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GILSON AND PASCAL

In this paper I highlight aspects of Étienne Gilson's (1884–1978) understanding of Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) to argue that in a fundamental sense Gilson became Pascal's heir.

Pascal played a prominent role in Gilson's choice of career by showing him that he could expect more of philosophy than the "amazingly gratuitous arbitrariness" Gilson found in the idealism of Descartes and Léon Brunschvicg:

> I loved Pascal and I knew whole pages of his *Pensées* by heart. True enough, Pascal was known to me as an author in literature, and it was as such that I had learned to admire him. But Pascal was also a philosopher, though I always found him writing, not about notions or "ideas" like Descartes, but about real objects, things, actually existing beings. No one was less inclined "to think about thinking." It was in this direction, as I believed, that one should look to avoid despairing of philosophy. So I gave up the dream of a life devoted to the study and teaching of the humanities . . . and I went to study philosophy at the Faculty of Letters in the University of Paris.[1]

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[1] Étienne Gilson, *The Philosopher and Theology*, trans. Cécile Gilson (New York: Random House, 1962), 18. Gilson's discussions of his professors at the Sorbonne (Id., 20–41) leave little doubt that, as a student, he was repeatedly exposed to Pascal's thought. Gilson followed Professor Delbos' course on French philosophy which included Pascal. See Victor Delbos, *La philosophie française* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit, 1921), 49–90. Frédéric Raugh, another of Gilson's professors, authored an important article on "La philosophie de Pascal," *Annales de la Faculté de Bordeaux*, 2 (1892), reprinted in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 30:2 (1923): 307–344. Professor Brunschvicg, who edited Pascal's works and taught at the Sorbonne while Gilson was a student there, interpreted Pascal as a practical rather than a rational genius, interested in the specific and the concrete. See Léon Brunschvicg, *Le Génie*

The young Gilson "was already plagued with the incurable meta-physical disease they call '*chosisme*,' that is cross materialism" or thinking about things, not ideas.[2]

Gilson loved to read Pascal.[3] When Gilson was a prisoner of war, he lectured on him;[4] he cited Pascal frequently throughout his long career to make precise, or illustrate, philosophical points;[5] and he published a few articles on Pascal in the 1920's and 1930's. But Gilson waited until he was almost eighty years old to provide us his most extensive treatment of Pascal dealing with his life in an article entitled "Pascal le Baroudeur" ("Pascal the Combatant"), published in 1962[6] and devoting a chapter in his *Modern Philosophy: Descartes to Kant*, published the following year to discuss Pascal's thought.[7] Gilson concentrated on five main areas of Pas-

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de Pascal (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1924), 50. Gilson's more mature treatment of Descartes' "idealism" became more nuanced: "The world, the structure of which Descartes intends to explain, is not to him a product of his own mind; in this sense, his philosophy is a realism. On the other hand, his interpretation of the universe goes from mind to things; . . . to that extent, then, it shares in the nature of idealism. Those who like labels could perhaps call Cartesianism a methodological idealism, or an idealism of method. Whether, in philosophy, an idealistic method can justify realistic conclusions is of course a problem beyond the competence of mere history" (Étienne Gilson and Thomas Langan, *Modern Philosophy: Descartes to Kant* (New York: Random House, 1963), 59–60).

[2] For Gilson's "*chosisme*," see Kenneth L. Schmitz, *What has Clio to do with Athena? Étienne Gilson: Historian and Philosopher*, The Étienne Gilson Series 10 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1987), 7–14.

[3] Armand Maurer, "The Legacy of Étienne Gilson," in *One Hundred Years of Thomism: Aeterni Patris and Afterwards, A Symposium*, ed. Victor B. Brezik (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1981), 43.

[4] When taken prisoner at Bois de Ville-devant-Chaumant in February 1916, Gilson was detained at Burg-bei-Magdeburg. He "entertained the officers in both camps with lectures on Bergson, in which he contrasted Aquinas, Descartes, and Comte, who make a rational 'effort to exhaust the real,' with, Bonaventure, Pascal, and Bergson, as philosophers who attempt 'to attain the real' suprarationally" (Francesca Aran Murphy, *Art and Intellect in the Philosophy of Étienne Gilson* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 68).

[5] For example, the numerous references to Pascal in Étienne Gilson's: *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy,* trans. A. H. C. Downes (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937); *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938); *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*, The Richards Lectures at the University of Virginia 1937 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941); and *God and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941).

[6] *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* (12 July 1962): 1, 7.

[7] Gilson and Langan, *Modern Philosophy*, 108–126. Although this collaborative volume makes no mention of who authored which chapters, "[t]he following were written by Langan: Montaigne, Bacon, Hobbes, Descartes (ethics section), Malebranche, Spinoza, Leibniz, Cambridge Platonists, Newton, Berkeley, Hume, d'Alembert, Diderot, Lessing, Herder,

cal's thought which I will explore. My concluding section asesses the similarities between Pascal and Gilson.

Method

Pascal's method of geometry operated within a realism. It became a major distinguishing characteristic between Pascal and Descartes. Like Descartes, Pascal thought that the true method to natural knowledge was mathematical. But unlike Descartes, who used algebraic geometry to try and solve all problems, Pascal was not interested in trying to develop a speculative science of nature and deduce it *a priori*. "Pascal wanted to think mathematically *within* experienced physical reality."[8] Gilson considered this one of the "deepest tendencies" of Pascal's mind, a mind that proceeded "step by step in its investigation of a fundamentally *unpredictable* nature." Pascal did not pursue Descartes' *a priori* geometry because he was not interested in the results it allowed one to achieve, a theoretical physics. Instead of following Descartes and making all knowledge as evident as mathematics, Pascal imposed upon all knowledge the limitations of geometry itself. Human knowledge assumes the certainty of geometry if it limits itself to strictly demonstrating consequences that are demonstrable, starting from principles that are naturally evident. But, Pascal maintained, we cannot define all terms either in geometry (e.g., "number," "space," "motion"), or in all the other fields of knowledge (e.g., the philosopher's definitions of "man," "time," "motion").[9]

Spirit of Finesse and Spirit of Geometry

For Pascal the highest quality of the mind is universality and the ideal man is the perfect "honnête homme," a truly integrated, or all around man equally at home speaking of mathematics or literature, of ethics and theology, and never making a show of his knowledge. Usually men do not enjoy such universality and are divided into two classes. Some possess the spirit of geometry and are gifted in mathematics while others enjoy the spirit of *finesse* and are gifted in conducting the human affairs of everyday.

