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Creative Suffering: The Theme of Mediation in Pascal's Pensées

IN PASCAL'S thought everything exists in relation to Christ, or, as Nicholas Boyle writes, "Just as all things in the literary world of the *Essais* fall into place around Montaigne, so all things in the religious world of the *Pensées* are ordered by the 'point de perspective' furnished by Jesus." (21) Pascal himself wrote that "men before Christ did not know where they stood, nor whether they were great or small," (Pascal, #691) In the *Pensées* Christ is described as the mediator in the irreconcilable opposition between God and man. No exchange, no communication can take place without this mediator. (Pascal, #189, #378) For Pascal, there is no direct, immediate knowledge of God or reality. However, I will argue that the nature of this mediation does not then provide the certainty that is not possible in a direct way. The mediating function of Christ in Pascal's text is that of a figure we can identify with because his experience is the same as ours, through this identification our experience

acquires meaning. Pascal's use of mediation is complex. Through our very distance from God or Truth, through the alienation and doubt that result from the paradoxical, contradictory nature of language and experience, we arrive not at certainty but at an awareness of and focus on the mediating process itself. Pascal describes man as being both wretched and great because he can understand his situation — the "thinking reed" knows his own wretchedness the way a tree does not. (Pascal, #114)

To understand Pascal's concept of mediation it is also necessary to examine his critique of reason. The limits to our ability to reason are those first principles, like God, Space, Self, and Time, that cannot be further defined or moved but are essential for our understanding of experience. Such terms are always clarified by their relation to something else — there is no first term that itself grounds all the rest. We always understand the world according to a paradigm or medium that can describe and account for our nature and the meaning of our existence. In Pascal's time the traditional understanding of man as the center of a hierarchical, ordered, finite universe was thrown into doubt by the theories of Copernicus and then DesCartes. Human beings now found themselves in an infinite universe whose center was everywhere and nowhere, insignificant creatures sketched between the infinitely great and the infinitely small. In this infinite space God has ceased to have a definable presence. The separation between mind and the world, the alienation of man from a world in which everything was ordered and explained through the manifest presence of God meant that God was no longer present but absent, a hidden God. Only a religion that was based on a hidden God could be applicable and meaningful to what Pascal defined as man's new condition. As Pascal tells us, "Recognize the truth of religion in its very obscurity." (Pascal, #439) Pascal, in the *Pensées*, attempts to revive Christian apologetics and affirm a religious meaning that does not give in to skepticism but that uses skepticism for its justification. By showing that reason itself relies on beliefs in first principles that are postulated but beyond proof, Pascal makes room for a faith that is not based on rational, logical, knowledge and certainty, but on beliefs which require our assent or submission. It is these fundamental concepts that set the limits beyond which reasoning can not go, and that involve not just rational, but physical and emotional, acceptance.

Pascal is adapting the Christian story of faith to make it suitable for man's experience as he defines it — engulfed in uncertainty, suffering, paradox, and anxiety. The Bible and Jesus are reinterpreted to emphasize the suffering and contradiction experienced by Jesus (and through the example of Jesus, the hope of redemption). We see our own limitations and identify with Christ as human in his suffering and sacrifice. (Goldman, 69) In this context, mediation involves identification with symbols that represent the unrepresentable, and "whenever and however such mediation occurs, the particular symbol, image, metaphor, myth, or concept is rendered *meaningful* to various degrees of adequacy dependent upon its disclosive power for our lived experience." (Tracy, 69)

In the seventeenth century paradigms were changing. A world in which everything had its place in a fixed, harmonious order became a world that had a different order, an infinite universe in which all starting points are arbitrary on the Cartesian principle that in homogeneous space no one point is privileged with respect to any other. However, Cartesian rationalism, by emphasizing the autonomy of the individual, the power of reason, and the certainty of science, may not itself have realized the full implications of its discoveries. Rationalism affected a society "still deeply imbued with values men still respected emotionally," and observed in practice. The old hierarchical world view continued to exist in the form of expectations. The dangers were temporarily hidden, allowing men to "celebrate the triumphs of scientific thought and technological progress as if these presented no problems. God had indeed left the world of men, but only a very small minority of the intellectuals in Western Europe realized that he had gone. (Goldman, 31). Pascal, perhaps better than most men of his time, understood the implications of the change. A different truth had come into being, not just a refinement of previous knowledge. What was previously understood to be the truth was revealed by the scientific revolution to be illusory — a construction. By implication, perhaps all truths would be constructions. God is no longer revealed everywhere in the order of the universe. He merely sets it in motion. Sensory information became something to be distrusted. Human values no longer had a place in a physical, impersonal universe of cold space. Individualism abolished any supra-individual reality capable of

offering transcendent norms outside the self as the basis for action. Pascal, in his fragment called *The Disproportion of Man*, speaks to the sense of dislocation that resulted:

