

Conservatism and Social Criticism: 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 will supplement these accounts by dwelling on the political implications of his critique of rationalism. Descartes' rationalist epistemology has political implications, some of which will be briefly explored below. Pascal's criticism of Cartesian rationalism, in turn, carries political import as well, primarily in the form of a unique articulation of conservatism.

He did not react to rationalism merely from the perspective of a skeptic or an anti-rationalist. Indeed, he directed his philosophical sights at the skepticism of Michel de Montaigne as much as at the rationalism of Descartes. A full understanding of Pascal's thought must come to terms with the nuances of his dialectical treatment of rationalism as well as skepticism. This chapter will pay special attention to the way in which Pascal responded to Cartesian rationalism, but the influence and surpassing of Montaigne will be discussed when pertinent.

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 6:62).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 this could provide 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. Part two of the *Discourse* justifies the 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. Likewise, 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 first principle. 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 6:12).

Descartes employed this analogy to shed light on his epistemological project, but it carries noteworthy political implications in its own right. 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, political orders, and systems of thought. First,

¹ All references to the writing of Descartes will refer to the Adam and Tannery pagination (Descartes 1996. Abbreviated AT). All quotations are from Donald Cress' translation (Descartes 1998).

² On the important connection between certainty and utility see McCarthy (1998).

an organic 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. Michael Oakeshott has noted Descartes' influence on what came to be known as political rationalism, that is, a method of analyzing political problems in light of a universally applicable method (Oakeshott 1991: 18-25).

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. Descartes, for his part, faithfully and consistently applied the architectural metaphor in his epistemological reflections. For example, part three of the *Discourse on Method* refers to his process of "rebuilding the [epistemological] house where one is living" (AT 6:22). The prospect of tearing down in order to rebuild hints at a Cartesian politics of revolution. If systems of thought must be demolished and rebuilt upon universal rational principles, and political orders can be conceptualized as analogous to systems of thought, then rationalism would seem to be a potent political phenomenon.³

Pascal's Critique of Cartesian Rationalism

³ The revolutionary implications of Cartesian thought have been noticed by many. Nietzsche calls Descartes "the father of rationalism (and consequently the grandfather of the [French] revolution)" (Nietzsche 2003: 114). Along similar lines, Arendt notes that "Robespierre had performed the same introversion upon the deeds of action that Descartes had performed upon the articulations of thought" (Arendt 1990: 97-98).

The best point of entry into Pascal's philosophical project is a conversation he had in 1655 with Isaac de Saci, confessor at Port-Royal des Champs (Pascal 1910: 392-406).⁴ He argues here that philosophers have generally taken one of two approaches – dogmatism and skepticism – exemplified by Epictetus and Montaigne. Epictetus, says Pascal, had a lofty conception of man according to which he could both know and fulfill his epistemic, moral and religious duties. Pascal accuses Epictetus of “diabolic pride” that fails to account for man's impotence (Ibid.: 394). Montaigne is accused of committing the equal and opposite error of emphasizing human weakness and frailty while ignoring his greatness. He “wished to discover what morals reason would dictate without the light of faith,” but subjected reason to a severe Pyrrhonism that left it unable to answer philosophic or moral questions (Ibid.: 395). After undermining reason, Montaigne could only follow appearance and custom as the rules for life; not because they are guides to truth, but because they are as good as any other – that is, not very.

Pascal goes on to tell M. de Saci that the correct philosophical approach is not to emphasize human greatness or weakness alone, but to combine them such that man is understood as simultaneously great and wretched. This is accomplished by invoking the Christian doctrine of the fall of man, according to which man was originally great but has been corrupted. Epictetus and the rationalists understand man only through the lens of his first nature, whereas Montaigne and the skeptics see only his second nature. Pascal counsels an affirmation of both.

Though Descartes is not explicitly mentioned in the conversation with M. de Saci, in the *Pensées* Epictetus is replaced by Descartes as the principle dogmatist. Like Epictetus and other

⁴ This conversation was recorded by Isaac de Saci's secretary, Nicolas Fontaine, and is typically published under the name “Entretien avec M. de Saci.” Scholars tend to agree that although the details of the conversation may not be a perfect reflection of Pascal's words, the interpretations of Epictetus and Montaigne, as well as the overarching theologico-philosophical argument, contained within it are Pascal's own (Goldmann 2016: 288; Hunter 2013: 235n24). I share this view.

representatives of this camp, Descartes believed that men could arrive at knowledge of God, duty, and principles of nature through the power of unaided human reason. We can thus understand Pascal's later writings as pitting Montaignian skepticism against Cartesian rationalism.