Kant. Gilson wrote all the rest" (Letter of Armand Maurer to Richard Fafara, 27 Nov 1998 (unpublished)).

[8] Gilson and Langan, *Modern Philosophy*, 109.

[9] Blaise Pascal, *De l'esprit géométrique*, in Blaise Pascal, *Pensées et Opuscules*, ed. Léon Brunschvicg (Paris: Hachette, 1897), 164–169.

In so far as the mind apprehends principles by a sort of simple, comprehensive, instinctual sight, it does so by "*coeur*" or "heart," the source of understanding and loving in the human person. Those with the spirit of geometry have hard, inflexible views. Once they *see* the principles far removed from common use, they see them clearly, and since they are clear it is hard to go astray in reasoning about them. The difficulty is *seeing* the principles first. The reverse is true with the spirit of finesse. Principles are in common use and there for everyone to see, but they are subtle and so numerous that it takes good eyes to see them. It is almost impossible to miss some of them and, as we know, omitting one principle inevitably leads to error.

Trying to open up the minds of those having a spirit of finesse to the truths of geometry is difficult. Take, for example, the notion of the infinite, a fundamental notion, signifying a property common to all things in nature. It can only be grasped by the heart and not demonstrated. When grasped, it divides into two infinities present in all things: an infinity of magnitude and an infinity of parvitude. Infinite magnitude is found in motion, space, and time, for example, but each one of these also contains infinite parvitude and can also be conceived as still smaller than it is. The infinity of parvitude is not easily conceived and some, because they cannot picture a content divisible to infinity, conclude that it is not actually divisible.[10] This is man's natural disease, i.e., believing that he always grasps the truth directly and denying all that he cannot understand. Gilson commented that in arguing for the reverse it seems that Pascal's epistemology was tainted by his Jansenism.[11] Because this twofold infinity generally belongs to all

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[10] Shortly after he published his volume on *Modern Philosophy*, Gilson made the point that some consider philosophy as reaching arbitrary positions, "and indeed it does, because it is reaching the primitive facts that are principles . . . Paul Valéry detested metaphysics and stopped short at the moment of crossing its threshold, so he included all such certitudes in a class of his own making, which he ironically called that of the 'vague things.' Now these notions are not vague, but primary and therefore necessary, which is something different. They are not clearly seen precisely because they are what makes us see. Each one of them is 'an impossibility-of-thinking-otherwise' which gives access to a distinct order of intelligibility. Principles should be accepted for the light they shed just as, in the darkness, a lamp brightens itself along with the rest" (Étienne Gilson, *The Arts of the Beautiful* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), 76–77).

[11] The bareness of Pascal's ideas can "cause them to appear as the products of a Jansenist mind," but if Pascal has "a Jansenist temperament" he never submits "to a pure Jansenist belief" (Wallace Fowlie, *Clowns and Angels: Studies in Modern French Literature* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1943), 57–58). Gilson concluded that while there are certainly obscure texts in the *Pensées*, Pascal disagreed with the core of Jansenism itself: "Jésus-Christ

things, because it belongs to number which Scripture tells us is found in all things (Wis., 11:21), one can say that all things are found between nothingness and infinity and, more importantly, at an infinite distance from these two extremes. These truths, the very foundations and principles of geometry, cannot be demonstrated; they must be seen. Pascal's philosophy was an extension of his scientific view of the world in which everything was intelligible except for the principles "from which is derived its very intelligibility."[12]

Pyrrhonism and Dogmatism

Not only does man himself lie between two infinities, above all does his knowledge. Truth lies in neither skepticism nor dogmatism. Not all is uncertain, and arguing that nothing is known is false. The principles of demonstrations apprehended, or seen to be true by the "heart," are absolutely certain and more than enough to overcome skepticism such as that entertained by Descartes. The natural evidence of principles renders Descartes' doubting whether he was awake or asleep impossible.[13] As for dogmatism, it is not the case that every proposition is rationally demon-

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est mort pour tous les élus, non pour tous les hommes." Gilson's method for dealing with the question of whether or not Pascal was a Jansenist consisted in separating the case of Jansenius from that of Port Royal, defining Jansenism by the doctrine of Jansenius himself, and comparing the text of Pascal's *Pensées* with that of Jansenius' *Augustinus*. See Étienne Gilson, review of Jacques Chevalier's *Pascal* (Paris: Plon, 1922) in *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 97 (1924): 309–311.

[12] Gilson and Langan, *Modern Philosophy*, 116. See Pascal, *De l'esprit géométrique*, 173–184.