For, after all, what is man in nature? A nothing compared to the infinite, a whole compared to the nothing, a middle point between all and nothing, infinitely remote from an understanding of the extremes; the end of things and their principles are unattainably hidden from him in impenetrable secrecy...

Such is our true state. That is what makes us incapable of certain knowledge or absolute ignorance. We are floating in a medium of vast extent, always drifting uncertainly, blown to and fro; whenever we think we have a fixed point to which we can cling and make fast, it shifts and leaves us behind; if we follow it, it eludes our grasp, slips away, and flees eternally before us. Nothing stands still for us. (Pascal, #199)

The eternal silence of these infinite spaces fills me with dread. (Pascal, #201)

It is the absolute uncertainty about ultimate causes or principles that prevents mediation from leading to knowledge of them. They both set the limits to knowledge and indicate that there is something beyond them. When operating within these limits there can be increasingly better descriptions of phenomena, but if pushed far enough, the explanation of phenomena forces a questioning of the grounds for explanation itself. Pascal tried to replace the Cartesian code based on certainty with one based on uncertainty and the absence of God. (Melzer, 103) He uses the Cartesian duality between mind and things, between human understanding and the world, as the evidence or trace of the hidden God. Science itself depends upon the acceptance of hidden principles, a system of a priorities that are only hypotheses.

We cannot be sure that these principles are true (faith and revelation apart) except through some natural intuitions. Now this natural intuition affords

no convincing proof that they are true. There is no certainty, apart from faith, as to whether man was created by a good God, an evil demon, or just by chance, and so it is a matter of doubt, depending on our origin, whether these innate principles are true, false, or uncertain. (Pascal, #131)

According to Pascal, atheists should say things that are perfectly clear, that is, no one can be an atheist because no one has the power to express perfectly clear ideas. (Pascal #161) Man is more than science and reason can explain. Through his critique of reason we get a clear understanding of the role that convention, belief, and perspective, play in both social and scientific life, as well as of the impossibility of "peeling away" convention to reveal an absolute truth underneath.

Pascal's thought is modern. Lucien Goldman says of Pascal that "it was by extending paradox to God himself, and making Him both certain and uncertain, present and absent, that Pascal was able to write the *Pensées* and thus open a new chapter in the history of philosophical thought." (Goldman, 183) In the nineteenth century, most prominently in the work of Kant and Hegel, there were attempts to find the "right" mediating agents, i.e., logic, metaphysics, art, and religion. Despite Pascal's work, rationalism dominated the thought of the eighteenth and most of the nineteenth centuries. Pascal's work stood as the exact opposite of rational, positivist arguments.

Beginning in 1890 and continuing into the second decade of the twentieth century, a reaction against positivism began from within science's own ranks. (Eastwood, 26) The work of Poincaré, Le Roy, and Duhem, coincided with Pascal's critique of reason. Like Pascal, they saw science as empirical and relative, and founded on hypotheses that relied on choice. At the same time, and relying on the same critique, philosophers Bergson and Blondel, emphasizing intuition, will, morality, and action over reason and science, found much support in Pascal's philosophy. (Eastwood, 18) In particular, Maurice Blondel's work *Action* (1893) had a profound coincidence with Pascal's. (Eastwood, 89) Blondel argued that science could not tell us how to act. Yet, a paradox or antinomy existed in the human will — "we will, but the will's origin always eludes us." (Eastwood, 94) The will cannot reach

itself or will itself except as an object. It cannot reach itself subjectively. Within the natural order this paradox or separation is insoluble. (Eastwood, 97) Man can only indirectly will himself and escape determinism by willing the cause of the will, which is, like Pascal's hidden God, a *l'unique necessaite* or first cause that is both immanent and transcendent. Like Pascal, Blondel finds in experience and paradox that our misery pushes us to overcome ourselves and accept this unique cause. (Eastwood, 97)

