, as Cartesian method would have it. Once again, and as Pascal's mathematical inclinations are now seen to confirm, the lower must be read in the light of the higher. In opposition to the homogeneous universe of Descartes's physics, Pascal believes that even that most analytical domain, the domain of number, supports the view that nature is a hierarchically ordered unity of diverse kinds, or that the being of beings is "analogical," to invoke standard Scholastic usage. Consistent with this orientation, whereas Descartes is most impressed by the mutability of nature, its plasticity or power,⁵⁹ the *Pensées* calls attention to the astonishing variety of forms found in nature (65/115, 558/114, 782/266), a variety that is not a random multiplicity because, as Pascal insists, "nature imitates itself."⁶⁰

That nature is drawn together into an analogical unity is, for Pascal, most evident in one being, the human being. The human being manifestly contains in his bodiliness what lies beneath him and prefigures in his thoughts what lies above. As a paradoxical union of apparent opposites, this being provides for Pascal an emblematic display of the wholeness of the whole. At the same time, the fact that human beings are di-

57. 171. Cf. 698/119. *De l'esprit géométrique*, 587-92, also advances some suggestive remarks on how mathematical kinds are to be conceived as both discrete and continuous.

58. See Jacob Klein, "The Concept of Number in Greek Mathematics and Philosophy," in *Lectures and Essays*, 43-52, for a brief statement on "eidetic numbers."

59. *Discours*, 44-45 (PW 1.133).

60. 698/119; cf. 541/120, 663/121. Passages such as these suggest that whatever Pascal means by the "infinity" of nature, he does not suppose it to be merely numerically without limit, or that it is abysmally unintelligible. It looks, rather, as though Pascal's nature is in itself thoroughly intelligible, but in a way that for us must always remain somewhat elusive or mysterious; cf. 199/72. In any case, the imitative ordering Pascal admires is at some distance from the "chaos" at the origin of Descartes's universe, and its intelligible "matter" (*Discours*, 42-43 [PW 1.132]).

vided or fragmentary suggests to him that the natural whole is not ultimate or self-contained (199/72). Given the logic of parts and wholes, however, it is not only true that the being of the human being has implications for our sense of the whole; the being of the whole must also be brought to bear on our sense of ourselves. On this basis, Pascal wonders whether it is possible for us to attain an adequate "perspective" from which to judge who or what we are. The grandeur of the visible universe, and the prodigious minuteness of its smallest known parts, leads him to suspect that we are situated both too near to and too far from ourselves to be able to size ourselves up correctly. Furthermore, what we have divined about the nature of the whole sends an ambiguous message about our place within it: we see enough order within nature to lead us to think that we belong where we are, and enough disorder that we cannot be certain that our placement within nature is anything more than happenstance.⁶¹

Accordingly, the *Pensées* would seem to discredit what the *Discourse on Method* offers as the two paradigmatic instances of "certainty," mathematical reasoning and the author's indubitable awareness of his existence. Both sorts of certainty are empty, Pascal appears to say, too removed from the aporetic being of things to afford a reliable starting point for science. These same considerations suffice to show that Pascal's preoccupation with the human things is not a matter of narrow "anthropocentrism." The *Pensées* does not amount to a renunciation of Pascal's earlier scientific ambitions. To the contrary, this *Apology* issues from the discovery that human life in all its ambiguity affords us the most reliable point of departure, not to say foundation, for a genuine science of the whole. Although an investigation of the human things cannot help but involve some narrowing of focus, in no other part of the whole does pursuit of depth involve so little loss of breadth (cf. 195/37). And at the center of Pascal's investigation of the human things is, again, his teaching on the "heart."

