

“An Inquiry into the Condition of Man”

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In the beginning, there was a question: why? For as long as we have had thought, we have been drawn to questions that are eternal and beyond creation. Our rationality leads us to believe that there must be a reason for *the way that things are*, and the fulfillment of the human experience must amount to more than just the events that constitute each moment. Through individual experiences, we tend toward the notion that the decisions we make in any given moment are substantial enough to affect what follows, thus we develop the idea of a personal agency over these events and the direction in which they advance our experience. Agency is obtained through the physicality of our existence: we see changes happen, effected through our actions and the actions of others. These actions are aimed at a certain goal, and therefore when we see these changes, we develop a sense of control over the events and direction of our lives. However with each of these individual actions, we must also recognize that there are infinite potential outcomes that did not occur, and while our will allows us the freedom to choose our actions and reactions, this is only half of the experience; in fact, we have little control over the consequences of the choices we make, and even less can we fathom the infinite possibilities that were narrowed by our choice. Yet this agency (however contrived) is still valid and significant within our existence, therefore it cannot be dismissed. Through every action, our agency is working toward a certain goal; thus even in the face of the uncertainty and chaos that the universe embodies, there is a significance that these actions and goals hold. Further, this is a characteristic of the human condition, therefore there is a universality that is involved though each individual may be striving toward a different goal. Given this brief analysis, the concept of such a personal agency grows increasingly inconsequential in the greater scheme of the cosmos, for even though our agency is valid, how do we know what we should aim toward, and what

determines that our view is correct given the diversity of perspectives that exist? Despite these questions, we are compelled to search for meaning in the small and the everyday, to fill the spaces that create a bigger picture. How do we reconcile our relative and individualistic condition with one that seeks to be whole and is, at the same time, undeniably universal?

Through our physical being, we exist — yet our existence does not offer a cause or a reason for our condition. This condition, the human condition, serves as the impetus of Blaise Pascal's *Pensées*, a compilation of analyses, criticisms, and expositions on this very subject. As a brilliant 17th century French philosopher, mathematician, theologian, physicist, and writer, Pascal often pondered the constitution of man — what makes him think, believe, act, and most importantly, exist. The fundamental elements of our nature are often found in contradiction with one another, and this, above all else regarding mankind, perplexed Pascal beyond all reason. For example, we are *made* of soul and body, two incompatible substances; we possess an innate capacity for good and evil, which shape our every action; we exist as temporal and finite beings, and this is the only body of reference by which we understand anything in a universe full of what is both infinitely large and small. How can we exist, and further thrive, on the foundation of such apparent conflict? “Who will unravel such a tangle? This is certainly beyond dogmatism and scepticism, beyond all human philosophy. Man transcends man. ... What then will become of you, man, seeking to discover your true condition through natural reason?” (Pascal 34, 35). Pascal here emphasizes our most preliminary difficulty: we seek answers to these eternal questions through our natural reason, yet the nature that shapes this reason is flawed and fundamentally at odds with itself. What then is the value of such judgment or reason, if we are only to find that our knowledge of the universe (and more importantly, ourselves) is not only

misguided, but a mere fraction of the whole truth? Yet in the same way, we cannot dismiss the capabilities of our reason altogether; to deny ourselves the importance of these questions is to deny the condition that inspires them, and a denial of the human condition is ultimately a denial of the self. Though fallible, the reality of our Self (our experiences as individuals, an irreducible 'I') is the only concrete principle that we hold in the face of this resounding empty space. We should certainly acknowledge our severe disadvantage in the universal schema, but to deny the Self is a dangerous disregard for what little tangible evidence we have in the pursuit of our place and purpose.

With the truth of our Self in mind, we can return to the question of meaning. Not only do we search for external meaning in the well-ordered machinations of the cosmos, but also in the internal stratagem of our mind and the invention of our relationships. What is more, our natural reason finds satisfaction in discovering these truths about ourselves, especially when we connect the internal to the external. The ideology of the materialists suggests that all meaning is derived from matter and its composition, yet the spiritual and ethereal are so closely related to our sense of fulfillment that it is almost impossible to limit our focus solely to the matter we have at hand. Further, we can hardly understand the origin of our own matter, thus how can we search for answers in matter alone, when we cannot understand the origin of the matter that makes us? Yet at the same time, if the answer lies somewhere outside, how can we understand the processes of a force so far removed from us? Thus the general question of our inquiry is this: how do we reconcile the inadequacies of our intellect *and* the meaning that we have already established through our experiences as individuals into one ideology by which we live and motivate our existence?

