PASCAL AND NIETZSCHE

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It is wonderful when you discover something which is really pleasing to hear about in an educational setting, let alone being able to investigate it for yourself – the something which you instinctively feel has something vital about it, which inspires you or ignites some cognitive flame. Blake, Shakespeare and Orwell have all done that for me, and now I can add two more to that list: Friedrich Nietzsche and Blaise Pascal.

Though almost entirely theoretically opposed to each other, I think it will be fruitful to look at how, despite this, the two share a commonality of style and intent which ultimately provides their allure – the reason why we are primarily fascinated by them. But before we get to that, a small bit of background for those who perhaps know Pascal for his mathematical or scientific work, and Nietzsche for being some sort of madman – or of course, for those who haven't a clue or need reminding. I'll deal with each separately, and then we can perhaps see where they might meet, might be brought to a partial reconciliation.

Pascal (1623–1662) was primarily a mathematician of some regard and fame, until he converted to Christianity (perhaps purely formally he would have said he was a Christian beforehand). After this, he was inspired to write various thoughts down, which we today call his *Pensées* [thoughts] (published posthumously in 1669). The theme of the Pensées is definitively religious, yet it has a strong anthropological concern – for Pascal, the two are inextricably linked, yet out of the two elements, it has proven easy to exaggerate one and forget the other, especially those with distaste for the transcendent. His 'nuit de feu' ('night of fire', so-called because of Pascal's use of the word 'FEU'

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as a heading in the subsequent 'memoriam') was an example of a radical Christian conversion, almost a mystic experience wherein he felt compelled to write his 'memoriam', a highly biblically referential string of religious utterances testifying to his intense faith. He has enjoyed a surge of popularity recently (though it must be noted the *Pensées* have never been out of print) due to his overall approach and outlook, which seems terribly modern, postmodern, even. His 'wager' has become especially famous, though unfortunately this tends to overshadow his more serious, representative argumentation. Pascal's view of the human is particularly modern: that of a spirit which has lost its 'true good', (i.e. God as Bonum) and therefore anything can become its good. For Pascal, this means that we are a wretched lot, prone to wishing our lives away with pointless diversion and ultimately, eternal misery due to our unwillingness to confront the one thing which can ultimately achieve happiness: contact with and devotion to God. Yet the thing which perhaps marks out Pascal as singular is his assurance in thinking that humans are, despite their wretchedness, capable of 'grandeur' – greatness, linked to their soul's ability to 'know' God. Indeed, Pascal is a great uniter of dialectics, and this can be seen in his approach to the 'antagonism' between 'misere/grandeur' [wretchedness/greatness]; his solution is that it is *knowing* that one is wretched that makes humanity something great, something above animals. Thus compare two of Pascal's *pensées*:

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

While:

> If he exalts himself, I humble him. If he humbles himself, I exalt him. And I go on contradicting him.

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> Until he understands. That he is a monster that passes all comprehension.

We can get a taste here of how Pascal walks both the high road and the low road, equally comfortably with the view he sees from both, but that to reach his ultimate destination he must take the middle road. What makes Pascal utterly fascinating is that he manages to combine religious inspiration with a critical, even haunting, look at humanity; he is not the sickeningly proud born-again Evangelical of modernity, rather his experience of religious revelation gives him only a greater insight into the condition of man ('inconstancy, boredom, anxiety' (24)). Well, so what? Well, it shows us the effects of original sin; man is inherently flawed, yet that there is redemption. But Pascal is not finished there, for if we were to just take this as read, then perhaps we would have no need to worry about the question any longer. His memorial of his night of revelation, however, shows that despite his strong belief in the redemptive power of God, he still begged 'Let me not be cut off from him for ever!', and this, in the time he felt in most intense contact with God. You can see here that we are not dealing with an arrogant faith, a presumptuous faith – but one still aware of the frailties of humanity at all times – and perhaps most importantly, one free from vanity (something which Pascal devotes much time to denigrate in the *Pensées*).

