

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Winter 1994–95

Volume 22 Number 2

- 157 Yuval Lurie The Cultural Predicament in Biblical Narrative
- 181 Paula Reiner Whip, Whipped, and Doctors: Homer's *Iliad* and Camus' *The Plague*
- 191 John C. Kohl, Jr. Design in the *Iliad* Based on the Long Repeated Passages
- 215 Judith A. Swanson The Political Philosophy of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*
- 247 John C. McCarthy Pascal on Certainty and Utility

Discussion

- 271 Will Morrisey Strengthening Social Contract Theory: *Justice and Modern Moral Philosophy*, by Jeffrey Reiman

Book Reviews

- 283 Leslie G. Rubin *A Companion to Aristotle's "Politics,"* edited by David Keyt and Fred D. Miller, Jr.
- 285 Will Morrisey *The World of the Imagination: Sum and Substance*, by Eva T. H. Brann
- 289 Robert Sokolowski *Possibility, Necessity, and Existence: Abbagnano and His Predecessors*, by Nino Langiulli
- 295 Stephen M. Krason *The American Presidency: Origins and Development, 1776–1990*, by Sidney M. Milkis and Michael Nelson

Interpretation

- Editor-in-Chief Hilail Gildin, Dept. of Philosophy, Queens College
Executive Editor Leonard Grey
General Editors Seth G. Benardete • Charles E. Butterworth •
Hilail Gildin • Robert Horwitz (d. 1987) •
Howard B. White (d. 1974)
- Consulting Editors Christopher Bruell • Joseph Cropsey • Ernest L. Fortin
• John Hallowell (d. 1992) • Harry V. Jaffa • David
Lowenthal • Muhsin Mahdi • Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr.
• Arnaldo Momigliano (d. 1987) • Michael Oakeshott
(d. 1990) • Ellis Sandoz • Leo Strauss (d. 1973) •
Kenneth W. Thompson
- European Editors Terence E. Marshall • Heinrich Meier
Editors Wayne Ambler • Maurice Auerbach • Fred Baumann
• Michael Blaustein • Patrick Coby • Edward J. Erler •
Maureen Feder-Marcus • Joseph E. Goldberg • Steven
Harvey • Pamela K. Jensen • Ken Masugi • Grant B.
Mindle • James W. Morris • Will Morrisey • Charles
T. Rubin • Leslie G. Rubin • Bradford P. Wilson •
Hossein Ziai • Michael Zuckert • Catherine Zuckert
- Manuscript Editor Lucia B. Prochnow
Subscriptions Subscription rates per volume (3 issues):
individuals \$25
libraries and all other institutions \$40
students (four-year limit) \$16
Single copies available.
Postage outside U.S.: Canada \$4.50 extra;
elsewhere \$5.40 extra by surface mail (8 weeks
or longer) or \$11.00 by air.
Payments: in U.S. dollars AND payable by
a financial institution located within the U.S.A.
(or the U.S. Postal Service).

THE JOURNAL WELCOMES MANUSCRIPTS IN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY AS WELL AS THOSE
IN THEOLOGY, LITERATURE AND JURISPRUDENCE.

CONTRIBUTORS should follow *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 13th ed. or manuals
based on it; double-space their manuscripts, including notes; place references in the
text, in endnotes or follow current journal style in printing references. Words from
languages not rooted in Latin should be transliterated to English. To ensure
impartial judgment of their manuscripts, contributors should omit mention of their
other work; put, on the title page only, their name, any affiliation desired, address
with postal/zip code in full, and telephone. Contributors using computers should, if
possible, provide a character count of the entire manuscript. Please send THREE
clear copies.

Composition by Eastern Composition, Inc.,
Binghamton, N.Y. 13905 U.S.A.
Printed and bound by Wickersham Printing Co.,
Lancaster, PA 17603 U.S.A.

Inquiries: Patricia D'Allura, Assistant to the Editor,
INTERPRETATION, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y.
11367-1597, U.S.A. (718)997-5542

Pascal on Certainty and Utility

JOHN C. MCCARTHY

The Catholic University of America

In what was to have been *An Apology for the Christian Religion*, but has come down to us as the *Pensées*, Pascal writes "Descartes: useless and uncertain."¹ This mordant dismissal of the father of modern philosophy is reminiscent of Descartes' own treatment of his predecessors. Just as the teacher of the *cogito* rarely mentions the ancient and mediaeval traditions he seeks to replace, so Pascal leaves largely unstated the substance of his quarrel with Descartes: there are perhaps a dozen explicit references to his opponent in the entire oeuvre of Pascal. Little wonder, then, that Pascal's relation to Descartes should so frequently have been a subject of scholarly concern.

The principal reason for Descartes' hesitation to speak openly and at length against his foes was his desire to avoid controversy, which would have impeded both the private execution and the public acceptance of his project.² The relative absence of philosophic disputation in the *Pensées* seems to have been due to more accidental considerations. As is well known, illness and an early death prevented Pascal from realizing his designs for that work. On the other hand, and despite his youthful delight in polemics, we know from his sister Gilberte Perier that for dialectical reasons he came to distrust eristic. There is, moreover, ample evidence from the *Pensées* themselves that Pascal thought it necessary to make his case to the nonbelievers by indirection.³ The orderless order that has resulted (532/373) suggests the following methodological principle. The fragments Pascal left to posterity must not be read in a fragmentary way; so far as is possible, each must be interpreted in light of all the rest (cf. 199/72). Accordingly, we are required to consult a wide range of texts in order to make sense of those explicitly devoted to Descartes. A reconstruction of Pascal's quarrel with Descartes is unavoidable.

No contemporary scholar questions the necessity of approaching the *Pensées* in this way. Nevertheless opinion is far from unanimous as to how Pascal's case against Descartes is to be assessed. In the main scholars have agreed that Pascal's intention was fundamentally anti-Cartesian. But some have argued that Pascal was closer to Descartes than he, Pascal, realized; and a variety of arguments have been advanced about the degree of their kinship. The scholarly debate, which has gone on for the better part of a century, has yielded numerous precisions. Yet readers of Pascal have generally taken too restrictive a view of Descartes' intentions. Consequently the full range and depth of Pas-

cal's dispute with Descartes has remained somewhat hidden from view. Because Descartes' rare statements of purpose have been neglected there has been little attempt to specify what Descartes himself understands to be useful. Similarly, commentators have construed Descartes' method rather narrowly, with the result that the precise meaning of Cartesian certainty has been left in some obscurity. In short, comparisons of Pascal and Descartes have, typically, understated Descartes' opposition to his predecessors. And this limitation has prevented students of Pascal from considering many fragments of the *Pensées* relevant to the question of his stance towards his compatriot. The extent to which the *Pensées* call Descartes' philosophic revolution into question has not been sufficiently appreciated.⁴

There should never have been any doubt about the sweep of Pascal's wry remark. "Utility" and "certainty" are the two watchwords of Descartes' most programmatic writing, the *Discourse on the Method*. Indeed if Hegel is correct, they characterize the whole period of "Enlightenment" Descartes helps inaugurate.⁵ Surely Pascal intends to condemn Cartesianism root and branch. But in order to evaluate that condemnation we must confront yet a third difficulty, often overlooked, besides the fragmentary and indirect style of the *Pensées*, and the need for an accurate understanding of the position Pascal rejects. From first to last the *Pensées* are stamped by Pascal's experience of Christianity. That is to say, his *Apology* is not altogether Socratic. Since Descartes is remarkably candid about his unwillingness to pursue properly theological investigations—they would require, he says, that he be more than a man⁶—it would seem obvious why Pascal should have been so hostile. As most commentators have noted, for Pascal the meaning of "certainty" and "utility" are set by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Apart from His measure, all else is either "figure" or "folly" (cf. 267/680). One is then compelled to wonder whether Pascal ever meets his adversary on common ground. Is their logomachy of anything more than doxographical interest?