What the *Pensées* announces about the heart constitutes Pascal's real alternative to Cartesian method. For it is the human heart that is, in his opinion, both the principal obstacle to, and the safest path to the truth about things. Now, although the romanticist reading of Pascal has long since been abandoned, it bears repeating that by "heart" he does not mean the seat of mere sentiment: "The heart has its *reasons* . . ." (423/277). The term is plainly of biblical provenance, as numerous scriptural

61. Among the many fragments relevant to the problem of an adequate "perspective" for self-knowledge, see 21/381, 54/112, 65/115, 199/72, 200/347, 558/114, 574/263, 701/9, and 113/348. On nature's ambiguous significance for our self-understanding, see 199/208, 427/194, 449/556, and 934/580. To my knowledge, no one has treated the cosmology of the *Pensées* better than Hans Urs von Balthasar, in "Pascal," *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 3, *passim*.

citations in the *Pensées* attests, but Pascal's use of the term is not exclusively or even primarily theological. A survey of its appearances indicates that it names a *hendiadys*. In Thomistic vocabulary, "heart" designates both *intellectus* or "understanding" (as opposed to *ratio* or "reason") and *voluntas* or "will." The *Pensées's* general refusal to employ two terms for what are, after all, two distinct powers of the soul surely involves some loss of precision, but it does have the advantage of maintaining their dramatic unity in view. Taken singly and in their being together these two moments of Pascal's teaching on "heart" offer a powerful challenge to Cartesian certainty.

When Pascal writes of the heart's possession of reasons "of which reason knows nothing," he has foremost in mind the fact that much of what we know we know nondiscursively, that a good portion of what we count as knowledge is given "all at once," "at a glance." In keeping with the tradition, he invokes the metaphor of sight to describe this noetic capacity. The proper objects of this power are what he calls "principles," which undergird the wholeness of the whole, and of its parts. Such principles mark the most subtle differences between things, which is to say that they are almost innumerable. Nor are they always easily communicated, especially if one's interlocutor does not have the "eyes" to see them (512/1, 751/3). Notwithstanding certain formulations, however, the author of the *Pensées* does not simply oppose the heart's easy insights to reason's hard labor. For he allows that owing to the limits of our noetic capacities, we must often work toward some truths discursively that are in principle available intuitively (110/282), even if it is "only to a certain degree" that reason can bring us to know things known or knowable through the heart (512/1). So, too, noetic apprehension of a principle does not eliminate the need for further investigation through both discursive and nondiscursive means, as a glance at *De l'esprit géométrique* makes plain (cf. 580–82). And while the directness of the heart's hold on what it knows does suggest a certain superiority to the more roundabout achievements of reasoning, Pascal never claims that the heart is infallible. To the contrary, he thinks it all too prone to err; indeed, its very superiority to reason's struggle to attain to what it knows is among the heart's greatest weakness, for of itself it is unable to distinguish genuine insight from woeful delusion (131/434, 530/274). Nevertheless, were reason skeptically to impugn the heart on the basis of the heart's inability to justify what it sees, reason would only betray its own stupidity, because human life, and indeed reason itself, cannot subsist without the acceptance of many indemonstrable principles (131/434, 512/1, 513/4, 514/356).

What may be said to be the subjective limitations of Pascal's "heart" do not entirely explain its scope, however, for its operation finally depends

upon the givenness of the thing known, and not on its acuity. There are obscurities in things that cannot be cleared up, no matter how sharp the mind's eye (449/556). Or rather, the inability of the human heart to grasp all existing "principles" does not ultimately point either to its own intrinsic limitations or to the twilight intelligibility of nature's more recalcitrant principles: what it really signifies is a superabundant intelligibility suffusing all that exists. That which most impresses itself upon Pascal's heart is that there is ever more to be seen than ever meets the mind's eye (512/1; cf. 931/550).

It should be clear why Pascal must think Descartes, and his methodically disciplined reasoning, so "uncertain." For Pascal, it is the thing known that provides the evidence sustaining the heart's knowing grasp of it.⁶² Admittedly, thinking is not for the rationalist Descartes an entirely "rational" process either. If the frequent use of "intuition" in the *Regulae* is not an entirely accurate gauge of his subsequent intentions, still, later appeals to the "clear and distinct" do suggest something like an immediate apprehension of certain truths.⁶³ Still, Pascal obviously accords greater authority to the "heart" than Descartes ever would. The upshot of his account is that much of what the heart knows for certain, indeed among the most important and most "scientific" things it grasps, simply cannot meet the demands of methodical rigor. As we have indicated, the heart's knowledge is always subject to refinement and even correction. Thus what appears in Descartes as a "realistic" distrust of normal human attachments, and of premethodical opinion above all, proves for Pascal to be wedded to "idealistic" suppositions of a most suspect sort.⁶⁴ Pascal's teaching on the heart could be said to show, once again, that philosophy cannot exercise fully rational rule over itself.