He is most famous for his *Pensées*, which have a somewhat curious origin. Pascal did not compose the book in the orthodox manner, instead he wrote his thoughts onto small squares of paper, thoughts which comprise of aphoristic statements, longer tracts, incomplete phrases, personal reminders, and passages which show him working through things as he writes. He would then take all the assorted pieces of paper and find ones which shared a thematic link, and group them thusly, creating little bundles. With these bundles, he would then sew them up – a kind of pre-modern paper clip, if you will. It is these

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bundles which comprise the book we have today. Unfortunately for us, Pascal died and the project these papers were a preparation for was never completed. Fortunately for the modern reader, a decent approximation has been able to have been made of the structure of the unfinished work by discovering a copy of a mock-up, written in Pascal's hand, of a page of contents for his *Apology for the Christian Religion*, i.e. the *Pensées*. What will prove interesting about this 'unfinished' nature of the *Pensées* is that its form perhaps does not correspond to the finished product. That is to say, the finished *Apology* in all likelihood would have looked radically different to how the *Pensées* look today, though its content would have been more or less the same, just formatted differently. The logic of this is that, though we cannot, of course, tell what Pascal would have done with the *Pensées* in their raw form eventually (we can conceive of him merely compiling them and publishing them 'as is', as happened posthumously anyway), we can make an informed supposition based on the his previous published work, and some hints within the text about how Pascal envisioned the final look of the *Apology:*

> There is one reference to 'order by dialogues' (2) and five to 'letters' (4, 5, 7, 9, 11). . .

What Krailsheimer argues is that Pascal's *Provincial Letters*, a published work in epistolary form, shows us that Pascal meant to combine the dialogue shown in the quoted aphorisms with letters from the 'the Good Father' of the Provincial Letters, so that the form would allow a conversation wherein Pascal proves the faith of the other man to be wrong, allowing scope for an organic development of his 'nascent faith'. Krailsheimer then goes on to say that whether we think all of the *Apology* would have taken this form, it is still reasonable to say that the *Apology* would have not been a straight treatise any more than it would

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have been a fragmentary document preserving the aphorisms as we have them.

Krailsheimer, I think, is right to suggest that the *Apology* would likely have figured a dialogue between Pascal and another – various other aphorisms display this dialogic form – yet there are still many other aphorisms or 'entries' which very much resemble a treatise. We must be careful not to presume these dialogues would be too regularly occurring. It is more likely that much of the work would still resemble a treatise, without any particular reference to an interlocutor.

Aside from these speculations of the finished form of the *Apology*, I think it is more interesting to look at the *Pensées* in their current form. We must view them as a valuable, intimate look at private thoughts of Pascal, rather than a mere stepping stone to a finished work. It is tempting to see the unfinished *Pensées* as *more* valuable than the finished *Apology*; instead of a formalised – perhaps more self-conscious – work, we have Pascal's raw thoughts, and they are all the more powerful for this rawness. It becomes much more of a personal experience; the reader assumes the role of perhaps a close friend of Pascal's, one who Pascal does not mind confiding in – or even, obscenely, as one discovering Pascal's notes covering his desk, and stopping to sneak a look at one or two phrases, before being found out. Pascal inevitably used the form of the aphorism as a 'cue', a theme which is distilled in a sentence or two, given enough of a prompt for later, where it will be expounded upon, padded out. But, I argue, if something can be distilled and understood in a shorter sentence, is it not better to preserve it in this formulation? This was enough for Pascal himself to know exactly what he meant, why not for us? Fair enough, one could say we need a statement expounded upon in order that we thoroughly understand something, which may be a reasonable argument if one is looking at a systematic approach to a theory, be it philosophical or theological. But I do not see Pascal as a systematiser; rather he is exposing his *attitude* and for

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this, an aphorism is ample. The role of the aphorism is here is to impress in order to open up the possibility for belief in it. Perhaps it is a mere linguistic trick that initially holds our attention; the balance, symmetry of a sentence, formulated so tightly and efficiently – it seems that something so neat and definitive is inherently more truthful than something akin to a treatise. With one sentence Pascal can have more impact than a whole essay:

> A trifle consoles us because a trifle upsets us.
>
> We run heedlessly into the abyss after putting something in front of us to stop us seeing it.
>
> Men are so inevitably mad that to not be mad would give a mad twist to madness.

In the context of the *Pensées*, these wonderful one-liners often stand alone, roughly related to the chapter theme, but perhaps too fragmentary to imagine their inclusion wholesale. An *Apology* without these proverbs, but merely a paragraph with the spirit of them, would have been a great shame. The *Pensées*' enduring popularity is testament to the fact that deep-down, on an instinctual level, humans crave the maxim, the all-encompassing statement which crystallises a phenomenon perfectly, leaving it in clear glass to be observed. It seems a rather pretentious and unconvincing argument to say that the aphorism is a cheap trick, trading on its seeming importance but really lacking real content and profundity. Clearly, we are contented, though, with the unfinished work; the aphorisms, the mystery of Pascal's private notes. Why dilute these phrases with justifications and qualifications? It is fitting that we should get Pascal's faith represented in such concentrated forms, for that is characteristic of his faith itself; arresting, genuine, savage in its rejection of anything else. It is charming to note that Pascal knew this himself:

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Proofs of Jesus Christ. Jesus said great things so simply that he seems to not have thought about them, and yet so clearly that it is obvious what he thought about them. Such clarity with simplicity is wonderful.

