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Political Philosophy and Wretchedness in Pascal's *Pensées*

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Introduction

Deep in Blaise Pascal's unclassified papers in his posthumously published classic *Pensées* is a fragment that is startlingly bold in its rejection of classical political philosophy:

> We always picture Plato and Aristotle wearing long academic gowns but they were ordinary decent people like anyone else, who enjoyed a laugh with their friends. And when they amused themselves by composing their *Laws* and *Politics* they did it for fun. It was the least philosophical and least serious part of their lives: the most philosophical part was living simply and without fuss.
>
> > If they wrote about politics it was as if to lay down rules for a madhouse.
>
> And if they pretended to treat it as something really important it was because they knew that the madmen they were talking to believed themselves to be kings and emperors. They humored these beliefs in order to calm down their madness with as little harm as possible.[1]

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Pascal's audacity may at first appear directed only at Plato and Aristotle, or perhaps also toward his contemporaries in the French universities who held the ancient philosophers in esteem. But an examination of the *Pensées* shows that this fragment is part of an even more audacious stance—that political philosophy, at least as a rational enterprise to understand political affairs and ameliorate laws, ends in self-defeat and therefore reveals our wretchedness.[2]

The place of political philosophy in the *Pensées*, gleaned from many fragments, can be summed up like this: In the timeless efforts to bring about justice or the just regime, one discovers that true justice can never be found in extant regimes and their laws. Nevertheless, many reasonable people find some form of political philosophy compelling and use it to reveal the inevitable injustices of the regimes under which they live. But this recognition of injustice only leads to the demand that the laws be made just (which they cannot), which in turn brings sedition, rebellion, and ultimately revolution. But in revolution, true justice cannot replace the injustice overturned, since true justice was never possible; the result of this upheaval is yet more unjust laws. And so, we come to see a terrible cycle of promising to make unjust laws just by perpetuating new unjust laws.

But political philosophy in Pascal's *Pensées* does even more than this, for it reveals the philosophical depth to our wretchedness and shows how even in that wretchedness we continue to rule over one another through the heart and the imagination, despite the injustice. Thus, political philosophy becomes an integral part of Pascal's rigorous appeal to a reasoned faith in God: By coming to understand our political wretchedness, we are led to accept the redeemed human greatness in God. The realization of our severe limits in politics allows human beings to see their greatness in the divine. "Man's greatness," writes Pascal, "comes from knowing he is wretched."[3] Fragment L 533 on Plato and Aristotle thereby becomes a fine starting point to understanding political philosophy in the *Pensées*. Pascal rejects the "seriousness" of Plato's *Laws* and Aristotle's *Politics* while using political philosophy in a philosophically serious way.

Taking Political Philosophy Seriously

Taking political philosophy seriously in the *Pensées* confronts us with two interpretive problems. First, the overall historic reception and interpretation of the book has usually not considered it a worthy source of compelling, or even coherent, philosophy, let alone political philosophy. Over the centuries since its posthumous publication, luminaries as diverse as Voltaire and Bertrand Russell dismissed the text as having any philosophical significance.[4] Second, it seems difficult to attribute a substantial political philosophy to Pascal when starting from an aphorism that in such a cavalier fashion dismisses the contributions of two of the greatest ancient Greek political philosophers of the Western canon. Nevertheless, this paper joins excellent recent scholarship that affirms Pascal's philosophical importance, and in particular it invites readers to consider his use of political philosophy as itself a significant contribution to early modern political thought.[5] His critique is not a mere extension of a shallow or superficial philosophical skepticism; rather, it is philosophically grounded. Neither is it merely a weak-minded premise for an apologetic of Christian fideism; rather, it is a serious essay on the limits of political philosophy, which are integral to Pascal's sophisticated Christian apologetic.

Pascal comes to see our political wretchedness, not through an abandonment of reason, but by an overestimation of reason's ability to know political truths and transform our circumstances without self-awareness of reason's limitations. As such, the political philosophy of the work is part of his general imperative for all humanity to "strive to think well,"[6] not to shun reason or to trust in whatever power or authority may prevail. It is only in thinking well that humanity, what Pascal calls the "thinking reed," gains its dignity, but it must guard against self-attributing powers and possibilities that are well beyond it, lest that "reed" collapse and break. Pascal warned that humanity subjected itself to one of two intellectual excesses: "to exclude reason" and "to admit nothing but reason."[7] In admitting nothing but reason in its quest to understand and ameliorate political life, humanity held fast to the unrealizable

promise that we could reason our way to just laws. But for Pascal, in the very failure to be just, humanity's greatness is demonstrated. As Pascal elsewhere writes, "[C]auses and effects show the greatness of man in producing such excellent order from his own wretchedness."[8]