Blondel reproduces the dilemma of the *Pensées*, Pascal's "incomprehensible that God should exist and incomprehensible that he should not." (Eastwood, 99) One must make a choice, like Pascal's wager, between what is incomprehensible to man (God, the *l'unique necessaire*) and what is incomprehensible in fact (the natural, empirical world). (Eastwood, 100) In choosing to have a comprehensible reality, we are forced to see that we must choose "God" as a ground, an ultimate cause that is both immanent and transcendent and that has its necessity indicated by our alienation, and affirm this cause by acting. The *unique necessaire* is "implicit in action as both its final and its efficient cause, in us, yet not of us." (Eastwood, 99)

Just as Blondel wrote at the end of the "Age of Rationalism" to recover a religious possibility, Pascal wrote at the beginning of the "Age of Rationalism" in the hope of preserving a particular value and meaning for man. As described earlier, he therefore undermined the basis for this new world view. Pascal refused to accept that either the rationalistic world or the libertine, skeptical world of seventeenth century France could provide human beings with the values to guide their actions. Pascal argued from within the Catholic tradition for a faith based on personal experience. The Church was not only threatened by the new science and the skepticism and pagan humanism that developed out of the Renaissance, but found itself in the wake of a period of religious instability and reform. (Wade, 131-2) Pascal's own involvement in the theological debates was in the argument between the Jesuits and the Jansenists, of whom Pascal in his *Provincial Letters* was an eloquent defender. (It has been debated whether Pascal was an orthodox Jansenist or not. The question of mediation in Pascal does not depend on how closely his thoughts conform to Jansenism, and I want to leave aside discussion of it.)

Very briefly put, the Counter-Reformation attempted to

moderate the severe theology of the Reformation, in which, particularly by Luther, man's free will to cooperate with God and act justly was denied and any attempt to either humanize or limit God's unconditional and impossible demands rejected. For Luther, acceptance by God was justified by faith alone — man in this life was always a sinner. Founded in 1534, the Jesuits and their main theoretician, Molina, formulated a modernizing theology that tried to reconcile free will, God's prèscience, and grace, and attempted to make religious truth more available. (Wade, 283) The Council of Trent in 1564 was the official Catholic response to the quarrels that developed over free will and grace. It gave a liberal interpretation of the doctrine of Augustine in expressing "the opinion that each Christian possesses a sufficient grace to reject sin and to carry out the law of God" (Wade, 285) (while insisting on the uncertainty of salvation). The Jansenists opposed the decision of Trent, favoring a strict interpretation of Augustine. Against Jesuit casuistry and sufficient grace, the Jansenists insisted on both Luther's emphasis on God's unconditional demands and the Calvinist doctrine of the absolute sovereignty of God in the bestowal of grace. Pascal, in his *Provincial Letters*, accused the Jesuits of trying to mitigate both. (Dunne, 86)

Since the Reformation, a common thread to the religious debates and contending theologies was the failure of the medieval system of spiritual mediation and attempts to either reject or recover it. (Dunne, 78) In the medieval sense of spiritual mediation, Man and God, death and life existed as a continuum in which the dead remained "alive" to the living. Through the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, this mediation became increasingly unsatisfactory and ineffectual as death itself came to be seen as an all-conquering and absolute, a point beyond which living men had no connection or knowledge. (Dunne, 78) By the time of Luther death was "no longer mitigated by any sense of spiritual mediation." (Dunne, 79) According to Dunne:

The life of Luther is a kind of paradigm of the course history has taken in modern times, the breakdown of spiritual mediation followed by a falling back upon temporal mediation [for Luther the institutional authority of the German princes] followed finally by a breakdown of temporal mediation.

...The loss of mediation, at least the loss of spiritual mediation, did not mean for Luther a decline in the significance of Christ as mediator between God and man. On the contrary, it meant a rediscovery of Christ, a new image of Christ, and this too was paradigmatic for the subsequent course of history. "Christians must be exhorted," he said in the 94th of his 95 theses, "to seek to follow Christ their lead through pains, deaths, and hells." (Dunne, 80)

Christ became such a model because he himself experienced an unmediated existence, a direct experience of hell, purgatory, and salvation. Pascal has a similar concept in fragment 241 of the *Pensées*, titled *A source of contradictions*: "A God humiliated even to the death on the Cross. Two natures in Jesus Christ, Two Comings. Two states of man's nature. A messiah triumphing over death by his death."

