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FAITH AND REASON IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF PASCAL

Pascal, on the basis of Cartesian principles, created a practical philosophy answering moral and religious needs. However, he did not attribute to the human mind a cognitive power as strong as Descartes did, and he even emphasized his critical attitude towards the Cartesian ideal of knowledge, which he saw as exorbitant and above man's capacity. Reason is useful only in the realm which it itself defines with rules and regulations, within boundaries which it cannot overstep or negate. Pascal also disagreed with Descartes on identifying the logical order as being the same as the ontic order. Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" was not, for him, the basis of all certainty. He wrote: "I feel that I might not have been; for the Ego consists in my thoughts. Therefore I, who think, would not have been, if my mother had been killed before I had life. I am not, then, a necessary being."¹

Man's existence, as seen by Pascal, depends on two, basically different sides of human nature – the spiritual and the corporeal – and at the same time, it is not completely clear if the essence of man's soul in this philosophy is fully identified with thinking. Though Pascal calls for achieving self-consciousness, at the same time he doubts if the mind is capable of knowing the essence of the self.² The ideal of knowledge, to him, was geometry, but he quickly realized that its methods turn out to be completely useless when applied to matters of life importance because "they do not allow us to know the eternity which surrounds us, nor do they solve ethical or religious problems".³ According to Pascal, such a method "would consist in two principal things: the one, in employing no term the meaning of which

¹ B. Pascal, *Pensees*, translated by W. F. Trotter, section VII (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/pascal/pensees.viii.html>).

² Z. Drozdowicz, *Antynomie Pascala*, Poznań 1993, p. 30.

³ W. Tatarkiewicz, *Historia filozofii*, Warszawa 1978, vol. II, p. 58.

had not first been clearly explained; the other, in never advancing any proposition which could not be demonstrated by truths already known; that is, in a word, in defining every term, and in proving every proposition.”⁴

Pascal, the rationalist, admits with humility that even the greatest mind remains powerless in the face of certain issues. He wrote: “we burn with desire to find solid ground and an ultimate sure foundation whereon to build a tower reaching to the Infinite. But our whole groundwork cracks, and the earth opens to abysses. Let us, therefore, not look for certainty and stability. Our reason is always deceived by fickle shadows; nothing can fix the finite between the two Infinities.”⁵ The impossibility of settling the question of whether the presumptions made about transcendental reality are true or not – a result of man’s place in the world – is the basic ontological obstacle preventing cognition.

Other difficulties arise, according to Pascal, from the blending of the spirituality and corporality in man. This duality of human nature does not allow us to precisely define simple issues, both spiritual and corporeal. Many obstacles arise from the innate as well as the acquired characteristics of the mind. These deceptive forces include not only the senses but also imagination and so called self-love. The senses by suggesting false images of reality distort what the mind knows. Imagination, which is an ability to create images and beliefs, fills man with anxiety, fear or desire, perverting our ability to distinguish the true from the false. Pascal wrote: “the entire theatrical apparatus of ceremony, dress and rites which men create to impress others, appeals to our imagination. Imagination dictates the rules of assessing beauty, goodness, and justice”.⁶ And further: “no less dangerous is the deceptive force of self-love in man, which makes us want to seem better, wiser and more beautiful than we are. And not just to others but to ourselves. That is why it forces us to wear a mask and disguise ourselves”.⁷

Because of all this, man, in a constant anxiety and inner struggle, overestimates the meaning of trivial things and overlooks the important ones. “Tangled in tragic inner indecision, dependant but longing for freedom, he searches in vain for light and peace”.⁸ In the essay *De l’art de persuader* the

⁴ B. Pascal, *Of the Geometrical Spirit*, in: *Minor Works. The Harvard Classics. 1909–14* (<http://www.bartleby.com/48/3/9.html>).

⁵ B. Pascal, *Pensees* (72).

⁶ I. Dąbska, *Sceptycyzm francuski XVI i XVII wieku*, [in:] “Prace Wydziału Filologiczno-Filozoficznego” 7 (1958), z. 2, p. 65.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Ibidem.

philosopher points out that we are more prone to believe that which plays into our desires and feelings and to reject all that goes against them. The impossibility of creating sure knowledge leads to skepticism. And – according to Dąbska⁹ – because the skeptical arguments remain insurmountable to Pascal in the realm of rational cognition, the philosopher, searching for a solution to the problems which are tormenting him, decides to introduce the notion of “knowing through the heart”. Rational human knowledge therefore seems to him but another variation on the vanity of the world. It is especially interesting that such a conclusion is reached by a man of science who realized that “physical science will not console me for the ignorance of morality in the time of affliction.”¹⁰