The only hope we have for understanding our condition is in thoroughly examining its aspects that make the least sense to our reason. “Let us then realize our limitations. We are something and we are not everything. Such being as we have conceals from us the knowledge of first principles, which arise from nothingness, and the smallness of our being hides infinity from our sight” (Pascal 62). *We are something and we are not everything*. If we are neither nothing nor everything, what are we? Unlike much of what Pascal reveals of our nature, this is *not* a contradictory statement, and his use of “and” rather than “but” leaves the reader to wonder about the kind of relationship he is representing here. Somehow even when not in conflict, our nature is still ambiguous and difficult to define. Moreover, our existence is substantial enough to be something, but Pascal reminds us that subsistence alone is *not* everything. This is clear in the following way: while we abide by and in our physical state, we cannot deny the urge that beckons us toward what is beyond us. If we were everything, this desire would not exist because there would be nothing left to wonder. Yet “something” is a rather indefinite term for our overall existence, and it seems to give less credit to our accomplishments than what is deserved — after all, these amount to the “somethings” that we are. While Pascal is correct in characterizing this as a limit of our condition, the significance in his statement is predominantly in the term “realize”. We must understand the ambiguity of our constitution as a *foundation* of our character rather than simply as a limiting property — it is inherent to us, and we are made to wrestle with these eternal questions in a struggle for knowledge and satisfaction. Most importantly, once we become *aware* of this disposition, we are armed with the most valuable weapon we have against the vast unknown.

The persistence of these qualities and questions within us and the extent to which they saturate our rationality is reason enough to consider the gravity of their implications. Curiosity presses us forward into the unknown, but skepticism weighs our judgment with prior knowledge and experience. This duplicity at the crux of our reasoning is just a hint at the opposition that is embedded within our nature; as described by Pascal, the greatest of these are our capacity for good and evil, our constitution of soul and body, and our place in the universe between what is infinite and what is nothing. These three contradictions are the cornerstone of our experience, for they simultaneously limit and define the existence that we make for ourselves. In other words, there is a continuity sustained by these contradictions insofar as they permeate our whole existence, from beginning to end:

Such is our true state. That is what makes us incapable of certain knowledge or absolute ignorance. We are floating in a medium of vast extent, always drifting uncertainly, blown to and fro; whenever we think we have a fixed point to which we can cling and make fast, it shifts and leaves us behind; if we follow it, it eludes our grasp, slips away, and flees eternally before us. Nothing stands still for us. This is our natural state and yet the state most contrary to our inclinations. We burn with desire to find a firm footing, an ultimate, lasting base on which to build a tower rising up to infinity, but our whole foundation cracks ... (63)

Clouded moral intuition and natural desire are the most powerful deterrents in our search for truth. Perception and desire are two primordial conditions that dominate our consciousness, and the objects of these conditions change constantly in accordance with our sensory stimulation. Without reason, these habits offer no understanding of what exists around us; yet clearly reason

alone is not enough to lead us through the “vast extent” of the infinite universe. These two instinctual tendencies are under constant stimulation and seek to pull us in any direction that is (even marginally) pleasing; combine this with our limited and flawed reason, and it is immediately clear what a severe disadvantage we have in our pursuit of knowledge. We are naturally bound to our senses and therefore we *must* experience the world, both by desire and necessity (a conscious life without perception is a life in name only). The human dilemma in this instance is, again, two-fold: we are forced to observe nature’s unfathomable grandeur constantly in comparison to our lack thereof (how could we ever compare?) and also condemned by the very agencies that allow our observations. While these senses are indispensable for survival, they are tools for the thoughts and actions that we know to be evil. The root of these evils are facets of our condition (pride, greed, lust, envy, etc.), but these vices would exist only as potentials if it were not for our ability to choose and act — feats of our reason that are rooted in the senses.