Given Pascal's insistence on our inability to know the divine, the nature of mediation becomes paradoxical. Man, who can identify with the human suffering of Christ, is left in a state of uncertainty about his relationship with Christ's divinity. This mediator has two natures: the human, whose suffering we can identify with, and the divine, a hidden nature with a secret resurrection. (Pascal, #308) The Christ on the Cross is visible to all, while Christ in his Tomb was hidden and visible only to saints. "Only saints went into it. It was there that Jesus took on a new life, not on the cross." (Pascal, #560) While Pascal frequently refers, using traditional religious language, to the union of both natures in Christ, it is clear from his statements on the uncertainty of our knowledge of God that we have access to only the human side, the nature that represents to us our own misery, confusion, and suffering. Traditional Christianity brought both natures together; Pascal keeps them separate. Pascal nearly always reverts to some sort of duality. (Wade, 313)

The mediation Christ represents cannot function in the traditional way. Lucien Goldman describes Pascal's view as the tragic vision, in which men are permanently trapped in error, illusion, ambiguity, and appearances; yet affirm faith and meaning. On the dual nature of Christ, Goldman says, "If there is a complete absence of any relationship between tragic man and Jesus Christ

the Righteous, there is; on the other hand, a positive and symmetrical relationship — that is to say a mutual one — between tragic man and Christ crucified, between such a man and Christ suffering and dying to save humanity.” (Goldman, 79)

The tragic interpretation of Christianity is obliged to emphasize the passages of the scriptures that speak of the *deus absconditus* and the sufferings of Christ, and to neglect those parts of scripture that speak of the manifest presence of God. Goldman argues that “In my view, Pascal was already putting forward a particular interpretation of the Scriptures, and was giving them a tragic meaning, by choosing to discuss the two passages in which Christ is supremely alone, the Garden of Gethsemane and the Cross.” (Goldman, 76) Pascal’s *Mystery of Jesus* describes the tormented and abandoned Jesus, a key phrase being “Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world. There must be no sleeping during that time.” (Pascal, #919) Pascal has used in the *Mystery of Jesus* the sole fragment of St. John’s Gospel that can fit this interpretation, the phrase from John XI, 33: “He was troubled.” Humanity, miserable and uncertain according to Pascal’s description, would identify with such a mediator, who provides a way that can be imitated, an experience that can be shared. Pascal’s interpretation of the story of Jesus can be seen in this group of quotations:

Jesus tears himself away from his disciples to enter upon his agony: we must tear ourselves away from those who are nearest and dearest to us in order to imitate him. (Pascal, #919)

That is why he took on this unhappy condition, so that he could be in every person and a model for every condition of men, (Pascal, #946)

We must open our mind to the proofs, confirm ourselves in it through habit, while offering ourselves through humiliations to inspiration, which alone can produce the real and salutary effect. Lest the Cross of Christ be made of none effect. (Pascal, #808)

All Jesus did was to teach men that they loved themselves, that they were slaves, blind, sick,

unhappy, and sinful, that he had to deliver, enlighten, sanctify and heal them, that this would be achieved by men hating themselves and following him through his misery and death on the Cross. (Pascal, #271)

This is not exactly the “good news” of the Gospels. Self-hatred becomes the central religious issue, and Christ the redeemer of our nothingness and the compensation for self-hatred. (Boyle, 22) The path we must follow is one that abandons the things of this world, destroys the passions and the self, and fixes on a search for that unattainable hidden Truth, because man is unable to either know or accept not knowing. Once more, Pascal’s text can speak for itself: “No other religion has proposed that we should hate ourselves. No other religion can please those who hate themselves and seek a being who is really worthy of love. And if they had never [before] heard of the religion of the humiliated God, they would at once embrace it.” (Pascal, #220) This hatred of the self is also part of Pascal’s dialogue with DesCartes and Montaigne — rationalism and skepticism. Both revolve around the perspective of the self, which Pascal sees in only a negative light as the “beginning of all disorder, in war, politics, economics, in man’s individual body.” (Pascal, #421)