[13] Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. & ed. A. J. Krailsheimer (Maryland, Penguin Books, 1966), #110, and #282 in Brunschvicg's edition (Pascal, *Pensées et Opuscules*). Gilson considered Brunschvicg's edition to be "accessible and priceless," but scholars now consider the arrangement of Pascal's fragments in M. Louis Lafuma's edition of the *Pensées* (Pascal, *Oeuvres completes*, Préface Henri Gouhier (Paris: Seuil, 1963)) to be closer to the original order of Pascal, knowing full well that no order can ever be final because only with publication does the form of a work become fixed. Henceforth, I cite the *Pensées* by fragment number from Krailsheim's (K) edition (who based his ordering on Lafuma's) followed by the number in Brunschvicg's (B) edition. The unfinished and fragmentary nature of the *Pensées* does not mean that more so than with other texts all interpretations of the fragments must be partial and tentative. Gilson can be seen as approaching them in the "right spirit" and finding an underlying coherence to them by describing Pascal's method and finding "not only recurrent problems but also reappearing lines of attack on them, tendencies that bespeak something conscious and deliberate" (Hugh M. Davidson, *Pascal and the Arts of the Mind* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1993), xiii).

strable since the principles cannot be demonstrated even though they are true. Not being able to prove everything, such as that we are not dreaming, simply shows the weakness of our reason. It does not prove the uncertainty of all our cognitions as the Pyrrhonians pretend it does. Thus, Pascal stands in the middle—as a skeptic to the dogmatist and a dogmatist to the skeptic.

The Human Condition: Man in the Middle

Like all of creation, man bears the mark of God's infinity and infinity is twofold, that of parvitude and magnitude. Man finds himself situated between these two infinities. Man is nothing when compared with infinity yet a giant compared to the smallest of known insects or atomic particle, a whole when compared to that nothingness which is impossible to reach. Man finds himself suspended between the two abysses of infinity, between two mysteries: the nothingness from which he was created and infinity in which he is drowned between two infinitely distant extremes in all orders of reality and of knowledge. Both man's origin and his end escape his sight.

"[O]ur intelligence holds, in the order of intelligible things, the same rank as our body in the order of nature." Just as our senses can perceive neither extreme in their objects, so also too much truth blinds the mind which is why prime principles are so hard to grasp. And since nothing can stabilize finite man, always infinitely distant from two extremes, whether or not we have a little more or less of anything, including knowledge, doesn't matter.[14]

Man and God

Endowed with a body like beasts, and with a mind like angels, man, for Pascal, is neither angel nor beast. These two components of human nature are not equal. By his body man is an exceedingly small thing in nature, whereas by his mind he can encompass nature. Frail as a reed as a material being, man is still a thinking reed and, although he can easily be crushed by the universe, he is still greater than that which can crush him because he would know that he is being crushed, whereas the universe knows nothing about it. Man's greatness lies in thought, admirable in its nature but ridiculous in its defects.

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[14] *Pensée*s, K #199, B #72; Gilson and Langan, *Modern Philosophy*, 119.

For this reason, man's greatness can be seen from his misery and *vice versa*. In 1646, at the age of twenty-four, Pascal entered into sickness and suffering and underwent his first conversion while discovering God. He renounced all other studies to concentrate on studying the law of God and living only for God. In the remaining fifteen years of his life, Pascal deepened that discovery, and concluded that sickness placed him in his natural condition because it is there that God wished him to be so as to summon him more surely to Him.[15] Pascal's sister summarized the thought of her illustrious brother as follows: knowing Christ is not only knowing God and our misery but rather knowing, with our misery, the God who delivers us from it.[16]

By nature man wants to be happy and rid himself of his misery. Pascal argued that the universality of this desire coupled with man's inability to achieve fulfillment must have a reason, namely, that man once had true happiness but now has merely a vestige of it. Having possessed perfect happiness, man now tries in vain to fill the void caused by the loss of this infinite which can never be regained via the finite objects of diversion at man's disposal.

For Pascal, only religion and the doctrine of original sin can account for the contradictions inherent now in human nature. Many refuse this answer because they find no acceptable demonstration of God's existence. But the truth of God's existence, Pascal maintained, is a principle not a conclusion. God is perceived by the "heart" of man, not his reason; such is faith.[17] As for original sin, it is "an astounding thing that the mystery the farthest removed from our knowledge, which is that of the transmission of

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[15] Gilson, "Pascal le Baroudeur," 1, 7. In commenting on Henri Gouhier's *magnum opus*, *Blaise Pascal: Commentaires* (Paris: Vrin, 1966, 2nd edition 1971) Gilson wrote his former student on 9 June 1966: "Ne l'ayant retrouvé dans aucun livre où j'ai parlé de Pascal, j'en viens à penser que ce doit avoir été dans un article sur Pascal écrit pour *Les Nouvelles Litté-raires*. Je ne sais plus où est cet article, mais je crois me souvenir que je faisais de lui un barouder et, un peu comme Jacques Maritain, une sorte d'aventurier de l'esprit" ("Lettres d'Étienne Gilson à Henri Gouhier," choisies et présentées par G. Prouvost, *Revue Thomiste* XCIV: *Autour d'Ètienne Gilson: Études et documents* (1994): 476, n. 3). When Gilson discussed Pascal, he remained true to his principle that "the very substance of a history of philosophy is philosophy itself" (Gilson and Langan, *Modern Philosophy*, viii). Each chapter in each volume of his *History of Philosophy* emphasized the doctrinal content of each philosopher in the text. Biographical and bibliographical information limited to what is needed to embark on any one of the philosophers, schools, or periods represented was relegated to the back note section of the book.

[16] *La vie de Monsieur Pascal écrite par Madame Périer, sa soeur*, Pascal, *Pensées et Opus-cules*, 21.

sin, be a thing without which we can have no knowledge of ourselves!" How Adam's sin could have rendered guilty men so utterly foreign to it is a mystery; but supposing it true renders the rest clear. Pascal concluded that "man is more inconceivable without this mystery, than this mystery is inconceivable to man."[18]

Gilson understood the opposition between skepticism and dogmatism as the basic philosophical problem for Pascal. Dogmatists like the Stoics considered man uncorrupted so they sought refuge in pride; others like the skeptics considered human nature so corrupt that they could not help surrendering to evil. Only another supreme mystery—Jesus Christ and the grace of redemption—could liberate man from this inner contradiction, the source of many others. Only the Christian religion can cure these two vices.

