Pascal on Faith, Reason, and Politics

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Blaise Pascal's importance as an early critic of Descartes is well-documented, with most scholarly attention being given to his recovery of "knowledge of the heart" over against the primacy of autonomous reason (Chevalier 1933: 269-272; Morris 1992: 183-194; Peters 2009; Hibbs 2017: 101-142). This paper hopes to supplement these accounts by dwelling on the political implications of Pascal's response to Descartes. That is, if Descartes' rationalist epistemology has political implications, then Blaise Pascal's criticism of Cartesian rationalism should have political implications too. There is indeed the outline of a political conservatism in Pascal's thought, some details of which I hope to clarify and contextualize within his broader thought.

Cartesian Rationalism: Epistemological and Political

Descartes' infamous method of radical doubt sought to eradicate uncertainty. Only beliefs based on a secure foundation, he believed, would be reliably true and therefore useful for

life (AT 62).[1] Systems of knowledge are akin to architectural structures, which are only as strong as their foundation. Knowledge, therefore, must be in principle traceable to an indubitable first principle. Only such a logically certain first principle could provide us with the certainty required to know and master nature.[2]

Descartes says very little about what this foundationalism means for statecraft, but one passage in the *Discourse on Method* is particularly relevant. He begins part two of the *Discourse* by justifying his foundational-architectural methodology by drawing on the examples of individual buildings and – most important for our purposes – legal-political orders. Buildings are best designed by a single architect according to a coherent blueprint, rather than being a collection of ad hoc additions and renovations that may conflict with the original plan. A good building is not the result of an historical process completed by multiple generations or perspectives, but must result from a single rational plan. Similarly, a system of thought should not develop through continued reflection on traditional theories – those of Aristotle and the scholastics, for example – but must arise at once from a single rational foundation. He goes on:

> Thus I imagined that peoples who, having once been half savages and having been civilized only little by little, have made their laws only to the extent that the inconvenience due to crimes and quarrels have forced them to do so, could not be as well ordered as those who, from the very beginning of their coming together, have followed the fundamental precepts of some prudent legislator (AT 12).

Descartes employed this analogy to shed light on his epistemological project, but it is carries noteworthy political implications. A politics of rational first principles is contrasted with the organic development of law in response to political problems. Three relevant points are implied in the comparison of buildings, legal systems, and systems of thought. First, an organic

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[1] All references to the writing of Descartes will refer to the Adam and Tannery pagination (AT). All quotations are from Donald Cress' translation (Descartes 1998).
[2] On the important connection between certainty and utility see McCarthy (1998).

common law politics will differ between polities, as each polity will have a different history and therefore a different set of problems that will have been addressed. Descartes' model, in contrast, would prescribe the same laws and institutions in all polities, regardless of history or local traditions. It thus leaves little room for historical and geographical contingency, preferring instead laws bearing the necessity of deductive logic. Second, organic political development is judged primarily by how well it has responded to particularistic, local problems. A politics of first principles, on the other hand, judges laws by how closely they adhere to universal standards. Third, depending on how seriously one is inclined to take Descartes' architectural analogy, the only solution to a structure built on a weak foundation is to demolish it and rebuild from the ground up.[3] This points to the potential for a Cartesian politics of revolution and reinforces the general connection between epistemology and politics, insofar as, for example, Burke's later criticism of the French Revolution was in part directed at the rationalism undergirding its revolutionary fervor.[4]

Pascal's Critique of Cartesian Rationalism[5]

Pascal's response to Descartes' epistemology can be boiled down to the following claim: knowledge does not originate from rational first principles alone, but from the use of reason in

[3] Descartes faithfully and consistently applied the architectural metaphor to his epistemology. Part three of the *Discourse on Method* references his process of "rebuilding the [epistemological] house where one is living" (AT 22).

[4] "All the pleasing illusions, which made power gentle and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which, by a bland assimilation, incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason....Nothing is left which engages the affections on the part of the commonwealth. On the principles of this mechanic philosophy, our institutions can never be embodied, if I may use the expression, in persons; so as to create in us love, veneration, admiration, or attachment. But that sort of reason which banishes the affections is incapable of filling their place" (Burke 2003: 66).