The *Pensées* abjure any philosophical defense of the traditional *praeambula fidei*. Philosophy in that sense has ceased to be a proreptic to theology, as it had been for the great medieval theologians. Thus the nearest literary precursor to the *Pensées* is neither the *disputatio*, nor the *summa*; it is the Augustinian form of "confession."⁷ In keeping with this form Pascal is ever mindful that he writes in and out of God's abiding presence (99/536, 627/150, 931/950), so much so that at times he even presumes to speak on God's behalf (149/430, 919/553). Like Augustine before him, he posits his own life as a clue to the whole (418/233, 689/64), and so does not hesitate to lay bare his heart (418/233). In the same breath, he insists that his person be forgotten (396/471), and would cultivate a love of hidden virtue (643/159, 719/788). Yet precisely as confession the *Pensées* prove to be the work of the "whole man" (848/806; cf. 12/187). They thereby mean to leave out of account no important human experience. It is in this way that they prove to be addressed to believer and

unbeliever alike. From the standpoint of unaided reason, then, what unifies this *Apology* is an old question: What is it to be a human being? The fragments Pascal left to posterity have aptly been described as an *anthropologia ancilla theologiae*;⁸ in this respect Pascal continues the line of inquiry initiated by Socrates after all.⁹ But Descartes' teaching on utility and certainty also depends, finally, on his understanding of the human things. As the peculiar autobiographical form of the *Discourse on the Method* indicates, Cartesian "method" derives from a comprehensive, premethodological reflection on the human situation. In sum, Pascal's debate with Descartes can and indeed must be interpreted in light of their common anthropological question.

The present essay falls into two parts. The first proposes that Descartes' account of utility issues from a revision of the traditional view of the human good. Loosely speaking, that revision involves a reconsideration of the relation between mind and body. Although echoes of Descartes' opposition to the tradition are found in the *Pensées*, Pascal ultimately rejects the "dualism" of mind and body implicit in the Cartesian doctrine of the good. In Pascal's understanding, Cartesian utility fails to address the real split in our being, which occurs within "soul." The second part of the essay begins with the observation that Descartes' method presupposes a novel understanding of the relation between mind and world. Human intelligence is displaced; the availability of "first principles and causes" is thrown into doubt. Method, accordingly, is meant to secure certain "foundations" in the absence of any natural access to the being of beings. While Pascal is as aware as Descartes of the difficulty we face in knowing the things themselves, he disavows any methodical solution to the problem. His teaching on the "heart" is meant to indicate the way to such certainty as is available to us. But the heart's promptings can only be taken seriously if the human soul is, for all its divisions, disclosive of the whole. To anticipate slightly, then, we hope to show that for Pascal Descartes is useless because his view of the good is uncertain, and uncertain because his understanding of the true is useless.

I

No reader of Descartes could fail to observe that he proposes to replace "the speculative philosophy taught in the schools" with a "practical one" promising to make its adherents "masters and possessors of nature." Cartesian science pledges to be useful in the highest degree, useful like no other teaching, by enabling us to put all of nature to use. This is possible because, as Part V of the *Discourse* asserts, "nature" has no real uses of its own: Cartesian physics dispenses with final causality. "Utility" now comes to mean "the general good of all men," and this good common to all is understood to be the private interest of each in a pleasant, healthy and lengthy life. At a stroke, the "common good"

has ceased to be common in the old sense. This is not to say that the interest that moved Descartes to think and to publish wholly coincides with the interest the public has or ought to have in reading him. As Part VI of the *Discourse* makes clear, the public and the philosophical uses of reason are at best mutually beneficial. That said, the charter statement of Cartesian philosophy describes the “laws of mechanics” as the most “important” truths discovered by the method, so even the substance of Descartes’ science looks to be practical in bearing. For surely mechanics cannot elevate the knower in the way traditional philosophy had claimed to do, namely, by enabling him to contemplate the first and highest things, the divine things. Quite consistently, then, the *Discourse* characterizes reason as a “universal instrument.”¹⁰

Pascal agrees with Descartes that the scholastic approach to nature is gravely flawed. His own scientific writings frequently betray his impatience with the tendency found in the Schools to substitute speculative dicta for thoughtful observation of natural phenomena. Witness his engagement in the controversy over the vacuum.¹¹ Nevertheless, he is all but silent about the practical potential of his own mathematical and physical writings. Once in passing he refers to a particular mathematical discovery as “useful,” but its utility is clearly no more than heuristic.¹² In any event, there is nothing to be found anywhere in Pascal like Descartes’ proclamation of a universally beneficent science. On the other hand, a blanket condemnation of Descartes’ practical intentions is also absent from his writing. In fact, we know that Pascal approved of the application of theoretical principles to practical problems. Throughout his life he devoted considerable energy to various attempts to make human life easier; his celebrated calculating machine is only the first of many such efforts.¹³ In order to gain an accurate understanding of Pascal’s argument against Cartesian utility it is therefore necessary to join the issue at a deeper level. That in turn requires consideration of an important point of agreement between the two thinkers. As we shall see, Pascal accepts in a large measure Descartes’ rethinking of the “common good.”

The mastery of nature teaching, addressed as it is to scientists and nonscientists alike, involves a two-pronged critique of the good as it had hitherto been conceived, a critique of conventional morality and a critique of the philosophers. Against the philosophers Descartes argues that they have never known a genuinely common good because they have never held anything in common: the history of philosophy is a history of endless disputation. Should one inquire into the ground of philosophical differences one would find “insensibility, pride, despair, or parricide” all parading as noble theorizing. The possibility of a philosophic detachment, of an interest in truth for its own sake, is cast into suspicion. But does not such suspicion poison the well for Descartes’ own philosophy? Not at all: the promise of utility both affords an indisputable criterion for scientific “success,” and shows how it is possible for an interest in the truth and self-interestedness to meet in one.¹⁴

Descartes’ argument against common life is similar. According to the self-

understanding of all premodern regimes, not narrow self-interest, i.e., the acquisition of honor or external goods, but some articulation of justice is the proper measure of the polity and its citizens. Granted that neither the city as a whole nor in its parts acts with perfect justice, the city's origin and continuance were thought ultimately to depend on some divination of the good beyond mere utility. In this philosophers after Socrates had tended to agree with ordinary citizens.¹⁵ The effect of Descartes' hyperbolic doubt, which stresses the great variety of moral and political opinions, is to intimate that all such differences are a function of purely arbitrary convention and not of a given regime's relative nearness to or distance from a truly just political order. The only thing one can count on is that human beings always vainly suppose their own opinions to be the right opinions. With prescientific opinion thereby dispatched, or at least disarmed, the way is cleared for the scientifically informed polity Descartes points to in the *Discourse*, Part VI. To conclude, Cartesian science will be useful to the ordinary citizen despite or rather because it ignores the ordinary citizen's understanding of the good.¹⁶

Pascal is close to Descartes on both counts. As regards ordinary morality, he is, like Descartes, struck by the number of different moral codes found in the world; and again like Descartes, he takes this variety to be a sign of the arbitrariness of political authority. "[W]e see nothing just or unjust that does not change in character with a change in climate. Three degrees of latitude reverses all jurisprudence; a meridian decides the truth." He mentions the view that common or natural laws may be seen to underlie such differences only to reject it: the range of actions deemed moral by the world is too extreme (60/294). He concludes with a candor his Port Royal editors found shocking¹⁷ that the only warrant for obedience to the law is that it is customary and "not because it is reasonable or just" (525/325; cf. 9/29, 25/308, 51/293, 61/309). He hereby announces for all to hear what Descartes utters only guardedly.¹⁸ And this difference is instructive. For while Descartes is prepared provisionally to accept the strictures of conventional morality until his scientific reform is fully in place, Pascal refuses to see in any merely moral or political arrangement even an instrumental value in realizing the true human good.¹⁹

Pascal is also more forthcoming than Descartes about the failure of philosophy, although again his criticisms are for the most part the same. Several times he observes that "the philosophers split themselves into a thousand different sects" (281/613; cf. 76/73, 456/618, 479/746, 507/363). It is true that he sometimes attributes their inability to reach some common understanding to the fact that each "sect" overemphasizes some particular aspect of reality at the expense of another (127/415, 131/434, 398/525, 449/556). This explanation will prove to mark an important divergence from Descartes, as we shall see. In the end, however, Pascal appears to accept the Cartesian reduction of philosophical differences to the "vanity" of the philosophers (142/463, 627/150); they are as much governed by base interests as anyone else (145/461).