> For it teaches the just, whom it raises up to participation in the divinity itself, that even in that sublime state, they still bear the source of all corruption which exposes them, throughout their whole lives to error, misery, death, and sin; and it cries out to the most ungodly that they are able to receive the grace of their Redeemer . . . Who can refuse belief and worship to such heavenly enlightenment?[19]

For Gilson, only the author of such a philosophy could write, along with his essays on the method of geometry, sublime pages on the *Mystery of Jesus*, and carry on himself the *Mémorial*[20] as a perpetual reminder of his greatest mystical experience on the night of 23 November 1654. The *Mémorial*, sewn in the lining of his garment and transferred when he changed clothes, was found after his death. Pascal's sister considered the collection of fragments called the *Pensée*s, the scraps of paper, the "debris" found on the floor of the room in which Pascal died, as parts of his war machine against atheism.[21] Gilson concluded that Pascal's life was a for-

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[17] *Pensée*s, K #424, B #278. See Henri Gouhier, "Le coeur qui sent les trois dimensions," in *La Passion de la raison: Hommage à Ferdinand Alquié* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1983), 203–216.

[18] *Pensée*s, K #131, B #434. "Pascal persists in remaining for the French, the clearest utterance which has been given to Christian psychology, and his thoughts, perhaps by their very incompleteness, appear inexhaustible and incapable of being fathomed in any absolute sense" (Wallace Fowlie, *Clowns and Angels*, 54).

[19] *Pensée*s, K #208, B #435.

[20] Id., K #919, B #553. The text of the *Mémorial* (K, #913; Pascal, *Pensée*s *et Opuscules*, 142–43) was found sewn into Pascal's coat after his death.

mal summons that engages each one of us.[22] Unfortunately, Pascal's fundamental experience is our own. What response should we propose if we refuse that which he gave? There scarcely remains the refusal, "No, I will never be your man because your man is a thinking reed."[23] Regardless of what man is made of, in the end each of us breaks, and the thought of that end is not agreeable to us. Each of us responds to Pascal as he pleases but, inevitably, all respond because in this combatant there is a *provocateur*.[24]

Pascal and Gilson

Citing Pascal's apparent disdain for philosophy—"we do not believe the whole of philosophy to be worth one hour's effort"[25]—some deny that Pascal was a philosopher.[26] Gilson disagreed. Pascal was a philosopher,

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[21] After discussing the unedited work that we today call the *Pensées*, originally entitled *Apologie de la religion Chrétienne*, Mme. Périer wrote: "Je vous renvoie donc à cet ouvrage, et j'ajoute seulement ce qu'il est important de rapeller ici, que toutes les différentes réflexions que mon frère fit sur les miracles lui donnèrent beaucoup de nouvelles lumières sur la religion . . . et ce fut à cette occasion qu'il se sentit tellement animé contre les athées, que voyant dans les lumières que Dieu lui avait données de quoi les convaincre et les confondre sans resources, il s'appliqua à cet ouvrage, dont les parties qu'on a ramassées nous font avoir tant de regrets qu'il n'ait pas pu les rassembler lui-même, et, avec tout ce qu'il y aurait pu ajouter encore, en faire un composé d'une beauté achevée" (*La vie de Monsieur Pascal*, Pascal: *Pensées et Opuscules*, 19).

[22] Pascal "speaks to us as a human being. He confronts the problems that pose themselves to every human being, and he uses the language of every man. He does distinguish himself by writing magnificently and he pushes questions further than most. There are so many learned men who string together complicated words and who avoid the essential. Pascal takes problems head-on, and he does not stop halfway. He belongs to those who are not afraid" (Philippe Beneton, "Elements of an Apologia," *Perspectives on Political Science* 31:1 (2002): 27).

[23] *Pensées*, K #200, B #347.

[24] "Pascal is one of those writers who will be and who must be studied afresh by men in every generation. It is not he who changes, but we who change . . . The history of opinions of Pascal and of men of his stature is a part of the history of humanity. That indicates his permanent importance . . . I can think of no Christian writer, not Newman even, more to be commended than Pascal to those who doubt, but who have the mind to conceive, and the sensibility to feel, the disorder, the futility, the meaninglessness, the mystery of life and suffering, and who can only find peace through a satisfaction of the whole being" (T. S. Eliot, "Introduction," in Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (New York: Dutton,1958), xix).

[25] *Pensées*, K #887, B #78.

[26] See, for example, Henri Gouhier (*Henri Gouhier se souvient... Ou comment on devient historien des idées*, eds. Giulia Belgioioso and Marie-Louise Gouhier (Paris: J Vrin, 2005), 49–50; "Pascal et la Philosophie," *Pascal: Textes du Tricentenaire par François Mauriac, Louis de Broglie, Daniel-Rops, Henri Massis...* (Paris: Fayard, 1963), 323; and *Les Grandes*

a Christian philosopher, as Gilson understood that term, i.e., the starting point of Pascal's meditations and the whole spirit thereof, even as a philosophy, is inseparable from Christian revelation.[27] For Gilson, a deep religious life, a soul in search of the divine, was at the origin of Saint Thomas Aquinas' powerful philosophical theses and the same held true of Pascal.