Political Philosophy and the Apologetic Purpose of the *Pensées*

In affirming the seriousness of political philosophy in the *Pensées*, we are confronted with a significant interpretive challenge: How can this be reconciled with a notoriously disorganized text with a Christian apologetic purpose? Famously, as readers and editors through the centuries have discovered, the *Pensées* defies attempts to thoroughly organize its contents without regard to Pascal's intentions. In great part, of course, this is because of the circumstances of its composition. It was, after all, a work left unfinished by Pascal's early death in 1662, but after he had become aligned with the Jansenist movement at Port-Royale, and after he had anonymously published—and finely written and organized—his *Provincial Letters*. The collection of words, jottings, paragraphs, and essays that came to be known as the *Pensées* was once thought to be so disorganized that the organizational cues in the original manuscript collection were abandoned in favor of other editorial arrangements.[9] But Pascal *had* left a significant portion of the text organized, with nearly one-third of the fragments written on strips of paper and bound into labeled bundles. Twenty-eight such bundles exist, and these now form the organized chapters of the *Pensées*. It is in this organization that the importance of Pascal's political philosophy takes its place.

In this basic bundling and labeling, Pascal clearly had a much larger purpose for the whole: The organized *Pensées* were to form the core of an extensive Christian apology, which he would use against the growing intellectual fashions of agnosticism and skepticism that were discarding and corrupting Christian faith. In particular, Pascal aimed to criticize the expanding popularity of the *honnête homme* ideal, which he and the Jansenists believed was

neo-Pelagian. Notably Epicurean in its focus on nature and pleasure, the ideal was becoming popular in the French upper classes of the period.[10] With this ideal as its target, the *Pensées* was organized to philosophically convince the reader to see the natural wretchedness of human nature before appealing to the greatness in humanity redeemed in Christ.

Thus, the *Pensées* had a basic, intentional, and instructive organization, which he outlined in L 6 in the very first strung-together bundle that he labeled "Order":

> First part: Wretchedness of man without God.
>
> Second part: Happiness of man with God.
>
> otherwise
>
> First part: Nature is corrupt, proved by nature herself.
>
> Second part: There is a Redeemer, proved by Scripture.[11]

And also in L 12:

> *Order*. Men despise religion. They hate it and are afraid it may be true. The cure for this is first to show that religion is not contrary to reason, but worthy of reverence and respect.
>
> Next make it attractive, make good men wish it were true, then show that it is.
>
> Worthy of reverence because it really understands human nature.
>
> Attractive because it promises true good.[12]

Pascal's political philosophy, first articulated in fragments from the third bundle, named "Wretchedness," takes its own clear and purposeful place within this larger Christian apology against the

philosophical arrogance of the *honnête homme* ideal. For Pascal, the age's new natural and moral philosophies were failing to show humanity's supposed good nature, and he would prove that to be true by philosophically demonstrating humanity's wretchedness. Pascal's political philosophy takes its firm place among the evidence for that wretchedness.

Thus, in an era when natural theological arguments for the existence of God were becoming popular, Pascal turns that commonplace Christian apologetics upside down: For him nature, on its own terms, ultimately shows humanity its natural wretchedness and therefore its need for God in Jesus Christ. For him, to properly defend Christian faith, the full powers of humanity to reason, to imagine, to feel, and to perceive must be taken seriously to conclude that left to its own power, humankind cannot escape its own natural contradictions. Only then, in an existential contradiction between wretchedness and greatness, can the Christian faith be intellectually defended to the skeptics. By failing to provide us with justice, political philosophy in the *Pensées* provides key evidence of our natural wretchedness, and a key piece of philosophically compelling necessity for the life of faith.

Wretched Justice

In his organized collection "Wretchedness," Pascal makes two startling claims regarding justice and injustice. "Justice," he writes in L 61, without adding any further explanation, "is as much a matter of fashion as charm is."[13] Shortly after, on "injustice," in L 66 he argues that "it is dangerous to tell the people that the laws are not just, because they obey them because they believe them to be just," which is why, he then argues, they must be told to obey the laws because they are laws.[14] In a mere few pithy lines Pascal intimates the human wretchedness exposed by political philosophy: What we call justice is not just, and yet we must tell ourselves to obey it because it is law, even if we know it is not just. And yet, as Pascal writes in L 60, humanity cannot help but strive for justice and seek to understand it. We strive for justice, believing that we know what it is, and yet this brings about only more injustice.

Pascal's "Wretchedness" chapter, among other things, shows the glaring weaknesses in all human law. This weakness persists whether law is based on the caprice of the rulers or exists in the name of justice. In L 60 Pascal begins to explain this wretched state of law with a probing question about what a ruler considers to be the basis of law: "[W]hat basis will he take for the economy of the world he wants to rule?"[15] Legal codes based on the whims of rulers make for chaotic laws. But the striving for just laws, Pascal argues, does no better than personal whim, for humankind does not know what justice is. If stable knowledge of justice were available, there would not be any basis for what he called the "most commonly received" of all maxims—namely, "that each man should follow the customs of his own country."[16] Custom could have no crucial place in the rule of law next to the awesome spectacle of true justice—if true justice could exist. The "whims and fancies of Persians and Germans" would never come to light if true justice were knowable in all times and places by philosophic inquiry. Instead, Pascal writes, we see that laws vary greatly by space and time: Something that is lawful on one side of the Pyrenees may be unlawful on the other, and thereby "three degrees of latitude upset[s] the whole of jurisprudence." Laws are also time bound, marking the beginning or end of what is a crime by the "entry of Saturn into the house of the Lion."[17] Thus, the body of laws around the world lend no credence to there being a stable knowledge of justice; they are too varied through space and time to be traced to reason's power to know true equity and institute laws on its basis. Otherwise, it would be a peculiar kind of timeless justice "whose limits are marked by a river."[18]