At this juncture, it will prove useful to take a more phenomenological look at the aphorism; how it works, why it has such potent force, and then why it is such an endemic feature of a particular style.

Firstly, the effectiveness of the aphorism. *Prima facie*, one would say that a short, undeveloped addressing of a topic or question would come across as rather ineffectual in fulfilling its purpose of being informative, convincing, and so on. Conversationally at least, when faced with such a style of riposte we are frustrated by it. We feel the need to ask again for more information or assurance that this is truly what is meant. Conversation as a medium does not suit the aphorism; conversation is inherently circular, requiring quick to-and-fro statements of a simple and direct sort. If our conversational partner were to suddenly to start answering in this bizarre fashion of tightly crafted aphorisms, we would no doubt be confused or else treat them with ridicule – mistrust, perhaps. Clearly then, there is a difference in approach to how we encounter the aphorism in speech compared to in text. We 'open ourselves up' to the very possibility of conveying knowledge in this fashion in literature, allowing things we would not accept any other time. Indeed, far from the circular nature we favour in conversation, we seem to treasure the preciseness and direct approach when reading; the more one can compress a sentiment, the more powerful – even irresistible – it becomes. Pick up a copy of the *Pensées*, and one's eyes will fix inevitably on those one-liners. Of course, the paragraphs and tracts will be taken in, too, but perhaps resting on the foundation of the aphorism.

To its place in the style of philosophers. It is no coincidence that the aphorism is employed by a particular *kind* of

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philosopher; the aphorism seems to attract the philosopher with a distaste for systematic approaches. Imagine, for instance, a Kant or a Hegel using them as a basis for an entire work. It is unthinkable. But that does not therefore make Kant somehow more refined or sensible for disregarding such a method, for opting to instead, so to speak, 'showing his working' – deducing things through logical argumentation and assumptions. Kant and Nietzsche (as non-systematic aphoristic philosopher *par excellence*) both have the same over-arching aim; that is to persuade us of the truth of their claims (of course, the idea of 'truth' concerned with Nietzsche is a complicated one, safe to say that Nietzsche at least does not want it to be dismissed). It is a fallacy to suggest that Kant, compared to Nietzsche is the orthodox, cool, sober one who need only lay down his reason in a clear manner and the day was won – we must agree if we understand. If Kant indeed only relied upon this method (and perhaps, other than his Third Critique, he on the whole did), then more fool Kant. Nietzsche realised that to really succeed in being taken seriously (to trouble the reader. . .) one had to use all of one's available ammunition. It just so happened that Kant was a genius, and achieved his great revolution, something which seemed to solve the great philosophical puzzle of the time. Despite this, I argue, Kant fell short. Whether he is correct or not in his theses, his writing must ensure his legacy. Kant however, resembles a great Enlightenment legislator, whose grand all-encompassing law is gradually eaten away at after his death, clause by clause, leaving only the core – empty? – statement as a leftover, a dead, lifeless monument. By contrast, Nietzsche resembles a tyrant who pushes through laws by force, if necessary, and whose all-too-lifelike-ghost lingers over the land, haunting those left. This is not a harmless ghost, but more of the ghost of the ancestor, which Nietzsche pinpoints as the root of a certain religious origin. With Nietzsche, one either dismisses him wholesale (as insane, anti-Semitic, etc.) or one has to at least admit a large portion of his work as *at least* arresting – Nietzsche

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is the solid boot in a door trying to be closed – stop to think about one thing and you find yourself accepting the rest. It is no doubt that his employment of the aphorism is a tool in this – the aphorism here as the boot in the door. In this way, Nietzsche preserves his immortality, the safety of his laws is ensured – returning to the analogy of Nietzsche *qua* tyrant – Nietzsche's style becomes propaganda, a motto, a catchy phrase ('four legs good, two legs bad') – a *précis* for perpetual revolution.