[5] Quotations from Pascal are taken from the A.J. Krailsheimer translation (Pascal 1995). Fragments are referred to by both Lafuma and Sellier enumerations (L and S, respectively).

conjunction with other sources of belief, including intuition, faith, and custom. These sources of belief, used properly, are *above* reason, but not *against* it. He pointed to the strange dualities in human nature – according to which men are not rational automatons but a combination of heart, will, and mind – as well as the structure of thought itself, using a quasi-Aristotelian argument for the necessity of unprovable first principles at the base of all reasoning.[6] Human beings acquire beliefs in multiple ways and the Cartesian goal of autonomous reason is not possible for beings such as we are. Moreover, reason depends on fundamental precepts that themselves elude logical demonstration while being necessary constituents of it.[7]

Pascal therefore rejects Descartes' rationalist claim that reason can be made to operate independently of, and even despite, all other sources of belief. A purely rational system, if possible, would provide a universally valid set of political principles against which all polities should be judged. However, if belief originates from reason working alongside the heart, will, custom, etc. then politics will have to take factors other than universal rationalist principles into account.

NOTE: This section will also include a sustained analysis of relevant Pascalian fragments that present his arguments to this effect – likely the fragments cited in footnote 7.

Pascal's Strange Conservatism

Scholars have long noted Pascal's claims concerning the importance of social order, preserving existing hierarchies in order to maintain peace, and avoiding civil war at all costs (Maritain 1943: 43; Clark 2015; Goldmann 2016: 275). Insofar as he touches on these themes he

[6] Cf. Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* i.3.
[7] See fragments L131/S434 and L110/S282 for Pascal's arguments along these lines.

falls in with anti-revolutionary and anti-rationalist conservatives like Edmund Burke and Michael Oakeshott.[8] Civil war and socio-political collapse are for Pascal the greatest evils, and he worries that subjecting existing political systems to the kind of rationalist analysis Descartes calls for threatens to weaken them. "The art of subversion, of revolution," he writes, "is to dislodge established customs by probing down to their origins in order to show how they lack authority and justice....There is no surer way to lose everything" (L60/S294).

Related to this theme is Pascal's strange defense of the vanity of people who are taken in by false and unreasonable legitimations of authority. He admits that most people respect the law simply out of pure habit or due to magisterial shows of royalty and power; nevertheless, they do respect the law and therefore contribute to social stability.

> Thus we have shown that man is vain to pay so much attention to things which do not really matter, and all these opinions have been refuted.
> Then we showed that all these opinions are perfectly sound, so that, all these examples of vanity being perfectly justified, ordinary people are not as vain as they are said to be (L93/S328).

Pascal's conservatism emphasizes the evils of civil war and revolution (L60/S294, L94/S313), and therefore the importance of forestalling them at all costs. Any reason for respecting law is good enough, even vanity or the mindless acceptance of custom. In fact, fragment L60/S294, his most sustained reflection on law and justice, begins and ends with the claim that it is good to deceive the people about the justice of the laws.

Law, he writes, is "self-contained," meaning that it bears no essential relation to justice or truth. It should be obeyed simply because it is the law of the land, and thus the only way we have to maintain social order. Throughout multiple fragments Pascal develops a theory of the origin of law in force and coercion, which by a process of becoming established and customary

[8] It is worth noting here that Burke and Oakeshott locate the ground of political radicalism in enlightenment rationalism, as does Pascal. See the quotation from Burke in note 4 and Oakeshott (1991).

was eventually deemed just and right (L60/S294, L81/S299, L85/S878, L103/S298, L828/S304; cf. Rogers 1998: 39-48). This is not simply a contingent historical argument, but a necessary function of the fact that force carries with it real and tangible power whereas the ideals of justice and right have no such efficacy in the human world: "If it had been possible, men would have put might into the hands of right, but we cannot handle might as we like, since it is a palpable quality, whereas right is a spiritual quality which we manipulate at will" (L85/S878). Subjecting laws to a rationalist analysis of their first principles exposes their self-contained and coercive character, which is precisely why the truth of the matter must not be made common knowledge.

Pascal's arguments thus suggest that the quest for first principles of justice may tear down the existing political structure without being able to replace it with something better. He does not deny the reality of the non-material as such, but he does deny the extent to which the non-materiality of right can influence political things, which suggests that any post-revolutionary political order is liable to baptize might all over again, leaving us no better off. Pascal's conservatism is, at this point in the argument, a politics of prudence that is wary of destabilizing established political institutions (L81/S299).

There is, however, another theme running parallel to his support for existing structures that has a distinct flavour of social criticism – that is, a penetrating moral critique of existing laws. For starters, Pascal's positivist and conventionalist theory of existing law effectively undercuts the eternal justice of the law, insofar as it entails that what governments deem just is not in fact so. Moreover, a repeated theme of his is the injustice of wartime killing, in which murder is said to be just if the victim happens to live on the other side of an arbitrary line.