At this juncture in the fragment, Pascal gives voice to medieval scholasticism's answer to the problem of multiplicity in human laws: It is not in common customs themselves that justice is known but in the natural law common to all peoples in all countries. But Pascal leaves any definition or discussion of natural law unsaid; he does not deny there is natural law, but he certainly challenges its efficacy to form and influence the laws we humans create. It is helpful to clarify Pascal's challenge to natural law by recalling one of its

greatest defenders. Thomas Aquinas, in I–II, question 91, article 2 of the *Summa Theologica*, defines natural law as rational humankind's participation in the eternal law of God by which it is inclined to its proper end through discernment of what is good and evil. While not citing a definition, Pascal nevertheless denies the power of reason to be inclined by natural law and base human laws upon it. Only "reckless chance" could derive from the great multiplicity of human laws and customs a single, recognizable universal law, but there was not even one to be found by chance. Pascal notes that the laws of nations show quite the opposite: At some point in human history across the world, the most egregious moral trespasses, such as the murdering of infants or of fathers, was thought to be virtuous and thus upheld by law and custom. For Pascal, the fact of vicious laws did not thereby prohibit the existence of natural law; rather, it signaled for him the extent of reason's corruption to recognize it. "There no doubt exist natural laws," Pascal wrote, "but once this fine reason of ours was corrupted, it corrupted everything."[19]

At first glance, Pascal's insistence on reason's thorough corruption by original sin may remind readers of sixteenth-century Protestant polemics. Indeed, in Martin Luther's vast corpus it is not difficult to find his accusations against "reason"; for instance, in his 1525 treatise, *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, Luther likens reason to the devil's "arch-prostitute" and "bride."[20] Adding weight to this association would be that Jansenism had been accused of holding Protestant views on grace and salvation. However, the comparison is misleading at best. Unlike Pascal's *Pensées*, Protestant political thought, at least of the major Lutheran and Reformed kinds, was profoundly *magisterial*. An essential part of their programmatic reforms were the allegiances made with city magistrates, nobility, and princes who supported and promoted reform. Far from decrying humanity's inability to live justly, magisterial Protestants like Luther considered political service in a wide variety of everyday forms as a divine calling and service.[21] In particular, Lutheran reform developed a robust natural law theory and wide jurisprudence that affirmed the godliness of political service, even if perfect justice was beyond reach.[22] In fact, magisterial Protestant

reformers hotly opposed radical reformers who denounced all political authority as hopelessly corrupt: Luther's *Against the Heavenly Prophets* is an example of one of his many antiradical writings. Thus, in emphasizing humanity's corruption and inability to find justice, Pascal was aligning himself with the Reformation's most radical thinkers and not with Luther or Calvin.

It is tempting to dismiss Pascal's critique as a mere pretext for a defense of unmerited divine grace, as if fragments L 60, L 61, and L 66 were no more than a shallow preparation for the Christian apology to come. There is no doubt that Pascal's anthropology was emphatically postlapsarian in that humanity had been historically transformed by the Fall in the Garden of Eden into beings afflicted by sin through perennial conditions of confusion, contradiction, anxiety, longingness, restlessness, boredom, vanity, and so forth. Consider L 210, wherein Pascal declares that "all men naturally hate each other" and that what we call the common good is a "sham and a false image of charity, for essentially it is just hate." Humanity forever changed its nature with the Fall, and the result was not for good. For Pascal, this postlapsarian transformation of humanity figures prominently in the later classified sections of the text; it is also a major part of his attempt to show how he and the Jansenists were the true inheritors of Augustine's theology of grace, avoiding what he perceived to be the extremes of John Calvin's predestination and Jesuit Luis de Molina's free will. Moreover, Pascal's own Christology accounts for Jesus's transformation of sin-afflicted humankind: "[T]he Incarnation shows man the greatness of his wretchedness through the greatness of the remedy required."[23] But even so, it is not necessary to concede to Pascal's postlapsarian view to conclude with him the human wretchedness revealed by political philosophy: in the end, our laws do not withstand philosophical scrutiny.

