

Pascal's Cross and Nietzsche's Abyss¹

The Goal

Nietzsche expresses a great appreciation for Pascal. In a letter to Brandes² he describes his relationship to Pascal as someone who “however antagonistic he may be to his deepest instincts”, he “almost loves”, explaining that Pascal ‘has taught him infinitely’ and is “the only logical Christian”. In *Dawn of the Day*, he calls Pascal “the first of all Christians”³, and in several of the *Posthumous Fragments* he speaks of how Christianity killed Pascal, telling us that “one must never forgive Christianity that it ruined men like Pascal”⁴. He says further, “Nothing has happened since Pascal; the German Philosophers do not count in compare”⁵. It is curious what Christianity ruined and for which it cannot be forgiven, and why across Nietzsche’s writings we are met with such appreciation for someone who ‘is antagonistic to his deepest instincts’.

The goal of this paper is to understand Nietzsche’s reference to Pascal in the Letter to Brandes⁶: we ask centrally What Pascal has infinitely taught Nietzsche? And Why Pascal is antagonistic to Nietzsche’s deepest instincts? I compare Nietzsche and Pascal’s thought, unveiling the clue to understanding this, consequently I assert that their thought is in many ways identical.

A Note on The Current Literature

There is little work on this subject, Lucie Lebreton’s *Nietzsche, Pascal et Le Suicide Du Sens Historique*⁷ highlights a number of their similarities, but reaches distinct conclusions: for instance that the thinker’s views of the role of habit are polar opposites – I instead characterize them as almost identical; or that in the conclusion of the work Lucie tells us that “Les Pensées se voulaient être une apologie du christianisme ; aux yeux de Nietzsche, elles sont surtout « les pages » qui «mettent à nu son destin et ce qui causera sa perte. »”, that the Pensées wanted to be an apology for Christianity; to the eyes of Nietzsche they are ‘the pages’ which above all ‘lay bare its destiny and which will cause its loss’⁸ which is the opposite of what I argue, instead I posit that these pages are to Nietzsche the only way one can be a ‘logical Christian’. Though in *Nietzsche et ‘le principe de Pascal “il faut s’abêtir”*⁹ she makes arguments very similar to mine but focuses on how Pascal overturns Platonism in the same manner as Nietzsche, she says, “In

¹Concerning the word count, the document lists it as ~4000 - this is a result of my parentheses, bibliography, and footnotes. My ‘actual’ writing includes ~3000 words

An earlier draft was titled ‘Nietzsche’s Pascal & Pascal’s Nietzsche’ – a title I love and for which I have Tomas Bardi to thank – unfortunately the paper evolved significantly, and the title is no longer fitting.

²Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Letter to Georg Brandes*, 20 Nov 1888, No. 20 (From *Friedrich Nietzsche* by George Brandes, 1914)

³Nietzsche, *Dawn of the Day*, §91, 1881 (Trans. John McFarland Kennedy, 1911)

⁴Posthumous Fragments, 1887 (I could not find a single collection of the fragments’ translation, so these are from various online sources- I lost them while writing the paper, but confirmed by cross-referencing that they are authentic)

⁵Posthumous Fragments, 1885

⁶Nietzsche, *Letter to Georg Brandes*, 20 Nov 1888

⁷Lebreton, Lucy, Nietzsche, “*Pascal et Le Suicide Du Sens Historique*”, 2019

⁸Translations from the French, excluding those of the Pensées are my own.

⁹Lebreton, “*Nietzsche et ‘le principe de Pascal “il faut s’abêtir”*”, *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, Vol. 4, No. 104, 2019

adopting Christianity, Pascal defends the values of Platonism, but in taking a path resolutely anti-platonic". In the concluding statement she tells us "But if Pascal questions the path from platonism for attaining perfection, for becoming the ideal, he never finally renounces it". Though I do not discuss this in specifics, contrary to Leberton it follows from my arguments that he does in fact renounce it.

Christianity and Value

Pascal's most famous work of philosophy is *The Wager*¹⁰ occurring primarily in fragment¹¹ 418 of the *Pensées*. Towards the end of this fragment Pascal says that this "will make you believe quite naturally, and will make you more docile"¹², and it is this that Nietzsche quotes in *The Genealogy of Morals* when he describes the methods of the priests¹³. The principle encapsulates both facets of Pascal's relation to Nietzsche: that he is antagonistic to his deepest instincts and that he has taught him infinitely.