The theme of the conversation with M. de Saci is revisited in the context of Cartesian rationalism in L131/S434⁵, a lengthy fragment from the *Pensées* that recounts the debate between skeptics and dogmatists and concludes that the impasse can only be resolved when man is understood in light of the Christian doctrine of the fall of man. In a notable addition to the conversation with M. de Saci, Pascal now invokes familiar Cartesian doubts concerning dreams and possible evil demons. Fragment L110/S282 further engages Descartes directly by attacking his methodological doubt and its rejection of commonsense knowledge. Pascal distinguishes between propositions, which belong to reason, and principles, which belong to the heart; the former can be rationally demonstrated whereas the latter are immediately perceived, but both have an equal claim to knowledge. While Aristotle is not explicitly named here, this argument has clear parallels with the argument for undemonstrable axioms in *Posterior Analytics* i.2-3.

Pascal suggests that there are many beliefs of which we can be certain even without having arguments in their favour. In an obvious rebuke of Descartes, the reality of the external world and our waking state are given as examples. These and other non-rational principles, being directly known through the heart, become the first principles upon which reason works and makes its deductions. There is a division of intellectual labour, in which the heart provides principles and reason discovers new propositions based on these principles. Moreover, neither faculty is equipped to judge the work of the other:

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

“[i]t is just as pointless and absurd for reason to demand proof of first principles from the heart before agreeing to accept them as it would be absurd for the heart to demand an intuition of all the propositions demonstrated by reason before agreeing to accept them.”

Descartes' error was that he only allowed for propositions – that is, statements that could be arrived at through reasoning. Even his supposed first principle, the thinking subject, was only accepted as the result of a strict logical process.

In sum, the implication of the argument of this fragment is to limit the scope of reason, recognizing that there are truths that it cannot know but depends on for its own activity. Pascal wants to “humble reason, which would like to be the judge of everything, but not to confute our certainty.” He continues: “[a]s if reason were the only way we could learn!”⁶

Pascal therefore rejects the rationalist claim that reason can be made to operate independently of, and even despite, all other sources of belief.⁷ 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, as Pascal argues, then politics will have to take factors other than universal rationalist principles into account.

Pascal's Strange Conservatism

The problems of civil war and political breakdown were at the forefront of 17th century political thought. Thomas Hobbes is perhaps the clearest example, with his conception of political life as taking place in the shadow of the brutal state of nature. Descartes, too, was concerned with the threat of war and political violence. Among the scant political allusions in the *Discourse on Method* are two references to the Thirty Years War, and his philosophical aim

⁶ All quotations in the preceding two paragraphs are from fragment L110/S282.

⁷ The foregoing analysis of Pascal's epistemology is indebted to Peters (2009: ch. 3).

of setting reason on a secure foundation was explicitly for the purpose of facilitating agreement on divisive religious matters (AT 7:1-3).⁸ Pascal was not immune to this concern with social and political instability. The France of his childhood was “a place of seething conflict and chronic political instability” (Rogers 2003: 4). King Henri IV had been assassinated in 1610 for reasons related to religious discord, resulting in the problem of royal minority as his successors took the throne at the ages of 9 and 4.⁹ Pascal was forced to move from Paris to Clermont in 1649 to escape the Fronde, a violent uprising in response to Louis XIV’s abuse of his tax-raising authority.¹⁰ Needless to say, political violence was a very real possibility, and as such exerted noticeable influence over his political thinking. The fleeting and tenuous nature of political order is best illuminated by L62/S177:

Three hosts. What man could enjoy the friendship of the King of England [Charles I, executed 1649], the King of Poland [John Casimir, deposed but reinstated in 1656], and the Queen of Sweden [Christina, abdicated 1654], and believe that he would one day nowhere find refuge and sanctuary?

It is therefore unsurprising that scholars have noted the importance for Pascal 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). 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 may weaken them to the point of breakdown. “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

⁸ Timothy Reiss (1991: 113) makes a similar point: “From all of this we may safely assume, since the philosopher himself chose to emphasize the events ([i.e. the Thirty Years War], that during the writing of the *Discourse*, the instability of the sociopolitical situation, in 1637 no less than in 1619-20 at the very beginning of his original thinking, could be seen only as counter to the stability desired of Method.”

⁹ I.E. Louis XIII and Louis XIV.

¹⁰ Pascal explicitly criticizes the injustice of the Fronde in L85/S878.

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 habit or due to magisterial shows of royalty and power; nevertheless, they do respect the law and therefore contribute to social stability (L93/S328).