For Pascal, Christianity is the only religion that can explain the paradoxes and contradictions found in man’s nature and experience. Pascal’s wager can lead to belief in religion in general by arguing that we cannot refuse to make a choice and that it is reasonable to bet on the existence of God: if you are right you’ve lost nothing; if you’re wrong you’ve lost everything. One is staking a finite life against infinite happiness. Pascal’s argument, however, is for Christianity in particular, a Christianity defined in terms of paradox and the suffering of Christ. For Goldman, this is the one point where Pascal abandons the paradoxical nature of his own argument — the constant swing between pro and con; between talk of the certainty of faith and the uncertainty of true knowledge (and ultimately of faith itself) — to affirm a truth without also arguing for its opposite. That truth is the correspondence between the paradoxical nature of man and the paradoxical nature of Christianity, in terms of a hidden God, original sin, and the Incarnation. (Goldman, 212) The one vanity of

men for which there is no “*raison des effets*,” the cause for every effect, is men’s contempt for themselves, which provides Pascal with a bridge to the Christian religion and its rejection of the self. (Boyle, 17)

The perspective of faith can not only describe the situation correctly, but offers an explanation for it. (Davidson, 79) Adam’s Fall has corrupted man’s original nature. Where there was originally clarity and direct correspondence between mind and the world, there is now only error and illusion. All knowledge is now mediated, but without certainty. Christianity explains the dual nature of man, that is, his present misery and his sense of a lost past greatness and happiness. (Pascal, #354) The intuition the heart has access to is a result of the recollection of a pre-Fall state. Christianity teaches hatred of the self; the source of the failure, and explains humanity’s experience — his misery and escape into diversions. As Pascal says in the *Pensées*, “Man’s condition. Inconstancy, boredom, anxiety.” (Pascal, #24) Our examination of our own experience and our self-awareness tells us that this is the case. Experience offers the proof that human nature is corrupt. The “proofs” of the Christian religion and Jesus Christ as the redeemer or mediator of our dual nature — our dual capacity for grace and sin — are not proofs in the usual sense of the word proof: “Proofs of religion: Morality / Doctrine / Miracles / Prophecies / Figures.” (Pascal, #402) These proofs are a marshalling of historical, empirical, and psychological evidence, and biblical exegesis, from as many directions as possible to converge on the argument that Christianity is “best for us to believe.” Pascal’s argument is circular — faith itself guarantees the truth of faith. The proofs are not rational but rhetorical and persuasive: “proof de facto, not proof de jure” (Natoli, lecture). In other words, as Natoli says, those things that do in fact convince us are all we have to go on. Faith is a postulate that makes rationality possible. Jesus Christ becomes the correct perspective through which to view the world and experience, and to orient our actions.

In Pascal, mediation has a broader context than the role of Jesus Christ within Christianity, one that applies to the question of the certainty or uncertainty of all forms of knowledge of the world. Pascal’s argument for belief rests on his assertion that meaning can only come from a transcendent source, a source that exists beyond the limits of our ability to define or explain it. Because the

Christian religion and a suffering, crucified, Christ are for Pascal the one right story that alone can give value and meaning to human life, and because it subsumes within itself all forms of sensory experience and scientific, rational knowledge as the ultimate principle of their existence, the mediation of Jesus Christ takes on the symbolic representation of our relationship to reality. Mediation provides a way of perceiving reality or being-in-the-world. Pascal's concept of the mediation of Christ is a metaphorical or symbolic form by which faith in the meaningfulness of existence is affirmed (even if that meaning is essentially negative). (Tracy, 78) Such symbolic representation is necessary when the limits or first causes to understanding are hidden and defy literal description. Symbol, image, myth, story, and fiction play a necessary role in revealing "some genuinely new possibilities for existence; possibilities which conceptual analysis, committed as it is to understanding present actualities, cannot adequately provide." (Tracy, 206)

