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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

KNOWING GOD THROUGH THE HEART: EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PASCAL'S EPISTEMOLOGY AND THEOLOGY IN HIS *PENSÉES*

Jonathan Fung

This article describes the relationships between heart and mind, knowledge of God and knowledge of self, human "greatness" and "wretchedness" in Pascal's Pensées. It demonstrates that for Pascal, to know God is to love God, which is made possible only in Jesus Christ through God's grace, and so it is only in the humility of the heart and not the arrogance of reason that God can be known.

Introduction

Blaise Pascal is one of the most well-known mathematicians, physicists, and inventors in history. However, he was also a profound Christian thinker whose fragmentary thoughts, his *Pensées*,¹ offer a robust *Apology for Christian Religion* to modern thinkers.² In his *Pensées*, one of the important topics that Pascal reflects upon is the heart, which he argues is more important than reason for knowledge—specifically the knowledge of God. Pascal says, “the heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing,” and, “it is the heart which perceives God and not reason.”³ This “epistemology through the heart” is actually a result of his theological understanding of the doctrine of the human condition, the hiddenness of God as well as the divine revelation through Jesus Christ as the grace of God, and this shows that there is an integral relationship between Pascal's epistemology and his theology when it comes to knowing God. Furthermore, by demonstrating this interconnectedness, Pascal's argument that God must be known through the heart and not reason becomes very clear.

¹ Pascal's philosophical thoughts were originally written in French and found in fragments. After his death, these fragments were collected, organised and eventually published in different editions as the *Pensées*. I will use the English version of the *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Kraisheimer (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), which follows Luis Lafuma's edition of presenting the fragments.

² Although Pascal intended these thoughts to be prepared as an apology to Christianity and the *Pensées* are often referred to as *Apology for Christian Religion*, he never used the title himself. See Pascal, *Pensées*, 18.

³ Pascal, *Pensées*, 154, fragments 423, 424.

To demonstrate how Pascal's knowledge of the heart is related to his theology, this paper will first define Pascal's understanding of the heart and its ability to acquire certainty of knowledge. Second, it will examine Pascal's doctrine on the human condition—a duality of “wretchedness” and “greatness”—as well as the doctrine of divine hiddenness to demonstrate why Pascal is opposed to the philosophers' approach of knowing God through metaphysical arguments. Finally, it will unpack Pascal's argument that to know God is to love him (charity), which being activities of the heart, not reason, are made possible only through Jesus Christ.

Defining Pascal's “Heart” and Knowledge of the Heart

Before defining the heart according to Pascal, it is important to first recognise that his understanding of the heart follows the biblical and Augustinian tradition although this was not always the case in his life.⁴ As one of the most celebrated mathematicians, scientists and philosophers of his time, Pascal spent most of his early life dedicated to intellectual pursuits in mathematics and science. After his conversion to Jansenism,⁵ his intellectual rigour was channelled towards helping formulate arguments for theological problems practically but without an appreciation and enjoyment of the theological value.⁶ It was not until the dramatic “night of fire” conversion experience in 1654 that Pascal came to know God as the “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob and not of the philosophers and scholars... God of Jesus Christ.”⁷ This striking conversion experience led Pascal to reject the philosophers' approach of relating to God through metaphysical means as he was convinced that

⁴ Klaas Bom, “Heart and Reason: Using Pascal to Clarify Smith's Ambiguity,” *Pneuma* 34.3 (2012): 352.

⁵ Jansenism is a theological movement within Catholicism named after Cornelius Jansen (1585–1638) who offered an interpretation of Augustine that emphasised efficacious grace. Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 5th ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 53, 367.

⁶ Norman Wilde, “Scepticism and Faith in the Philosophy of Pascal,” *HTR* 9.1 (1916): 60.

⁷ An account of the decisive “night of fire” is given in the biography on Pascal by Marvin R. O'Connell, *Blaise Pascal: Reasons of the Heart*, Library of Religious Biography (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997). After Pascal's death, a piece of parchment recording the decisive experience of 1654 was found sewn into his clothing suggesting that he carried it around his whole life. The text can be found in *Pensées*, fragment 913.

neither those who followed scholasticism (such as René Descartes who relied solely on clear distinct ideas) nor those who adhered to Pyrrhonism (a school of extreme scepticism) were on the right track.⁸ Instead, his heart was moved as a genuine Christian believer and therefore adopted the Pauline and Augustinian concept of Christianity—which is essentially the gospel.⁹ It was also this experience that gave him a fresh understanding of the heart, which finds its roots in the biblical and Augustinian tradition.