Still more striking is another point of agreement. Cartesian utility means, to

repeat, the promotion by science of bodily well-being rather than either disinterested theorizing or civic virtue. The *Discourse on the Method* may therefore be said to seek a liberation of self-interest. For according to Descartes' predecessors, human beings need to be educated in a kind of self-forgetting; they must be taught to take an interest in both the political and suprapolitical whole of which they are members, even or rather especially when such interest is at the expense of their individual or bodily well being.²⁰ What is decisive about Descartes' utilitarianism, then, is the suggestion that the interest of the human whole is furthered precisely by advancing those interests of the human parts not concerned with the whole. As Leo Strauss describes this dramatic peripety in the career of self-interest, the good or rational political order is now seen to be brought about by forces which do not themselves tend toward the good or the rational.²¹ Surprisingly, Pascal seems to endorse this notion. "All men naturally hate one another," he observes quite serenely. Accepting the leading principle of Cartesian utility as an accomplished fact, he adds that "[w]e have used concupiscence as best we could to make it serve the public good." The result of this "use" of concupiscence is not, as the ancients may have supposed, political fragmentation, but "an image of charity" (210/451). And far from being scandalized by such arrant Machiavellianism, Pascal describes its workings as proof of man's greatness (106/403, 118/402, 211/453). Nowhere else does the *Pensées* come so close to approving Descartes' view of the "common" good, and therewith, Cartesian utility.

Yet it is precisely at this juncture that Pascal's opposition to Descartes begins to come into view. Enlightened concupiscence may well be an image of charity but it is, manifestly, a "false image" (210/451). We must now consider why.

As the textbooks instruct us, Cartesian mind is strangely disembodied, outside the world. On closer inspection, the separation of mind from body, never satisfactorily defended by Descartes in "metaphysical" terms,²² proves to be exactly what is required by mathematical physics, which can explain body, or nature, only apart from soul and its purposiveness. Hence the dismissal of formal and final causality. The rational conquest of nature achieved by the new physics is, by its service to our bodily needs and desires, able to effect in turn a reunion of sorts between human body and human soul. Prompted by the "teaching of nature," and its language of pleasures and pains, mathematical physics dissects human life in order to benefit the composite or whole human being.²³ To speak somewhat hyperbolically, Descartes radicalizes the duality of body and soul in order to overcome it. This understanding of the "mind-body problem" is at the nerve of Descartes' teaching on utility.

The *Pensées* move in precisely the opposite direction. It goes without saying that Pascal distinguishes soul from body (108/339, 115/349, 161/221, 418/233). But he also stresses their unity. "The nature of man is entirely natural, *omne animal*" (630/94; cf. 664/94b, 372/483). There is, therefore, no es-

caping our embodiment and all that it entails. Yet this does not mean that rationality is subjugated to the body. To the contrary, reason necessarily elevates human bodiliness beyond worldly categories. In his celebrated turn of phrase, “Man . . . is a thinking reed” (200/347). The human being is thus a being between, a worldly being not explicable wholly in worldly terms. “Man must not believe that he is equal to the brutes or to the angels, nor be ignorant of either, but he must know both” (121/498; cf. 522/140). It follows that human life must be lived in tension, in the stretch between what is above us and what is beneath us (678/358). Any attempt to overcome or even reduce this tension will result only in a distortion or destruction of the human being. “To depart from the middle is to depart from humanity” (518/378). Descartes’ utilitarian account of the goal of science must, for Pascal, be just such a departure, aiming at once too high and too low. It is for precisely this reason that Cartesianism is “useless.”

Not that Pascal advocates a full-scale restoration of the theoretical life. For reasons we have already indicated, he doubts whether philosophy in the ancient sense is able to perfect the human being (cf. 926/582, 545/458). Nevertheless the limits of reason never prompt him to reduce rationality to something instrumental; as he says repeatedly, it is reason that “constitutes man’s greatness” (759/346; cf. 111/339, 756/365). Nor is the dignity of the human being obscured by the baser aspects of our nature. Awareness of how low we can sink only underlines our inherent grandeur. Otherwise stated, it is only in the light of the high that the low can be understood as such (53/429, 117/409, 470/404, 526/408). For the author of the *Pensées*, then, the unity of soul and body is something given, not achieved; and it is explicable only by soul, not by the pineal gland, nor by appeal to the teaching of our natural appetites (cf. 957/512).

It is also soul which explains the duality of the human being, again contrary to Descartes. When Pascal supposes that human “nature” is irreducibly dual he is not referring to a division between mind and body. He means rather the duality of nature as our end or perfection and nature as the principle of the class or kind or multitude, i.e., how we ordinarily find ourselves to be (127/415, 149/43). “This duplicity of the human being is so visible that there are those who have thought that we have two souls” (629/417). To say that we are dual means for Pascal that we are at odds with ourselves, both drawn to and repulsed by our true good.²⁴

The abiding duality of the human being leads Pascal to doubt whether those passions most disposed to submit to Descartes’ scientific polity can be taught always to prevail over other, more volatile, human urges. “The sweetness of fame is so great that, to whatever object we join it, even death, we love it” (37/158; cf. 470/404). Indeed, “[a]ny opinion may be preferable to life, the love of which appears so strong and so natural” (29/156). Of course, Descartes was well aware of the dangers associated with the passions, and seems to have

called for a sentimental education, for the correction of passion by passion.²⁵ Pascal, however, is much less sanguine about the possibility of reforming our more truculent impulses. Accordingly, he expresses grave reservations about the dependability of our self-interest, at one point calling it “a marvelous instrument for blinding us in an agreeable fashion” (44/82). To sum up, although he concedes that society may well be founded upon concupiscence, he insists that human life both individually and communally is permanently feverish, alternating between sweats and chills (27/354, 771/355, 56/181). Descartes, then, was mistaken to identify bodily health as the “first” because the most basic human good.²⁶

The “reason for these effects” surfaces with Pascal’s remarks on “diversion.” These remarks suggest that the subordination of science to the passions is self-defeating. Without simply dismissing the desire for a pleasant, healthy and lengthy life, Pascal believes that the true human problem would only be brought more sharply into focus by the attainment of such a life. His argument is not simply that human desire is restless (362/472); Descartes was well aware of the potentially infinite character of the will.²⁷ Rather, he considers the attempt to satisfy the passions in the terms they themselves dictate as an abstraction from their real significance. Most human appetites are ultimately to be explained not by their putative objects but as a means to avoid something else, namely, an unsettling emptiness no worldly object could ever fill.²⁸

We do not seek that soft and peaceful employment which permits us to think of our unhappy condition . . . but the bother which steers our thinking away from it and diverts us. (136/139; cf. 70/165b, 137/142, 139/143)

The state both antecedent to and consequent from diversion in its manifold forms is “boredom” which, were it confronted, would compel us to raise disconcerting questions about our existence.²⁹ Yet surely Descartes was aware of this aspect of the human problem. Indeed, it could be argued that the Enlightenment that looked back to him was designed largely to keep the people distracted and to keep controversial, that is to say, theological questions at bay.³⁰ Still, if Pascal’s critique of enlightened hedonism is correct, the victory of the Enlightenment could never be more than Pyrrhic. On his reading even the most consuming diversions are only temporary. Unease continually breaks in upon us (410/413). Moreover, it is by no means clear why peaceful distraction should be preferred to the diversionary charms of war (cf. 136/139).