Now, although the intuitive powers of "heart" are readily visible in the *Pensées*, Pascal's treatment of heart as the seat of volition obviously constitutes the dominant theme of his analysis. Even here, however, the issue is again primarily noetic, concerning as it does the ways human desire both

62. Cf. 255/756, 7/248. This summary sketch does not mean to imply that the *Pensées*'s teaching on the heart fully restores the ancient theory of noetic intuition. Like so much else Pascal has left us, the argument here is undeveloped. Nor am I claiming that his vocabulary is entirely consistent. In *De l'esprit géométrique*, e.g., "heart" appears to have a somewhat more restricted meaning than in the *Pensées*; cf. 592-94.

63. *Regulae*, AT 10.361, 368-70, 379 (PW 1.10, 14-15, 20); *Discours de la méthode*, 32-33, 36, 39 (PW 1.127, 128, 130); *Méditations*, 4, AT 7.58-59; *Principia philosophiae*, AT 8A.8, 21-24 (PW 1.206-9).

64. Baird points out a further difference between Pascal and Descartes on the question of "intuitive" knowledge especially relevant in this regard. Whereas Descartes argues for the separation of intuition from sensation and especially imagination, Pascal "expressly affirms that self-evident principles or axioms can derive from either the senses or the reason" ("Inconsistencies in Pascal's Conception of Scientific Knowledge," 223).

impedes and promotes our search for the truth. At the forefront of his analysis of the heart as an appetitive organ is his observation that "the eyes of the heart" (308/793) are often clouded by spurious interests, that our ability to lay hold of the proper starting points for understanding may be "poisoned" by corrupt inclinations. "How the heart of man is hollow and filled with dung," he laments (139/143; cf. 136/139, 310/801, 427/194, 470/404, 821/252, 978/100). Let us not allow this impassioned utterance to obscure his intentions, however. For he also insists that it possible for men to desire the truth, and even to do so wholeheartedly (149/430, 150/226, 427/194). The human being is not in his book utterly depraved; it would be more accurate to say that our hearts are "torn" (924/498). Hence two different men can construe the same experience in two different ways, the one's heart disposing him to see the thing as it is, the other's misdirecting him—the division between two hearts being a function of the division possible within any single one (503/675; cf. 539/99). Pascal's principal point is, therefore, that there is a deeply moral basis to all cognition. And this becomes especially significant when we are confronted by truths the evidence for which is equivocal (835/564). Indeed, if it is true that "everything here is partly true, partly false," that all knowledge is provisional or partial, it follows that all genuine science is and must be moral science. Again, the Cartesian method would seem not to confront the most serious obstacles to the advancement of learning.

One might object, however, that equally for Descartes the will plays an integral role in the attainment of truth. As it is introduced in the *Discourse*, the method depends at crucial junctures on its author's "resolve." And in the Fourth of his *Méditations* he explains that error has its origin in the fact that "the will extends further than the intellect," from which it follows that a willful disciplining of will is needed in order to limit our affirmations to what is really clear and distinct.⁶⁵ Pascal, however, could counter that precisely because thought always finds itself in the context of obscurity, restraint and resolve will never suffice. The burden of numerous fragments of the *Pensées* is to show that the only guarantor of our moving in the right direction is that our heart be in the right place; where certainties are not available (but also when they are), the best we can do is to dispose ourselves to be drawn to and to receive what truth there is to be known; and this means, in the final analysis, that we are again dependent upon something "outside" us, upon that which would

65. 12, 14, 16-17, 18, 22-24, 41, 60 (PW 1.116, 118-19, 120, 122-23, 131, 142); *Méditations*, 4, AT 7.58-62 (PW 2.240-42). See Hiram Caton, "Will and Reason in Descartes' Theory of Error," *Journal of Philosophy* 72 (1975): 87-104.

rightly "incline our heart." In short, there can be for Pascal no permanent overcoming of the circle of intellect and will; what is left to us is the perpetual reconsideration of our own stance in every attempt to discern how things stand with the world.⁶⁶