Though I have hitherto shown Nietzsche and Pascal as fellow free spirits, it is true that this is exclusively in the domain of style. As far as content goes it is perhaps quite illuminating to think of Pascal being able to point to Nietzsche as pitiable atheist *par excellence*, and Nietzsche in turn being able to label Pascal as decadent *par excellence* (and indeed, Nietzsche comments to this effect). I wish to demote this content-based opposition, however, and for once give some prominence and importance to the way that they go about propounding their content *through* style. When we start this revaluation of priorities, we are thrown into a disregarded and uncared for land. One instantly thinks of the worthlessness of appearance, the infantilism of *ad hominem* critiques, the over-psychologising of the author in isolation, and so on. Well, I wish to take the advice of Pascal here, when he says '. . .Thinking about things too little or thinking too much both make us obstinate and fanatical.' Content-context; which are we to favour? *Both*. In terms of style, Nietzsche and Pascal are indeed fellow free spirits; they both act as diagnosticians for the human spirit (Nietzsche's idea of 'bad conscience', Pascal's idea of original sin leading to man's flawed condition), they both base their conclusions on observations of human behaviour, they both use *ad hominem* as refutation (Nietzsche's 'slave morality' of Judeo-Christianity, Pascal's account of the Jesuits) and most importantly, they understand the importance of style. In a saying attributed to Pascal (Concerning the style of the *Provincial Letters* – a series of polemical letters aimed at the Jesuits):

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> People ask why I named the authors from whom I took all the detestable propositions I quoted. – I reply that, if I were in a town where there were twelve fountains, and I knew for certain that one of them was poisoned, I should be obliged to warn everyone not to draw water from that fountain, and, as people might think that it was just my imagination, I should be obliged to name the person who had poisoned it rather than expose a whole town to the risk of being poisoned.

Here we see how Nietzsche and Pascal share commonality; firstly, the *ad hominem* aspect is clear (the naming of perpetrators; see for Nietzsche Socrates in *Twilight of the Idols*, and countless other targets throughout his work), the appreciation that academic work cannot be a mere matter for scholars, it is inextricably linked to the 'health' of the populace, shown in Pascal's analogy, mirrored in Nietzsche's idea of decadence as in some way being detrimental to health.

As far as showing the ground our two subjects share, I think it is fairly self-evident upon reading the two that there is no doubt a great deal to say about their similarity of style (and no doubt, an equal amount to say about their differences of content). But to end this article, I wish to return to the neglected idea of style as important, perhaps primary, and, its allure aside, whether it can be justified in the Nietzchean/Pascalian form. Such a matter is essentially a closed matter in philosophy, *ad hominem* is reductive, a fallacious argument or refutation, which overlooks a perhaps good idea and points to the foibles of the promulgator only. Why then do we let Nietzsche get away with it? Are we merely treating him as a jester, someone who amuses us and pleases us in their approach, but one we ultimately mock and do not take seriously? Surely not. The opposite in fact: we try to treat him thusly, but he resists it, breaks away from our attempt to pacify him. This points to the growing conclusion in modern philosophy that we must

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break up *ad hominem* attacks into the limiting sort and the expansive sort. Robert C. Solomon, in his article *Nietzsche ad hominem* (Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche) seeks to defend Nietzsche's use of *ad hominem*, and thus its status in general:

> '[I]n Nietzschean metaphor, *ad hominem* arguments make us look at the soil and the seed as well as the plant from which the flower grows. It allows us to see what is not being said or argued, the limitations of a position as well as its possibilities ['The Socratic virtues were preached because the Greeks had lost them']'

Thus, for Nietzsche, the *ad hominem* was essential to his kind of philosophy. As a diagnostician, one who always stressed the need to think historically, the *ad hominem* approach gave him the perfect outlet for this. We may reject his stressing of contextual matters, but within this, the *ad hominem* itself has internal validity, coherence even. In the *Provincial Letters*, too, the *ad hominem* nature is structurally vital – it is what gives it is weight, gives the polemic force.

It is inescapable to say that in terms of style Pascal and Nietzsche were surprisingly (in terms of what we superficially might expect given their theoretical opposition) united in their choice. Here we have to appreciate the link between style and purpose, and if they have a similar style, it is reasonable to conclude that their purpose were similar: both of them had a need to very clearly delineate between right and wrong ways of living, to speak in generalities, and this, tied to their dispositions – their authenticity of their beliefs and force of character – has no doubt produced two thinkers disparate and yet essentially very similar. That two thinkers so opposed in theory present their thinking in such a highly provocative, original and fascinating style is a great gift, enabling us to see the beauty in atheism and theism at the same time, like watching two great orators

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debate an eternal point. Who is right almost becomes secondary; primarily we are enthused and delighted.

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