In his famous debate with Professor Brunschvicg on the notion of Christian philosophy, Gilson specified "the impact of Christian faith on Pascal's philosophical positions." For example, Saint Paul had known what Pascal called "the misery of man." Gilson thought that this notion, Pascal's point of departure, could have been introduced by a non-philosophical route; while there was not philosophy in the text of Saint Paul, it could have generated a philosophy.[28] Gilson also cited Pascal's speculations on the two infinities which certainly are of a philosophical order and can only be explained in a Christian universe because the notion of a positive infini-

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Avenues de la Pensée Philosophique en France depuis Descartes (Louvain: Universitaires de Louvain, 1966), 33–35, 46–47); Emile Bréhier (*Histoire de la philosophie*, (Félix Alcan, Paris 1929), II, 127) and Fredinand Alquié (*Signification de la philosophie* (Paris: Hachette 1971), 129). "Pascal did not want to be a philosopher;" he "did not want to think of himself as one, and it is probably fair to say that he wasn't one at least not in the sense in which the term was used in his day" (Leszek Kolakowski, *Why is there Something Rather than Nothing? 23 Questions from Great Philosophers*, trans. Agnieska Kolakowska (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 123, x). Nevertheless, Kolakowski included Pascal in his book about "great philosophers." Vincent Carraud (*Pascal et la philosophie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1992), 26–28) argued that the attribution of a philosophy to Pascal is a pseudo problem for three reasons. It is at least paradoxical to do so when Pascal derides philosophy; the insufficiency of philosophy cannot be established in philosophy. If one extends the notion of physics and identifies it with philosophy the question of the status of philosophy in Pascal is not raised. Finally, if philosophy is taken to mean a general vision of the world or a conglomeration of knowledge, the question is already resolved. Victor Delbos, who had a significant impact on Gilson's thought, placed Pascal beside Descartes as one of the great representatives of a different line of French thought. "[S]i pour lui [Pascal] il n'a pas voulu être philosophe, ses *Pensées* n'en constituent pas moins une philosophie, et il apporte des vues nouvelles en étudiant la physique, le géométrie, et surtout l'homme" (Delbos, *La philosophie française*, 50). Frederick Copleston considered a variety of possible interpretations of Pascal and, like Gilson, concluded that Pascal is not "a Christian thinker simply in the sense that he is a thinker who is Christian: he is a Christian thinker in the sense that his Christianity is the inspiration of his thought and unifies his outlook on the world and man" (Copleston, *A History of Modern Philosophy*, IV: *Modern Philosophy: From Descartes to Leibniz* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 173).

[27] Gilson and Langan, *Modern Philosophy*, 87.

[28] Gilson, "La notion de philosophie chrétienne," Session of 21 March 1931, *Bulletin de la Société française de Philosophie* (31): 56.

ty had no sense among the Greek philosophers. The notion of perfection and infinity is a Christian notion.[29] In addition, Pascal's acceptance of a supernatural order engendered a philosophical framework because it distinguished the order of thought from the order of charity which is infinitely superior to it.[30] Gilson recognized Pascal's so-called contempt for philosophy as the right of "one of the greatest philosophers, one of the greatest scientists, and one of the greatest artists of all times" to disdain what he surpasses "especially if what he disdains is not so much the thing loved as the excessive attachment which enslaves us to it. Pascal despised neither science nor philosophy, but he never pardoned them for having once hidden from him the most profound mystery of charity."[31]

Philosophically, both Pascal and Gilson were realists, placing the emphasis on "*choses*" or things, not on our ideas of them. Both Pascal and Gilson were convinced that revealed faith stimulates arguments for realism better than any non-Christian philosophy can reach.[32] Both denied the

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[29] See Leo Sweeney, *Divine Infinity in Greek and Medieval Thought* (New York: P. Lang, 1992). In the early 1950's, Gilson initiated Sweeney's work by seeking why medieval authors spoke of God's "being" as itself infinite, a statement found neither in Judaeo-Christian Scriptures nor in Greek philosophers. See also Emilio Brito, *Philosophie Moderne et Christianisme* (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), II, 54–62.

[30] Pensées, K #423, #424; B #278, #279, and Gilson, "La notion de philosophie chrétienne," 82. After arguing that recent scholarship on Pascal (e.g., that of Jean Luc Marion and Vincent Carraud) has "not given Pascal his full due as a theological thinker," Wood contends that Pascal's account of subjectivity is "theologically rich," so much so that "we can read the *Pensées* as a theological text from beginning to end" (William Wood, "What is the Self?: Imitation and Subjectivity in Blaise Pascal's *Pensées*," *Modern Theology* 26:3 (2010): 417–18).

[31] Étienne Gilson, "The Intelligence in the Service of Christ the King," in *A Gilson Reader: Selections from the Writings of Étienne Gilson*, ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1957), 38–39.

[32] "[F]aith, through the influence it wields from above and over reason as reason, makes possible the development of a more fruitful and truer rational activity" (Étienne Gilson, *Thomism: The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Laurence K. Shook and Armand Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2002), 20). Methodologically Gilson followed Saint Thomas as he remained in the Augustinian tradition of *fides quaerens intellectum*. "[O]ne may err because in matters of faith he makes reason precede faith, instead of faith precede reason, as when someone is willing to believe only what he can discover by reason. It should in fact be just the opposite. Thus Hillary says: 'Begin by believing, inquire, press forward, persevere'" (Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the De Trinitate of Boethius*, Q. 2, a.1, resp. in *Faith, Reason and Theology*, trans., with introduction and notes, Armand Maurer (Montmagny: Les Éditions Marquis Ltée, 1987), 38). See also, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II–II, q. 2, art. 4: "Is it necessary to believe what can be proved by natural reason?" The answer is in the affirmative: "We must accept by faith not

possibility of philosophical systems in the sense that we intuit principles on which we construct a house of reason, be it a Cartesian or Thomistic one.[33]