Exhibiting excessive trust towards the knowledge of “physical science” as well as towards philosophy itself seemed madness to Pascal. He wrote: “The last proceeding of reason is to recognize that there is an infinity of things which are beyond it. It is but feeble if it does not see so far as to know this. But if natural things are beyond it, what will be said of supernatural?”¹¹ and therefore “There is nothing so conformable to reason as this disavowal of reason.”¹² According to the philosopher we should simultaneously use reason and question reason because there are questions to which reason knows not the answers. In Władysław Tatarkiewicz’s interpretation, Pascal’s skepticism grew from rationalism, because empiricists, who believed that knowledge is to know the facts, had no reason to end in doubt. Knowing the facts without understanding them cannot constitute cognition for a rationalist. Pascal’s doubt is therefore the result of a disappointed rationalism leading to despair.¹³

Doubting means despair and unhappiness. Nevertheless, a thinking man’s duty is to search when in doubt. Doubt gives a sense of the insignificance of thought, the nothingness not only of its results but of the process of thinking itself. The only remedy to this is to constantly search for the truth. In the case of Pascal, it led to the discovery that there is a separate order of cognition, the order of the heart, different from the order of reason, which scientists believe to be the only one. This does not mean that Pascal doesn’t appreciate the importance of reason. He believed that reason can lead you to ultimate matters, but only when you keep it within bounds

⁹ Ibidem, p. 66.

¹⁰ B. Pascal, *Pensees* (196).

¹¹ Ibidem (466).

¹² Ibidem (465).

¹³ W. Tatarkiewicz, *Historia filozofii*, Warszawa 1978, vol. II, p. 59.

and accept its limitations. Such was, for the French philosopher the essence of the “reasonable mind”, which gives man a chance to create truly wise knowledge.¹⁴

Reason is able to reject certain metaphysical concepts, but it cannot do anything more, even when relying on a specific concept of God because it would have to be only a rational God of scientists, abstract and impersonal. Whereas, as Pascal wrote, “wisdom sends us to childhood”.¹⁵

Reason must therefore bow with humility before infinity and accept the authority of Revelation and faith. According to Pascal, true wisdom is characterized by the possession of a powerful, clear mind, which, in situations which surpass it can see its limitations and then, with a child’s submissiveness surrender to the Revelation. Wisdom is to “know where to doubt, where to feel certain, where to submit. He who does not do so, understands not the force of reason.”¹⁶

To put things simply, the power of mind amounts to the strength of its arguments. Aware of this, Pascal searches with his intellect for the strongest possible arguments in order to settle his bet regarding God’s existence. He writes: “You have two things to lose, the true and the good; and two things to stake, your reason and your will, your knowledge and your happiness; and your nature has two things to shun, error and misery. Your reason is no more shocked in choosing one rather than the other, since you must of necessity choose. This is one point settled. But your happiness? Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager then without hesitation that He is.”¹⁷

The argumentation used in the wager isn’t based on giving convincing proof. The issue is rather to prove that even consequent and logically sound reasoning cannot force man to believe. Pascal strove to prove that reason is not only unfit to decide in the matter of God’s existence, but even to motivate faith or the lack of it. It is not reason which prevents man from believing, even if the mind claims so itself. The choice to believe or to renounce belief is made on a different level. The role of reason is to reveal these circumstances and to draw the borderline between the things which it can address, and the ones which remain beyond its reach.

¹⁴ L. Brunscgvieg, *Le Genie de Pascal*, Paris 1924, p. 180.

¹⁵ B. Pascal, *Pensees* (464).

¹⁶ *Ibidem* (461).

¹⁷ *Ibidem* (451).

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According to Pascal “Nothing is so important to man as his own state, nothing is so formidable to him as eternity; and thus it is not natural that there should be men indifferent to the loss of their existence, and to the perils of everlasting suffering. They are quite different with regard to all other things. They are afraid of mere trifles; they foresee them; they feel them. And this same man who spends so many days and nights in rage and despair for the loss of office, or for some imaginary insult to his honor, is the very one who knows without anxiety and without emotion that he will lose all by death. It is a monstrous thing to see in the same heart and at the same time this sensibility to trifles and this strange insensibility to the greatest objects. It is an incomprehensible enchantment, and a supernatural slumber, which indicates as its cause an all-powerful force.”¹⁸ Because “between us and heaven or hell there is only life, which is the frailest thing in the world.”¹⁹ Indifference towards the ultimate matters astounded the philosopher and he found it absurd that not only simple people but philosophers as well put their own, impermanent existence above God. He wrote: “Shall it be that of the philosophers, who put forward as the chief good, the good which is in ourselves? Is this the true good? Have they found the remedy for our ills? Is man’s pride cured by placing him on an equality with God?”²⁰