Pascal's decision to wager that God exists, rather than to assume his existence was something established carried Jansenism to its logical conclusion, introducing doubt about whether God himself really exists. (Goldman, 55) The wager shifts the question from "Does God exist?" to "Is it prudent to believe that God exists?" (Rescher, 99) Pascal's God of the wager is similar to Kant's God as a practical postulate. That is, God is certain and necessary, but this certainty and necessity are practical and human, not theoretical. For Pascal, they are certainties of the heart, not reason. For Kant (who uses the term reason differently, in a manner similar to the intuition of Pascal's heart) they are certainties of reason, but not of the understanding. Kant's "practical" certainty depends upon will and value, and the need to legitimate actions when the evidence is insufficient. (Rescher, 44-5) Like Pascal's certainties of the heart "they are not proofs or demonstrations but postulates and wagers." (Goldman, 66) Like Kant, in Pascal's philosophy, rational knowledge cannot prove the existence of God, for the last step it can take is the recognition of the infinity which lies beyond. It is clear that in the text of Pascal's *Pensées* there is a radical uncertainty about our knowledge of first principles. However, we do have in Pascal, as in Kant, an intuitive practical ability to function in the world. We affirm a reality in practice but it is a human reality, limited by human capacities.

Both Pascal and Kant exist as tragic figures, in Goldman's terms, because they insist on retaining absolute knowledge as an impossible demand, while arguing that it is beyond the reach of human knowledge. (Goldman, 230) All value is located in a transcendent reality, not this one. Pascal, in the seventeenth century, would not take the Nietzschean step of affirming reality as it is for us without transcendental truths. Yet there are places in Pascal's text that point in the direction of recognizing the role perspective plays in all our access to reality. Some examples of this are:

Thinking reed. It is not in space that I must seek my human dignity, but in the ordering of my thought. It will do me no good to own land. Through space the universe grasps me and swallows me up like a speck; through thought I grasp it. (Pascal, #113)

There is... a relationship between man and all he knows. Everything in short is related to him. (Pascal, #199)

We not only look at things from different points of view, but with different eyes; we do not care to find them alike. (Pascal, #672)

Imagination decides everything: it creates beauty, justice and happiness, which is the world's supreme good. Such, more or less, are the effects of this descriptive faculty. (#44)

There is even the Kantian notion that perspective not only limits our access to a reality-in-itself, but constructs it. Pascal says, "nature has set us so exactly in the middle that if we alter one side of the scales we alter the other as well. ... This leads me to believe that there are certain mechanisms in our head so arranged that we cannot touch one without touching its opposite." (Pascal, #519) And there is this: "Instead of receiving ideas of these things in their purity, we color them with our qualities and stamp our own composite being on all the simple things we contemplate." (Pascal, #199) This applies as well to the process of reading — the reader reads himself into the text. Pascal, as a reader of Montaigne's *Essais* tells us "it is not in Montaigne but in myself that I find

everything I see there.” (Pascal, #689)

Because Pascal insists on the need for absolute truth (God), human perspective is seen as a limit, a deception, a sickness — the natural unhappiness of our feeble mortal condition. (Pascal, #136) We are trapped in an intermediate state. Here Pascal’s response to human existence can be contrasted with Nietzsche’s. Pascal describes this life as a sickness and rejects it for the hope of an afterlife that can alone bring certainty. Nietzsche, who absorbs into his own arguments most of Pascal’s analysis of the human condition, rejects Pascal’s conclusions. Nietzsche affirms this life, despite its sufferings. Rather than posit all value in an otherworldly being, one must create one’s own value here and accept the impossibility of finding a mediation that leads us to the “Truth” to be found. Brendan Donnellan, in his article “Nietzsche and Pascal” written for the *Germanic Review* says, “The later Nietzsche is more radical and consistent in his skepticism than Pascal, disputing the validity not only of rational systems, but also of the intuitions and convictions which Pascal believed to offer the real truth. For Nietzsche, everything became fiction and projection, a life-enabling and asserting process of unconscious interpretation.” (Donnellan, 92)