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only what is above reason but also what can be known by reason." The Augustinianism of Thomas Aquinas is often neglected, partly because he does not go to great lengths to prove his theological pedigree—it is assumed in many places. Del Noce described Gilson as infusing an "Augustinian spirit into Thomism." Gilson would have agreed with Del Noce that in the relationship between faith and reason, "the process must go from faith to reason because the God of faith is not the god of reason *plus something else*. There is a leap because all the philosophical cognitions about God added together cannot get us to the redeeming God. For this reason, rather than speaking of a faith that is superimposed on rational knowledge, we ought to speak of a faith that *saves* reason by setting it free from the idolatry of itself, from rationalism" (Augusto Del Noce, "Thomism and the Critique of Rationalism: Gilson and Shestov," *Communio* 25:4 (1998): 734). In discussing Gilson's existential Thomism with an Augustinian spirit, Del Noce wrote: "I said 'infusion of Saint Augustine,' and I was just about to write 'Pascal.' In fact, if we look carefully at Gilson's position, we see that it strikes a blow against the habit of Catholic philosophers who, in the name of a certain Thomism, eliminate Pascal from the history of philosophy and relegate him to apologetics" (Id., 744). Del Noce was convinced that Gilson recognized the "extraordinaire actualité" of Pascal because he admitted "un acte de foi original qui s'accomplit ainsi dans la pensée religieuse comme dans le rationalisme, à la difference que dans la première il est reconnu et declaré, dans le second non." (Augusto Del Noce, "Fede e filosofia secondo Étienne Gilson," AA. VV., *S. Tommaso nella storia dei pensiero* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vatican, 1982), 306–307). For a conceptual comparison of Gilson and Del Noce, see Massimo Borghesi's "Introduction," in Augusto Del Noce, *Mon Cher collègue et ami: Lettres d'Étienne Gilson à Augusto Del Noce* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2011), 7–59.

[33] ". . . Thomism is not a system if by this is meant a global explanation of the world deduced or constructed, in an idealistic manner, from *a priori* principles" (Étienne Gilson, "The Spirit of Thomism," in *A Gilson Reader*, 248). Because of the title of the first three editions of Gilson's classic work *Le Thomisme: Introduction au système de Thomas d'Aquin*, (Strasbourg: Vix, 1919; Paris: Vrin, 1922; Paris: Vrin, 1927), some mistakenly have maintained that initially Gilson interpreted Saint Thomas as having a "system." Gilson used the term to refer to "the hierarchic order of beings reaching from the lowest up through the angelic substances towards God. He was concerned above all to distinguish the Thomistic hierarchy from various Neo-Platonic ones (*Le Thomisme* (1919), 170–174). As to the use of the word 'system' to describe the order of the universe as Saint Thomas understood it, Bréhier (*Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 92 (1921): 147–149)—with the tighter more idealistic meaning of the term 'system' in mind—had already declared it to be no system, but (quoting Gilson's own words (*Le Thomisme* (1919)) 'an ensemble of philosophical demonstrations.' And Gilson himself,—as he became more aware of his own orientation towards the concrete, and perhaps less satisfied with the modern implications and connotations of the term 'system,'—eventually abandon it entirely in the subtitle of *Le Thomisme*" (Schmitz, "What has Clio to do with Athena?," 7–8). In 1920, Gilson may have maintained that philosophy is a systematic representation of the universe, but he also cautioned that "la cohérence parfaite vers laquelle tendent les systèmes philosophiques est une limite idéale que ne rejoint jamais la réalité" (Étienne Gilson, "Essai sur la vie intérieure," *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 89 (1920): 71–74; see also Gilson's "La paix de la sagesse,"

Both viewed the universe as a creation of God and, hence, ultimately ineffable because it originated from a source that surpasses human understanding. Pascal, who knew the nature of scientific explanation, concluded that "[a]ll things hide some mystery; all things are veils which hide God."[34] Gilson agreed and cited Saint Thomas' statement that "God is in all things, in their very depths."[35] With a universe peopled with living essences sprung from a source as secret and rich as their very life, Gilson maintained that Aquinas' world, "despite many superficial dissimilarities," was "continuous with the scientific world of Pascal rather than that of Descartes. In Pascal's world, the imagination would more likely grow weary of producing concepts than nature will tire of providing them." Pascal's physics governed by geometry reduces the ontological reality of the natural world to its quantitative aspects; it does not depend on, or receive help or direction from, either the principles of being used by metaphysics or the principles of substance from natural philosophy. Aquinas regarded the mathematized sciences as a distinct type of science— "intermediate sciences" whose principles are obtained directly through

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Aquinas 3 (1960): 38, n. 5). Following Aristotle and Saint Thomas, philosophy, for Gilson, is a perfection of the mind, a *habitus*, acquired through repeated acts enabling its possessor to demonstrate truths through their causes or principles. See Étienne Gilson, "The Education of a Philosopher," in *Three Quests in Philosophy*, ed. Armand Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Study, 2008), 21–22. See the excellent discussion of this issue by Rev. Gerald B. Phelan, Co-Director of the Institute of Mediaeval Studies and later the first President of the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies (1939–1946), in his "Being and the Metaphysicians," in *From an Abundant Spring*, ed. The Staff of the Thomist (New York: P. J. Kennedy & Sons, 1952), 423–447. Gilson's pupils agreed with him: "Metaphysics is . . . first and foremost . . . a living habit of thinking (in the Aristotelian sense of *habitus...*). Metaphysics is primarily a vital quality and activity of the intellect, and not a collection or systematic organization of data either in print or in the memory. In its own nature metaphysics exists solely in intellects, and not in books or writings, though the name may be used, in a secondary sense, to denote a body of truths known through the metaphysical *habitus*, and to designate a treatise or a course in which metaphysical thinking is communicated" (Joseph Owens, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1963), viii–ix, 25, n. 1). See also, Leo Sweeney, *A Metaphysics of Authentic Existentialism* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1965) 8, 13–14, and Armand A. Maurer, "The Unity of a Science: St. Thomas and the Nominalists," in *St. Thomas Aquinas, 1274–1974, Commemorative Studies* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1974) 2, 269–292.