Pascal's Use of Montaigne

At the midway point in fragment L 60, Pascal makes a bombshell argument, declaring that "merely according to reason, nothing is just in itself, everything shifts with time."[24] If this is truly and

objectively so, it is no wonder, then, that the perennial search for justice leads only to confusion: Cicero, Seneca, and Tacitus, all pagan Roman authors, are here employed to show the fluidity of laws and elusive nature. The quotation Pascal provides from Tacitus speaks well to the confusion: "Just as we once used to suffer for our vices, we now suffer for our laws."[25] In fact, this is the very same quotation given by Michel de Montaigne in his essay "On Experience,"[26] where he complains about the Code of Justinian and how in his present-day France they have more laws than the rest of the world put together and yet have no clarity on what is just. Fragment L 60, like many others, is heavily indebted to Montaigne's *Essais*.[27] For Pascal, like Montaigne, the abundance of French legal code and the long tradition of codified law show the puzzling gap between the realm of human action and any standard of immutable law and eternal justice.

Given the similarity of L 60 and the ideas and quotations from Montaigne, one may reasonably wonder if Pascal's use of political philosophy in the *Pensées* is not simply a specific adaptation of the latter's philosophical skepticism. There is at least no doubt that Montaigne's *Essais*, or perhaps a compendium of excerpts from them, held an important influence on Pascal and the formation of the *Pensées*. Montaigne was certainly for Pascal a crucial source of ancient pagan philosophy and various ideas regarding current critical philosophic questions. Pascal also appreciated Montaigne's conversational style and had imitated it, or in some cases simply quoted him, to rhetorically appeal to his own anticipated readers.[28] In L 745, he explicitly identifies the style of Montaigne, Epictetus, and "Salomon de Tultie," an anagram for Louis de Montalte, his very own pseudonym in the *Lettres Provinciales*, as the "commonest, which is most persuasive, stays the longest in the memory and is most often quoted, because it consists entirely of thoughts deriving from everyday conversations."[29] Given the wide popularity of Montaigne in France of the seventeenth century, this would have been an appropriate model for his own work. Pascal also harbored deep affinities and fascinations with Montaigne on the complexities and contradictions of human nature. Themes of malleability, moral

corruption, diversion, and restlessness can easily be traced from the *Essais* to the *Pensées*.

But there were also clear differences with Montaigne and at times even outright hostility to his conclusions. Pascal's appropriation of Montaigne does not mean that the common themes in the *Pensées*, such as the want of justice, are simply derivative; as one scholar put it, "Pascal has recourse to Montaigne for a purpose not designed by Montaigne."[30] Pascal's open criticism of Montaigne in L 780, which accuses him of being muddled, "talking nonsense," and foolishly painting his own portrait,[31] gives some insight on Pascal's unique use of Montaigne's *Essais*. Montaigne may have been a powerful witness for Pascal on several common themes, but he clearly wanted to distance the *Pensées* from the danger of self-indulgence,[32] as well as indifference and skepticism, that he saw in his *Essais*. In L 649 Pascal warns that "what is good in Montaigne can only be acquired with difficulty," while the bad—his morals, and talking too much about things and himself—was in plain sight.[33] The *Pensées* contain extensive treatments against self-indulgence, skepticism, and indifference; for instance, L 427, against an indifferent theological skepticism, is one of the longest and most developed essays of the entire collection.[34] Pascal's main use of Montaigne thus appears to wish to direct his admirers away from what he considered to be the muddling, meandering ideas of the *Essais* toward the anxious, existential crises of wretchedness in his *Pensées*.

Political philosophy shows the rule of law to be wretched: This is the essence of Pascal's argument on law and justice, and he employs Montaigne as a star witness, even though the *Essais* do not support Pascal's conclusion. As one scholar put it, Pascal "takes [Montaigne's] facts and arguments, but does not follow him to his conclusions."[35] The topic of justice is a perfect illustration, for Pascal uses Montaigne not to sow doubt or skepticism but to show, through his familiar skepticism over the rule of law, that there is no true justice at all. He thus grants all Montaigne's criticisms on law as correct but then argues that this evidence means there is no such thing as justice, since for Pascal these very same inconsistencies

and contradictions cannot be separated from the general viability of justice.[36] Pascal uses Montaigne's treatment of justice as a powerful but unwitting witness to the wretchedness of humanity revealed by political philosophy.

The Rule of Custom

But Pascal's *Pensées* also explains how polities work in our very state of wretchedness, and again, it is through a common topic with Montaigne: custom. If justice cannot be truly known, then by what that they commonly call justice are people governed? What is the basis for rule? In returning to L 60, Pascal shifts from the confusion over the meaning of justice to an explanation of who or what decides what is right. The turning point is that the confusion over what justice is cannot be determined by any legislator or the convenience of the sovereign; Pascal argues that it is only custom that is sure and dependable. Drawing again on Montaigne and paraphrasing him (though without any acknowledgment), Pascal writes, "[C]ustom is the whole of equity for the sole reason that it is accepted. That is the mystic basis of its authority."[37] Law is obeyed because it is law and *nothing* more; custom appropriates law in such a way that it comes to be *felt* and *imagined* as true. But either at its origin or at maturity, custom is not at all in any veritable way *reasonable*. In fact, anyone who tries to examine custom's reasons, Pascal writes, will find it "so trivial and feeble that, unless he is used to contemplating the marvels of human fancy, he will be amazed that in a century it has acquired so much pomp and reverence."[38]