Man’s realism lies in seeing oneself for who one really is. As man realizes who he is, and what his limitations are, he draws nearer to discovering the ultimate sense and purpose of life and to the chance to escape doubt and despair. But this, however, is only possible thanks to grace, for only grace can overcome man’s weaknesses and limitations. Reason clears man’s path towards believing, but it cannot, even under the best circumstances, grant it. The necessary precondition is “inspiration”. “Faith is a gift of God; do not believe that we said it was a gift of reasoning”²¹ Pascal wrote.

Therefore faith is a gift that comes from God’s inspiration. The notion of a heart “inspired by God” means nothing else than the state of God’s spirit penetrating the individual. God first persuades man to receive grace, and only later bestows it upon him. The individual is capable of knowing God, but “the knowledge of God is very far from the love of Him.”²² A quali-

¹⁸ Ibidem (335).

¹⁹ Ibidem (349).

²⁰ Ibidem (483).

²¹ Ibidem (480).

²² Ibidem (476).

tative leap must take place because there is no passing from the order of reason to the supernatural order of love given by God directly.

“The heart has its own order; the intellect has its own, which is by principle and demonstration.”²³ If faith is a feeling of the heart, then how should we understand this notion? J. Russier²⁴ interprets the notion of heart as a will, a tendency towards love. Also for L. Brunschvicg²⁵ the heart is the domain of passion and spontaneity, while Per Lönning²⁶ believes that the knowledge of the heart comes from man’s self-consciousness. An even more rationalistic interpretation comes from W. Marciszewski,²⁷ who describes the “heart” as intensified intellectual intuition. A similar view is held by D. von Hildebrand²⁸. W. Tatarkiewicz²⁹ separates the order of the heart from the order of the intellect, treating the “heart” as a separate ability to assess supernatural goods. Dąbska³⁰ ascertains that the impossibility of formulating rational criteria for the truth proves only the weakness of the mind and not the uncertainty of all cognition. Ascertaining the intuitive assuredness of the heart’s truths constitutes to her an overcoming of normative skepticism – she sees the heart as an intuitive, instinctive knowing of certain facts. In M. Scholtens³¹ interpretation it is something of a mystic sense.

These varied interpretations point to the fact that Pascal’s notion of the heart seems wider than it is in the view of those who interpret it, but nevertheless, they all agree on one thing: the heart searches for the signs of God in the world, and finds them.

The meeting of God and man is only achieved through love, being the only way to knowing God directly. Jeanne Russier in her work titled *La foi selon Pascal* notes that if we examine this matter from the perspective of the individual, two notions come to mind: inspiration and persuasion.

²³ Ibidem (72).

²⁴ J. Russier, *La foi selon Pascal*, Paris 1949, pp. 153–154.

²⁵ L. Brunschvicg, *Le Génie de Pascal*, Paris 1924, p. 180.

²⁶ P. Lönning, *The Dilemma of Contemporary Theology: Prefigured in Luther, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche*, Oslo 1962, p. 62.

²⁷ W. Marciszewski, *A Rationalistic Interpretation of Reasons of the Heart. A Study in Pascal*, “Dialectics and Humanism” 4 (1980), p. 161.

²⁸ D. von Hildebrand, *Serce*, Poznań 1985, p. 33.

²⁹ W. Tatarkiewicz, *Porządek dóbr. Studium z Pascala*, „Przegląd Filozoficzny” 23 (1921): Księga pamiątkowa K. Twardowskiego, p. 297.

³⁰ I. Dąbska, *Sceptycyzm francuski XVI i XVII wieku*, [in:] “Prace Wydziału Filologiczno-Filozoficznego” 7 (1958), z. 2, p. 66.

³¹ M. Scholtens, *Le mysticisme de Pascal*, Arsen 1974, p. 27.