Pascal is also at odds with Descartes over the place of contingency in human affairs. With Descartes he acknowledges the pleasure to be had from overcoming this or that aspect of our “fortune” (552/107): Despite his admiration for Epictetus, Pascal was no Stoic. He even professes admiration for the “extraordinary greatness of soul” necessary to perform rare deeds of good *and* evil (526/408; cf. 157/225). Nevertheless, the bid to overcome all of nature is not greeted sympathetically by the author of the *Pensées* (788/486). His restatement

of the doctrine of a cyclical fortune (27/354, 705/180) is not enough to command acquiescence, of course, because as Descartes had observed, it is surely unwise to submit to unhappy circumstances before we have made a rational determination of what is in our power.³¹ Similarly, Cromwell's kidney stones (750/176) and Cleopatra's nose (413/162) prove only that traditional political action is particularly susceptible to accidental reversal; they do not prove the fragility of the new, practical philosophy. More pertinent is Pascal's observation that our moral and intellectual formation is to a high degree dependent upon others (814/6). But Descartes also knows that our judgments may be colored by the influences of our earliest years.³²

Pascal's position comes more clearly into view when we compare it with the teaching on self-mastery advanced especially in the third part of the *Discourse on Method*, Part IV of the *Meditations* and the last part of *The Passions of the Soul*. This obscure doctrine culminates in an account of "*generosité*," a distinctively Cartesian virtue combining Aristotelian, Stoic and Epicurean elements in an audacious new whole. We have indicated that the common goods secured by the scientific mastery of nature do not explain Descartes' own commitment to his project. The expansiveness of *generosité* does account for Descartes' willingness to "do good to others" by initiating the public works of the Enlightenment, works the many fruits of which he knew he would not live to enjoy.³³ In the end, however, *generosité* proves to be essentially self-regarding, the excellence of a man who takes pleasure in esteeming the freedom, resolution, and power of his good will even apart from any actions he may perform. Viewed in this light, Descartes' science manifests his self-satisfaction in being "beyond the power of fortune." His virtue appears, then, to be both the condition for and the conclusion of the attempt to master nonthinking nature. Not for nothing does Descartes write that the self-mastery of *generosité* "renders us in a way like God." To summarize, *generosité* is the most powerful embodiment of Cartesian "wisdom," whose principal "use" is said in *The Passions of the Soul* to be

that it teaches us to render ourselves master of our passions to such a degree, and to manage them with such adroitness, that the evils they cause are quite bearable, and even that we derive joy from them all.³⁴

Here, surely, is the deepest stratum of Cartesian "utility."

Were one to search the *Pensées* for a counter to the radical autonomy of *generosité*, one would be struck first by Pascal's insistence that "it is not in our power to control our heart" (100/467). He means by this not only or even primarily that our desires take us places we would not go (149/430). More fundamentally, he means that human beings are born into, or constituted by, a longing which is on that account not of their own choosing. This unalterable longing would lead us beyond ourselves, to transcend ourselves, to leave the "hateful me" (597/455) behind. Although its very existence is a sign or trace of

that alone which would satisfy our hearts, it cannot of itself assure our satisfaction; consequently it spells our essential dependence on something “outside” of us to complete us (136/139, 143/464). Secondly, Pascal believes that even our thoughts are more adventitious than would be allowed by Cartesian self-mastery. “What an absurd god” he says of the creature whose reasoning is disturbed by a fly buzzing round his ears (48/366). Less egregious but no less indicative of our humble state is the fact that even our best thoughts come to us largely unbidden, and, owing to the fallibility of memory, are likely so to depart (542/370, 656/372). Finally, and most decisively, the radically contingent character of our very being persuades Pascal that the desire to be self-sufficient is a delusion. The rhetoric of his argument can be misleading however. Consider the following passage:

When I consider the short duration of my life, absorbed in the eternity which comes before and after . . . the tiny space which I fill and even see swallowed up in the infinite immensity of the spaces of which I know nothing and which know nothing of me, I am unnerved and astonished to see myself here rather than there, because there is no reason at all why here rather than there, now rather than then. (68/205; cf. 135/469, 154/237, 194/208, 198/693, 201/206)

Fragments such as this are scattered throughout the *Pensées*, and it is easy enough to read them as a symptom of neurotic anxiety. On closer analysis Pascal’s intention proves to be dialectical: he seeks to awaken in his readers’ minds questions which he believes follow quite naturally from a confrontation with our contingency.³⁵ Cartesian self-mastery, no matter how successful in the short term, could never overcome the obscurities attending our being in time. Seen from Pascal’s perspective, Descartes is to be faulted for having silenced prematurely what are legitimate because unavoidable human questions.

This brings us to the nerve of Pascal’s quarrel with Descartes about utility. The *Pensées* do not really oppose the Cartesian teaching on the good with an alternate theory. Pascal holds, rather, that while an adequate understanding of our good is truly needful, we do not possess such an understanding. The problem is twofold, involving a failure both of intellect and of will. Specifically, we neither know what is truly in our best interest nor, by and large, do we make much of an effort to find out.³⁶ In effect, the problem is not for Pascal that human beings are excessively self-interested. Rather, we are not self-interested enough (418/233, 427/194, 749/456). Should it be objected that some human beings at least have caught a glimmer of the good, and do strive to attain it, Pascal would reply that it is nevertheless not in their power to secure it for themselves (141/509, 148/425, 269/692). The evidence he adduces for his claim that we do not possess the good falls under the general rubric of “misery,” aspects of which we have already discussed. Human misery in turn constitutes a *ratio dubitandi* for the goodness of the Cartesian project. If Pascal’s analysis of our condition is at all plausible, then on Descartes’ own terms we

ought not to accept the Cartesian doctrine of utility: a science whose purpose is uncertain is unscientific in a decisive sense. To conclude, Pascal would seem to have shown that the mastery of nature is useless because it is uncertain.³⁷ “Useless” is hardly a neutral term in Pascal’s vocabulary, however. In his eyes Descartes’ philosophy is a terrible distraction. In the guise of offering us happiness it diverts us from the urgent task of discovering and pursuing our true good. We begin to see why Pascal should have resolved “to write against those who deepen the sciences unduly” (553/76; cf. 23/67, 164/218, 496/714, 687/144).

II

Pascal provides reasons for doubting whether Cartesian science truly serves man as he is, to say nothing of man as he ought to be. But the charge of uncertainty is meant not only to impugn the goal or goals of Descartes’ project; it also expresses Pascal’s dissatisfaction with Descartes’ means. In a word, Pascal questions the worth of Descartes’ “method.” What is at stake in this quarrel, however, is much greater than the proper “technique” to be employed by science. Method cannot itself be understood methodologically. Because Descartes’ teaching on method issues from a sustained meditation on the relation between the knower and the world, Pascal’s disagreement with him proves once again to concern the nature and place of the human being.

It is in Descartes’ *Regulae*, unpublished during his lifetime, that we find some of his most suggestive remarks on the meaning of the new method. The first several “rules” explain why methodical direction of the mind should be required. Descartes argues that while the “natural light” of the mind is able to attain simple and certain truths, as is shown paradigmatically by mathematics, nevertheless the “intuitive” power of the mind is naturally hobbled by our manner of proceeding. Instead of moving patiently and assuredly from truth to truth, “blind curiosity” prompts us to venture too quickly into obscure matters; in the absence of methodical discipline, we set our course by vague “experience” and hasty “conjectures”; such is our respect for authority that we rely excessively on “the writings of the ancients” despite their manifest failure to advance systematically. For all these reasons, such discoveries as have been made to date must be considered a matter of dumb luck. Method, by ordering the mind’s native ability to grasp truth, will eliminate science’s dependence upon fortune. As we have already indicated, the mastery of nature doctrine looks both outward and inward.³⁸

The most startling premise of Descartes’ method is the claim, evident already in the first “rule,” that thinking may rightly be ordered independently of its objects. In likening the mind to the sun the *Regulae* upend the traditional solar metaphor for knowledge: not being but mind lights up the way to the truth

of the things known. By supposing that the mind can possess truth without recourse to the world's self-disclosure, the method is able to bypass the seemingly obvious articulation of the world into kinds. This means in turn that method is universal, the same for all "objects" of study. Thus Descartes is able, almost miraculously, it must have seemed, to establish method on a scientific footing wholly in advance of any scientific encounter with the world. So established, method is itself able to certify any such an encounter. Not for nothing will the *Discourse on the Method* propose Descartes himself as "the first principle of philosophy."³⁹

A reader of Pascal who confined himself to *De l'esprit géométrique* might be pardoned for believing that Pascal accepted the notion of a universal method modelled on mathematics. The *Pensées* compel a different conclusion, however. To the extent that the literary character of the work embodies Pascal's intentions, a more anti-Cartesian style of investigation could not be imagined (cf. 532/372). Or consider the claim that there is no "art" available either to conserve or to acquire our thoughts (542/370); or again, that the "ethics [*morale*] of the mind" is "without rules" (513/4).⁴⁰ Also to be noted is Pascal's insistence that an act of intellectual "submission" may well be in keeping with the demands of reason (167/269, 170/268, 173/273, 174/270, 188/267): submissiveness, it goes without saying, is not a Cartesian virtue. By extension, Pascal must reject the idea of a single method suited to all objects of investigation (511/2, 512/1). Hence the demand that we "not judge nature in accordance with us but in accordance with it" (668/457). At a stroke Pascal rejects what Kant would later call the "Copernican revolution."