Just as Nietzsche took Pascal’s thought to its furthest conclusions, Pascal took Montaigne’s and DesCartes’, and used them to postulate the existence of a transcendent center, given the absence of one in the world. DesCartes, as a disciple of Montaigne, took himself as the center, the privileged starting point. Pascal’s criticism of this self is devastating — in a mechanistic analysis in which human beings are a mechanical part of a mechanical universe, the self turns out not to exist at all. (Boyle, 11 and Pascal, #688) Pascal argues that after the various qualities like judgement or memory are eliminated, there is no essential “me, myself” to be found. The self is only an empty collection of qualities. In the *Pensées* there is no description of the human personality “other than in the terms of a moi that would make itself centre of all or the borrowed qualities hanging round a vacancy.” (Boyle, 11) Yet Pascal’s approach does not differ from the Cartesian principle of identifying reality through the cogito. Pascal insisted that man begin with self-knowledge. It is the nature of man that provides the median term between nature and God. (Wade, 301) When Pascal acted on the dictum “know thyself,” he found only darkness and

obscurity. He replaces Montaigne's pleasurable self with a miserable, empty one. This miserable, alienated self is unbearable. For Pascal, religion provides the solution. The self that is missing from this world is found in another — that of Jesus Christ, who exists to mirror our own human misery yet console us in his divinity for the self hatred this misery causes. Jesus Christ becomes the center that establishes a fixed point of reference, the point of infinity that orders all others, the "one indivisible point which is the right place," (Pascal, #21) that can bring meaning into chaos. (Boyle, 20)

Pascal's response to uncertainty is a search for mediation in which the search itself has the effect of mediation. (Dunne, 102) For Pascal, in this life there can only be a continually renewed search for a certainty that is unavailable, because the search itself gives man the only form of certainty he can have, a certainty of conscience. It is both impossible to have truth and happiness and impossible not to want them. (Pascal, #401) The search, which Pascal attempts to persuade his reader must be directed towards a belief in the Christian religion, has no terminus in certainty, but puts man in the best position to hope. To Pascal there is "at least an indispensable obligation to seek." (Pascal, #427) The entire *Pensées* is aimed at the persuasion of the reader to his interpretation of Catholicism, yet "this aspect of Pascal's approach, though rational in the broad sense, does not lead to salvation, it merely prepares for it, if perchance God wishes to give His faith to the heart."

Among the fragments of the *Pensées* are:

It is good to be tired and weary from fruitlessly seeking the true good, so that one can stretch out one's arms to the Redeemer. (Pascal, #631)

But is it probable that probability brings certainty? Difference between peace and certainty of conscience: Truth alone brings certainty; the sincere quest for truth alone brings peace. (Pascal, #599)

The search can not only lead to the desire to believe, it can restore to man some of his dignity in knowing that he is doing everything he can as a thinking person. Pascal's human being never ceases to affirm the need for immediate certainty but remains forever

unsatisfied, so that “the tragic believer lives constantly in hope and never in certainty.” (Goldman, 85)

Mediation does not bring certainty. It forces a reflection back on the process itself — the movement between the poles of knowing and not-knowing, just as language moves between the poles of communication and noncommunication, clarity and obscurity. The similarity between Pascal’s use of mediation and the mediating function of language makes an interesting comparison. Sara Melzer, in interpreting Pascal according to contemporary deconstruction theory, describes a Pascal who forces his readers to experience language’s inability to represent the truth, but hopes that the heart can understand truth outside of language. Language is always “other” to what it claims to represent, yet this very otherness suggests the possibility of escape. (Melzer, 135) Our awareness is reflected back onto language to seeing language as an obstacle, which indicates that the truth Pascal desires must be somewhere else. (Melzer, 140) In other words, “transcendence ... is rooted in the necessary awareness both of the seductive and pervasive lure of presence and of its impossibility.” (Atkins, 61) Nevertheless, language, or mediation, is itself the only way of understanding its own limits, even if it cannot hold a transcendent truth. In this sense, Jesus Christ becomes “the model reader” of the world as text, having access to the truth of God’s authorship of this text, and providing the key to its interpretation. (Melzer, 137) Human beings must wager on whether God is the author of this “true text” or whether there are simply an endless series of codes and interpretations. There is not only the same play in Pascal’s mediation and in language between the poles of certainty and uncertainty, but the trace of an absent origin or ground that can lead to the belief that it might be possible to escape to a place beyond language — absence implies presence. Pascal wanted a ground to judge interpretations. The play of interpretation, the interpretations of interpretations that are our mediated relationship to both texts and reality is not “play” in Pascal’s work, but a source of misery and error. Pascal could not accept the implications of his own analysis of reason, truth, and human nature, and rejected the self that made them.

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