These constitute the two concurrent and complementary aspects of God's actions.³²

The meeting of God and man happens in absolute solitude. In solitude, which Pascal considers to be an expression of religious experience, the "tenderness of the heart" – the very essence of faith – manifests itself.³³ Therefore, faith is a specific inner act of man directed towards God. The encounter of God and man can only happen through love because Love can only be recognized and grasped by love. "It is the heart which experiences God, and not the reason. This, then, is faith: God felt by the heart, not by the reason"³⁴ – writes Pascal. The essence of the spiritual connection to the Absolute is "feeling with the heart". And so, faith is such an act of acknowledging the transcendent Being that allows man to create a direct connection with God through inner commitment and acts of love. And love, in turn, is not only the source of feelings but also the source of so called direct cognition which – despite the fact that everything in it takes place "without rules or observations" – constitutes the basis of beliefs. Belief, usually realized in speech, in this case comes through silence because it is "an eloquence of silence, which is more piercing than speech could ever be. Love recognizes through barely decipherable signs – which it finds infallible – that which remains invisible to others".³⁵ The speech of faith, the speech of the heart is in silence.

According to Thomas More Harrington³⁶ there are two types of faith to be found in the philosophy of the French thinker: human faith and divine faith. This differentiation clearly ties in with the problem of the foundation of faith in Christianity. "Divine faith" is a result of grace, "human faith" is achieved through habit and reasoning. This kind of faith needs argumentation but its drawback is that it remains on the level of the intellect. Without a change of heart, without a moral change, human faith is condemned to be futile or even to wane away. According to Pascal, true faith, stronger than conceit, comes only from the love of things divine. Human faith, typical of overly rational individuals, remains shallow even in its intellectual aspects. Rationalistic optimism entails the overlooking of the tragic, which is an inseparable element of human existence. An intellect formed in such a man-

³² J. Russier, *La foi selon Pascal*, Paris 1949, p. 155.

³³ L. Brunscgvieg, *Le Genie de Pascal*, Paris 1924, p. 185.

³⁴ B. Pascal, *Pensees* (481).

³⁵ J. Russier, *La foi selon Pascal*, Paris 1949, p. 162.

³⁶ T. M. Harrington, *Vrite et methode dans les „Pensses de Pascal”*, Paris 1982, pp. 137–138.

ner knows not paradox, and only paradox expresses the true condition of man. Paradox requires of man special abilities to understand matters which exceed the limits of man's cognition. E. Tielsch claimed that: "Paradox is a characteristic pathos of intellectual life, and just as only great souls are capable of developing passion, so only a great mind can find themselves in the face of what I call paradoxes, which are nothing else than infinitely free thought."³⁷

Only with the category of paradox can one describe the human condition, filled with contradictions, because man's natural state is both misery and greatness. Knowing the former breeds despair, and knowing the latter – conceit. Despite being aware of the misery, man possesses an instinct which lifts him up. He suffers from the incapacity to find out, but has a undefeatable sense of the truth. He longs for the truth but finds uncertainty. His mind fights an everlasting battle against passions. We have faith and goodness only partially, mixed with evil and falseness. For Pascal there is no liberation from these contradictions other than through faith, because for him "all contradictions are brought together and unified in God and in God alone".³⁸ Only through knowing God can all doubt and despair be removed. As man realizes who he is and what his limitations are, he approaches the discovery of the ultimate sense and purpose of life.³⁹

Abstract

The paper analyzes Pascal's understanding of the relation between faith and reason as the two possible ways in which man attempts to establish whether God exists and how He may be reached. Pascal departed from an analysis of "physical knowledge" and its possible application to the questions of faith and things infinite. Discovering the limitations of reason, the philosopher turned elsewhere to search for both proof of Gods existence and the possible ways in which man can strive to be closer to Him. The paper analyzes the meaning and various interpretations of Pascal's notion of "knowing through the heart". The author shows how the French philosopher's concept developed, departing form a critique of Cartesian philosophy, his concept of faith and love as essential elements of creating a real relationship with

³⁷ E. Tielsch, *Kierkegaard Glaube*, Göttingen 1964, p. 162.

³⁸ M. Tazbir, *Świadomość heroiczna*, „Życie i Myśl” 9–10 (1962), p. 7.

³⁹ In this paper, I also drew upon my book *Pascal i Kierkegaard – filozofowie rozpacz i wiary (Pascal and Kierkegaard – Philosophers of Despair and Faith)*, Kraków 2001.

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God. Later, the paper presents Pascal's thought on the human condition and the acts which are necessary to achieve the "leap of faith" without which man cannot attempt to surpass doubt and despair inherent in the human experience. Finally, the paper describes the philosopher's differentiation between "human" and "divine" faith, which once again ties into the critique of pure reason and its limitations, such as the inability to reconcile the various contradictions and paradoxes experienced by man.