In describing the “reasons of the heart” in a fragment of his *Pensées*, Pascal does not simply refer to feeling or instinct. Hibbs explains that when Pascal refers to the heart, he is describing “a faculty of perception, of awareness, and thus a vehicle of knowledge about the world” which has cognitive dimensions as well as emotional elements. Furthermore, he describes the heart to be receptive rather than active.¹⁰ Thus, the heart has an ability to perceive what Pascal would describe as first principles like numbers, time, space, motion as well as God—which Pascal includes as a first principle. It follows that the definition for feeling is the perception of first principles by the heart. Therefore, heart knowledge or reasons of the heart can be understood as instinctive knowledge or self-evident intuition.¹¹

In his *Pensées*, Pascal notes that “we know truth not only through our reason but also through our heart, it is through the latter that we know first principles” and it is through the knowledge of these first principles that “reason has to depend and base all its argument.” In the same fragment, he also makes the distinction that “principles are felt” (by the heart) and “propositions proved” (by reason) while “both with certainty though by different means.” Furthermore, he argues that “our inability proves nothing but the weakness of our reason, and not the uncertainty of our knowledge.”¹² Here, Pascal is showing that the knowledge of the heart has a certainty that knowledge of reason cannot refute but must depend on. It is the heart which is the source of first principles and not reason. It

⁸ Graeme Hunter, *Pascal the Philosopher: An Introduction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 202.

⁹ Wilde, “Scepticism and Faith in the Philosophy of Pascal,” 70.

¹⁰ Thomas S. Hibbs, “Habits of the Heart: Pascal and the Ethics of Thought,” *International Philosophy Quarterly* 45.2 (2005): 212. Hibbs also explains that the English language has often neglected the cognitive dimension of the heart due to its translation of “feelings.” The French *sentiment* (as in the Latin roots) has both cognitive and emotional elements.

¹¹ Roy A. Clouser, *Knowing with the Heart: Religious Experience & Belief in God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 95.

¹² Pascal, *Pensées*, 58, fragment 110.

follows that reason can neither demonstrate nor disprove knowledge of the heart.

Bom shows that the sharp distinction between the knowledge of the heart and the knowledge of reason that Pascal presents is a result of his hierarchal order for the different types of knowledge—knowledge of the heart, knowledge of reason and knowledge of the senses. On account of persuasiveness, the knowledge of the heart is described as most important and certain albeit prone to subjectivity. Of lesser importance are reason and sensory knowledge which can be demonstrative and even challenge the subjectivity of heart knowledge but cannot deny it.¹³ The hierarchal order of these types of knowledge stems from Pascal’s understanding of the human being consisting of body, mind and charity (love of God). Hibbs describes that not only is there an increasing order of importance in the body, mind and charity but the three are distinctly different.¹⁴ As Pascal himself notes, “the infinite distance between body and mind symbolizes the infinitely more infinite distance between mind and charity, for charity is supernatural.”¹⁵ Since charity belongs at the level of the heart, the knowledge of God should also start there.

Pascal on the Human Condition and Divine Hiddenness

Pascal follows the Augustinian tradition of finding God through meditation on the human instead of nature. Therefore, Pascal’s knowledge of man and its relationship to the knowledge of God starts with an assumed comprehension of the human condition.¹⁶ In his *Pensées*, Pascal both raises the question of “what is the self?”¹⁷ and offers his understanding of the human condition to be in a duality of “wretchedness” and “greatness.”¹⁸

Wood argues that in understanding the self, Pascal rejects the Cartesian proposition of the self as being autonomous from the world, but instead suggests the self to be embedded in a network of relations including the relation to God.¹⁹ Pascal’s opposition to Descartes’ perspective of the self being the mind, not body, grounds his main argument for understanding

¹³ Bom, “Heart and Reason,” 353–54.

¹⁴ Hibbs, “Habits of the Heart,” 219.

¹⁵ Pascal, *Pensées*, 123, fragment 308.

¹⁶ Bernard Wills, “Reason, Intuition, and Choice: Pascal’s Augustinian Voluntarism,” *International Philosophy Quarterly* 46.1 (2006): 46.

¹⁷ Pascal, *Pensées*, 245, fragment 688.

¹⁸ Pascal, *Pensées*, 61, fragment 122, 133, fragment 352.