This willingness to be guided by nature's self-presentation by no means heralds a return to prescientific naivete. Pascal is quite aware that "nature often deceives us and does not obey its own rules" (660/91); or as he puts it in the *Préface pour le traité du vide*, "the secrets of nature are hidden" (532). Moreover, he readily concedes that our very constitution creates manifold obstacles to the investigation of nature. One cannot read the *Pensées* without thinking of the critiques of natural consciousness found not only in Descartes, but in all the early modern philosophers. Not the least of our troubles is our blindness to our deficiencies. As he writes in *De l'esprit géométrique*, "[i]t is a natural malady of man to believe that he possesses the truth directly" (585). What, then, can Pascal mean by "judging in accordance with nature"? And how is such judgment possible?

Among the most important of statements on nature in the *Pensées* is the fragment entitled "Disproportion of man." In that fragment Pascal opposes Cartesian science for the very reason that could be said to have motivated the method, namely, the fact that we do not presently possess knowledge of the whole, or more precisely, knowledge of the principles of the whole. Pascal puts the difficulty in the following way.

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

To be sure, Pascal is scarcely the first to have stated the problem in these terms. All the same, this passage goes a long way towards explaining his doubts about Descartes' "certainty."

As is clear from the context in which this *aporia* appears, Pascal's purpose is not sceptical in the strict sense. To the contrary, he uses the *aporia* to awaken self-knowledge in his readers: he would have us see the paradoxical limits of our ability to know. These limits are paradoxical, of course, because they come into view only to the extent that we have in some measure overcome them. We can know that our knowledge of the whole is fragmentary only because knowledge of the whole is in some way available to us. Otherwise stated, the human being is "disproportionate," a consciously finite being who qua knower is aware of, and hence open to completion by, the infinite.

Easily overlooked here is the conception of the universe informing this statement of the problem. In the first place, Pascal's argument depends upon a divination of the wholeness of the whole. In the *Pensées* nature is neither monolithic nor is it a heap of shards, a "bad tragedy." Diverse beings are seen to make up a causally unified world order. And if this is true then we are required to take seriously the self-presentation of the parts, i.e., the fact that particular beings themselves show up as relative wholes. Consequently, the way a part appears—for Pascal the part in question may be either a kind of being or an individual—can on inspection be reason for revising one's initial formulation of the wholeness of the whole. Yet the interdependence of part and whole also implies that some prior awareness of the whole is indispensable for the investigation of the wholeness of the part. Pascal's *aporia* leads therefore to a vindication of "experience," where "experience" means both the determining and determined ground of all understanding.⁴¹

One aspect of this defense of experience, rarely discussed, is his estimation of opinion. Earlier we mentioned Pascal's affinities to Descartes in his repudiation of both conventional morality and the ambitions of the philosophers. On the other hand, Pascal admits that prephilosophic opinion, faulty though it is, expresses a genuine apprehension of the truth; for this reason, he is prepared to mount a qualified rescue of it (520/375). Similarly, although he venerates no philosopher as wise, he is much more willing than Descartes to give the philosophers their due, appealing now to one now to another in support of his position.⁴² Thus, whereas Cartesian method proposes to set aside received opinion in order to proceed in a linear fashion from certainty to certainty, Pascal believes that understanding can only advance in a "zig-zag" fashion, moving dia-

lectically from simplicity to sophistication to knowing simplicity as partial truths are seen to be partial, corrected in light of a fuller understanding, and appreciated anew in their partial truthfulness (90/337, 91/336, 92/335, 93/328). It is in such terms that we should interpret his celebrated aphorism, "To mock philosophy is truly to philosophize" (513/4).

The preceding contrast could be put in another way. As is generally accepted, Descartes' method involves a curious amalgamation of skepticism and dogmatism. Experience is subjected to the severest sceptical scruples; what emerges unscathed is to provide "foundations" for a true or certain advancement in learning. According to Pascal, this procedure does both too much and too little. Too much, because we know enough not to suppose skepticism to be wholly reasonable; too little, because nothing we know can be stated with dogmatic assurance (109/392, 131/434, 406/395, 655/377). In Pascal's opinion there are no "simple" certainties, but there are innumerable partial truths. "Here each thing is true in part and false in part" (905/385). Consequently all demonstrations involve some degree of circularity (527/40). Pascal's unswerving adherence to the twilight state between dogmatism and skepticism⁴³ explains the generally derisive tone he adopts when referring to Descartes. The title of Descartes' 1644 manual, *The Principles of Philosophy*, is "ostentatious" (199/72); Descartes' opinions on matter and space are a "reverie . . . approved by pig-headedness [*entêtement*]" (1005); the Cartesian philosophy as a whole is a "romance of nature, quite like the story of Don Quixote" (1008).⁴⁴ It is not so much that Pascal is troubled by particular aspects of Descartes' science. Rather, it is the imperiousness of the method that offends him. Notwithstanding his "certainty," Descartes' definitive pronouncements on the nature of nature exceed the evidence available to him; worse still, nature supplies evidence to contradict him.⁴⁵

But is it not true that Pascal accepts the Cartesian mathematicization of nature? While he distinguishes physics from geometry (376), he also treats space as something homogeneous or absolute, indifferent to the kind of being moving through it (603ff.). And when he writes

Our soul is cast into a body where it finds number, time, dimensions; it reasons thereupon and calls this nature, necessity, and can believe nothing else (418/233; cf. 420/419, 110/282, 583)

it is impossible not to think of Descartes, as numerous commentators have observed. That Pascal scholars have regularly taught that he accepts the Cartesian equation of the laws of nature and the laws of mechanics could have been predicted. Nevertheless they are mistaken. To be sure, Pascal did entertain the animal-machine hypothesis (105/342, 107/343, 738/341). Yet the evidence that he rejected global mechanism is in plain view. The most fitting contemporary example of an automaton was Pascal's own calculating machine, but the only

time he refers to it in the *Pensées* it is in order to contrast machines with animal volition (741/340).⁴⁶ That mechanism is untenable also follows from Pascal's estimation of the logic of parts and wholes. To conclude, while he may well have endorsed the attempt to mathematicize nature, he certainly did not consider Descartes' reduction of body to extension to have saved the appearances (cf. 84/79, 686/368, 958/75).

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

in a continuous quantity, whatever quantities of some kind are added to a quantity of a higher kind add nothing to it. Thus points add nothing to lines, lines nothing to surfaces, surfaces nothing to solids; nor in the case of numbers . . . are roots commensurate with squares, squares with cubes, cubes with numbers of the fourth power, etc. Hence, inferior grades are not to be considered, since they are beings of no significance.

That is, a lesser order of mathematical "being" prefigures but never yields the greater order, which may be said to contain it. Pascal goes on to explain that he has subjoined this remark, which should be "familiar to those who are students of indivisibles," in order that "the connection never sufficiently admired, by which nature, lover of unity, assigns to a one those things which seem most remote" be better appreciated (171).⁴⁷ In short, Pascal's understanding of number points him in the direction of what has been called the "arithmos structure of being," and away from mechanism.⁴⁸ According to such an understanding, one cannot explain what is distinctive about a given being merely through analysis into its elements, as Descartes' method would have it. Once again, and as Pascal's mathematical inclinations confirm, the lower must be read in the light of the higher. In contrast to the homogeneous universe of mathematical physics, Pascal believes that the experience of number supports the view that nature is a hierarchically ordered unity of diverse kinds. In keeping with this view, the *Pensées* call attention to the astonishing variety present in nature (65/115, 558/114, 782/266) and insist that this diversity is not a random multiplicity because "nature imitates itself" (698/119; cf. 541/120, 663/121).