But what other means, what other reference do we have to substitute? It may at first seem counterintuitive to raise such a circular argument — *Why ask a question if you will only assert that every answer is based on no objective certitude, and our frame of reference is merely a curtain that we cannot see behind?* The significance lies not in pointing out the futility of our condition, but rather analyzing the limits that contain our existence (since they are the foundation of it), because “it is a wise ignorance that knows itself” (Pascal 22). For clarity: this “wise ignorance” manifests as an understanding of these underlying contradictions and the harmony that develops as a result. It is important to note here that harmony does not necessarily imply an equal or balanced relationship; it is rather the necessity that one cannot exist without the other. We cannot separate the soul from the body, cannot isolate the good nor the bad from the rest,

cannot remove ourselves from the universe. But how is a singular being to distinguish between and evaluate the indeterminate parts of itself, let alone the greater structure in which it participates?

On the Human Relationship to the Whole

If man studied himself, he would see how incapable he is of going further. How could a part possibly know the whole? But the parts of the world are all so related and linked together that I think it is impossible to know one without the other and without the whole. (64)

Answering our question with another riddle, Pascal proclaims that we are so connected with the world around us that in studying ourselves, we cannot help but come to know the whole in which we take part. But when the truth of our own condition is just as elusive as the knowledge of the universe, where do we begin? Pascal describes nature's vast infinity as an "infinite sphere whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere" (60). Thus nature is and extends throughout the intelligible universe, surpassing all human perception and reason. We find ourselves suspended between what is too big to comprehend and what is too small to see:

I want to depict to him not only the visible universe, but all the conceivable immensity of nature enclosed in a miniature atom. Let him see there an infinity of universes ... in which he will find again the same results as in the first; and finding the same thing yet again in the others without end or respite, he will be lost in such wonders, as astounding in their minuteness as the others in their amplitude. (60-61)

If the expansive space outside of us were not perplexing enough, there is an equally astounding infinity enclosed in the smallest unit of life. Within a single atom, there lies a motive force that generates and sustains life when it is combined with others of its kind (a characteristic similar to our own disposition). This powerful substance is life at its smallest, most reduced point. Yet unlike the matter that contains it, the infinite pattern will find no end, and even within this basic unit there is a version of the infinity that the whole of the universe exudes. In its evanescent properties we find the “infinity of nothingness beyond reach”, and with it the same eternal questions that overshadow our knowledge of the universe on the whole (61). Despite our relentless questions, we can synthesize the information gathered thus far and assert this: within nature, an underlying duality exists that is infinite in every direction and simultaneously expanding and shrinking. In every case, we face the inescapable reality of our situation: there is no hope of knowing either of these extremes, as if they did not exist for us nor we for them — yet we are here, designed to exist between them. Perhaps, then, the most fruitful place to begin the search is not at either end of physical phenomena, but exactly where we find ourselves — that is, in the middle.

A Nuanced Analysis of that Relationship

What else can he do, then, but perceive some semblance of the middle of things? (61)

Our subsistence between nature’s infinite expansion and regression is the necessary step in establishing the following relationship: humanity exists as an intermediate, both sentient and rational, amid the infinities of nature. Despite our inadequacies, we *can* see layers that illustrate the similarities between our nature and the nature of the universe:

For who will not marvel that our body, a moment ago imperceptible in a universe, itself imperceptible in the bosom of the whole, should now be a colossus, a world, or rather a whole, compared to the nothingness beyond our reach? Anyone who ... seeing his mass, as given him by nature, supporting him between these two abysses of infinity and nothingness, will tremble at these marvels. ... For, after all, what is man in nature? A nothing compared to the infinite, a whole compared to the nothing, a middle point between all and nothing, infinitely remote from an understanding of the extremes ... (61)

This is our most concrete connection to the universe. Though we are far removed from either end of the universal spectrum, we embody both extremes in a peculiarly human way. In the comparison of the infinitely large and small (and in the same way, the part and whole), we are simultaneously one *and* the other — the relationship remains consistent, and our perception fluctuates only when we shift our perspective from one extreme to the other. (This hearkens back to Pascal's earlier claim that "we are something *and* we are not everything".) In relation to the universal infinite, we are negligible; in relation to the infinity of nothingness, we are a whole. The harmony within this enigma is created and sustained by our very existence. Further explained: the "contradiction" of our finite, temporal being in a system of the everything and the nothing is the very foundation that allows us to connect with the infinite. It is precisely because we are so far removed from the ends of the infinite spectrum that we are capable of placing ourselves in this proportion. Since we are unimaginably distant from the infinite, it precipitates no error to place ourselves in the center of it. To avoid a misinformed mind, we must remember that an explanation for this condition is *not* to be determined as its cause. To use our condition as

means of achieving a relationship between ourselves and the universe is quite different from citing this relationship as a cause for our condition. We must not assume such lofty conclusions based on a single rationale. However, the mere fact that we are able to reach even this level of understanding without truly knowing the source of this condition speaks to the power we hold as rational beings. Though we have no grasp on either the minute intricacies nor the grand stature of nature, we exist in and around it, all the while maintaining the conviction that our experiences are real and valid. The unconscious resolution to continue living in the midst of this unknowable and apathetic universe is the greatest advantage we have over it.