Both the noetic and the moral aspects of Pascal's teaching on the heart are implicit in his censure of Cartesian "theology."⁶⁷ "I cannot forgive Descartes: he would like, in all his philosophy, to do without God; but he could not prevent himself from granting to him a flick of the finger in order to set the world in motion; beyond this he had no use for God" (1001). Pascal here appears to overlook the fact that Descartes does not restrict God's role to filling in an explanatory gap in his physics. God's existence also functions in Descartes's philosophy as the third paradigm of certainty, after the indubitable "I think," and correct mathematical reasoning; in fact, it purports to be the rationally validated guarantor of the first two forms of certainty, albeit never as "first principle" of the method. But whatever one makes of the appropriateness of Descartes's use of the divine, the Deism his publications helped decisively to launch is, according to Pascal, not at all a sure thing. Worse still, it is almost as far removed from Christianity as is atheism (449/556; cf. 191/549, 463/243). Pascal's complaint is anything but sectarian. Quite apart from his concern to defend the specific claims of biblical revelation, he is troubled by a science which, under the banner of methodical certainty, would obscure the genuine traces of God's wisdom and goodness present in the world.⁶⁸ To be sure, the *Pensées* must itself seem curiously deficient, not to say insouciant, when viewed from a Scholastic perspective, given its inability or unwillingness to marshal an argument for God's existence drawn from the order of nature. Yet there is no disputing that Pascal understood the world and everything in it to be an image of God.⁶⁹ If he did not supply a natural theology of his own, this must have been in part because Descartes had helped him to see that formal and

66. Cf. 21/381, 558/114. Even the definitive correction of the heart's wayward tendencies, which comes from "above," and which Pascal, following Saint Paul, following Jeremiah, following Deuteronomy, calls "circumcision of the heart" (268/683, 270/670, 288/689, 453/610), does not eliminate all obscurities.

67. The theme has recently been treated in Vincent Carraud, "Le refus Pascalien des preuves métaphysiques de l'existence de Dieu," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 75 (1991): 19-45; and Francis Kaplan, "Deux attitudes face au problème philosophique de l'existence de Dieu," in the same source, 81-95. See notes 8, 26, and 34 above.

68. Note that Descartes's various "proofs," whatever other merits they may have, never proceed from some order perceived within the world. The turn to mechanism and away from teleology implies that nature expresses no divine "intentions," such that the only things Descartes offers as evidence for God's existence are his "ideas."

69. See 429/229, 471/441, 698/119, 934/580. Also "Lettre III à Mme. Périer," 484; "Lettre V à Mlle. de Roannez," 51; "Entretien avec M. de Saci," 571.

impersonal arguments do not necessarily serve Christianity. In general, he seems to have thought that ordinary Scholastic arguments failed to do justice to the obscurity of the subject, and that they did not attend sufficiently to the circumstances in which such efforts would be most useful. Especially in light of recent developments in physics, but even apart from them, Pascal expressed hesitations about the properly theological worth of ordinary natural theology: it is impossible thereby to "see" the biblical God, who reveals to man that he hides himself (242/585, 427/194, 449/556, 463/243). He was also convinced that those most in need of a proof for God's existence are least disposed to appreciate its force. "I see by reason and experience that nothing is more suited to arouse [the unbeliever's] contempt than the usual proofs for religion" (781/242; cf. 3/244, 190/543, 449/556). As for Descartes, to the limited extent that he does engage in "theology," he must truly be "more than a man," for the god in whom he would have us entrust all our certainties is introduced with little or no regard for human experience as such, and so can have little or nothing to teach us about our humanity. Here as elsewhere, the thrust of Pascal's interrogation of Descartes's method is that we cannot possibly make use of the certainty it professes to provide.

Pascal's teaching on the heart restores us to our point of departure. For if Cartesian utility is useless because it is humanly uncertain, Cartesian certainty is dubious because it is not humanly useful. Just as the problematic character of the good or goods Descartes's science means to foster calls the utility of that science into question, so, Pascal seems to argue, Descartes's method must fail to reach genuine certainty because it does not properly confront the disproportion of the human being, and therewith the divided heart, that which makes all knowledge both possible and problematic. Just as we cannot gain scientific access to the good apart from a sustained reflection on the true, so the true only comes into sight through a continuous meditation on the good. The *Pensées* would have us see that a science that departs from the human experience of the human will divert us from both the good and the true.