Any reason for respecting law is good enough, even vanity or the mindless acceptance of custom. L60/S294, Pascal's 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 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 was eventually deemed just and right (L60/S294, L81/S299, L85/S878, L103/S298, L828/S304; cf. Rogers 1998: 39-48). This is not 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: "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 common people must not know the full truth. 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). It is important to note that his theory of the coercive and unjust character of the law is essentially Montaignian. In his essay, "On Habit," Montaigne (2003: I.23 122-139)¹¹ outlines the many ways in which the world is ruled by custom and habit, not reason or nature. Laws and social customs have no foundation other than longstanding usage. In a passage copied almost verbatim by Pascal, Montaigne writes the following of one of the customs of his day: "I traced it back to its origins: I found its basis to be so weak that I all but loathed it" (Montaigne 2003: I.23 131). The conclusion drawn from the predominant influence of custom is "that each should observe [the laws] of the place wherein he lives" (Ibid., I.23 133). Given his undermining of reason, discussed above, Montaigne did not believe that anyone had unfettered access to nature or true justice, so any program of socio-political reform, with its attendant risks, is bound to do more harm than good: "innovators do most harm" (Ibid., I.23 135). Pascal's prudent conservatism, then, is inspired by the Montaignian-Skeptical school of philosophy.

There is, however, another theme running parallel to his support for existing structures, namely a strategy of social criticism that delivers a penetrating moral critique of existing laws. For starters, Pascal's positivist and conventionalist theory of 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 (L51/S293, L60/S294).

Finally, we can detect something of a critique of private property rights scattered throughout the *Pensées*. Three fragments are relevant to this claim. First, L81/S299 declares

¹¹ References to Montaigne are to book and essay number followed by pagination in the Penguin Classics edition.

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). The mine-thine distinction is diagnosed as the origin of usurpation, and therefore injustice. This distinction arose when certain groups acquired the power to protect their property against others, and has eventually become recognized as right and natural.

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. Indeed we can say with some justice that Pascal’s social criticism subjects political orders to a rationalist analysis of the sort that Descartes might have called for, insofar as it attends to the ways in which laws fall short of natural justice. His conservatism did not attempt to avoid the greater evils of sedition and civil war by washing over the injustice of the present, even though his social criticism could very well have the effect of weakening support for established order.¹²

Existing human justice often amounts to socially legitimated convention, but Pascal nevertheless sees political justice as being subject to moral and rational criticism. This is the

¹² Virgil Martin Nemoianu rightly notes the “subversive implications of [Pascal’s] critique of human political arrangements” (Nemoianu 2013: 39).

point at which he surpasses Montaigne's extreme skeptical account of custom. 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 cannot be said to be just or unjust. Nor does Pascal's critique of rationalism require him to adopt an irrationalist stance that denies man's ability to judge institutions. On the contrary, his critical political reflections are motivated by the very injustice and irrationality of the political order.

Any effort to comprehend the fullness of Pascal's political stance must account for his conservatism as well as his penchant for social criticism.¹³ In other words, he attempts to combine the political insights of Montaignian skeptical conservatism with a rationalist political idealism. An important theme that runs through Pascal's work is the need to affirm the truth of contradictory positions:

"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

¹³ 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 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.

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.¹⁴ Similarly, man is not a midpoint between great and wretched, but is wholly great and wholly wretched. Recall that in his conversation with M. de Saci Pascal’s argument was not that dogmatists are wrong to notice human greatness or that skeptics are wrong to emphasize human fallibility, but that each was incomplete in its ignorance of the opposite principle. 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 interlocutors, rather than each element being represented by distinct dialectical viewpoints. Fragment L60/S294, discussed 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. His conservative defense of established institutions is not a departure from or negation of this social criticism but is contingent upon it. It is precisely because the law has no relation to justice that it must not be subjected to rationalist analysis. A Cartesian rationalist analysis, in other words, would only 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

¹⁴ Readers surprised by the claim that Pascal defends reason are encouraged to see his preface to the treatise on the vacuum, which defends the importance of reason and empirical demonstration in the face of automatic deference to traditional authorities (Pascal 1910: 444-451).

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.¹⁵ On the contrary, the social critique must be absolutely true in order for his prudential conservatism to follow. The two positions are logically related in such a way that they must be held together.

Pascal makes the same point in his *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,” which is 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 chapter has attempted to demonstrate that his manner of responding to Descartes’ epistemology was carried over into his political thought as well. His

¹⁵ See note 12 for Pascal’s use of these terms and Nemoianu’s dialectical interpretation of them.

critique of Cartesian politics is not that of a reactionary conservative in the Montaignian mold. In both cases, he rejects the dichotomous either-or framing: reason or faith, universalist idealism or prudential conservatism. Pascal does not so much take issue with reason or political idealism as with the dogmatic insistence that they must crowd out all other considerations. His recovery of knowledge of the heart places it alongside reason, and his theory of conservative prudence places it alongside idealistic social criticism. In each case, neither is watered down but each retains its full strength. Just as skepticism and dogmatism are not wrong but incomplete, Pascal argues that prudential conservatism and political idealism require each other. Descartes' weakness was not that he was a rationalist, but that he ignored the skeptical account of human laws. Montaigne committed the equal and opposite error. On their own, dogmatic rational idealism and skeptical conservatism each lead to a dangerous error: the potential for civil war and sedition awaits us at the end of the first path, while a naïve belief in the eternal justice of established order is at the end of the other.

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