Finally, we can detect something of a critique of private property rights throughout the text, the full articulation of which is beyond the scope of this paper. Three fragments are

relevant to this claim. First, Pascal writes in fragment L81/S299 that "equality of possessions is no doubt right." No argument for this strong claim is made, though L797/S310 elaborates with the similarly vague statement that "the proper function of wealth is to be freely given." A social and economic system that permits hoarding and inequality of wealth is contrary to the true purpose of wealth. It ought to be shared and made into a means of equality, rather than marking out differences between individuals and classes, as was the case in his day and still is in ours.

The third relevant fragment reiterates the injustice of existing arrangements and connects his theory of property to his theory of the coercive origin of law: "*Mine, thine.* 'This is my dog,' said these poor children. 'That is my place in the sun.' There is the origin and image of universal usurpation" (L64/S295). In proto-Rousseauean fashion, the mine-thine distinction is diagnosed as the origin of usurpation, and therefore injustice.[9] This distinction arose when certain groups possessed the power to protect their property against others and has eventually become recognized as right.

Far too little is written on these matters to generate a complete theory of property, but it is evident that Pascal did not consider himself an apologist for established order. His concern for maintaining peace is counteracted by an equal and opposite desire to expose existing injustices. His conservatism did not wash over the injustice of the present to avoid the greater evils of sedition and civil war, even though his social criticism could very well have the effect of weakening support for established order. Virgil Martin Nemoianu rightly notes the "subversive implications of [Pascal's] critique of human political arrangements" (Nemoianu 2013: 39).

The literature on Pascal's moral and political thought, scant though it is, offers competing solutions to this tension. One option is to reduce Pascal to a mere conventionalist who views

[9] Cf. the opening paragraphs of Part II of Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* (Rousseau 2009: 55).

politics as belonging wholly to the realm of fallen human nature, and in which power alone carries the day and human reason is unfit to pronounce on matters of political justice. Jacques Chevalier argues that although for Pascal morality itself was not relative human justice could never amount to anything more than positive law (Chevalier 1933: 216-218). Similarly, Jacques Maritain refers to Pascal's "pessimistically bitter conservatism" (Maritain 1943: 43). If human justice is madness and folly, then the proper stance towards political life is one of distance and separation, and one must instead focus one's energies on getting closer to God.[10]

This approach recognizes the conventional nature of human justice but overlooks the extent to which Pascal nevertheless sees political justice as subject to moral and rational criticism. The fact that human laws are often not in accordance with true justice does not entail the unqualified positivist or conventionalist thesis that human laws are neither just nor unjust. Nor does Pascal's criticism of rationalism require him to adopt an irrationalist stance that denies man's ability to judge institutions. Indeed it is the very injustice and irrationality of the political order that motivates his political reflections.

Any effort to comprehend the fullness of Pascal's political stance must account for his conservatism as well as his penchant for social criticism. Nemoianu has recently reconciled Pascal's conventionalism and moral realism by reading these extreme positions as dialectical stages in the progression from the view of ordinary people to that of true Christians. The social criticism of the "half-clever" is superseded by the prudent acceptance of custom on the part of "clever men," which in its turn is superseded by the higher wisdom of "pious folk" and "perfect Christians" (Nemoianu 2013; See L90/S337 for Pascal's dialectical treatment of these groups). Politics belongs to the temporal order of the body and must therefore aim at the avoidance of

[10] Nemoianu provides a helpful summary of this approach (2013: 36).

harm, tyranny, and civil war, but does not exhaust the moral or spiritual good of human beings; this is to be found in the higher orders of mind and charity.

Nemoianu's interpretation is promising for its attention to the dialectical subtlety of Pascal's argument and its refusal to reduce him to a run-of-the-mill conventionalist. However, it is my contention that reading Pascal's conservatism and social criticism as dialectical moments threatens to dilute the force of each. It does this by treating each dialectical stage as being partially correct and as having "relative validity" (Nemoianu 2013: 55) – that is, neither position enjoys Pascal's "unqualified endorsement" (Ibid.: 53). Without ignoring the importance of Pascal's dialectical mode of argument and presentation, I argue that Pascal gives us reason to unambiguously affirm the complete truth of each position without relativizing them or relegating them to dialectical moments.

A theme that runs through Pascal's work is the need to affirm the truth of contradictory positions. The following fragment provides the clearest articulation of this theme, though it can be found throughout the text:

> "I do not admire the excess of a virtue like courage unless I see at the same time an excess of the opposite virtue, as in Epaminondas, who possessed extreme courage and extreme kindness. Otherwise it is not rising to the heights but falling down. We show greatness, not by being at one extreme, *but by touching both at once and occupying all the space in between*" (L681/S353; italics mine).