Christianity's Effect on Pascal

On the one hand the principle¹⁴ describes Pascal's surrender to Christianity- it is of particular interest that Pascal uses 'abetira'¹⁵ deriving from abattre, 'to slaughter'¹⁶- since it is wholly in line with what Nietzsche says of Pascal when he says that Pascal was killed by Christianity. The picture of Christianity that Nietzsche provides us with is remarkably like that of Pascal who says:

"All Jesus did was teach men that they loved themselves, that they were slaves, blind, sick, unhappy and sinful, that he had to deliver, enlighten, sanctify and heal them, that this would be achieved by men hating themselves and following him through his misery and death on the Cross."¹⁷

Pascal tells us Christianity teaches us that "the only good thing in this life is the hope of another life, that we become happy only as we come nearer to it"¹⁸. It is clear from this that Nietzsche is correct in saying that Pascal denied life, that Christianity forced him¹⁹ into denying life.

¹⁰ Pascal, *Pensees* 418-426, 1670. Penguin Classics, Trans. A. J. Krailsheimer, 1966. (I use the page/section numbers on the left margin in the translation I have used, I am fairly confident these are the ones from the Lafuma collection, but am uncertain)

¹¹ I say fragment for lack of a better term, I think this is accurate but am uncertain

¹² Ibid., 418

¹³ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Third Treatise, Section 17, 1887 (All Nietzsche citations are from Stanford's *The Complete works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, unless otherwise specified)

¹⁴ Il faut s'abetir

¹⁵ Pascal, *Pensees*. 'Il faut s'abetir'

¹⁶ My emphasis on the language used is a product of 1. Pascal says in the *Pensées*, 784, "Different arrangements of words make different meanings, and different arrangements of meanings produce different effects." And 2. Nietzsche in §22 of Part I of *Beyond Good and Evil* says, "I should be forgiven as an old philologist who cannot forget the malice of putting his finger on bad tricks of interpretation,". With this I think it is fair to conclude that both thinkers paid significant attention to the words they used. On similar lines, I sometimes quote the original French from Pascal, where the English translation does not have the same effect. There is an interesting point to be made on the thinker's emphasis on language – this is beyond the scope of my work.

¹⁷ Ibid., 271

¹⁸ Ibid., 427

¹⁹ Pascal's affirmation of Christianity forced him.

Pascal as “the Only Logical Christian”

The principle ‘Il faut s’abêtir’ though also explains Nietzsche’s admiration for Pascal for precisely the same reasons - because Pascal understood exactly what Christianity does, it is why he is “the only logical Christian”²⁰ and “the first of all Christians”²¹. Nietzsche’s further highlights his recognition of Pascal’s understanding of Christianity - he says “I understand how Pascal’s absolute continence and his immense labors led him to see constantly an abyss at his side”²², that he understands what led Pascal to suffer²³.

The Morality Project

There is though evidently more to Nietzsche’s admiration than Pascal understanding Christianity - in the *Letter* Nietzsche says, Pascal “has taught him such an infinite amount”²⁴, to understand what this ‘infinite amount’ is, we must look at what it is that Pascal can teach us.

Pascal tells us of human virtues, “it is a funny sort of justice whose limits are marked by a river”, continuing later, “larceny, incest, infanticide, patricide, everything has at some time been accounted a virtuous action”²⁵, pointing out explicitly the arbitrary nature of the moral values we so deeply treasure. These *highest values*²⁶ of ours he deems wholly meaningless, telling us that they have no ground – eerily similar to what Nietzsche tells us in the *Genealogy of Morals*. Pascal does not stop at establishing the arbitrariness of virtue but continues saying it is reason that has corrupted our virtues,

“The result of this confusion is that one man says that the essence of justice is the authority of the legislator, another the convenience of the sovereign, another present custom, and that is the most reliable. Merely according to reason, nothing is just in itself, everything shifts with time. Custom is the whole of equity for the sole reason that it is accepted.”²⁷

What he says next is in many ways a summary of the argument Nietzsche presents in the first treatise of the *genealogy*,

“Anyone wishing to examine the reason for this 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. The art of subversion, of revolution, is to dislodge established customs by probing down to their origins in order to show how they lack authority and justice. There must, they say, be a return to the basic and primitive laws of the state which unjust custom has abolished. There is no surer way to lose everything; nothing will be

²⁰ Nietzsche, *Letter to Georg Brandes*, 20 Nov 1888

²¹ Nietzsche, *Dawn of the Day*, §192

²² Nietzsche, *Posthumous Fragments*. 1884

²³ In *Pensees* 57, 70, & 427 among other places Pascal tells us that we cannot ever be happy or satisfied – 57 says “It is not good to have all one needs”.