[34] "Toutes choses couvrent quelque mystère; toutes choses sont des voiles qui couvrent Dieu" (Pascal, "Extraite des Lettres à Mlle de Roannez, fin d'octobre 1656," in *Pensées et Opuscules*, 215).

[35] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 8, a. 1.

observation and abstraction. As such, Pascal's physics can find a place within Thomism.[36]

Gilson's profound appreciation of Pascal resided in his seeing in Pascal's critique of rationalism a bridge that joins Saint Thomas' unity of philosophy and theology. Both Pascal and Gilson considered mystery as the hinge on which reason turns while distinguishing philosophy from religion. Pascal wrote about the infinite distance that separates thought from charity. Gilson propounded an existential Thomism infused with the Augustinian spirit of faith preceding reason and denied that philosophy leads to a redeeming God, or that natural theology transforms faith into knowledge.[37] Both maintained that the Incarnation is the only means for us to understand ourselves,[38] and both shared the view that God's existence is largely independent of philosophical demonstrations that one gives of it since the God of faith is so much more than the God of reason.[39]

Intimately familiar with the charge of giving primacy to faith over reason, Gilson did not find Pascal guilty of fideism. Gilson granted that "it is difficult to know if Pascal would admit, in the present condition of man, demonstrations of the existence of God." Pascal regarded Descartes'

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[36] Gilson, *Thomism*, 425; Joseph Owens, "Saint Thomas Aquinas and Modern Science," in *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, I, Series IV, June 1963 (Ottawa: Royal Society of Canada, 1963), 283–291. For shortcomings of Pascal's overall philosophy made from a Thomistic perspective that Gilson did not note, see James Collins, *God in Modern Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1960), 331–340.

[37] Étienne Gilson, *Constantes philosophiques de l'être* (Paris: Vrin, 1983), 221. For Gilson's antipathy towards rival versions of twentieth century Thomism (Conceptualist-Suarareian, Roman, and Louvainiste), see Murphy, *Art and Intellect*, 49–62.

[38] Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, 216.

[39] Pascal, Pensées K #417, B #548, and Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, 227–228. After 1960, Gilson became less interested in the "ronde des preuves" for God's existence because he was convinced that no philosophy, no natural knowledge of God, could put us in possession, whether it be by one or five ways, of a knowledge of God's existence that belongs to the economy of salvation. "It is true that if the God of revelation exists, he is the Prime Mover, the First Efficient Cause, the First Necessary Being, and everything reason can prove about the First Cause of the universe. But if Yahweh is the Prime Mover, the Prime Mover is not Yahweh. The First Efficient Cause never spoke to me by his prophets, and I do not expect my salvation to come from him. The God in whose existence the faithful believe infinitely transcends the one whose existence is proved by the philosopher. Above all, he is a God of whom philosophy could have no idea . . . The God of reason is the God of science; the God of faith is the God of salvation" (Étienne Gilson, *Christian Philosophy*, trans. Armand Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1993), 11). See Richard Fafara, "A Change in Tone in Étienne Gilson's Christian Philosophy," *New Blackfriars* 94:1051 (2013): 267–277.

philosophy as "useless and uncertain."[40] For Pascal, Descartes' so-called philosophical proofs of the existence of God were not worth very much, both because of their metaphysical intricacy, which is of use to very few, and because the proofs do not imply a knowledge of Christ. For Gilson, this meant not that Pascal had no interest in the rational aspect of the problem but that his real aim was to convince atheists of good reasons for admitting the existence of God.[41] Pascal's famous wager supposes that reason is as unable to prove there is a God as to prove there is not a God. In the absence of proofs, Pascal takes stock of the fact that we have to bet in saying there is no God as much as saying that there is one. "By betting there is a God I gamble finite goods for an infinite one. No hesitation is possible."[42]

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[40] *Pensée*s, B #78, K #887.

[41] Gilson and Langan, *Modern Philosophy*, 483, n. 23. The charge of fideism or an attenuated version of it has been leveled frequently against Pascal. See, for example, Richard H. Popkin, "Fideism," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 3 & 4, ed. Paul Edwards (New York, Macmillan, 1967), 201–202. "Yet in avoiding a rigorous fideism, he [Pascal] himself never makes use of the metaphysical proofs [for the existence of God], nor does he analyze in detail how the natural knowledge of God is obtained. He seldom mentions this knowledge without adding a word of warning about the attendant moral and religious dangers. Instead of approving of such knowledge as supplying a solid groundwork for the life of grace, he invariably treats it as an obstacle to the reception of faith" (Collins, *God in Modern Philosophy*, 330). For an interpretation of Pascal's position on faith and reason being "exactly what Aquinas says," see Peter Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal's Pensées Edited, Outlined, and Exlained* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 235–244. McInerny charged Gilson with blurring the line between philosophy and theology and thus undermining the very cornerstone of Thomas Aquinas' intellectual project. According to McInerny, Gilson suggested that Aquinas' supposedly philosophical insights were really drawn from Biblical revelation and were thus based on faith, making it impossible for Thomistic philosophy to address itself to non-Christians and pushing it into something akin to fideism. See Ralph McInerny, *Praeambula Fidei: Thomism and the God of the Philosophers* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), ix, and Joseph White, *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity* (Washington, D.C.: Sapientia Press, 2009), xxxii, 225. "One can raise the question of whether a kind of fideistic methodology has entered into Gilson's later thinking, since he seems to make the natural, philosophical specification of the human intelligence directly dependent upon the objects we know by the light of faith" (Id., 130–31). Gilson commented: "Le phénomène le plus extraordinaire que je connaisse en ce sens est *Doctor Communis* [an Italian philosophical review] . . . Quand je leur cite du saint Thomas sur la foi, ils m'accusent de fidéisme. Non! Mais de 'pencher dangereusement vers le fidéisme'" (Lettre à H. de Lubac, 1er avril, 1964, *Lettres de M. Étienne Gilson au père de Lubac* (Paris: Cerf, 1986), 54).