¹⁹ William Wood, “What is the Self? Imitation and Subjectivity in Blaise Pascal’s *Pensées*,” *Modern Theology* 26.3 (2010): 420.

the human condition. As a Christian believer, Pascal holds the position that the human self is the object of God's loving affection hence it cannot be collapsed to simply the mind. Philosophers such as Descartes, as well as some of Pascal's other contemporaries, believed that lasting happiness could be achieved by using empirical methods on human life which Pascal disagreed with and challenged by raising questions of how happiness can be found through scientific means when they cannot even produce knowledge.²⁰ Pascal recognised these propositions to be the human pride and sin of the philosophers as Pascal understood sin as duplicity towards the self or the "false self" imitating God.²¹

Boyd argues that Pascal's anthropology shows that human beings live in a universe of paradoxes and are an "infinite paradox" unto themselves.²² The most significant of these paradoxes is what Pascal calls the human duality of "wretchedness" and "greatness." He notes in his *Pensées*, "Man's greatness and wretchedness are so evident that the true religion must necessarily teach us that there is in man some great principle of greatness and some great principle of wretchedness."²³ Furthermore, he also writes that "man's greatness comes from knowing that he is wretched... thus it is wretched to know that one is wretched, but there is greatness in knowing one is wretched" as well as "wretchedness proves his greatness."²⁴ Peters explains this paradoxical condition that Pascal presents by noting that to be human is to yearn for unity of the human self but also to recognise that we cannot achieve this through our own meagre means. As such, he explains that the "greatness" of human nature is our ability to project greatness, knowledge and true happiness. However, while human nature bears such marks of greatness, we fail to bring it about to fulfilment through our own strength, resulting in our "wretchedness" which is understood as suffering on the grounds of our inability.²⁵ Therefore, it follows that even our awareness of wretchedness shows a sense of our greatness. This sophisticated paradoxical relationship between greatness and wretchedness is based on Pascal's doctrine of

²⁰ Hunter and Pascal, *Pascal the Philosopher*, 202.

²¹ Wood, "What is the Self?"

²² Gregory A. Boyd, "The Divine Wisdom of Obscurity: Pascal on the Positive Value of Scriptural Difficulties," *JETS* 28.2 (1985): 197.

²³ Pascal, *Pensées*, 76, fragment 149.

²⁴ Pascal, *Pensées*, 59, fragments 114, 116.

²⁵ James R. Peters, *The Logic of the Heart: Augustine, Pascal, and the Rationality of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 84.

original sin, and so one cannot make sense of or find a solution to this apart from the message of the gospel.²⁶

Through recognising Pascal's understanding of the human condition, his strong opposition against the metaphysical approach of knowing God by the philosophers becomes clear. The "greatness" of the philosophers means that they are aware of their own limitation and "wretchedness" as human beings to obtain true happiness by their own strength. However, instead of turning to God in humility, which Pascal argues as the only solution to this duality of the human being, they arrogantly and ignorantly turn to their own rational arguments resulting in them being stuck back in this paradox of the human duality without realising it themselves. Therefore, they are not able truly to know God or themselves. This argument can be clearly seen in his *Pensées* as he notes:

It is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness as to know his own wretchedness without knowing the Redeemer who can cure him. Knowing only one of these points leads either to the arrogance of the philosophers, who have known God but not their own wretchedness, or to the despair of the atheists, who know their own wretchedness without knowing their Redeemer.²⁷

From this argument, it naturally follows that Pascal's explanation for divine hiddenness is based upon God hiding himself from those who attempt to seek him through means other than recognising the need for a Redeemer.

The doctrine of divine hiddenness is a key theme in Pascal's theology. Pascal argues that "God is hidden, but he lets those who seek find him,"²⁸ and "we can understand nothing of God's work unless we accept the principle that he wishes to blind some and enlighten others."²⁹ Furthermore, Pascal describes that "it is not only right but useful for us that God should be partly concealed and partly revealed since it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness as to know his wretchedness without knowing God."³⁰ Nemoianu explains that Pascal's understanding of divine hiddenness does not mean the absence

²⁶ Hibbs, "Habits of the Heart," 213–16.

²⁷ Pascal, *Pensées*, 168, fragment 190.

²⁸ Pascal, *Pensées*. Not recorded in the edition of Louis Lafuma but can be found in fragment 14 in the section of *Additional Pensées* in the book.

²⁹ Pascal, *Pensées*, 101, fragment 232.

³⁰ Pascal, *Pensées*, 167, fragment 446.

of God in nature; instead he argues that God being hidden is “primarily a function of human volitional aversion and only secondarily a result of God’s intentional action.” Moreover, he describes that the purpose of divine hiddenness is for humans to obtain a genuine knowledge of God, hence the balanced disclosure of God being partly revealed and partly hidden is for pedagogical and moral reasons to preserve human freedom. Therefore, God’s intentional hiding is actually progressive self-disclosure since revelation that does not encourage human searching (such as an excess of miraculous appearance) would remove all merit from faith and belief.³¹ McGrath states that God’s hiddenness is seen as “part of a divine strategy to impress upon humanity the limitations placed upon human reason, and the need for humility in matters of faith.”³²