²⁴ Nietzsche, *Letter to Georg Brandes*, 20 Nov 1888

²⁵ Pascal, *Pensees*, 60

²⁶ Pascal speaks of values like justice, morality, and truth which I liken to the values Nietzsche critiques when he says “The highest values devalue themselves” (quoting from ‘Nihilism’ in Walter Kaufmann’s *The Will to Power*, 1967)

²⁷ *Ibid.*

just if weighed in these scales. Yet the people readily listen to such arguments, they throw off the yoke as soon as they recognize it, and the great take the opportunity of ruining them and those whose curiosity makes them examine received customs.”²⁸

Looking then to Nietzsche’s layout of the project he undertakes,

“We need a critique of moral values; the value of these values is for the first time to be called into question—and for this purpose a knowledge is necessary of the conditions and circumstances out of which these values grew, and under which they experienced their evolution and their distortion ... This knowledge has neither existed up to the present time nor is even now generally desired. The value of these values was taken for granted as an indisputable fact. No one has ever doubted that the ‘good man’ is of higher value than the ‘evil man’ ... What if the converse were the truth?”²⁹

We see that this is precisely the project Pascal describes and warns against. Against undertaking this project Pascal tells us, “The wisest of legislators used to say men must often be deceived for their own good”³⁰, the custom (slave morality) which Nietzsche undoes, Pascal says “we must see that it is regarded as authentic and eternal”³¹, and that its origins “must be hidden if we do not want it soon to end”³². We see here that Pascal knew of the genealogy of morals, understood its arbitrariness and cautioned against uncovering its roots.

Reason and Skepticism

Another interesting parallel between Nietzsche and Pascal’s thought concerns what reason can do for us - what we can get from reason. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, we are met with the skeptical position that Nietzsche holds³³, reason he explains is incapable of determining its own boundaries, for an instrument cannot be used to measure itself³⁴. This realization he holds as an undoing of the Cartesian first truth, explaining in §16 that the ‘I think’ is not an absolute foundation, that what it is is a ‘want’ or ‘feeling’, and in §17 that there can be no immediate certainties. The self is not something rational for Nietzsche, but instead a non-rational drive, a willing. In one of the posthumous fragments he says, “the intensity of consciousness is inversely proportional to the ease and speed of cerebral transmission”³⁵, that instinct is the first to arrive and reason comes only later; Pascal expressed this same priority of ‘instinct’³⁶ over reason when he said “thoughts come at random, and go at random. No device for holding on to them or for having them”³⁷. Similarly, Nietzsche says, “nothing is easier to wipe away than the effect of a

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Preface §6.

³⁰ Pascal, *Pensees* 60

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Book I, §15–§17

³⁴ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Book Three, 473

³⁵ Nietzsche, *Unpublished Fragments from the Period of Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

³⁶ I believe there is an argument to be made that when Pascal speaks of the ‘reasons of the heart’ (*Pensées* 423), he is talking about something analogous to Nietzsche’s will; but this is beyond the scope of my paper.

³⁷ Pascal, *Pensées* 542

dialectician... For dialectics cannot afford us any certainty of metaphysical truth”³⁸ and in *Human all too Human* ‘the role’ he says ‘becomes truth’³⁹.

It is with this skeptical position that Nietzsche rejects the ontological argument and other metaphysical arguments – they are beyond the scope of reason. Instead of reason’s priority, in *Twilight of the Idols* he says, “the body must be persuaded first”⁴⁰, a similar sentiment to Pascal’s ‘Il faut s’abêtir’ in the wager⁴¹ or where he asks, “what are our natural principles but habitual principles?”⁴². On the same lines as Nietzsche, he rejects reason whose last step he says is “the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it,”⁴³ and that, “contradiction is no more an indication of falsehood than lack of it is an indication of truth”⁴⁴. Pascal, like Nietzsche rejects all the proofs for God and metaphysical arguments⁴⁵. Adopting instead a skepticism and placing reason as subordinate to something greater, for Nietzsche the will and for Pascal faith.

Proving God

One wonders on what grounds I hold that Pascal adopts a skeptical position with regards to the existence of God, after all is Pascal not to be credited for one of the more popular ‘proofs’ for God? One he calls ‘démonstratif’⁴⁶. To answer this, it is necessary to understand what the wager does, an understanding of its *mechanism*, which will also bring to light exactly how similar Nietzsche’s thought is to Pascal’s.