A Reflection of the Infinite Manifested in the Human Form

The eternity of things in themselves ... must still amaze our brief span of life. The fixed and constant immobility of nature, compared to the continual changes going on in us, must produce the same effect. And what makes our inability to know things absolute is that they are simple in themselves, while we are composed of two opposing natures of different kinds, soul and body.

(65)

Whereas in the previous section we became aware of our relation to the universe, we now reveal the mannerism of the human condition that imitates its infinite propensity. The spectrum that nature comprises (expanding and shrinking, yet never ending in either respect) is considered a “double infinity” — nature then “[engraves] her own image ... on all things” so that they all take some part in that duality (62). Nowhere in our physical form is there a clearer duality than in our opposing elements of soul and body. It is apparent that the body is our physical state, but the soul (that which is spiritual), according to Pascal, is that part of us which reasons. This core

condition is the substance of our existence and the framework of our experiences, for this natural opposition is a physical manifestation of our inclination toward desire and our capacity to reason. Therefore, the same contrasts that appear throughout our mental faculties are also present when considered with the material. In the same way that desire is fruitless without reason, the body is unknowable without the soul, “since there is nothing so inconceivable as the idea that matter knows itself” (65).

And what are we if not first and foremost matter? We are tied to the physical reality in which we find ourselves, constantly surrounded and distracted by ever-changing matter — that being so, it is obvious why we are never able to grasp any form of the absolute, let alone its truth.

Who would not think, to see us compounding everything of mind and matter, that such a mixture is perfectly intelligible to us? Yet this is the thing we understand the least; man is to himself the greatest prodigy in nature, for he cannot conceive what body is, and still less what mind is, and least of all how a body can be joined to a mind. This is his supreme difficulty, and yet it is his very being. (65)

This is our tragic flaw: that we can never truly know ourselves apart from what exists around us. Everything we understand is in relation to another, so that when taken individually, a single human being is to itself the most impenetrable mystery of the universe. We have considered the marvels of the infinite and found a loose, but informed connection through which we reach some level of understanding — only then do we make a definitive statement about our nature *in comparison to something else*, but the knowledge of our condition in and of itself, even just a single aspect of it, remains as elusive as ever. The communion of body and soul is the epitome of this pitiful truth.

Not only are we kept from complete knowledge of ourselves, but also from those things in nature that are unified and absolute in themselves. For reference, the infinite is sufficient in itself: there are no varying degrees, and though it may consist of a multitude of objects (think of the infinite number line), each piece will unfailingly align with the greater structure of constructing and continuing the infinite pattern. We, on the other hand, are consumed by thoughts and desires that create conflict between what rouses our senses and what satisfies our spirit. Our very being is a compound of two incompatible substances; yet somehow they coexist within, and further construct, the human experience. Despite the fundamental incompatibility, we find that humanity's dual nature behaves in the same way as nature's double infinity: "one depends on the other, and one leads to the other" (62). As discussed previously, the idea of separating the soul and body is completely unfeasible (since matter cannot know itself and an incorporeal spirit cannot exist in a physical world), and in this way these substances are co-dependent and an evaluation of one always leads to the other. Therefore the connection between man and nature established, and it is two-fold: he is the mean proportional between nature's dual infinities *and* there exists within his nature a relationship similar to that of nature's double infinities.