When confronted with seemingly incompatible virtues or claims, Pascal counsels a full affirmation of the truth of each, not a compromise position that merely affirms their partial or relative truth. Elsewhere he writes that "[i]f there ever was a time to profess two opposites it is when one is accused of leaving one out" (L786/S865). The truth of opposite extremes was an ontological principle for Pascal, such that many phenomena have this dual feature. Faith and reason, thought to be opposite and incompatible by the likes of Descartes, were instead equally reliable sources of knowledge. Kept within their proper sphere, they are both unqualified goods.

Similarly, man is not a midpoint between great and wretched, but is in fact wholly great and wholly wretched. These conditions are related, insofar as our knowledge of wretchedness is evidence of our greatness – "a tree does not know that it is wretched," Pascal writes (L114/S397) – but the truth of one does not moderate or relativize the truth of the other. Pascal's anthropology and epistemology attempt to touch both extremes as once, and now it appears that his politics does so as well.

There are two primary sources of textual evidence for this interpretation. First, we see both elements of Pascalian politics intertwined within the same fragments and coming from the same dialogical interlocuters, rather than each element being represented by distinct dialectical viewpoints. Fragment L60/S294, referred to above, begins by arguing that laws do not represent true justice, but are a result of "reckless change" and other contingent factors like geography and history. Human laws do not reflect true justice or principles of right. This was referred to earlier as the "self-contained" nature of law and is the basis of his social criticism. What our legislators tell us is just and intrinsically worthy of obedience is not so, but is a result of an historical process by which might has been socially legitimated and transformed into (perceived) right.

The opposite political stance, namely his conservative defense of established institutions, is not a departure or negation of this criticism, but in fact follows from and is contingent upon it. It is precisely because the law has no relation to justice that it must not be subjected to rationalist analysis. His defense of the law is premised on the claim that its ability to command obedience must not be undermined. A Cartesian rationalist analysis, moreover, only threatens to undermine the law if Pascal's social criticism is correct, that is, if the law originated from coercion, chance, and contingency. "The truth about the usurpation must not be made apparent," he writes, because "it came about originally without reason and has become reasonable" (L60/S294).

These extreme positions, at once pointing out the illegitimacy of the law and enjoining obedience to it, are not separate dialectical moments. Neither is the social criticism of the *half*-clever tempered or relativized by the prudential conservatism of the *really* clever. On the contrary, the social critique must be absolutely true in order for his prudential conservatism to follow. Both positions are held at the same time and are logically related in a way that they must be held together.

The same point is made in Pascal's *Discourses on the Condition of the Great*. Addressing those who may be tempted to confuse the accidents that have made them rich and powerful with their own merit, he counsels them to "have a double thought." They are to "act externally with men in conformity with [their] rank," while maintaining "a more secret but truer thought," namely that they are not naturally superior to other men (Pascal 1910: 379). Any social and economic distinctions between men are unnatural, arising as they do from chance and coercion, not merit or ability, but the conclusion from this is to defend and uphold established distinctions, not undermine them:

> "I will not say that it does not legitimately belong to you, and that it is impermissible for another to wrest it from you; for God, who is its master, has permitted communities to make laws for its division, and when those laws are once established, it is unjust to violate them" (Ibid.).

The relevant point for our purposes is that the defense of established laws and institutions the first thought – is maintained at the same time as the recognition that they are nothing but established coercion – the second thought. Moreover, each is held to be unconditionally true.

Pascal's critique of Cartesian epistemology is not simply an equal and opposition reaction into irrationalism or fideism. This paper has attempted to demonstrate that his manner of responding to Descartes' epistemology was carried over into his political thought as well. His critique of Cartesian politics is not that of a reactionary conservative. In both cases, he rejects

the dichotomous either-or framing: reason or faith, universalist idealism or conservatism. Pascal does not so much take issue with reason or political idealism as with the dogmatic insistence that they crowd out all other considerations. His recovery of knowledge of the heart places it alongside reason, and his recovery of conservative prudence places it alongside idealistic social criticism. In each case, neither is watered down but retains its full strength. At various points in the *Pensées* Pascal warns of the dangers of retreating into one pole and forgetting its opposite:

> Two excesses: to exclude reason, to admit nothing but reason (L183/S253).
>
> It is dangerous to explain too clearly to man how like he is to the animals without pointing out his greatness. It is also dangerous to make too much of his greatness without his vileness. It is still more dangerous to leave him in ignorance of both, but it is most valuable to represent both to him.
> Man must not be allowed to believe that he is equal either to animals or to angels, nor to be unaware of either, but he must know both (L121/S418).

It is unfortunate that he did not explicitly offer the same clarification concerning conservatism and social criticism, but if my argument is correct the same insight applies here. Either one on its own leads to a dangerous error: a naïve belief in the eternal justice of established order is at the end of one path, while civil war and sedition await us at the end of the other.

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