[42] After bringing nonbelievers to the edge of a decision, Pascal realized that a person's very constitution—composite nature and concurrence of bodily habits and feelings—prevents one from taking the practical step to place one's life on the side of God. Pascal's advice to the

As one of the last century's most dynamic apologists for Christianity, Gilson drew on Pascal "for his description of the vocation of the Christian intellectual" and how to place "intelligence in the service of Christ." This meant "showing the world that a man can be a man of science, because he is a man of God" with everyone realizing that Catholicism itself is the source of his greatness.[43] This certainly held true of Gilson who, much like a laboratory scientist, examined philosophy within the lab of its history. As one of the best historians of his generation, Gilson authoritatively delineated "the fumblings and the follies of the human mind" which ensure that reason is helpless without religion.[44] He expressed little confidence in the autonomous powers of the intellect.[45] Towards the end of his long career, after disagreeing with excessively rationalist versions of Saint Thomas' thought[46] and propounding what some have

interested was to follow the example of other people who have committed themselves to a Christian way of life. "This will quite naturally bring you to believe, and will make you more docile" [vous abêtira] (*Pensée*s, K #418, B #233). See Étienne Gilson, "Le sens du terme 'abêtir' chez Pascal," *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuse* 1 (1921): 338–344; republished in *Les idées et les lettres* (Paris: Vrin, 1932), 263–274.

[43] Murphy, *Art and Intellect*, 4, 7, 159; Gilson, "The Intelligence in the Service of Christ the King," 43.

[44] This is the main lesson of Gilson's *God and Philosophy*; see Anton C. Pegis' review of this work in *Thought* 17 (1942): 329. Gilson thought that "simply by believing what God has said they [Christians] were finding themselves possessed of all that which they needed in the way of philosophical truth . . . [T]he great majority of Christians who are not philosophers in the technical sense of the word . . . find in the Christian revelation a view of the world, of man, and of his destiny that gives full satisfaction to their reason" (Étienne Gilson, "What is Christian Philosophy," in *A Gilson Reader*, 179). While admitting that it is an exaggeration, some thought Gilson's limited confidence in the autonomous powers of the intellect and Pascal's antipathy toward a natural theism could trigger the thought that in this respect both were tinged by Jansenism; see Maurice Nédoncelle, *Is There a Christian Philosophy?*, trans. Illtyd Trethowan (London: Burns and Oates, 1960), 87. For Gilson's own account of a reviewer of his work *Christianisme et philosophie* (Paris: Vrin, 1936) finding in it "a concealed Jansenism," see his *The Philosopher and Theology*, 82. On Jansenism in Pascal, see note 11 above.

[45] In the sixth and final edition of his lifelong work *Le Thomisme*, Gilson recognized the current paradoxical situation: the proofs for the existence of God St. Thomas wanted to be simple and elementary have become "a 'mystery' for our time; disagreement exists even among Thomists as to their meaning and value; and anyone following St. Thomas' position today that very few can understand the proofs for the existence of God "is suspected of fideism or semi-fideism" (Gilson, *Thomism*, 75).

[46] Pope Benedict XVI did not endorse "the neoscholastic rationalism that was trying to reconstruct the *preambula fidei*." He thought "the approach to faith, with pure rational certainty, by means of rational argument that was strictly independent of any faith, has failed;

called a Pascalian Thomism—because of his taking Thomism into a faith-based theology[47]—Gilson found himself increasingly isolated and excluded "from the society of philosophers."[48] But at the same time, he found himself among good company while maintaining such positions—Saint Thomas and Blaise Pascal being in agreement with him. Both were believers who thought by means of their faith. Neither was willing or tried to separate reason from faith any more than one can separate nature from grace.

GILSON AND PASCAL

SUMMARY

Gilson's early admiration for Pascal as a literary figure evolved into a deep appreciation of him as a Christian philosopher. Pascal showed Gilson that one could expect much more of philosophy than the idealism of René Descartes and Léon Brunschvicg so rampant in France during Gilson's days as a student. Gilson's existential Thomism, which highlighted Augustinian elements in St. Thomas' thought, shares Pascal's realism, his critique of rationalism, his situating philosophy within theology, and his view that the God of faith's existence is largely independent of philosophical demonstrations that one gives of it. Despite many superficial dissimilarities, Gilson found Pascal's scientific worldview continuous with the world of St. Thomas. Pascal, for Gilson, remained a model for the vocation of the Christian intellectual.

KEYWORDS: Gilson, Pascal, Christian philosophy, Thomism, fideism.

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and it cannot be otherwise for any such attempts to do that kind of thing" (Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 136).

[47] Murphy, *Art and Intellect*, 10, 158. The French publisher of Gilson's *oeuvre* also characterized him by using Pascal's terminology when describing Gilson's *Les Idées et les lettres* as "le divertissement d'un philosophe qui sut aussi être 'honnête homme': celui dont le nom reste attaché à des textes plus austères n'a pas négligé de relire, au soir des journées passées sur des commentaires médiévaux d'Aristote, certaines pages de Villon, de Dante, de Rabelais ou de Rousseau, et de les éclairer d'une lumière nouvelle . . ." (www.vrin.fr/book.php?code=9782711680825&search_back=gilson&editor_back=%; accessed on 27.01.2015).

[48] Gilson, *The Philosopher and Theology*, 8.