Pascal's treatment of custom sharply distinguishes him from Montaigne, despite the influence and inspiration Pascal derived from him on the topic. "Montaigne is wrong," Pascal curtly argues, for "the only reason for following custom is that it is custom, not that it is reasonable, or just, but the people follow it solely because they think it just."[39] Montaigne's own views on custom are saddled with the major difficulties of obeying custom while rejecting its tyranny over spiritual life.[40] Pascal accepts these difficulties as entirely natural to custom, but he goes much further in that custom

becomes essential to his understanding of politics. In brief, it plays a vital role in how political life coheres; he even assigns it a central role in our very existence, even going so far to claim that "custom is our nature."[41] Several fragments scattered throughout the text, both classified and unclassified, lend insight into Pascal's concept of custom. "We are as much automaton as mind," Pascal writes, and since so few things can be truly demonstrated to our reason, "habit [*coutume*] provides the strongest proofs and those that are the most believed."[42] Even what may be supposed to be "natural principles," Pascal argues, are nothing other than inherited "habitual principles" [*principes accoutumés*].[43] In changing the habits, new natural principles are created. For "nature," Pascal writes in the adjacent fragment, is nothing other than a "first habit."[44] Therefore, Pascal notes, even natural love—such as the love of a child for its father—can be eradicated by habit. For Pascal, political communities are communities of custom. In L 634 he writes, "[S]o great is the force of custom that where nature has merely created men, we create every kind and condition of men."[45] Even political authority is upheld by customs that only have the appearance of being by nature. Since "kings are habitually seen in the company of guards, drums, officers, and all the things which prompt automatic responses" by custom, the world believes this political authority is thus derived by nature. Hence political authority comes to appear as natural and reasonable, when it appears so only by the effects of custom.[46]

For Pascal, political philosophy reveals not only that justice is unknown but also that the reasonableness of custom is weak (if not entirely absent). Having no other origin than custom, the laws of the land are revealed as bereft of justice and authority. Political philosophy thereby becomes little more than the guiding thought behind what Pascal calls the "art of subversion, of revolution," because it unmoors laws from customs by investigating their origins and then questions the legitimacy of these customs while advocating a return to the supposed philosophical roots of law (which do not truly exist).[47] "There is no surer way to lose everything," Pascal writes, for "nothing will be just if weighed in these

scales." The consequence of this philosophical examination is that a destructive confederation takes place between what Pascal calls "the people" and "the great." The people listen to the arguments undermining custom and henceforth discard them, and the great, for their part, use their positions to destroy these customs for their own ambitious ends; both are unaware of the challenge ahead for the reestablishment of law by new customs.

To last, laws must be *regarded* as legitimate and reasonable, and this brings Pascal to contemplate the "wisest of legislators,"[48] those who recognize the need to deceive the people. In this vein, he offers a quotation from Augustine: "[W]hen he asks about the truth that is to bring him freedom, it is a good thing that he should be deceived."[49] At the conclusion of this fragment one may be tempted to compare Pascal's note on the need for a wise legislator to the problem of the philosopher-king in Plato's *Republic*, or the prince-founder in Machiavelli's *The Prince*. But this is not apt: It is not that Pascal leads us to contemplate the need of the wise legislator; rather, he is highlighting the intractable contradiction revealed by political philosophy—namely, that custom cannot stand philosophical scrutiny, while humankind cannot abandon the demands of reason. The great and many alike will abandon custom, as they both listen to the philosophic arguments undermining it. But a universal innate curiosity drives political philosophic inquiry, and no matter how few political philosophers there are or how careful they may try to be, the drive of the human soul to know will in turn drive the general abandonment of the rule of law. Thus, in the rule of custom, our striving for justice is shown to be deeply wretched.

The Limited Ethics of Custom

How, then, is moral action understood in a wretched political world upheld by customs? In L 60 and other fragments in the *Pensées*, Pascal seems to offer precious little other than scrutinizing the popular mantra to obey the customs of one's country. Even a scouring of the remaining fragments of the text, organized and unorganized alike, yields little to guide the "Then, what now?" ethical

question that follows the revelation that only custom is behind the rule of law. Something more substantial is given beyond the *Pensées* in his short work circa 1660, though edited and published posthumously in 1670, *Three Discourses on the Condition of the Great*.[50] In it, Pascal gives an account of why custom is so ethically limited.

The *Three Discourses* is written as advice to the "great" so that they would come to know the natural condition of their greatness and how to rule their subjects accordingly. Pascal begins the first discourse by explaining the condition of the great with an analogy: Imagine a man who was brought by a storm to an island filled with subjects who had lost their king. But by chance, the man had a striking resemblance to this lost king, and he was "taken for him, and recognized as such by all the people." While at first he did not know what to do, he then accepted his good fortune, received the honors being given to him, and let the people treat him as their king. Pascal writes that being treated as king and yet knowing that he was not, the man began to have a "double thought," in one side of which he acted as king, and in the other, he knew his true state; with the former he treated his people, and with the latter he treated himself.