That nature is drawn together into an analogical unity is, for Pascal, most evident in one being, the human being. The human being manifestly contains what is beneath him and prefigures what is above him. As a paradoxical union of apparent opposites, this being provides for Pascal an emblematic display of the wholeness of the whole; at the same time, the fact that human beings are divided or fragmentary indicates to him that the natural whole is not ultimate or self-contained. Hence Pascal's preoccupation in the *Pensées* with the human experience of the human is not narrowly anthropological, it is not a renuncia-

tion of his earlier scientific efforts. Pascal comes to see that human life in all its ambiguity is the key to a genuine science of the whole. And at the center of his investigation of the human things is his teaching on the “heart.”

What the *Pensées* tell us about the heart constitutes Pascal’s real alternative to Descartes’ method. For the human heart is, in Pascal’s reckoning, both the principal obstacle and our surest access to knowing the truth about the world. Now, although the romanticist reading of Pascal has been discredited, it bears repeating that by “heart” he does not mean anything in the least sentimental. The term is, of course, of Biblical provenance, as numerous Scriptural citations in the *Pensées* attest. But Pascal’s use of the term is not exclusively or even primarily theological. A survey of its appearances indicates that it names a *hendiadys*. In Thomistic vocabulary, “heart” designates both *intellectus* or “understanding” (as opposed to *ratio* or “reason”) and *voluntas* or “will.” Pascal’s general refusal to employ two terms for what are, after all, two distinct powers of the soul may involve some loss of precision. Yet he thereby maintains in view their dramatic unity. Taken singly and in their being together these two moments of his teaching on “heart” offer a powerful challenge to Cartesian certainty.

When Pascal writes “The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing” (423/277) he has foremost in mind the fact that much of what we know we know nondiscursively; that is to say, some knowledge is given “all at once” or “at a glance” (512/1, 751/3). Following the tradition, Pascal uses the metaphor of sight to describe this noetic capacity. The proper objects of this power are what Pascal calls “principles”; these would appear to be the grounds of the wholeness of the whole and of its parts; they often mark subtle differences between things; and in Pascal’s account they are almost innumerable. Notwithstanding certain formulations of the issue, the author of the *Pensées* does not simply oppose “heart” and “reason,” however. For example, he allows that because of the limits of our noetic abilities, we sometimes come to truths discursively which are in principle available intuitively (110/282). That said, “only to a certain degree” can reason bring us to those things already known through the heart (512/1). We should also note that noetic apprehension does not eliminate the need for further investigation through both discursive and nondiscursive means, as a glance at *De l’esprit géométrique* makes plain (cf. 580–82). Nor does Pascal ever suggest that the heart is infallible. He considers it, rather, all too prone to err (131/434, 530/274). Finally, Pascal’s “heart” is essentially dependent on the givenness of the thing known. There are obscurities in things that cannot be cleared up, no matter how clear the mind’s eye (449/556). It is the thing known that provides the evidence for the heart’s possession of it (cf. 255/758, 7/248).⁴⁹

Of course, it must be admitted that for Descartes, too, thinking is not entirely “rational.” If the frequent use of “intuition” in the *Regulae* is not an entirely accurate gauge of his subsequent intentions, still, appeals to the “clear

and distinct” do suggest something like an immediate apprehension of some truth or other.⁵⁰ All the same, it is obvious that Pascal accords much greater authority to his “heart” than Descartes ever would. His claim is that much of what we know, indeed among the most important and most “scientific” things we know, simply is not subject to methodical discipline. On the other hand, and again contrary to Descartes, the heart’s apprehension of principles does not afford the certainty of “clear and distinct” ideas. As we have observed, the heart’s awareness is, for Pascal, always subject to refinement and even correction.⁵¹

Although the intuitive dimension of “heart” is prominent in the *Pensées*, it must be said that Pascal’s discussion of heart as the seat of volition dominates the analysis. Here again, however, the issue is primarily noetic, concerning as it does the ways our desires both impede and promote our search for the truth. At the forefront of his presentation of the heart as an organ of the will is his concern that “the eyes of the heart” (308/793) are clouded by countless spurious interests. Our ability to lay hold of the proper starting points for understanding is “poisoned” by corrupt inclinations (136/139). “How the heart of man is hollow and filled with dung” (139/143; cf. 310/801, 427/194, 470/404, 821/252, 978/100). Yet we must not permit Pascal’s vivid rhetoric to obscure his intention. He does believe it possible for us to desire the truth, even to desire it wholeheartedly (149/430, 150/226, 427/194); the human being is not utterly depraved. It would be more accurate to say that our hearts are “torn” (924/498). So it is that two different people will construe the same experience in two fundamentally different ways, the one’s heart disposing him to see the thing as it is, the other’s misdirecting him (503/675; cf. 539/99). His principal point, then, is that there is a deeply moral basis to all cognition. And this becomes especially significant when we are confronted by truths the evidence for which is equivocal (835/564). Indeed, given the fact that “everything here is partly true, partly false,” that all knowledge is provisional or partial, it follows that all science must be moral science. Once again, Descartes’ method does not confront the most serious obstacles to the acquisition of genuine science.

One might object, however, that equally for Descartes the will plays an integral role in the attainment of truth. As introduced in the *Discourse on the Method* the method depends at crucial junctures on its author’s “resolve.” And in the Fourth of his *Meditations* he explains that error has its origin in the fact that “the will extends further than the intellect,” from which it follows that a willful disciplining of will is needed in order to limit our affirmations to what is truly clear and distinct.⁵² Pascal, however, could counter that precisely because of the necessity of thinking in the context of obscurity restraint and resolve do not suffice. The burden of numerous fragments of the *Pensées* is to show that the only guarantor of our moving in the right direction is that our heart be in the right place; where certainties are not available we must be rightly disposed to be drawn to and to receive what truth there is; that is, we are once again

dependent upon something “outside” us. If the *Pensées* are correct, then, no methodically disciplined volition can correct our errant ways. To sum up, for Pascal there is no permanent overcoming of the circle of intellect and will. There is only the constant reconsideration of our own stance in every attempt to discern how things stand with the world.⁵³

Both the noetic and the moral aspects of Pascal’s teaching on the heart are implicit in his censure of Cartesian “theology”⁵⁴:

I cannot forgive Descartes: he would like, in all his philosophy, to do without God; but he could not prevent himself from granting to him a flick of the finger in order to set the world in motion; beyond this he had no use for God. (1001)

The deism Descartes’ publications helped decisively to inaugurate is, according to Pascal, almost as far removed from Christianity as is atheism (449/556; cf. 191/549, 463/243). Pascal’s complaint is anything but sectarian, however. Quite apart from the claims of Revelation, he is troubled by a science which, under the banner of certainty, would obscure the genuine traces of God present in the world.⁵⁵ Admittedly, the *Pensées* must themselves seem curiously deficient not to say insouciant when viewed from a scholastic perspective, given their inability or unwillingness to marshal an argument for God’s existence drawn from nature. But there is no disputing that Pascal understood the world and everything in it to be an image of God.⁵⁶ If he did not supply a natural theology of his own, this was in part because Descartes had shown him that such arguments do not necessarily serve Christianity. In general, he seems to have thought that ordinary scholastic arguments failed to do justice to the obscurity of the subject, and that they did not attend sufficiently to the circumstances in which such efforts would be most useful. Especially with the recent developments in physics, but even apart from them, Pascal expressed hesitations about the properly theological worth of ordinary natural theology; it is very hard to “see” the Biblical God, a God who hides himself (242/585, 427/194, 449/556, 463/243). And Pascal was convinced that those most in need of a proof for God’s existence are least disposed to appreciate its force. “I see by reason and experience that nothing is more suited to arouse [the unbeliever’s] contempt than the usual proofs for religion” (781/242; cf. 3/244, 190/543). To the extent that Descartes does engage in theology, he is indeed “more than a man,” for his god tells us nothing about our humanity. According to Pascal, we could not possibly make use of such “certainties.”