The Duality Reflected in Reason

It is dangerous to explain too clearly to man how like he is to the animals without pointing out his greatness. It is also dangerous to make too much of his greatness without his vileness. It is still more dangerous to leave him in ignorance of both, but it is most valuable to represent both to him. (31)

Embedded within the duality of soul and body, there is a parallel relationship that resides primarily in the realm of the soul, but is closely connected to what we feel with our body. The combination of the spiritual and the bodily amount to impossibly complicated and intertwined realms of possibility concerning our actions such that we can never fully understand the extent to which *things did not happen* — and yet even our knowledge of the things that do happen (viz. our reality) is limited. In either case, none can deny that the intention of every choice and decision (which are the elements that shape our reality) is some perceived good. “All men seek happiness. There are no exceptions. However different the means they may employ, they all strive towards this goal” (Pascal 45). Our desires are colored with the objects of our sensation and perception, and thus our inclinations and efforts fluctuate between what we find pleasing to one or both of these faculties. In many situations, that pleasure is the perceived happiness. However, in a broader application we can fathom scenarios (hypothetical and from experience) wherein a ‘good’ is perceived that is removed from and often contrary to what incites our pleasure; yet this is still understood by our reason as what is good. This conflict manifests as the difficult choices we are often faced with in our experiences, the kind that force us to reconsider all that we have so painstakingly conditioned ourselves to perceive as what is good.

Yet still we understand that even though the good may change, we are working toward some greater mission of eventual happiness. Thus there is a duality involved within our reason that involves the choices we make, and more significantly, how we make those choices and what we are striving toward when we do. The duality comes in the form of what we perceive as good though the conditioning of our reason (via past experiences) versus what we perceive as a more general good, namely through experiences that involve the good of another; when these accounts

of the good come into conflict, we are forced to re-evaluate our individual perspectives. But from where do we acquire this sense of good? What is its origin such that it is malleable? And even more obscure, how do we determine what is not good? (These questions will help us later understand what qualifies this ultimate happiness we unfailingly seek.)

An Examination of “Good”

Let man now judge his own worth, let him love himself, for there is within him a nature capable of good; but that is no reason for him to love the vileness within himself. Let him despise himself because this capacity remains unfilled; but that is no reason for him to despise this natural capacity. Let him both hate and love himself; he has within him the capacity for knowing truth and being happy, but he possesses no truth which is either abiding or satisfactory. (30)

Since we have no established truth of an absolute Good that exists without us, what we perceive outwardly as the good (and its counterpart) must be shaped by a likeness of the good we perceive within ourselves. In fact, we have no conclusive insight regarding any of these universal concepts that permeate our experience, therefore this must also apply to all of the indeterminate terms we have utilized thus far. This explains why this “good” that we possess is not concrete or objective, but a capacity to *experience it* when we know truth. The word for clarity in this example is ‘experience’, for this in and of itself is pre-conditioned with our personal beliefs and biases. Even if there were an absolute good that existed without us, we could only know and experience it through our physical existence, which is tainted with the less-than-noble desires of the body (and sometimes even of the mind). And just as we cannot separate the soul from its body, neither can we uncouple the good from the base; thus we only experience these tendencies

at varying degrees of potentiality. All things possess some element of good *and* bad, and we realize these potentialities *through the actions and intentions of our will*.

Experience as a Prerequisite to Reason

This is yet another baffling, cyclical relationship in the realm of our existence: we use reason to create an idea of the reality that we possess and the will (a facet of reason) to actualize those ideas through decisions and intentions, but these processes of reasoning (and reason itself) are influenced by and inseparable from the objects of that already existing reality. To answer our question regarding the origin of good: our awareness of good and evil in our experiences is based on the conditioning of our reason through the physical, and we effect the potential ‘goodness’ or ‘badness’ in external objects through our will, the feature of reason which intends and decides. The synergy between reason and will might seem clearly analogous to the body and soul that make us, or otherwise loosely understood, as the relationship between ourselves and the universe. However, what makes our volition pivotal to our condition is its application in the context of real experiences. Our will is rather useless in scenarios wherein it is overpowered or otherwise incapacitated, for if not executed or acted upon, the will has no agency. Without this agency, we can *only* perceive what is around us; but reason without application is reason in a fugue. It seems that apart from interaction with matter, reason cannot understand its fundamental purpose. In other words, if we are not capable of putting them in practice, our faculties of perception and reason lose their identity in the scheme of our condition. This results either in a life lived in absolute contemplation (if one reasoned without practice) or in complete ignorance (if one did not reason and therefore could not practice). Both of these habits of living leave some

facet of our condition untouched and unfulfilled, therefore neither are conducive to the happiness that we seek. Reason without application does not cease to exist, but it does cease to be purposeful. We began this investigation intending to examine the aspects of our condition that make the least sense to our reason, and here we have reached the paragon — reason unable to understand its own purpose.