For Pascal, this king is like *all* the powerful and great—all authority and property is derived from convention and custom, not by nature or by right. All is a "human institution" (établissement *humain*). The supposed rights of wealth and property of the great were to Pascal like this king: One may be the son of a duke, but the fact that he is in the world at all is only through "an infinity of chances" through a marriage based on "a chance visit, an empty discourse, a thousand unforeseen occasions." The wealth accumulated was also acquired by a "thousand accidents" founded upon the lawmakers who for reasons other than natural right allowed the duke and his son to inherit it. The basis of authority and wealth, therefore, is nothing but a "human institution."

What, then, are *les grands* to do with the power and wealth given to them? Pascal answers that they must first have the same "double thought"—that is, they must look on their subjects as

subjects of a human institution *and* look on themselves as no different in *nature* from them. In the second discourse, he argues that this ontological equality of nature between the great and the people means that the great must rule and the people obey by external condition rather than on any natural or "internal" basis. Pascal distinguishes greatness of nature from greatness of institution (*grandeur d'établissement*). Greatness of institution, he argues, depends on people who with reason consider it right to honor certain social positions and to give them respect. This greatness is therefore quite limited, and thus the duties due to it are similarly limited. Subjects obey the human institution, not someone who is greater by nature; the great in turn rule the subjects on this same basis, not on false assumptions of greatness by natural disposition. In the third discourse, Pascal gives a sketch of its ethical practice: The great are masters of a kind of distributive justice. They are masters of desirable things, with subjects who desire and covet those things. The role of the great is in the general distribution of desirable things, and the role of the people is to gain some of those things by giving limited honor to the great. Thus, the justice of custom is, for Pascal, quite limited. He even admits at the end of the work that "what I tell you does not go very far" and does "not save you from being lost." But anything more would exceed the ethics derived from custom, and with corrupted reason, such limited ethics is all that undergirds lawfulness.

Given the ethical limitations of custom in the *Three Discourses*, we can return to the *Pensées* to see that Pascal's fragment on the unseriousness of Plato and Aristotle's political philosophy begins to be much more compelling and far less flippant. Rather than teaching substantial political philosophy, Plato and Aristotle (who are wise to its severe shortcomings—or at least Pascal implies them to be so) offer their works as harm reduction medicine against the malignant madness of political ambition. For Pascal, the *Laws* and the *Politics* are antidotes to the poisonous belief that regimes can be improved by the ambitious few.

Laws of Imagination and Heart

But a political question remains in Pascal's *Pensées*: With such weak ethics and the threat of reason's revolt, how are laws at all obeyed and maintained? How do regimes survive even for a short time if reason is as weak and ineffectual as Pascal judges it to be? He provides several explanations through our nonrational nature, which stabilizes political order and the rule of law. One is the subject of the essay in L 44. "Imagination," Pascal argues, is the "dominant faculty of man," a second nature, a master of deception, a dominator of reason, an arbiter of the senses, and a decider of everything.[51] "Love or hate alters the face of justice," Pascal writes. Anyone who chooses only reason against imagination is made a fool.

Pascal's unique account of imagination is not just that it can deceive but that far more generally it is "what makes it possible for human beings to evaluate, experience, and desire beyond measure."[52] Unlike reason, it is the arbiter of meaning, and thus it is its "dominator." Imagination's power over reason includes the ability to render the insignificant all-important. The things that we most value, Pascal observes, often amount to "almost nothing"; but "it is a nothing which our imagination magnifies into a mountain."[53] It can also fool us philosophically and theologically by vastly overstating our own importance in the universe,[54] as well as by dismissing the infinite realities of God and eternity. "Imagination magnifies small objects with fantastic exaggeration until they fill our soul," Pascal argues, "and with bold insolence cuts down great things to its own size, as when speaking of God."[55]

But it is the political power of imagination that maintains regimes that favor the pure power of the stronger over the weaker. For Pascal, regimes originate in that pure power, but it is imagination that maintains it: The "bonds securing respect for a particular person are bonds of imagination."[56] In Pascal's view, it is the faculty of imagination, and not reason, that lends authority to justice by lending feeling to the appearance and reason of things: "[W]e only have to see a lawyer in cap and gown to form a favourable opinion

of his competence."[57] Likewise, kings surround themselves with legions of armed soldiers and courtly retinues. Neither of these appearances are for Pascal examples of the innate reasonableness of power and prestige, but they reflect the ability of imagination to lend *feeling* to authority. Pascal gives a poignant example: "[I]t would take reason at its most refined to see the Grand Turk, surrounded in his superb seraglio by 40,000 janissaries, as a man like any other."[58]

Pascal also identifies the "heart" (or what could also be called instinct or intuition) as another nonrational part of human nature through which laws may be upheld. Here again, the obedience due to political order has roots in a prerational instinct to obey the law and authority. Pascal describes the "heart" as the source of "first principles," the originator of deeply held but basic ideas or beliefs that are rationalized only once they are recognized and reflected on,[59] for as Pascal explains elsewhere, "the heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing."[60] In fragment L 110,[61] Pascal sees the heart as the locus of faith in God, who must move the heart in the believer if the faith is salvific. For Pascal, the heart is similarly the origin of the trust in law and political authority. This fact explains the danger of political philosophy teaching humankind that the laws are unjust. In fragment L 66, he illustrates the point: "[I]t is dangerous to tell the people that the laws are not just, because they obey them only because they believe them to be just."[62] The people do not *know* the laws to be just but *believe* them to be just through the intuitive principles of the heart. This is how regimes survive in our wretched existence.