The teaching on the heart restores us to our point of departure. For if Cartesian utility is useless because it is uncertain, it now appears that his certainty is dubious because it is not useful. Just as the problematic character of the good or goods Cartesian science is meant to achieve calls the utility of that science into question, so, Pascal seems to argue, Descartes’ method must fail to reach genuine certainty because it does not properly confront the disproportion of the human being, and therewith the divided heart, that which makes all knowledge

both possible and problematic. Just as we cannot gain scientific access to the good apart from a sustained reflection on the true, so the true only comes into sight through a prolonged meditation on the good. The *Pensées* would have us see that a science that departs from the human experience of the human will divert us from both the good and the true.⁵⁷

NOTES

1. *Pensées sur la religion et sur quelques autres sujets*, ed. Louis Lafuma (Paris: Editions du Luxembourg, 1951), vol. 1, *Textes*, fragment 887. All further citations to the *Pensées* will employ Lafuma's enumeration of the fragments. For ease of reference I have added the fragment number in the Brunschvicg edition (in the present instance, 78). Translations of Pascal are my own.

2. *Discours de la méthode*, 5th ed. Étienne Gilson (Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1976), 23, 41, 60, 66, 68. That Descartes made Ovid's motto—*bene vixit bene qui latuit*—his is commonly acknowledged, but seldom brought to bear on Cartesian studies; see the letter to Mersenne of April 1634, in *Oeuvres* (henceforth *AT*), ed. C. Adam and P. Tannery (Paris: Cerf, 1897–1913), vol. 1, 286. For an iconoclastic presentation of Descartes' art of writing consider Hiram Caton's "Analytic History of Philosophy: The Case of Descartes," *Philosophical Forum* 12 (1981): 273–94. For a more scholarly assessment, cf. Louis E. Loeb, "Is There Radical Dissimulation in Descartes' *Meditations*?" in *Essays on Descartes' "Meditations,"* ed. A. O. Rorty (Berkeley: UCLA Press, 1986), 243–70. David R. Lachterman, *The Ethics of Geometry: A Genealogy of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 1–7, conjectures that the reasons for Descartes' reticence about his predecessors are not prudential merely, but concern the very substance of his teaching, i.e., its modernity.

3. "La vie de Monsieur Pascal," in Blaise Pascal, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Jacques Chevalier (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1954), 19. All references to writings of Pascal other than the *Pensées* will be to this edition, and will be cited by page number. For Pascal's art of writing, see *Pensées* 55/111, 91/336, 308/793, 529/105, 532/373, 542/370, 701/9, 737/10, 927/505, 934/460; also "Fragment d'une lettre," 525–26, "De l'art de persuader," 594–602.

4. The literature on this question is too extensive to cite here. Michel Le Guern, *Pascal et Descartes* (Paris: A. G. Nizet, 1971), provides a brief summary of the debate. Both he and E. Baudin, *Études historiques et critiques sur la philosophie de Pascal*, vol. 1: *Pascal et Descartes* (Neuchâtel, Switzerland: Editions de la Baconnière, 1946) argue that Pascal was heavily indebted to the philosophy he so openly rejects. Earlier, Léon Brunschvicg had suggested that the disagreement between the two could be traced to their common debt to Montaigne; cf. *Descartes et Pascal: Lecteurs de Montaigne* (New York: Brentano, 1944). More recently, and in defense of the view that the two figures were antithetical, is Pierre Magnard's "Descartes inutile et incertain," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 75 (1991): 63–80. Magnard represents many others when he claims that "inutile" means "inutile pour le salut." Descartes' "uncertainty" is generally thought to concern either particular errors Pascal locates in Descartes' physics, or the inability of Cartesian science to deliver the certainty, once again, of "salvation"; see Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, "Doute et certitude chez Descartes et Pascal," *Europe* 59, 594 (October 1978): 5–14.

The failure to appreciate the scope of Descartes' revolution is not a new phenomenon. Antoine Arnauld, one of Pascal's colleagues at Port Royal and subsequently one of his editors, believed, despite Pascal's warnings to the contrary, that Descartes' writings were "a singular effect of God's providence" serving to "stop the dreadful inclination shown by many persons of late towards irreligion and libertinage." Cited by Stephen Nadler, *Arnauld and the Cartesian Philosophy of Ideas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 30, n. 24.

5. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 355. For Hegel's assessment of Pascal see *Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. T.M. Knox and A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 162–63.

6. *Discours de la méthode*, 8.

7. On the meaning of "confession" see Joseph Ratzinger, "Originalität und Überlieferung in Augustins Begriff der *confessio*," *Revue des études augustiniennes*, 3 (1957): 375–92; Thomas Prufer, "Notes for a Reading of Augustine, *Confessions*, Book X," in *Recapitulations: Essays in Philosophy* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 27–32; Ann Hartle, *Death and the Disinterested Spectator* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 85–87.

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

9. Compare, e.g., *Phaedrus* 230a with 130/420, 477/406.

10. *Discours de la méthode*, 61ff., 41, 57; also the "Conversation with Berman," *AT* 5, 165; and see Richard Kennington, "Descartes and the Mastery of Nature," *Organism, Medicine and Metaphysics*, ed. S. F. Spicker (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1978), 201–23.

11. "Préface pour le traité du vide," 529–32; "Lettre à M. le Pailleur," 400. Notably, Pascal thinks that Descartes' defense of the plenum is in its own way a scholastic error.

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

13. For a list of Pascal's inventions cf. Pierre Humbert, *L'Oeuvre scientifique de Pascal* (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 1947), 62–66. René Taton, "Sur l'invention de la machine arithmétique," in P. Costabel et al., *L'Oeuvre scientifique de Pascal* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964), 207–28, offers a more cautious assessment of Pascal's practical achievements.

14. *Discours de la méthode*, 8, 9–10.

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

16. *Discours de la méthode*, 1, 10, 16, 23.

17. Mara Vamos, "Pascal's *Pensées* and the Enlightenment: the Roots of a Misunderstanding," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 97 (1972): 7–145, provides a valuable study of the editorial work done by Pascal's Port Royal editors on the first edition, the deficiencies of that edition, and the influence of these defects on the Enlightenment reading of Pascal.

18. In Pascal's defense, we note that he does not intend to preach subversion. He is aware that if such thoughts were made widely known the existence of all regimes would be imperilled (6/294, 66/236). In a move reminiscent of Hobbes, he claims that precisely because convention, sustained by force, is the great guide to ordinary human life we can have no reason either to contest existing laws or to incite the many to disobedience (103/298, 525/325). Is there any way to resolve this difficulty, apart from appealing to the unfinished state of the *Pensées*? Pascal was certainly aware of philosophic irony (260/678, 276/671, 279/690, 533/331). Given his censure of the Jesuit practice of equivocation, however, the extent to which he himself would have resorted to such practices is not clear (cf. *Lettres provinciales* no. 9, 760–61). We hasten to add that he does offer a second argument for obedience to the law, one long sanctioned by Christianity (cf. 14/138 with Romans 13:2).

19. *Discours de la méthode*, 22–24. A. J. Beitzinger, "Pascal on Justice, Force, and Law," *Review of Politics* 46 (1984): 212–43, offers a useful summary of Pascal's political thought. Among other things, he answers the charge made by Jacques Maritain, "The Political Ideas of Pascal," in *Ransoming the Time*, trans. H. L. Binsse (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), that Pascal was a "Christian cynic." A more serious difficulty is raised by Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964), 18, when, in light of such fragments as 60/294, he claims that Pascal "while admitting that there are things which are by nature just . . . denies that they can be known to unassisted man owing to original sin." That Strauss overstated his case is suggested by the following texts: 81/299, 148/425, 149/430, 374/475, 402/230, 421/477, 454/619, 482/289, 540/380, 905/385, *Lettres provinciales* no. 14, 819–32. As these texts indicate, Pascal believed that some knowledge of the naturally just was indeed available; what he doubted was the actualization by unassisted man of a truly just political order. In short, those passages in the *Pensées* of a radically conventionalist hue are not entirely representative of his position. See 257/684; also Philippe Sellier, *Pascal et Saint Augustin* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1970), 98–103.