Our Dignity in Thought

Let us then strive to think well ... (66)

However striking this realization may be, we must understand that reason does not exist in a vacuum, and therefore is not useless in our condition. In fact, it is what separates us from everything else that exists in the known universe. But still, the question persists: why? What of our limited knowledge and rationality is appreciable in the spectrum of the universe?

Man is only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed. There is no need for the whole universe to take up arms to crush him: a vapour, a drop of water is enough to kill him. But even if the universe were to crush him, man would still be nobler than his slayer, because he knows that he is dying and the advantage the universe has over him. The universe knows none of this. (Pascal 66)

We are an enigma to ourselves, but the very truth *that we understand*, regardless of its limitations, is the only power we maintain over the unknown. Just as we cannot know it, the unknowable can never know itself — and by our very existence, we will always maintain that knowledge. We are insignificant in the greater scheme of the universe, but the truth that we know

this of our condition and still desire to know even to our destruction — this must necessarily be what makes us extraordinary and distinguishable, even in the midst of the incredible infinity that surrounds us. It is this, our reason, that is the cornerstone of our greatness as the human race; for it is through this that we know that we temporal and finite, and despite this insurmountable disadvantage, we persist in our will to find meaning and keep on existing.

“Thus all our dignity consists in thought. It is on thought that we must depend for recovery, not on space and time, which we could never fill. Let us then strive to think well; that is the basic principle of morality” (Pascal 66). *Thus all our dignity consists in thought.* We do not abandon materialism completely; quite the opposite, we acknowledge it for all that it is, and nothing more. Reality and our condition as we know it are inseparable from the physicality of our world and our body, but there are definite limits to this matter. As Pascal so astutely claims, we could never fill the space and time that surround us. Why then should we feel stuck when we reach this obstacle? If the tangible is insufficient, it is clearly rationale (our higher function) that we should turn to for answers. However, this is where processes of our mind (and even the questions we pursue) become increasingly obscured, since thinking about thinking is a rather complicated task. Ask us to think and rationalize about any external object, and we do so almost involuntarily thanks to the powers of suggestion. Yet in our attempts to understand the function of our own reasoning, we fall short for answers. The reason: we are not *wholly* rational beings. As recognized earlier, we cannot separate our thought from the physical. If our being were absolute and unified, perhaps we could fathom the pure and unlimited style of nature as it lives without us, and similarly the clarity of our functions. However this is not the case, thus it is not simply on thought that we must depend, but on our ability *to think of our existence as it is*

contained in the world. We have already seen that thought alone will not produce the desired happiness that all beings tend toward; for it to be applicable and useful, we need the sensory stimulation of the world. To animate our reason is progress in the direction of achieving that happiness.

The Problem of God

Reason's last step is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it. It is merely feeble if it does not go as far as to realize that.

If natural things are beyond it, what are we to say about supernatural things? (56)

Steadfast in his religion, Pascal declares that the only authentic knowledge we can gain of ourselves must come from God. Our inability to conceive of the infinite and our natural, vile tendencies are the foundation of this argument:

This consideration derives solely from realizing our own vileness, but, if you sincerely believe it, follow it out as far as I do and recognize that we are in fact so vile that, left to ourselves, we are incapable of knowing. ... Since we do not know of ourselves what we are, we can learn it only from God. (Pascal 49)

Compounding all that he has illuminated of our condition, Pascal uses a major deficit in our experience as proof of the existence of God by equating the gap between our reason and the infinite to the gap that exists between us (because of our natural vileness) and the God of Christianity. As vast as the mystery of the *what the infinite is*, so is the mystery of God — therefore why do we question the existence of God and not the infinite? Because: while we cannot see the infinite, we can see remnants of it (Pascal calls this “extension”: the endless

horizon, the completeness of space surrounding us, the infinity in number); God has left no such traces of himself. We realize a version of this extension in our physical experiences, and that is why the infinite is identifiable and, in that aspect, relatable. God, however, has neither extension nor limit, and in this way is even further removed from our finite being. Pascal himself acknowledges this: “We are therefore incapable of knowing either what he is or whether he is” (122). The cornerstone of his validation in God is *faith* — Christianity is strange in the way that it acknowledges the insurmountable hurdle of never truly knowing God, and when we disregard this blatant truth of our existence, this it calls faith. Yet faith is an abandonment of reason, a defiance of knowledge. But this faith is the foundation of most religions. “If they did prove it they would not be keeping their word. It is by being without proof that they show they are not without sense” (122). The lack of proof, the inescapable unknown, is the bridge that allows those who believe to cross the infinite gap.