Context for Our Political Wretchedness

For Pascal, political philosophy shows us our wretchedness through its inevitable failure to ameliorate political life. But was Voltaire's criticism of the *Pensées* as misanthropic not at least somewhat true? Are human beings truly as "wretched" as Pascal claims? Or, more precisely for this study, can no political escape from our wretchedness be ascertained in the world apart from the Christian apology Pascal introduces? Pascal was after all living in a century that is

often today credited with the foundations of modern political thought, whether it be the beginning of the modern state, the modern international order, or the origins of limited and responsible government. But taken from the mid-seventeenth-century French perspective of Pascal, there were many compelling historical political circumstances that appear to point to the ultimate wretchedness of humanity and our inability to escape it.

The political upheavals of seventeenth-century Europe, at least from Pascal's perspective in mid-century, would have provided him scant evidence of a universal law of nations. Europe had just emerged from the immensely destructive Thirty Years' War in which France, in opposing the Hapsburg dynasty, had come to the aid of Protestant Sweden. The Long Reformation, including the Catholic Reformation and Counter-Reformation, had by Pascal's day not only left confessional jurisdictions in conflict and had contributed to the continent-wide war but had even transformed societies and political authority in ones where there was widespread confessional agreement, and not as nearly all reformers had intended the Reformation to unfold. Perhaps the most significant evidence available to Pascal for the failure of reason to improve regimes was at home in France, where the long aftereffects of the French civil war and the failed Huguenot Reformation were felt in a Bourbon monarchy that aggrandized and centralized its power to an unprecedented degree. Perhaps most emblematic of this Bourbon trend was the ministerial power accorded to Cardinal Richelieu, with whom Pascal's own father Etienne fell into disfavor for joining a noble protest against taxation in 1636; this misstep came with some consequence to his legal career and family life, first by his having to leave Paris for Auvergne, and then by his taking a post in Rouen when he was somewhat restored to royal patronage. Overall, the strict, consolidating reigns of both Louis XIII and Louis XIV grew in a context of threatening political chaos, not—at least from the perspective of Pascal and many of his fellow countrymen—a world of early modern states, the rule of law, and a post-Westphalian international order.

This broad political context confirmed for Pascal that power was based on unjust laws buttressed by the imagination, the heart, and custom. Current political events seemed to dash any supposed progress to a world governed by good laws and limited power. Consider the contemporary context in his fragment L 103:

> *Right, might.* It is right to follow the right, it is necessary to follow the mighty.
>
> > Right without might is helpless, might without right is tyrannical.
> >
> > Right with might is challenged, because there are always evil men about. Might without right is denounced. We must therefore combine right and might, and to that end make right into might or might into right,
> >
> > Right is open to dispute, might is easily recognized and beyond dispute. Therefore right could not be made mighty because might challenged right, calling it unjust and itself claiming to be just.
> >
> > Being thus unable to make right into might, we have made might into right.[63]

Pascal's fragment not only sums up the wretchedness of justice but also speaks to the general political chaos of the age and the hollowness of contemporaneous regimes, like the Bourbon absolutism he was living under, to exhibit true justice.[64]

Conclusion

Thus, there is a philosophical seriousness behind the charge in L 533 that Plato's *Laws* and Aristotle's *Politics* were the "least philosophical and least serious part of their lives." Pascal's evaluation of these texts was not merely some provocative hyperbole but an extract of the role political philosophy plays in the *Pensées* to show

the philosophical depth of our wretchedness; in looking for justice, it reveals all laws to be unjust and based on faulty knowledge. It shows that truly just laws are impossible. Political philosophy destroys the pretense of good laws without leading to more just ones; it shows how custom forms laws and how the imagination and heart of humanity uphold them. Thereby, it shows the "wretchedness" of humankind—and so, for Pascal, prepares us to see the reasonableness of our salvation.