In its shortest form, Pascal’s wager says, “I should be more afraid of being mistaken and then finding out Christianity is true than of being mistaken in believing it to be true”⁴⁷. The wager is not an argument for the existence of God, it is unlike metaphysical proofs which are “so remote from human understanding and so involved that they can make no impact”⁴⁸, instead we see that a necessary premise to Pascal’s ‘demonstration’ is the impossibility to conclude whether or not God exists⁴⁹.

Evidently then, the skeptical position can be maintained - but if not a proof for God, then what is the wager? The wager says only that the one who bets on God has made a smarter decision – it is only an argument that we **should believe not a proof**⁵⁰. The question that necessarily follows is that of how one can place a bet on God. Or more accurately, how it is conceivable to *choose to believe* in God when one adopts an epistemic position that rests on the impossibility of such knowledge.

³⁸ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, The Problem of Socrates §6

³⁹ Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*

⁴⁰ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, Skirmishes in a War with the Age §47 (Translated. Anthony M. Ludovici)

⁴¹ Pascal, *Pensées* 418

⁴² Ibid., 125

⁴³ Ibid., 188 (Though not classified under ‘The Wager’ in the Krailsheimer translation, I think it is fair to think Pascal is talking about the same thing)

⁴⁴ Ibid., 177

⁴⁵ Arguments that like the Ontological Argument that attempt to use reason to discover ‘truths’ beyond its scope.

⁴⁶ Pascal, *Pensees*, 418

⁴⁷ Ibid., 387

⁴⁸ Ibid., 190

⁴⁹ Ibid., 418

⁵⁰ In Cartesian terms, this gives us neither scientia nor cognition (See: Reply No. 3 in the Second set of Objections & Replies to the Meditations)

Habits and Passions

The answer to this question lies in Pascal explaining that “reason works slowly...that it is constantly nodding or straying because all its principles are not present”, instead since “feeling does not work like that, but works instantly, and is always ready”, we must “put our faith in feeling, or it will always be vacillating”⁵¹, to understand what Pascal means by “le sentiment” (feeling) here, we return to the wager⁵² where Pascal explains that we must begin by “diminishing our passions” and that “faith comes from habit”. Faith for Pascal is in no way a product of reason - all that reason hints us towards is its incapacity, hence “reason’s last step is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it”. The Wager then only points towards the necessity to leave reason behind to make oneself stupid so that “the heart can follow *its reasons* of which reason knows nothing”⁵³.

Nietzsche’s *Twilight of the Idols*, expresses this same Pascalian principle - Nietzsche explains the reason “the Greeks remain the *foremost cultural event* in history”, for their destiny began at the “correct point”, which is “*not* in the “soul””, but instead “is the body, gesture, diet, physiology...” from which the rest follow, it is this difference that makes Christianity “the greatest misfortune of humanity”⁵⁴. This is also the mistake of Plato to which Nietzsche points in *Beyond Good and Evil*⁵⁵, and why Plato for Nietzsche has *stood truth on its head*⁵⁶.

What makes Pascal the only logical Christian though is precisely his recognition of this - his discussion of the automaton explains that we must make both parts of us believe, “The mind by reasons, which need only be seen once in a lifetime, and the automaton by habit”⁵⁷, and his explanation of how virtues are acquired, “one accustoms oneself to inward virtues by outward habits”⁵⁸ anticipating Nietzsche who says:

“Morality results from compulsion, it is indeed itself one long compulsion to which obedience is rendered in order that pain may be avoided. At first it is but custom, later free obedience and finally almost instinct. At last it is (like everything habitual and natural) associated with pleasure—and is then called virtue.”⁵⁹

The overlap in the two thinker’s conception of values underscores the impact that Pascal’s thought must have had on Nietzsche. There remains though a final aspect of their thought to be considered, namely how despite all these almost tragic conclusions that reason leads us to, we may continue to live.

⁵¹ Ibid., 821

⁵² Ibid., 418

⁵³ Ibid., 423. (My Emphasis)

⁵⁴ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, Forays of an Untimely Man §47 (This one, unlike the previous one is from the Stanford collection)

⁵⁵ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Preface

⁵⁶ I failed at finding a direct reference for these words, but am quoting you from class (I hope this is acceptable)

⁵⁷ Pascal, *Pensées*, 821

⁵⁸ Ibid., 912

⁵⁹ Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human* §99

On Living

Nietzsche's doctrine of the Eternal Recurrence⁶⁰ takes center stage in his philosophical thought and is the *prophecy* that allows us to live post-nihilism; Zarathustra declares it:

“Wanted ye ever once to come twice; said ye ever: “Thou pleasest me, happiness! Instant! Moment!” then wanted ye ALL to come back again! All anew, all eternal, all enlinked, enlaced and enamoured, Oh, then did ye LOVE the world, Ye eternal ones, ye love it eternally and for all time: and also unto woe do ye say: Hence! Go! but come back! FOR JOYS ALL WANT— ETERNITY!”