Pascal introduces a proposition he calls “the wager” wherein he establishes why this choice is necessary, and more, why it must end in God. Through existence alone, we are committed to the wager. Reason is what brings us to this choice, whether or not we believe that God exists, but it cannot say which is true and cannot prove either wrong. Pascal ultimately claims that we must wager that God does exist, for we risk finite stakes (our pleasures, reason, and will) for an infinite gain (“an eternity of life and happiness”), with a finite chance of losing (123). Therefore, we are foolish if we do not choose such, for there is an infinity to be gained against our finite stakes, and it is our passions that cause our folly. “That leaves no choice; wherever there is infinity and where there are not infinite chances of losing against that of winning, there is no room for hesitation, you must give everything” (124).

But again, there is no way to know that this infinite gain is real, and this is the most difficult problem of religion. While Pascal brings to light this great issue of the human condition, that is, human choice and what we do with this incredible will, he wrongly assumes that our ability to choose inevitably leads to a definitive belief that God must exist. Giving this as the only viable perspective confines our great capacity to something much narrower than it actually is. I do not deny the great will that is necessary to lead a truly faithful life or the fulfillment it brings to those who believe, but I doubt that this can be the only viable choice for humanity, given the sheer number of individuals in the collective in which we exist and the fundamental differences that each of these individual rationales inspire. It is unfathomable that there should be one, single God that holds the fulfillment and purpose for every one of these unique individuals. Furthermore, our deep-seated connection to the reality that we have here makes it incredibly difficult to forsake the physicality of our condition and the happiness and meaning that we derive from this connection. Thus for those who do, in faith, find reprieve from the existential confusion that human nature spawns, enduring and boundless happiness is achievable. But for those who do not find solace in a *deus ex machina*, faith goes against every fiber of our nature — and for that reason, a wager that commits us to renouncing what we know, see, and feel is impractical for our happiness and incompatible with our condition, even if it is only for the time being, since this “time being” is all the time we have. The “hope” that God is real belongs to a time that does not exist, and may never exist — we have no way of knowing. “We try to give [the present] the support of the future, and think how we are going to arrange things over which we have no control for a time we can never be sure of reaching” (Pascal 13). All we have is what we know ourselves to be presently, in this life, and this puts faith opposite to our reason.

But where does that leave God in the realm of man? Obviously the idea of god has made its place in the hearts of those who have claimed theistic religion as their preferred perspective, and many naturalists see a similar parallelism between nature and god; this elevated adaptation of our condition is without a doubt to be admired. But is there room for belief in any higher power within this rudimentary relativism (that our metaphysical purpose and spiritual sense are inseparable from the tangible and material) we have discussed so far? How can the relativity of the human condition (and its dependence on the physical) exist in union with the belief in a divinity that has left no tangible traces of itself? Answer: *through thought*. Just as we found that rationality (the root of humanity) has developed to acknowledge that there are facets of the human condition that our reason does not comprehend, we must also acknowledge that there is an aspect of our soul over which reason has no control: the heart. In a unique way, the heart tends to ‘think’ for itself, as Pascal says: “The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing: we know this in countless ways. I say that it is natural for the heart to love the universal being or itself, according to its allegiance, and it hardens itself against either as it chooses” (127).

A love of God is the paradigm of the peculiar reason of the heart, for it is a love that is grounded in an idea that is entirely impossible to prove either the truth or the falsity of. It goes against all sense, all reason, all knowledge — but still, the mystery of God elicits a love that gives us something *different*. Something separate from the way we exist, a unifying harmony wherein every aspect of our being converges at the experience of love. “There is no doubt that he knows at least that he exists and loves something” (Pascal 49). This is the happiness we all inevitably seek, and it is founded on an extension of our being: we know that we exist *and* that we love something. In this love, we are able to imitate the infinite extension of the universe by

forsaking for the moment our finite condition and believing that a piece of our self exists outside of our physical being, and inside the being of another. Then, it is not only a love of God that brings us to this happiness, but *any genuine love* that, even if only for a moment, allows us to surrender our fixation to reason *and* abandon the crippling finiteness of our humanity.