Pascal’s Knowledge of God as Charity through Christ

Pascal’s accounts of faith and reason follow the two Augustinian principles: “*credo ut intellegam*”—which affirms a certain priority of trust and love over understanding; and “*fides quaerens intellectum*”—which states the existence of a mutual dependence and harmony between reason and heart. It is around these convictions that Pascal, just like Augustine, insists that to attain a rational understanding of God, one must first turn to God in loving faith.³³ Hibbs concludes that for Pascal, there is neither dichotomy between knowing and loving nor gap between intellect and will.³⁴

Wood argues that for Pascal, it is in knowing and loving God that we can truly know our authentic “self.” However, this knowledge of ourselves is not simply to know our own wretchedness but to know God through Jesus Christ. Therefore, one cannot know and love God apart from knowing and loving Jesus Christ, in which the “knowledge” means knowing the Redeemer who alone can save us from our “wretchedness.” Furthermore, he argues that “only when we imitate Christ can we love God above all things and thereby become our true selves.”³⁵ In his *Pensées*, Pascal states, “not only do we only know God through Jesus Christ, but we only know ourselves through Jesus Christ; we only know life and

³¹ V. Martin Nemoianu, “Pascal on Divine Hiddenness,” *International Philosophy Quarterly* 55.3 (2015): 325–43.

³² Alister E. McGrath, ed., *The Christian Theology Reader*, 4th ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 27.

³³ Peters, *The Logic of the Heart*, 20–21.

³⁴ Hibbs, “Habits of the Heart,” 220.

³⁵ Wood, “What is the Self?,” 431.

death through Jesus Christ. Apart from Jesus Christ we cannot know the meaning of our life or our death, of God or of ourselves.”³⁶ Tomlin takes this argument further and says that when Pascal refers to knowing God through Jesus Christ, he is referring to the crucified Christ, hence Pascal just like Luther had a strong Christological focus and theology of the cross.³⁷ He observes that in Pascal’s *Pensées*, the cross seems to play an important role showing that “what makes them believe is the cross”³⁸ and God is described as “a God humiliated even to death on the Cross.”³⁹ In another fragment of the *Pensées*, he shows that union with God is through Christ by arguing that “we love ourselves because we are members of Christ. We love Christ because he is the body of which we are members. All are one. One is in the other like the three persons [of the Trinity].”⁴⁰ Given that Pascal understood divine hiddenness as primarily a function of human volitional aversion, this divine revelation and union through Jesus Christ must be an act of grace. Therefore, Soerensen concludes that that “for Pascal, it is correct to say that someone who is anxiously searching has indeed ‘already found’, but this cannot be solely due to human efforts: rather, it is because the whole enterprise is entirely infused by grace.”⁴¹

Finally, since Pascal’s understanding of the knowledge of God cannot be separated from the love of God through Jesus Christ, it follows that since charity is an activity of the heart then knowing God must also be through the heart and not reason. Bom, who shows that knowledge is understood as an integrative activity of the human being, summarises this argument of Pascal clearly when he states that “the real integration of human being is not realized by the heart as such, but by the union of love between God and human being in the human heart through Jesus Christ.”⁴² Therefore, just like Augustine, Pascal’s epistemology follows his doctrine that the heart is the proper faculty for genuine apprehension of God.

³⁶ Pascal, *Pensées*, 148, fragment 417.

³⁷ Graham Tomlin, *The Power of the Cross: Theology and the Death of Christ in Paul, Luther and Pascal* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999), 215–18.

³⁸ Pascal, *Pensées*, 290, fragment 842.

³⁹ Pascal, *Pensées*, 103, fragment 241.

⁴⁰ Pascal, *Pensées*, 136, fragment 372.

⁴¹ Jennifer L. Soerensen, “Search, Rest, and Grace in Pascal,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 76.1 (2014): 19–40.

⁴² Bom, “Heart and Reason,” 358.

Conclusion

Pascal argued that “faith is God perceived by the heart, not by reason.”⁴³ While Pascal may have despaired about how knowledge was used by certain philosophers in his day, who relied solely on metaphysical proofs to relate to God, he certainly did not despise knowledge. Instead he developed an epistemology through the heart and argued that this knowledge is more important and certain than reason when it comes to first principles such as knowledge of self (anthropology) and knowledge of God (theology). In following an Augustinian theology, Pascal recognised that it is the sinful human condition—the duality between “wretchedness” and “greatness”—as well as divine hiddenness that renders reason incapable of attaining a genuine knowledge of God. It follows that for someone to attain a rational understanding of God, they must first turn to God in loving faith, which is an activity of the heart. However, Pascal showed that it is solely by God’s grace that divine revelation and union through Jesus Christ is made possible. Therefore, it is only in the humility of the heart and not the arrogance of reason that God can be known to us.

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⁴³ Pascal, *Pensées*, 154, fragment 424.