And,

“Sing now yourselves the song, the name of which is “Once more,” the signification of which is “Unto all eternity!””⁶¹

Zarathustra teaches us that with this doctrine we can write for ourselves our own meanings, that we can choose for ourselves what our values are and that concepts may be whatever we *will* them to be. Thus, Nietzsche restores for us meaning when Christianity with its unattainably high values destroys them. The only way to live ‘meaningfully’ for Nietzsche is by the ‘Will to Power’, which through its creative force sculpts the world as it *wills*.

Pascal's solution with the wager uses the same method but arrives at the opposite conclusion⁶². There are two things to consider in his solution to the skeptical problem reason brings forth: a. that we can decide for ourselves what we choose to believe and b. that we resort to custom. It is ‘a’ that is echoed in Nietzsche's solution – our ability to ‘condition’ ourselves into belief through habit permits us to resolve our desperate situation⁶³ and offers a way out of skepticism. On the other hand ‘b’ is deeply antithetical to Nietzsche's ‘Will to Power’, Pascal in asking us to diminish our passions encourages us to return to custom, he tells us that the wager is of use only to the one who already possesses faith in his heart – Nietzsche tells us to do the exact opposite⁶⁴ – through realizing the origin of our values, he asks that we reconstruct them and this begins with first destroying them while Pascal asks that we instead preserve these same values.

We find here the answer to the question from the *Letter to Brandes* with which we began our inquiry: it is ‘1’ that Nietzsche speaks of when he says that Pascal has taught him infinitely and ‘2’ when he says Pascal is antagonistic to his deepest instincts.

⁶⁰ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* §341

⁶¹ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, The Drunken Song, 12 (Trans. Thomas Commons)

⁶² I would like to say that: Nietzsche affirmed life by denying faith/custom, while Pascal (in Nietzschean terms) affirmed custom/faith by denying life.

⁶³ I deliberately frame this with phrases borrowed from Nietzsche and Pascal to demonstrate the similarity.

⁶⁴ See: Leberton, “Nietzsche, Pascal et Le Suicide Du Sens Historique”, 2019

As a final note, I find it rather amusing that Nietzsche would likely have hated everything about this work: it performs the exact form of historical analysis that he condemns in his *Uses and Abuses of History*, it is structured in the ‘customary’ manner with little creative contribution from the will, and it is in exactly that type of academic setting that he expresses detest for in *Schopenhauer as Educator*.

Works Cited

- Brandes, Georg. Friedrich Nietzsche. London: William Heinemann, 1914.
- Leberton, Lucy. "Nietzsche et 'le principe de Pascal 'il faut s'abêtir.'"" *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, vol. 4, no. 104, 2019.
- "Nietzsche, Pascal et le Suicide du Sens Historique." *Perspektiven der Philosophie*, vol. 45, 2019, pp. 122–145.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Translated by Helen Zimmern, 1886. The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Stanford University Press.
- Dawn of Day*. Translated by John McFarland Kennedy, London: T. N. Foulis, 1911.
- Human, All Too Human*. Translated by Helen Zimmern. The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Stanford University Press.
- Letter to Georg Brandes, 20 Nov. 1888. In Friedrich Nietzsche by George Brandes, 1914.
- On the Genealogy of Morals*. Translated by Horace B. Samuel. The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Stanford University Press, 1887.
- Posthumous Fragments, 1884–1887. Various translations from online sources.
- The Gay Science*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Stanford University Press, 1882.
- The Will to Power*. Edited and translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, New York: Vintage Books, 1967.
- Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Translated by Thomas Common. The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Stanford University Press, 1883–85.
- Twilight of the Idols*. Translated by Anthony M. Ludovici. London: T. N. Foulis, 1911.
- Unpublished Fragments from the Period of Thus Spake Zarathustra. The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Stanford University Press.
- Pascal, Blaise. *Pensées*. Translated by A. J. Krailsheimer. Penguin Classics, 1966. (Based on the Lafuma edition.)