Freedom Found in Love

Consider the things that make you happy. Remember the love that you feel for those around you, and how often this love consumes you. Can you explain this? “Is it reason that makes you love yourself?” (Pascal 127) The desire to exercise control over and influence others is a terrifying vice within human nature; it is the fundamental cause of conflict. When we are consumed by this love, we render all power to it and to the individual who inspires it (human or divine) — this is why it is so freeing. This ‘thinking heart’, choosing against reason, releases us from the inescapable condition, a condition that confines us to reason. Therefore although it is through thought and reason that we arrive at this love, it is our heart that understands the fulfillment and completeness it brings us:

We know the truth not only through our reason but also through our heart. It is through the latter that we know first principles, and reason, which has nothing to do with it, tries in vain to refute them. ... We know that we are not dreaming, but, however unable we may be to prove it rationally, our inability proves nothing but the weakness of our reason, and not the uncertainty of all our knowledge ... For knowledge of first principles, like space, time, motion, number, is as solid as any

derived through reason, and it is on such knowledge, coming from the heart and instinct, that reason has to depend and base all its arguments. (28)

Through reason we are compelled to choose what we believe, but the prerequisite to our reason is the character of our heart, which surpasses the limits of our physical existence and allows us to believe in what reason will not let us see. Thus, that reason does not restrict us to any certain or strict path, and in combination with our emotional cognizance (the thinking heart), this free and inexplicable form of thought can conceivably allow for *anything*, be it the God of Christianity or simply an ambient love that motivates our actions and forms our idea of the good. It is only through instinct and the knowledge of the heart that we can accept any notion of first principles and absolute truths, since finite reason could never grasp these. Thus the human concept of a divinity *can* have a place in our existence, but Pascal is misled in limiting this belief to one of the Christian God. “Considering how likely it is that something exists beyond what [we] can see” (Pascal 59), we are faced with the choice of believing in something that is greater than we will ever be, and the place where that belief is born and lives is in the heart. Pascal is right in asserting that we must make this choice, but the scope of his wager, though it includes the infinite, is quite narrow in its execution. It is no coincidence that the character of our heart, the place where we find God, is also the place where we feel any mesmerizing love that graces and eases our presence; it is here that we construct meaning, and thus it is not only a love of God through which we discover our eternal purpose, but rather simply, it is any love that ignites our existence, sustains our hope, and overpowers our natural attachment to what is reasonable and what is tangible. Only in these moments do we understand the joy in and the purpose of the conflict and struggle within us.

Seeing the amalgamation of all these things concerning us, combination after combination of physicalities, perceptions, capacities, and intentions — and at the peak of our investigation, how we find reason at the core of our *need to know*, as a capacity for intellectual awareness that is inseparable from the senses of our body — seeing the way in which *everything is connected by a relationship to another*, how could we crave so deeply to separate these faculties from one another? How could the combination of two or more unlike substances suddenly perplex our reason until it questions to the point of despair? Why wouldn't we, rather than continuously defining and isolating, seek to grasp and be sensitive to the relationships as unities (though composed of different substances) that constitute our existence? Instead, we attempt to deconstruct and categorize (most famously demonstrated by Aristotle, this tendency has followed us through history) because we believe that if we reach one, indivisible conclusion about ourselves that can maintain its identity outside of us, we will have an indisputable truth that will satisfy the principle need to know: that *of ourselves*. However, the very essence of what we aim toward, happiness and purpose, are products of these relationships' sympathetic (meaning that the substances of these relationships are sensitive to one another and adapt to the dynamic of the other) coexistence within our experience. For instance, in the duality of our reason and heart, we find the highest gratification when we experience genuine love, because this love gives our finite condition longevity and durability, freeing our mind chained by reason, allowing us to fathom that there is a portion of the self that exists outside our physical limitations. This is reason adapting to the heart's unique ability to see past what the tangible world has to offer — and when we do this, we are happy. The communal nature of humans is that from which we derive all meaning, internally and externally, and the most validating

experiences of our existence are those we *share* with others, specifically with those within whom we have entrusted a piece of our self, to carry and care for outside of our bodies. It is with them that we face the unknown and the questions it beckons, and through them that we find the answers and our purpose within it.

Work Cited

Pascal, Blaise. *Pensées*. Trans. A. J. Krailsheimer. London: Penguin, 1966. Print.