Notes

1. L 533; 188. Following scholarly convention, this article uses the fragment numbers based on the order of the *Pensées* in the *Ouevres complètes* (Paris: l'Intégrale, Éditions du Seuil, 1963), trans. and ed. Louis Lafuma (hence identified as "L"). This article uses the English translation of Lafuma's edition of the *Pensées* by A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin Books, 1966) and notes the page number(s) for each quotation following the fragment number.
2. Following Krailsheimer's edition of the *Pensées*, this article translates Pascal's *misère* as "wretchedness."
3. L 114; 29.
4. Voltaire, *Lettres philosophiques*, XXV: Sur les *Pensées* de M. Pascal; Bertrand Russell, *The History of Western Philosophy* (Simon & Schuster, 1945), 768.
5. For the defense of Pascal's general philosophical significance, consider Graeme Hunter's recent study *Pascal the Philosopher* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013). For an overview of the significance of Pascal's political thought, see A. J Beitzinger, "Pascal on Justice, Force, and Law," *Review of Politics* 46 (2): 212–43; and Hélène Bouchilloux, "Pascal and the Social World," in *The Cambridge Companion to Pascal*, ed. Nicholas Hammond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 201–15.
6. L 200; 66.
7. L 183; 55.
8. L 106; 27.
9. See the concise summary of Pascal's organization in chap. 4, "Origin and Plan of the *Pensées*," in A. J. Krailsheimer, *Pascal* (Oxford University Press, 1980), 41–49.
10. See Nannerl O. Keohane, "Self-Love and Society: Jansenism and the *Honnête Homme*," in *Philosophy and the State in France: The Renaissance*

to the Enlightenment (Princeton University Press, 1980), 283–311; Marvin R. O'Connell, *Blaise Pascal: Reasons of the Heart* (William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 42 ff. Consider the intellectual survey in the classic by Richard Popkin, *The History of Skepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

11. L 6; 4.
12. L 12; 4.
13. L 61; 18.
14. L 66; 18.
15. L 60; 16.
16. L 60; 16.
17. Meaning at the time the planet was observed moving into the zodiac constellation Leo.
18. L 60; 16.
19. L 60; 16.
20. Martin Luther, "Against the Heavenly Prophets," trans. Bernhard Erling and Conrad Bergendoff, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 40, *Church and Ministry II* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 175.
21. For a doctrinally significant example for Luther and German Evangelicals, consider the high praises of the ruler and the ruled in the discussion of the fourth commandment (honoring parents) in *The Large Catechism*, in which civil government is described as "the most priceless jewel on earth." Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 407.
22. See, e.g., John Witte Jr., *Law and Protestantism: The Legal Teachings of the Lutheran Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
23. L 352; 106.
24. L 60; 17.
25. Tacitus, *Annals*, III.25.
26. Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, III.13.
27. E.g., the same Seneca quotation appears in *Essais*, III.1. For an overview of Pascal's use of Montaigne, see Frank M. Chambers, "Pascal's Montaigne," *PMLA* 65 no. 5 (1950): 790–804.
28. Chambers, "Pascal's Montaigne," 790.
29. L 745; 229.
30. Henry Philips, "Pascal's Reading and the Inheritance of Montaigne and Descartes," in *The Cambridge Companion to Pascal,* ed. Nicholas Hammond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 28.

31. L 780; 236.
32. Cf. L 421, L 577, and L 88.
33. L 649; 212.
34. L 427; 127–33.
35. Chambers, "Pascal's Montaigne," 802.
36. One of the best expositions of this difference between Montaigne and Pascal on law is in Pierre Manent, *Montaigne: Life Without Law*, trans. Paul Seaton (University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 164–65ff.
37. L 60; 17. Cf. Montaigne, *Essais*, III.13.
38. L 60; 17. Cf. Montaigne, *Essais*, III.13.
39. L 525; 186. Nearly all Pascal's explicit evaluations of Montaigne are unfavorable, despite the amount of influence and number of quotations and allusions to him that are in the *Pensées*. Chambers, "Pascal's Montaigne," 794.
40. Manent, *Montaigne*, 145ff.
41. L 419; 125. *Coutume*, generally translated into English as "custom" but sometimes as "habit," appears in the *Pensées* forty-one times. Thus, an understanding of custom in the *Pensées* must also include "habit." Hugh M. Davidson and Pierre H. Dubé, *A Concordance to Pascal's "Pensées"* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 227.
42. L 821; 247.
43. L 125; 32.
44. L 126; 32.
45. L 634; 209.
46. L 25; 6.
47. L 60; 17.
48. L 60; 17.
49. L 60; 17; *City of God*, IV.27.
50. *Oeuvres complètes*, 366–68. The English translation is mine. For a brief context of this work, see Krailsheimer, *Pascal*, 48.
51. L 44; 9.
52. Matthew W. Maguire, *The Conversion of Imagination: From Pascal Through Rousseau and Tocqueville* (Harvard University Press, 2006), 10. In Macguire's compelling study, Pascal's seminal ideas on imagination initiate a long intellectual tradition in French philosophy.
53. L 531; 188.
54. Cf. L 199.
55. L 551; 192.
56. L 828; 251.
57. L 44; 11.

58. L 44; 11.
59. Cf. L 298.
60. L 423; 127.
61. He does this elsewhere, such as in L 424.
62. L 66; 18.
63. L 103; 26–27. Krailsheimer translates *justice* and *force* as "might and right." See the striking analysis of this fragment in Erich Auerbach, ed., "On the Political Theory of Pascal," trans. Ralph Manheim, in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984), 102–3; and in Beitzinger, "Pascal on Justice," 223–25.
64. On the criticisms of Bourbon absolutism in Pascal and Jansenism, see Keohane, *Philosophy in the State in France*, 160–66.