20. *Politics* 1337b27; *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1141a22; 1143b20; 1177b25.
21. *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 315. Strauss calls this “the principle of modern political economy.”
22. See Pamela A. Kraus, “*Mens humana: res cogitans* and the Doctrine of Faculties in Descartes’ *Meditationes*,” *International Studies in Philosophy* 18 (1986): 1–18.
23. See Jacob Klein, “Modern Rationalism,” in *Lectures and Essays*, ed. Robert B. Williamson and Elliot Zuckermann (Annapolis, MD.: St. John’s College Press, 1985), 58–59; and especially Richard Kennington, “The ‘Teaching of Nature’ in Descartes’ Soul Doctrine,” *Review of Metaphysics* 26 (1972): 86–117.
24. Compare *Les passions de l’âme* a. 48: “il n’y a en nous qu’une seule âme, et cette âme n’a en soi aucune diversité de parties. . . . L’erreur qu’on a commise en lui faisant jouer divers personnages, qui sont ordinairement contraires les uns aux autres ne vient que de ce qu’on n’a pas bien distingué ses fonctions d’avec celles du corps, auquel seul on doit attribuer tout ce qui peut être remarqué en nous qui répugne à notre raison” (AT 11, 364–65).
25. *Les passions de l’âme*, aa. 48–50, AT 11, 366–70.
26. Compare *Discours de la méthode*, 61–62 with 139/143, 146/350, 470/404, 638/109.
27. *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, IV, AT 7, 56–62.
28. Descartes also cautions against allowing the passions free reign to determine their proper objects; but reason only corrects the course of the passions, it does not call their fundamental orientation into question (*Meditationes* VI, AT 7, 84–90; *Les passions de l’âme* aa. 138–48, AT 11, 430–43).
29. An observation Nietzsche cites approvingly. See *Unmodern Observations*, Part I: *David Strauss: Writer and Confessor*, ed. William Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 46; also 36/164, 414/171, 622/131.
30. *Discours de la méthode*, 8, 11–12, 31, 39; “Conversations with Berman,” AT 5, 176. The political theology of the Enlightenment has been treated at length by Robert P. Kraynak in *History and Modernity in the Thought of Thomas Hobbes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).
31. *Discours de la méthode*, 27–28.
32. *Discours de la méthode*, 12–13.
33. *Principia philosophiae*, Preface to the French edition, AT 11b, 20.
34. *Les passions de l’âme*, aa. 152, 187, 212; AT 11, 445, 470, 488. See G. Krüger, “Die Herkunft des philosophischen Selbstbewusstseins,” *Logos: Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie der Kultur* 22 (1933) 225–72, esp. 251–61; and Richard Kennington, “Descartes,” *History of Political Philosophy*, 2d. ed., ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1972), 395–414, esp. 406–9.
35. Hence the long fragment 427/194 puts similar words in the mouth of an interlocutor. See 958/75 “What is there about the vacuum that could make them fear? What could be baser and more ridiculous?” On the dramatic character of Pascal’s rhetoric consider P. Topliss, *The Rhetoric of Pascal. A Study of His Art of Persuasion in the “Provinciales” and the “Pensées”* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1966), esp. 274–304. Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, 2, 94–95, observes that “[t]he spatially infinite is for him a pointer (which even the dim-witted can grasp).”
36. Cf. J. H. Broome, *Pascal* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1965), 76–77; and 2/227, 28/436, 75/389, 76/73, 119/423, 149/430, 401/437, 427/194, 905/385.
37. Richard Kennington, “The ‘Teaching of Nature’ in Descartes’ Soul Doctrine,” 116; “Descartes and the Mastery of Nature,” 212.
38. *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*, ed. Giovanni Crapulli (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), 3–21; also *Discours de la méthode*, 18–22; and see Pamela A. Kraus, “‘Whole Method’: The Thematic Unity of Descartes’ *Regulae*,” *Modern Schoolman* 63 (1986): 83–109.
39. *Regulae*, 2–3, 40–45.
40. On fragment 513 cf. Buford Norman, “L’idée de règle chez Pascal,” in *Méthodes chez Pascal: Actes du colloque tenu à Clermont-Ferrand 10–13 juin 1976* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1979), 87–99; also Thomas More Harrington, *Verité et methode dans le “Pensées” de Pascal* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1972), 82.
41. On “experience” see 111/339, 125/92, 128/396, 365/496, 403/174, 427/194, but especially

"Préface pour le traité du vide," 530, 535. A. W. S. Baird, who provides an otherwise excellent discussion of Pascal's views on nature, overstates the tension between Pascal's experimentalism and his desire for demonstrative arguments. Consider his "Inconsistencies in Pascal's Conception of Scientific Knowledge," *Aumla* 24 (1965): 220–38; and "Pascal's Idea of Nature," *Isis* 61 (1970): 297–320. In fact, it is clear even from *De l'esprit géométrique* that for Pascal science is hypothetical through and through. For an invaluable treatment of this and related themes see Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, 2, 188–95. See also Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 122–26, for a discussion of the Socratic approach to part and whole, an approach Pascal here emulates.

42. This is especially evident in "L'entretien avec M. de Saci," 573–74.

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

44. As scholars have occasionally noticed, Descartes himself advises his readers to read his work, at least on one level, as a piece of fiction: *Discours de la méthode*, 4, 42 and *Principia*, "Preface to the French Edition," AT 11b, 12.

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

46. As Baird points out in his "Pascal's Idea of Nature," 313–16; also Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, 2, 190, n. 55.

47. *De l'esprit géométrique*, 587–92, also advances some suggestive remarks on how mathematical kinds are to be conceived as both discrete and continuous.

48. See Jacob Klein, "The Concept of Number in Greek Mathematics and Philosophy," in *Lectures and Essays*, 43–52, for a brief statement on "eidetic numbers." Pascal's understanding of mathematics is discussed by Léon Brunschvicg in his *Blaise Pascal* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1953), 127–58. Cf. also Jean Guittou, *Pascal et Leibniz. Étude sur deux types de penseurs* (Paris: Aubier, 1951), 29–60. René Taton notes in "L'oeuvre de Pascal en géométrie projective," 49, that in the *Traité des sections coniques*, known to us through extracts and through a summary by Leibniz, Pascal successfully employs Desargues' projective geometry to solve the same "Pappus problem" tackled by Descartes by other means in his *Géométrie*.

49. I do not mean to imply that Pascal's teaching on the heart fully restores the ancient theory of noetic intuition. Like so much else he has written, the argument here is undeveloped. Nor are we claiming that his vocabulary is entirely consistent. In *De l'esprit géométrique*, for example, "heart" appears to have a somewhat more restricted meaning than in the *Pensées*; cf. 592–94.

50. *Regulae* 7–8, 19, 22, 28, 37, 47, 51–58, 57; *Discours de la méthode*, 33, 38; *Meditations*, IV, AT 7, 58–59.

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

52. 15, 18, 22ff., 41, 60; AT VII, 58ff. See Hiram Caton, "Will and Reason in Descartes' Theory of Error," *Journal of Philosophy* 72 (1975): 87–104.

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

54. The theme has most recently been treated in Vincent Carraud, "Le refus Pascalien des preuves métaphysiques de l'existence de Dieu," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 75 (1991): 19–45, and Francis Kaplan "Deux attitudes face au problème philosophique de l'existence de Dieu," *ibid.*, 81–95.

55. Note that Descartes' various "proofs" never proceed from some order perceived within the world. The turn to mechanism and away from teleology implies that nature expresses no divine "intentions."

56. See 934/580; "Lettre III à Mme. Périer," 484; "Lettre V à Mlle. de Roannez," 51; "Entretien avec M. de Saci," 571.

57. I am grateful to Robert Kraynak, Jean DeGroot, and above all Thomas Prifer for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay.