

AXIOLOGY, SELF-DECEPTION, AND MORAL WRONGDOING IN BLAISE PASCAL'S *PENSÉES*

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ABSTRACT

Blaise Pascal is highly regarded as a religious moralist, but he has rarely been given his due as an ethical theorist. The goal of this article is to assemble Pascal's scattered thoughts on moral judgment and moral wrongdoing into an explicit, coherent account that can serve as the basis for further scholarly reflection on his ethics. On my reading, Pascal affirms an axiological, social-intuitionist account of moral judgment and moral wrongdoing. He argues that a moral judgment is an immediate, intuitive perception of moral value that we willfully disregard in favor of the attractive, though self-deceptive, deliverances of our socially constructed imaginations. We can deceive ourselves so easily because our capacity to evaluate goods is broken, a dark legacy of the fall. In the article's concluding section, I briefly compare Pascal to contemporary ethicists and suggest directions for future research.

KEY WORDS: *Pascal, ethics, imagination, self-deception, sin, intuition*

FEW WOULD DENY THAT BLAISE PASCAL is a brilliant moralist and a keen observer of the human condition. In both the *Provincial Letters* and the *Pensées*, he exposes the vanity and hypocrisy of his targets with acuity and flair. Oddly, however, even though Pascal's reputation as a *moraliste* is secure, his reputation as a moral philosopher is virtually non-existent, and there is a striking dearth of scholarly work in English on Pascal's ethics. For example, the *Cambridge Companion to Pascal*, published in 2003, features chapters on Pascal's scriptural hermeneutics, his physics, and his theory of knowledge, but no chapter on his ethics. In fact, A. W. S. Baird's *Studies in Pascal's Ethics*, published in 1975, remains the sole work in English—of any length—principally devoted to its topic.¹ Of course, it could be that

¹ There are many publications in French—and some in English—that discuss aspects of Pascal's ethics in the course of treating other matters, especially his anthropology (Magnard 1991), his understanding of the prideful fallen will (Sellier 1970), and his critique of Jesuit moral theology (Cariou 1993; Parish 2003, 182–200). Some of the best treatments of Pascal's ethical thought are found in discussions of his political and social

Pascal's ethical theories have not received much scholarly attention because Pascal does not have much of interest to say about ethics. However, even a cursory reading of the *Pensées* suggests that Pascal has a great deal to say about many topics that are central to contemporary ethical theory. Scattered among its fragments, one can find Pascal's thoughts about the nature of the good, for example, as well as an account of moral motivation and a fairly well-developed theory of moral judgment. Pascal is much more than a religious moralist with a fine prose style. He is also an important moral *philosopher*, one who deserves a place alongside the other, more systematic, ethicists of the early modern pantheon.

Baird's work remains useful. Baird does emphasize, rightly, that Pascal's ethics is teleological and axiological. Pascal holds that all human beings seek a stable happiness that he equates with rest in God; he also holds that restful happiness is imbued simultaneously with moral and aesthetic value. On Pascal's account, to pursue happiness just is to pursue what one takes to be most attractive, desirable, and good (see especially fragment L148/S181).² Baird also recognizes that Pascal classifies moral goods on a hierarchical scale, "with the different orders representing at once categories of moral value and orders of being" (1975, vii). Moreover, Baird is not wrong when he claims that the fragment that outlines that scale's three major categories—body, mind, and charity (L308/S339)—is of signal importance to Pascal's ethics. At times, however, Baird focuses too heavily on supposed tensions and inconsistencies in Pascal's thought, such as whether his "natural ethics" loses its value from the perspective of the supernatural order of charity. This focus prevents him from devoting sustained attention to other important aspects of Pascal's ethics.

In this essay, I will follow Baird by emphasizing the axiological character of Pascal's ethics, but I will extend his analysis into areas that he himself does not discuss—Pascal's account of moral judgment and moral wrongdoing. I aim to assemble Pascal's scattered thoughts on moral judgment and moral wrongdoing into an explicit, coherent

theory (Beitzinger 1984; Moriarty 2003a, chap. 4; Lazzeri 1993, especially chaps. 1–3). Many discussions of Pascal's ethics of belief may be found in English-language philosophy, but their concern is largely epistemological. See, for instance, Hibbs 2005. Similarly, despite its title, Ann T. Delehanty's "Morality and Method in Pascal's *Pensées*" (2004) mainly seeks to show that Pascal's religious epistemology responds to proto-deconstructionist worries about the perspectival character of moral language and moral truth.

² Unless otherwise noted, I cite the *Pensées* by fragment number from Krailsheimer's translation (Pascal 1995), which uses the Lafuma numbering scheme. In addition to the Lafuma number ("L"), I also cite each fragment by Sellier number ("S"), which is used in both Roger Ariew's translation (Pascal 2005) and in Levi 1995.

account that can advance the scholarly conversation on Pascal's ethics and serve as the basis for further reflection. The task is not a simple one, because Pascal rarely presents overt arguments for easy inspection. Interpreting the *Pensées* must therefore be a digressive and associative endeavor. Nevertheless, scattered among its fragments, Pascal does have a unified, coherent account of moral judgment and moral wrongdoing. To be sure, that account is more often implied than expressly stated, but it is no less coherent, interesting, or plausible as a result.

My discussion has four parts. First, I begin by presenting Pascal's axiological account of moral judgment. He posits a special cognitive faculty, which he calls "the heart," that intuitively perceives moral value. The heart responds to moral value by producing a *sentiment*, a spontaneous moral judgment that is both cognitive and affective. A *sentiment* is inherently compelling: our *sentiments* seem true and so we naturally want to believe them. In contemporary terms, then, Pascal's account of moral judgment is a form of ethical intuitionism.³ Second, I present Pascal's account of how agents invest moral goods with subjective value. If it is the heart that perceives value, it is the faculty of imagination that bestows value. According to Pascal, the imagination determines the subjective value of objects and situations by shaping the way we construe and interpret them. The imagination is often, but not always, a deceptive, self-serving faculty. Thus, third, because Pascal holds that belief formation is largely determined by our subjective perceptions of value (via the imagination), he emphasizes that our moral reasoning is often self-serving and deceptive, too. According to Pascal, the central threat to the moral life is neither ignorance of the moral law nor moral weakness. Rather, the central threat to the moral life is self-deception. Moral wrongdoing is usually a product of self-deceptive moral reasoning in which a moral agent spontaneously recognizes that some course of action is immoral but persuades herself that it is moral after all. Pascal's analysis compels us to ask, why are we able to deceive ourselves so easily? To answer this question, I turn, fourth, to Pascal's account of the fall. Pascal holds that as a result of the fall, we have lost the ability to perceive and respond appropriately to the true value of moral goods. Accordingly, the fall may be understood as an evaluative fall, which explains why we are highly apt to deceive ourselves when we make moral judgments. Together, the above four elements constitute Pascal's axiological account of moral wrongdoing: a moral judgment is an immediate, intuitive perception of moral value that we willfully disregard in favor of the attractive, though

³ For important recent discussions of ethical intuitionism, see Audi 2004; Haidt 2001. The classic statement is Ross 1930.

self-deceptive, deliverances of the imagination. We can deceive ourselves so easily because our capacity to evaluate goods is broken, a dark legacy of the fall.

1. Pascal on Moral Judgment: The Heart and *Sentiment*

Pascal's account of moral judgment depends on a unique faculty, the heart. The Pascalian heart is a cognitive faculty that unifies key operations of the will and the intellect. It is a faculty of tacit, intuitive knowledge, including moral knowledge—it might be glossed as, among other things, the seat of conscience. According to some commentators, Pascal posits the heart in order to free his philosophical anthropology from the rigid faculty psychology of his day. Late medieval and early modern thinkers sharply distinguished the intellect, a speculative and ratiocinative faculty, from the will, an appetitive and executive faculty. This separation presented special problems in the moral sphere because it inevitably raised questions about which faculty has priority in moral action. If the intellect has priority, then the moral life seems at its root to become a desiccated matter of rational calculation, which undercuts the traditional Christian emphasis on love. Alternatively, if the will has priority, then love itself seems to become irrational. Other thinkers of the era appealed to “the heart”—a suitably biblical and Augustinian term—as a way out of this dilemma, but still ended up collapsing the heart into the will. The Pascalian heart, on the other hand, does successfully reconcile various aspects of the intellect and the will without finally collapsing into either (Warner 1989, 161; Levi 1964, 326–28).⁴

Scholarship on Pascal's *coeur* is voluminous and does not tend toward mutual agreement.⁵ Exegetical debates and distinctions abound. Matters are complicated by the fact that Pascal uses the term “heart” both as a technical term in his new faculty psychology and as a biblical, metaphorical term that means something like “subjectivity.” For example, “How hollow and foul is the heart of man!” (L139/S171).⁶ It is not always easy to see which sense is in play in a given passage. Furthermore, Pascal sometimes uses “heart” and “will” interchangeably, and in places where a sensitive reader expects the one term, Pascal sometimes supplies the other.

⁴ Philippe Sellier says that the heart includes the will but exceeds the will, because it also includes the memory and various other intellectual operations (1970, 128).

⁵ See especially Sellier 1970, 117–39. See also Norman 1988, 3–18, 38–44; Warner 1989, 152–82; and Davidson 1970, 106–11.

⁶ Sellier, waxing rhapsodic, says, “*Le coeur représente donc la profondeur et l'intimité, notre être véritable*” [The heart therefore represents depth and inwardness, our true being] (1970, 135).

In any case, it is clear that the Pascalian heart does unite various cognitive, affective, and volitional operations of the person. The cognitive dimensions of the heart are most clearly outlined in fragment L110/S142. It is the heart that furnishes us with the knowledge of first principles that cannot be demonstrated. It operates by means of its own kind of perception, characterized by the verb *sentir* and its derivations (usually translated as “to feel,” but used by Pascal to signify any immediate apprehension).

We know the truth not only through our reason but also through our heart. It is through the latter that we know first principles, and reason, which has nothing to do with it, tries in vain to refute them. . . . For knowledge of first principles like space, time, motion, and number is as solid as any derived through reason, and it is on such knowledge, coming from heart and instinct, that reason has to depend and base all its argument. The heart feels [*sent*] that there are three spatial dimensions and that there is an infinite series of numbers. . . . Principles are felt [*se sentent*], propositions proved, and both by certainty though with different means . . . [L110/S142].

The heart is also the faculty that allows us to perceive God and the truths of faith: “As if reason were the only way we could learn! Would to God that we never needed it and knew everything by instinct and feeling [*sentiment*]! . . . That is why those to whom God has given religious faith by moving their hearts are very fortunate . . .” (L110/S142). Pascal never repudiates his claim that the heart has an immediate, intuitive grasp of the first principles of reasoning, but it is the heart’s grasp of moral and religious principles that interests him the most: “It is the heart which perceives God, and not the reason. That is what faith is, God perceived by the heart, not by the reason” (L424/S680). Although this fragment suggests a sharp disjunction between the heart and the reason, in another important fragment, Pascal says that the operations of the heart unite aspects of love and reason:

The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know. We know this in a thousand things.

I say that it is natural for the heart to love the universal being naturally and itself naturally, according to its practice. And it hardens itself against one or the other as it chooses . . . [L423/S680].⁷

⁷ This fragment is Ariew’s translation of “*Je dis que le coeur aime l’être universel naturellement, et soi-même naturellement, selon qu’il s’y adonne. Et il durcit contre l’un ou l’autre, à son choix.*” For some reason, Krailsheimer translates Pascal’s “*et*” with “*or*” in L423/S680, which changes the meaning of the passage by suggesting a complete disjunction. Krailsheimer writes, “. . . it is natural for the heart to love the universal being or itself, according to its allegiance, and it hardens itself against the other as it chooses.”

The first line of this fragment, arguably the most famous line in the *Pensées*, is often misunderstood as a plea for rank emotivism. In fact, Pascal emphasizes that the heart is a rational faculty—the heart has its *reasons*—even though it is not a deductive, ratiocinative faculty.

To say that the heart is both a cognitive and a volitional faculty is just to say that it is first of all an *evaluative* faculty (Warner 1989, 201–2; Norman 1988, 40). By positing the faculty of the heart, which unites key operations of the intellect and the will, Pascal is able to assert that the propositions of faith and morality are simultaneously true and attractive.⁸ In this regard, I want to emphasize that the cognitive dimension of the heart aims at truth, full-stop, and not at something less than or different from truth. To speak somewhat awkwardly, nothing could be more solidly true than the first principles of time, space, and number. The truths of faith and morality, which the heart also intuits, are just as true as these first principles, according to Pascal. At the same time, because the heart is also a volitional and affective faculty, it is by means of the heart that we find ourselves attracted to moral truth and goodness. Consider the richly aesthetic language with which Pascal describes the heart's perception of Jesus: "Jesus without wealth or any outward show of knowledge has his own order of holiness. . . . With what great pomp and marvelously magnificent array he came in the eyes of the heart, which perceive wisdom" (L308/S339). Here the true form of Jesus, which is visible only to the eyes of the heart, is presented as possessing a kind of moral beauty that also has a cognitive value (the beauty of Jesus is tied to his wisdom).

1.1 Sentiment

Pascal's account of the heart may be understood as an attempt to provide a psychological and rational basis for the traditional medieval slogan "love itself is a form of knowledge."⁹ Love itself may be a form of knowledge, but just what does love's knowledge look like? To find Pascal's answer to this question, one must turn to the heart's characteristic operation: *sentiment* (feeling or intuiting). One can get a sense of the full meaning of *sentiment* from the various ways Krailsheimer translates it: realization, feeling, intuition, persistent inward sense, perception, instinct, opinion, heartfelt (noted in Norman 1988, 4–5). Another appropriate term would be "insight." A *sentiment* is a spontaneous insight that does not result from a chain of progressive

⁸ Indeed, we are hardwired—that is, created—to view them as such. The fact that we often do not so view them is a legacy of the fall. See section four below.

⁹ "*amor ipse notitia est.*" See Gregory the Great, *Homelia in Evangelium* 27.4.

reasoning. It may or may not be explicitly formulated in words. The word “*sentiment*” names both an operation of the heart (feeling) and the product of that operation (a feeling). A spectrum of quotations confirms this initial picture:

Those who are accustomed to judge by *sentiment* have no understanding of matters involving reasoning. For they want to go right to the bottom of things at a glance, and are not accustomed to look for principles. The others, on the contrary, who are accustomed to reason from principles, have no understanding of matters involving *sentiment*, because they look for principles and are unable to see things at a glance [L751/S622].

Reason works slowly, looking so often at so many principles, which must always be present, that it is constantly nodding or straying because all its principles are not present. *Sentiment* does not work like that, but works instantly, and is always ready. We must then put our faith in *sentiment*, or it will always be vacillating [L821/S661].

Memory, joy are *sentiments* and even geometrical propositions become *sentiments*, because reason makes natural *sentiments* and natural *sentiments* are erased by reason [L646/S531; my translation].

The last fragment is especially interesting because it suggests that over time, even propositional knowledge can become a tacit, innately-known *sentiment*.¹⁰ Conversely, by reasoning about one’s sentiments, one can alter or overturn them. Even though the reason and its operations are distinct from the heart and its operations, both sides can still affect one another. In sum, a sentiment is a judgment of value that imposes its truth immediately on the reason (Gouhier 1986, 72).

1.2 Moral judgment

The heart and *sentiment* furnish the building blocks for a Pascalian account of moral judgment. When the heart perceives a moral good, it responds by producing a *sentiment*, a spontaneous insight that seems

¹⁰ Pascal’s point in L646/S531 is that through repetitive reasoning, we can develop an intuitive grasp of even the most abstract principles. As Pierre Force writes, “In other words, habitual reasoning can turn some propositions into principles that have the same status as the first principles we know by the light of nature. Conversely, critical reasoning can demote some first principles and make them appear conventional and artificial, instead of obvious and natural” (2003, 226). This fragment is also why it is clear that Pascal does not think that the knowledge born of *sentiment* must always be non-discursive. One’s knowledge of a mathematical proposition could become so innate that it becomes a *sentiment*, but presumably one would still be able to express it in language. The fact that *sentiment* plays a role in Pascal’s scientific writings (Jones 2001) also weighs against the view that knowledge born of *sentiment* is non-discursive.

true, and therefore seems compelling, by its very nature. One may think of a moral *sentiment* as something like a spontaneous deliverance of the conscience. It is an immediate moral judgment that one should (or should not) do something or that some course of action is morally good. A *sentiment* of the heart is innately compelling because it has the felt sense of truth.

In contemporary terms, Pascal's account of moral judgment may be understood as a version of ethical intuitionism. Ethical intuitionism claims that when people grasp moral truths, "they do so not by a process of ratiocination and reflection but rather by a process more akin to perception, in which one just sees without argument that they are and must be true" (Haidt 2001, 814). In Pascal's terminology, a *sentiment* of the heart is an immediate perception that some situation or course of action is morally desirable (or morally forbidden). To say that a *sentiment* has the felt sense of truth is just to say that when the moral agent forms a *sentiment* that some state of affairs is licit or illicit, she judges automatically, without deliberation. It is simply self-evident to her that some course of action or situation is morally good (or bad). For example, if I see someone robbing a bank, I do not initially respond to that state of affairs by deliberating about whether theft is morally justified. Rather, I immediately judge that this instance of theft is wrong. Subsequent deliberation may overturn my initial view, but the spontaneous moral judgment still precedes, and does not follow, any deliberation.

Ethical intuitionism is very much in vogue at the moment, in both philosophical ethics and contemporary moral psychology, in part because a wealth of empirical data suggests that it offers a descriptively correct account of moral judgment (Nado, Kelly, and Stich n.d.). The fact that Pascal is an important early-modern proponent of ethical intuitionism has not been recognized in this literature. Pascal's status as an overlooked forebearer of ethical intuitionism should not exhaust contemporary interest in his moral philosophy, however. His most important contribution to ethical theory lies in his account of how and why we fail to live up to our ethical intuitions.

2. The Imagination Bestows Value

The preceding analysis raises an important question. If the heart produces immediate moral *sentiments*, and if those *sentiments* are both true and compelling, then why does anyone ever act immorally? Why do we not always act in accordance with our *sentiments*? Pascal's response to this question leads directly into his famous critique of the imagination. Even though our moral *sentiments* have the felt sense of truth, according to Pascal, we are also strongly motivated to believe

that our imaginative fantasies are true. If it is the heart that responds to the perceived value of moral goods, it is the imagination that bestows value on them in the first place. As a result, even though we do respond immediately to moral goods, we typically perceive those goods only after they have already been filtered through a haze of imaginative fantasy.

Early on in the *Pensées*, Pascal launches what is arguably the sharpest attack on the imagination in Western intellectual history.¹¹ He calls it the “dominant faculty in man,” and even goes so far as to say that it has established a second human nature in each person (L44/S78). In its war with reason, the imagination is the “master of error and falsehood” because its products are not always false and so are even more insidiously duplicitous: the imagination sets “the same mark on true and false alike” (L44/S78). Moreover, Pascal notes that far from being immune to its seductions, intellectual sophisticates are the most vulnerable to them: “I am not speaking of fools, but of the wisest men, among whom imagination is best entitled to persuade. Reason may object in vain, it cannot fix the price of things” (L44/S78).

To say that the imagination can, and reason cannot, “fix the price of things” is to give the imagination the power to bestow value (Maguire 2006, 17–21). Because it has this power, it would appear that the imagination can satisfy virtually any desire. Pascal himself suggests that the imagination can satisfy the desire for domination, knowledge, and pleasure (in other words, the “triple concupiscence” of 1 John 2:16, discussed in fragments L545/S460 and L933/S761). In each of these spheres, the imagination asserts its power to create objects of value:

Imagination has its happy and unhappy men, its sick and its well, its rich and poor; it makes us believe, doubt, deny reason; it deadens the sense, it arouses them; it has its fools and sages, and nothing annoys us more than to see it satisfy its guests more fully and completely than reason ever could. Those who are clever in imagination are far more pleased with themselves than prudent men could reasonably be. They look down on people with a lofty air; they are bold and confident in argument, where others are timid and unsure. . . . Imagination cannot make fools wise, but it makes them happy, as against reason which only makes its friends wretched: one covers them with glory, the other with shame. . . .

Imagination decides everything: it creates beauty, justice and happiness which is the world's supreme good [L44/S78].

The imagination can satisfy the desire for power and domination (the clever in imagination “look down on people with a lofty air . . .”); it can

¹¹ To date, the best treatment of Pascal's account of the imagination is Ferreyrolles 1995, which emphasizes the relationship (discussed below) between the imagination and custom. See also Ferreyrolles 2002, an article-length précis of this work.

satisfy the desire for knowledge (the imagination “makes us believe, doubt, deny reason”), and it can satisfy the desire for bodily pleasure (it “deadens” and “arouses” the senses, and it “creates beauty”). Pascal also seems to imply that from a subjective point of view, imaginary satisfaction is no different from real satisfaction. It does not really matter whether I *am* superior to someone else—imagining that I am feels just as good. The imagination makes fools happy because it allows them to desire objects that are not real, conjure up groundless pleasures, and invest real objects with more value than they can bear.

One such object is the self. True to his Augustinian roots, Pascal focuses on the self as the primary object that is imaginatively invested with excessive value. Pascal calls the imagination a “proud power” (*superbe puissance*) and regards it as the handmaiden of pride (L44/S78).¹² How else could the self “make itself the center of everything” (L597/S494) except by imagining that it is? A real person faces infeasible limits; only an imaginary person can seem like a god. Although Pascal usually focuses on the way we excessively magnify the value of our own selves, any object may be imaginatively invested with more value than it can bear: one may build up a fantasy about a commodity (a new car, for example), a specific self-understanding (of oneself as being just the kind of dashing person who *would* drive such a car), or some other pursued goal (making enough money to buy the car). The possibilities are endless. In each case, however, the perceived value of the object sought is a function of how it is imaginatively construed.

2.1 *Custom and the social imagination*

So far, Pascal’s indictment of the imagination is severe, but it remains squarely within our own thought-world. That is, we can map Pascal’s critique onto our own contemporary understanding of “the imagination” and see why he criticizes its power. Yet recent scholarship has shown that according to Pascal, the imagination does more than allow us to dream up wishful, self-serving fantasies. The imagination also shapes our spontaneous experience by functioning as a socially constructed repository for our dispositions and tacitly held values. As a result, the faculty of imagination is internally related to the body, custom, and habit. As John D. Lyons puts it, the Pascalian notion of custom

is so closely linked to the imagination that the two forces are two facets of the human condition. One appears to be more concerned with action

¹² “Arrogant force” is Krailsheimer’s translation of “*superbe puissance*.” “Proud power” is a better translation, because it captures Pascal’s associative link between the imagination and the sin of pride (*superbia*).

(custom) and the other with perception (imagination), but they act together, strengthening each other. What we have the habit of doing shapes what we see, and vice-versa [2005, 99].

For example, Pascal's major critique of the imagination also includes this initially puzzling description of a wise and dignified magistrate who reacts badly to an odd-seeming preacher:

Would you not say that this magistrate, whose venerable age commands universal respect, is ruled by pure, sublime reason, and judges things as they really are, without paying heed to the trivial circumstances which offend only the imagination of weaker men? See him go hear a sermon in a spirit of pious zeal, the soundness of his judgment strengthened by the ardor of his charity, ready to listen with exemplary respect. If, when the preacher appears, it turns out that nature has given him a hoarse voice and an odd sort of face, that his barber has shaved him badly and he happens not to be too clean either, then, whatever great truths he must announce, I wager that our senator will not be able to keep a straight face [L44/S78].

Pascal's phrase at the end of this passage (*je parie la perte de la gravité de notre sénateur*) suggests that the magistrate is so struck by the preacher's lack of decorum that he loses control of his own body and laughs involuntarily.¹³ This is certainly an amusing scene, but it is somewhat curious that Pascal blames the magistrate's behavior on his imagination. After all, the magistrate does not dream up a vivid yet false scenario to distract himself from the preacher's message. There is no suggestion that, in truth, the indecorous preacher does not have an odd face, a hoarse voice, and so on. Thus, it would seem to make more sense for Pascal to blame the magistrate's behavior on the faculty of sensation, or the will. For instance, he might say that vividly concrete sensations impede the magistrate's grasp of abstract truth, or that his will errs in failing to assent to the truth because it is distracted by considerations that are rationally irrelevant. Instead, he criticizes the imagination.

Notice, however, just what it is about the preacher that so shakes the magistrate's composure. The magistrate is struck by the preacher's shabby, indecorous, and unseemly demeanor. In the relevant context, there is nothing inherently humorous about a hoarse voice or an unkempt appearance. Indeed, these qualities might be thought to inspire reverent awe instead of laughter. They might be taken as proof that the preacher is a genuinely holy man who is properly contemptuous of the world's secular values, for example. This is not the

¹³ My analysis of the social aspects of the imagination depends heavily on Moriarty 2003a. See also Ferreyrolles 1995.

magistrate's reaction at all. So the question remains: why does the magistrate laugh, and why does Pascal blame his laughter on the imagination?

Surely the magistrate laughs at the preacher because the magistrate has internalized the customary values of his wider social world. His concern for decorum shows that he has internalized the values of his society, and that his unreflective reaction to the preacher is a product of a lifetime of habituation and training. When he looks at the preacher, he sees what he has been trained to see. Myriad social pressures—his family life, his concern for his self-image, his political and economic interests, and so on—have collectively shaped his character and turned him into someone who laughs at a preacher with “a hoarse voice and an odd sort of face.”

Presumably, however, the magistrate does not explicitly regard himself as the kind of person who mocks and ignores the unsophisticated. He does go to hear the preacher “in a spirit of pious zeal . . . ready to listen with exemplary respect,” after all. Nonetheless, his behavior shows us what he really values—not truth, but decorum. He is so struck by the preacher's lack of decorum that he cannot stifle his own laughter. Moreover, the fact that his reaction is spontaneous and bodily suggests that he holds these values tacitly. We can assume that if asked, the magistrate would not explicitly assent to a claim like, *one should not pay attention to people who appear disheveled*. However, the magistrate's behavior shows that he does believe it. His body expresses the underlying beliefs and values that he would never explicitly avow. The fact that he manifests them physically and not reflectively shows that they subsist at a level beneath his explicit awareness. He has internalized them so thoroughly that, in Pierre Bourdieu's phrase, they are “inscribed on his body.”¹⁴

In short, Pascal claims that the imagination shapes the way we perceive moral goods because it serves as the repository for both personal and social values. The imagination is personally constructed because it can be altered by our own behavior; in this sense, its deliveries are the product of those personal dispositions and values that we have, over time, embraced and reinforced, until they have hardened into habit. Yet the imagination is also socially constructed

¹⁴ Bourdieu, in speaking of the submission to “symbolic violence”—his version of ideology—writes, “This submission . . . is itself the effect of a power, which is durably inscribed on the bodies of the dominated, in the form of schemes of perception and dispositions (to respect, admire, love, and so on), in other words beliefs which make one sensitive to certain public manifestations, such as public representations of power. It is these dispositions, *in other words, more or less what Pascal puts under the heading of ‘imagination’* which dispense ‘reputation’ and ‘glory’, give respect and veneration to persons, works, laws, the great” (2000, 171; my emphasis).

because it is the point of intersection between our personal values and the customary dispositions and values of our wider social milieu. The personal and social aspects of the imagination are dynamic and mutually reinforcing.

To return for a moment to contemporary ethical theory, Pascal's account of the socially constructed imagination reveals that he is not just an ethical intuitionist but a social intuitionist. A social intuitionist recognizes that people are "intensely social creatures whose moral judgments are strongly shaped by the judgments of those around them" (Haidt 2001, 828). While some moral intuitions may be innate to everyone, social intuitionists claim that people acquire most of their particular moral intuitions through custom and habituation—that is, through their participation in thick cultural webs of moral practice. Once again, although social intuitionism currently enjoys pride of place among empirically oriented moral psychologists, there has been no recognition that Pascal is an early advocate of its central claims.

3. How Moral Reasoning Goes Wrong: Self-Deception

According to Pascal, moral judgments are spontaneous responses to perceived moral values, and the deceptive faculty of imagination bestows value on moral goods. It is no surprise, therefore, that Pascal also thinks that our moral reasoning is highly vulnerable to self-induced error. By "moral reasoning," I mean the *ex post facto* deliberation that often follows spontaneous moral judgments of the heart. Pascal claims that even when our moral *sentiments* are veridical, we often reject those *sentiments* as a result of self-deceptive moral reasoning.

Accurate moral reasoning requires that our spontaneous moral *sentiments* be veridical. There is no guarantee that our *sentiments* are veridical, however. Worse, they can seem veridical even when they are not. As a result, we can easily mistake false fantasies for truthful *sentiments*.

All our reasoning comes down to surrendering to *sentiment*.

But *fantaisie* is like and also unlike *sentiment*, so that we cannot distinguish between these two opposites. One person says that my *sentiment* is mere *fantaisie*, another that his *fantaisie* is *sentiment*. We should have a rule. Reason is available but can be bent in any direction.

And so there is no rule [L530/S455].

Whereas a *sentiment* comes from the heart, a *fantaisie* comes from the imagination. But from the subjective point of view, it can be difficult to distinguish between the two. A veridical *sentiment* and a false *fantaisie* both come with the same self-certifying warrant of felt truth. When one

tries to distinguish between them, one has recourse only to reasoning, which is highly vulnerable to the persuasive power of imaginative fantasy. As a result, we often treat false, self-serving *fantaisies* as if they were veridical *sentiments*.

Furthermore, this error—treating false *fantaisies* as veridical *sentiments*—is often far from innocent, according to Pascal. Indeed, it is most often a willful mistake, which means that the central threat to the moral life is not just error but self-deception. In fragment L975/S739, Pascal succinctly outlines his account of how the imagination affects moral reasoning: “Men often take their imagination for their heart, and often believe they are converted as soon as they start thinking of becoming converted.”¹⁵ To take the imagination for the heart is to self-deceptively believe that one’s own self-serving fantasies reveal the felt sense of conscience. The unbeliever who falsely believes that he is converted takes his imagination for his heart when he willfully fails to discern the difference between what he merely wants to be true (an imaginative fantasy) and what he really knows to be true (a deliverance of the heart). Thus, according to Pascal, moral reasoning typically goes wrong when a moral agent persuades herself that her immoral beliefs and actions are, in fact, moral after all.¹⁶

It is useful to present a concrete example of “taking the imagination for the heart.” Consider the case of Tom, a stockbroker engaged in a scheme to defraud his clients. On Pascal’s account, when Tom is initially presented with the opportunity to participate in the scheme, he spontaneously forms a veridical *sentiment* (he might experience it as a “pang of conscience”) that his participation would be wrong because the scheme is illegal and immoral. He is disposed to believe this spontaneous, immediate insight because *sentiments* are subjectively self-certifying. At the same time, his imagination produces a range of false, exculpatory, and self-serving fantasies. These imaginative fantasies suggest ways in which his participation in the scheme would be licit after all, and so they function as temptations that incite him spontaneously to reinterpret his own immoral engagements as moral. (Perhaps he imagines himself as a latter-day Robin Hood, defrauding

¹⁵ Of course, the explicit topic of the fragment is religious conversion and not moral reasoning, but the obstacles that impede conversion are also the obstacles that impede successful moral reasoning. Moreover, even though Pascal would take care to leave room for the operation of divine grace in conversion, it is also the case that the trajectory of Pascal’s apology in the *Pensées* depends on his ability to present the choice to become a Christian as both a rational and a moral choice.

¹⁶ The brief sketch in this section is not intended as a complete Pascalian account of self-deception, still less as a full account of self-deception as such. For a way into the vast philosophical literature on self-deception, see Mele 2001. For a contemporary account that stresses Augustinian themes, see van Frassen 1988.

his morally dubious clients as a way of providing for those who are more deserving—in other words, himself and his family.) Because the *fantaisie* is even more attractive than the *sentiment*, Tom believes the former, persists in his moral wrongdoing, and even comes to believe that his actions are morally upright.

It is not hard to multiply cases like that of Tom ad infinitum. Very often, when one is faced with a morally fraught situation, what one perceives as the moral choice is relatively unattractive, but the immoral choice is highly alluring. Pascal gives us a technical vocabulary in which to describe this state of affairs, a vocabulary that is grounded in an interesting and plausible philosophical psychology. Moreover, assuming that the case of Tom seems convincingly realistic, it is an account that resonates with our own lived experience of the moral life.

However, Pascal's contribution to moral theory is more than just another technical description of moral wrongdoing. Pascal's chief contribution is the insight that the conflict between *sentiment* and *fantaisie* is an evaluative conflict, driven by the moral agent's response to the perceived attractiveness of competing goods. Pascal's central claim is that in a moral dilemma, an agent usually perceives an immoral choice as more attractive than a moral choice precisely because the immoral choice is rooted in self-serving imaginative fantasy. In the example above, Tom does not participate in the fraudulent scheme as a result of a clear-eyed decision for evil (he is not a moral monster). Nor does he explicitly choose to do wrong all the while desiring to do right (he is not morally weak). Nor does he fail to understand what the moral law requires (he is not morally ignorant). Rather, his immoral choice is attractive to him because he is able to call up imaginative fantasies that allow him to quash his pangs of conscience and spontaneously reinterpret his actions as morally licit.

Pascal probably would not assert that moral wrongdoing must always proceed in exactly this way. That is, I doubt that he would deny that reflective, fully self-aware moral wrongdoing is possible. Even in such cases, however, we still might want to say that moral wrongdoing includes an element of self-deception. Suppose, then, that Tom knows perfectly well that his participation in the price-fixing scheme is wrong, and suppose that he justifies his actions only by saying to himself: *Ha! All this "right and wrong" stuff is for losers!* Granting that Tom initially forms a veridical *sentiment* that his participation is morally wrong, when he later embraces the imaginative fantasy that he is somehow beyond good and evil (so to speak), he has persuaded himself of something that, as a result of his *sentiment*, he already knows to be false: that he is not bound by the relevant moral standard. This justification still seems like a form of self-deception.

Thus, Pascal argues that we are highly vulnerable to self-deception as a result of the way we respond to value—in this case, to the value of different moral goods. Like any attentive student of the human condition, Pascal recognizes that under the influence of desire, people often depart from the strict canons of rationality and believe just what they want to be true. In the *Pensées*, he makes this point using the faculty psychology of his day:

The will is one of the chief organs of belief, not because it creates belief, but because things are [that is, seem] true or false according to the aspect by which we judge them. When the will likes one aspect more than another, it deflects the mind from considering the qualities of the one it does not care to see. Thus the mind, keeping in step with the will, remains looking at the aspect preferred by the will and so judges by what it sees there [L539/S458].

Even when the mind, the locus of belief, is in a position to form correct judgments, it often does not do so because it is led astray by its own desires. The image of the mind brought up short, captivated by the charms of one aspect (*face* in the French) of the matter it is judging, evokes nothing so much as the rapt gaze of a lover caught in the fog of love. Like a lover so caught, the mind, believing that the object of its gaze is eminently worthy of attention, realigns its judgments of truth and falsity accordingly. Metaphorically, Pascal is making the point—now common in philosophical psychology—that desire can influence belief formation.

It is therefore easy to see why we are highly likely to come to believe that our self-serving but enticing imaginative fantasies are true. Our imaginative fantasies are so enticing because we ourselves voluntarily construct them as maximally alluring. The faculty of the imagination is partly under our control, after all. Of course, sometimes we seem to be passive recipients of fantasies that wash over us unbidden, but it is equally clear that sometimes we actively, explicitly construct attractive fantasies. Moreover, even in the former case, we can usually exercise enough control to interrupt unwelcome fantasies or dismiss them from our minds, so it is still accurate to say that the imagination is under our voluntary control, in the relevant sense.

In the arena of moral decision making, our imaginative fantasies give us a way to preserve an image of ourselves as morally upright and blameless, even when we are not. Because *fantaisies* are inherently compelling, the very activity of imagining our own moral innocence comes with built-in persuasive power that can shape our beliefs self-deceptively. In the example above, Tom may initially realize that he is not really a virtuous Robin Hood figure, but as he continues to turn his fantasy over in his mind, reinforcing it with loving attention and

psychic energy, he will soon come to believe in it wholeheartedly. Moreover, because this imaginative activity is something over which Tom has voluntary control, it seems apt to say that by steeping himself in his imaginative fantasies, he deceives himself. To return to the terminology above, in the moral arena, taking the imagination for the heart—mistaking *fantaisie* for *sentiment*—is usually a willful misconstrual.

Indeed, Pascal implicitly makes this very claim in a long fragment entitled “self-love” (*amour-propre*):

The nature of self-love and of this human self is to love only self and consider only self. But what is it to do? It cannot prevent the object of its love from being full of faults and wretchedness: It wants to be great and sees that it is small; it wants to be happy and sees that it is wretched; it wants to be perfect and sees that it is full of imperfections; it wants to be the object of men's love and esteem and sees that its faults deserve only their dislike and contempt. The predicament in which it thus finds itself arouses in it the most unjust and criminal passion that could possibly be imagined, for it conceives a deadly hatred for the truth which rebukes it and convinces it of its faults. It would like to do away with this truth, and not being able to destroy it as such, it destroys it, as best it can, in the consciousness of itself and others and it cannot bear to have them pointed out or noticed.

It is no doubt an evil to be full of faults, but it is a still greater evil to be full of them and unwilling to recognize them since this entails the further evil of deliberate self-delusion [*illusion volontaire*] . . . [L978/S743].

There can be no doubt that this fragment describes something that is recognizable as a project of self-deception. According to Pascal, under the influence of excessive self-love, the human self tries to hide from itself the fact that it is wretched, small, flawed, and deserving of contempt from others: “*il veut etre grand, il se voit petit; il veut etre heureux, et il se voit miserable. . .*”¹⁷ In the French, Pascal's alliterative repetition of the verbs *valoir* (to want) and *se voir* (to see oneself), draws attention to the gulf between what the self desires and what it knows to be true. The self does not just notice the gulf between what it wants and what it is, it also actively tries to hide this gulf from itself and others. It “conceives a deadly hatred for the truth which rebukes it,” and it “would like to do away with this truth,” but it cannot. Instead, it destroys the truth “in the consciousness [*sa connaissance*] of itself and others”—not completely, however, but only “as best it can.”

This fragment is not only about self-deception, however. It is also about love, the immoderate love that people have for themselves and

¹⁷ Nicholas Hammond makes this point (2003, 244).

their concomitant demand that others ratify that love. For Pascal, self-deception—and, by extension, all moral wrongdoing—is, first of all, an axiological blunder about the value of the self. The operative notion of value is a thick, almost Platonic conjunction of moral worth, beauty, and fulfillment. What the self desires, and knows it does not possess, is a sheen of greatness and perfection that compels the love of others. Conversely, the qualities the self does possess are, in the classical Greek sense, shameful—wretchedness, faults, and flaws that deserve only the contempt of others. Furthermore, the self's axiological blunder is not an isolated mistake, but a form of moral perversity that infects its every engagement and facilitates tyrannical behavior toward the world at large. As he writes elsewhere in the *Pensées*, each person comes to think he or she is everything to everyone (L668/S547), and we all try to subjugate others when they frustrate our goals (L597/S494). We can even come to believe that we are rivals to God, the center and source of all value (L617/S510). Accordingly, the present fragment on self-love suggests that the initial question that should launch any study of moral wrongdoing is, how can we so drastically misapprehend our own value?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Pascal holds that in order to answer that question, we must advert to the fall and the noetic effects of sin. As a result of the fall, we have lost the ability to evaluate goods properly. This is why we deceive ourselves, why our imaginative fantasies are so alluring, and why we so easily slough off the demands of the moral life.

4. The Evaluative Fall

So far, my presentation of Pascal has been lamentably one-sided, ignoring the fact that Pascal's ethics is, first and foremost, a theological ethics. Moreover, no aspect of his ethics is uncolored by his understanding of the fall. Most studies treat Pascal's account of the fall in straightforwardly conventional terms as a fall of the reason or the will.¹⁸ In my view, we may arrive at a better understanding of Pascal's account of the fall, and thus a more complete understanding of his ethics, by looking beyond the fall of the reason and the will—understood narrowly as the faculties of calculating and choosing—to an even deeper fall, a fall in our ability to perceive and respond to value.

¹⁸ Melzer 1986 is one of the few book-length treatments of Pascal's understanding of the fall. It offers a post-structuralist account of the fall as a "fall from truth into language." Another is Wetsel 1981, which argues that Pascal hopes in the *Pensées* to demonstrate the fall's historicity. See also Miel 1969, 66–74; and, more recently, Moriarty 2003a, 2006.

Pascal himself regards the consequences of the fall as primarily axiological and affective. The fall is therefore first and foremost an evaluative fall.

Certainly, Pascal does launch a variety of attacks on our rational faculties in the *Pensées*.¹⁹ Like his master, Augustine, Pascal clearly believes that the human will is fallen and divided.²⁰ More importantly, throughout the *Pensées*, he asserts that since God alone is the infinite good, God alone is the proper object of our love: we should love God alone with unbounded love, and we should love other goods only insofar as they help us to love God. As a result of the fall, however, we have lost the ability to love God above all things. Although we retain a capacity for infinite love, we can find no infinite object in the world that answers to that capacity. We therefore strive to satisfy our infinite love with finite goods, an inevitable project inevitably doomed to failure.

Pascal amplifies this traditional Augustinian account by emphasizing that our inability to love God above all things manifests itself concretely as an inability to perceive the true value of moral goods. When Pascal says that the will is “depraved,” he means that it is fundamentally oriented toward some false conception of the good, and that this basic orientation affects every concrete instance of moral perception. After all, the fundamental love that Pascal names “love of self” or “love of God” is not just one particular emotion, attitude, or desire among others. It is more like a comprehensive orientation or stance. As such, it shapes all of one’s emotions, attitudes, and desires. When Pascal says that concupiscence automatically makes all our decisions for us because it has become our second nature, he makes this very point (L119/S151, L616/S509). A person does not wake up in the morning and say, “Today, I want to do three things—get a haircut,

¹⁹ He calls reason “corrupted” (L60/S94, L600/S497) and “impotent” (L131/S164), suggests that reason is not reasonable (L76/S111), and says that reason and the senses are engaged in mutual deception (L45/S78). In fragment L199/S230, surely one of the most important in the *Pensées*, he presents the human being as suspended between the twin infinities of the microscopic and the super-terrestrial, and cut off from the knowledge of either. The many fragments in which Pascal straightforwardly praises human reasoning frustrate any attempt to tie him to anti-rationalism, however. For example, he writes that reason “constitutes [our] being” (L491/S736), that “all our dignity consists in thought” (L200/S232), and that we should form beliefs on the basis of our “own inner assent and the consistent voice of [our] reason” instead of on the basis of authority (L505/S672). If Pascal condemns the reason as fallen, it is also the case that this condemnation is qualified.

²⁰ See, for instance, fragment L502/S738: “For the will of man is divided between two principles: cupidity and charity . . . cupidity makes use of God and delights in the world, while charity does the opposite.” Sometimes, however, the two wills are presented as two natures: “Concupiscence has become natural for us and has become second nature. Thus there are two natures in us, one good, the other bad” (L616/S509).

clean my apartment, and idolatrously love myself instead of God.” Rather, the fact that he loves himself instead of God disposes him to value certain things and reject others, to pursue certain projects and not others, and so on. It disposes him to engage with the world selfishly, no matter what he does, and so it shapes his life as a whole.²¹ In fact, to extend Pascal’s reflections a bit, every instance of love is the adoption of a stance. Love is always a stance because it always comes packaged, as it were, with a principle of interpretation. It orders the lover’s values and engagements by deriving them from the needs and interests of the beloved. As such, love always shapes one’s attitudes and dispositions, more or less comprehensively, depending on the nature of the beloved object.²² As Pascal succinctly writes, “the heart calls good that which it loves” (L255/S287).

Throughout his writings, Pascal pursues this point by metaphorically linking love and visibility.²³ In one of his most important fragments, Pascal presents a developed picture of the relationship between love, value, and perception. In fragment L308/S339, he sets up three hierarchically arrayed orders of reality—body, mind, and charity—and characterizes each with an appropriate kind of perfection, roughly described as physical power, intellectual acumen, and saintliness, respectively. The three orders of being are also three orders of value and, as such, three orders of visibility:

All the splendor of greatness lacks luster for those engaged in pursuits of the mind.

The greatness of intellectual people is not visible to kings, rich men, captains, who are all great in a carnal sense.

The greatness of wisdom, which is nothing if it does not come from God, is not visible to carnal or intellectual people. They are three orders differing in kind.

Great geniuses have their power, their splendor, their victory, their luster, and they do not need carnal or intellectual greatness, which has no relevance for them. . . .

²¹ Conversely, the desire to turn away from himself and back toward God is also not one desire among others. It results from conversion. He must adopt (be given) an entirely new vantage point from which everything looks different.

²² Harry G. Frankfurt puts it nicely (and sounds properly Pascalian) when he says, “Loving something has less to do with what a person believes, or with how he feels, than with a configuration of the will. . . . This volitional configuration shapes the dispositions and conduct of the lover with respect to what he loves, by guiding him in the design and ordering of his relevant purposes and priorities” (2004, 43).

²³ The best discussion of the motif of sight in the *Pensées* is found in Hans Urs von Balthasar’s chapter on Pascal in the third volume of his theological aesthetics (1984, 179–88).

Saints have their power, their splendor, their victory, their luster, and do not need either carnal or intellectual greatness, which has no relevance for them . . . [L308/S339].²⁴

Pascal claims that denizens of each order cannot properly evaluate the goods of the other orders because they cannot see them. The “splendor” and “luster” of intellectual greatness is not visible to carnal people, he writes, because intellectual greatness has no “relevance” (the French is *rapport*) for them. Similarly, the absence of *rapport* prevents the splendor and luster of saints from being recognized by inhabitants of lower orders. Objects from outside of one’s own order seem alien and unattractive, and because one does not see them as valuable, one does not really see them at all. This is, of course, literally false, but it does point toward an important idea. To return to the language of love (for the three orders can be seen as three different stances of love), Pascal claims that I necessarily experience the world—my world—as the world that I love.²⁵

Yet Pascal is certainly no subjectivist. The three orders are best seen as an objective hierarchy that presupposes a robust axiological and moral realism. Even if we are not always able to recognize and properly evaluate the real worth of some perceived good, its objective location on the hierarchy of goods remains in place. It is simply a feature of the world, on Pascal’s account, that it exists within a framework of objective, hierarchically ordered values. With the three orders, Pascal highlights the difference between love as a response to the inherent, pre-existing value of an object, on the one hand, and love as what invests a beloved object with value, on the other. It is natural to say that one ought to love things that are worth loving and, further, that one ought to love them in the right way.²⁶ This insight reintroduces the key claim of the previous section, that sometimes we invest beloved objects with a value they cannot objectively bear.

Thus, according to Pascal, to say that the will is “depraved,” is just to say that we have lost the ability to evaluate goods properly. Since we do not affirm that God, the universal good, is the standard of value, anything can seem like the highest good. Accordingly, Pascal delights in pointing out the bewildering array of things that philosophers, believing that their opinions are grounded in reason, have identified as the supreme good: virtue, pleasure, truth, peaceful ignorance, idleness, indifference, and more (L76/S111). Ordinary people fare no better.

²⁴ On the point that the orders of being are also orders of value, see Mesnard 1988, 39.

²⁵ See Lear 1998, 132–42 for an interesting version of this idea from a psychoanalytic perspective.

²⁶ Susan Wolf pursues this point at some length in her critique of Harry Frankfurt in “The True, the Good, and the Lovable: Frankfurt’s Avoidance of Objectivity” (2002).

Pascal grants that all people naturally seek happiness but points out that no one agrees about what happiness is. Since humankind abandoned God,

It is a strange fact that nothing in nature has been found to take his place: stars, sky, earth, elements, plants, cabbages, leeks, animals, insects, calves, serpents, fever, plague, war, famine, vice, adultery, incest. Since losing his true good, man is capable of seeing it in anything, even his own destruction, although it is so contrary at once to God, to reason, and to nature [L148/S181].

This is a bizarre list, to be sure, but according to Michael Moriarty, each element on it has either been the explicit object of worship by some human community, or has been sought as a form of “transcendence through transgression,” which is an implicit form of self-worship (Moriarty 2003a, 132).²⁷ Of course, it is even easier to imagine more typical substitutes for the highest good: wealth, power, and national identity come readily to mind. In any event, the salient fact about the human will, according to Pascal, is that it tries (and fails) to invest finite goods with an infinite value that they cannot bear.

Readers of the *Pensées* are often struck by the seemingly subjective, even relativistic, nature of some of Pascal’s thoughts about evaluating moral goods. He emphasizes that our moral judgments are perspectival, and that what seems like a firmly founded moral truth to some will seem wholly unfounded and false to others:

Those who lead disorderly lives tell those who are normal that it is they who deviate from nature, and think they are following nature themselves; just as those who are on board ship think that the people on shore are moving away. Language is the same everywhere: we need a fixed point to judge it. The harbor is the judge of those aboard ship, but where are we going to find a harbor in morals? [L697/S576].

A closer reading of the *Pensées* suggests that, far from filing a brief on behalf of relativism, Pascal wants to lay the groundwork for identifying Jesus Christ, “the object of all things, the center toward which all things tend,” as the desired fixed point in morals (L449/S690).²⁸ Here, however, I wish to emphasize that in our fallen state, the (apparent)

²⁷ Moriarty does not say any more about just who it is who worshipped all these things. Further research shows that—who knew?—it was apparently commonplace of early modern thought that the ancient Egyptians worshipped vegetables, especially leeks and onions. Rampant Egyptian vegetable worship is mentioned by, for example, Thomas Hobbes (*Leviathan*, 4.44), David Hume (*Natural History of Religion*, chap. 12), and Nicolas Malebranche (*The Search After Truth*, 6.2.6).

²⁸ On this point, and for a thorough exploration of Pascal’s ideas about interpretation, see Force 1989, especially 167–84.

absence of such a fixed point means that we can easily exploit the perspectival character of moral truth, and even the very language with which we make moral judgments, in order to self-deceptively rationalize away our worries about our own immoral actions.

In his critique of dueling in the *Provincial Letters*, for instance, Pascal savagely mocks the way his Jesuit opponents sanitize immoral acts by redescribing them as innocent. Jansenist and Jesuit alike agree that dueling is immoral and that defending oneself against attack is permitted. Thus, Pascal's Jesuit innocently inquires, how could it be wrong merely to stand at an appointed spot at an appointed time? In addition, if someone else should happen by at that time and try to shoot you, well then . . . what choice do you have, really, but to defend yourself? As Pascal ironically notes, in the seventh provincial letter, "That is not really permitting the duel. On the contrary, he avoids saying that it is one, in order to make it lawful, so sure is he that it is forbidden" (Pascal 1967, 106). Under the description "fighting a duel," I am culpable, but under the description "defending myself," I am blameless, even though I agree that "dueling" is immoral. Without a fixed point in morals, then, our own moral language becomes a tool with which we can deceive ourselves.

Furthermore, because the will has no such fixed point, and no genuine standard of value, it is buffeted by an unceasing stream of desire. That is, each person constantly experiences his own psychic life as an endless series of plastic, unstable desires that, when satisfied, immediately produce further desires. According to Pascal, our occurrent (felt) desires are instrumentally related to the incoherent project of treating finite goods as the ultimate good. Regardless of their explicit target, occurrent desires also implicitly aim at a target they cannot reach—restful happiness. Even when our desires are satisfied at the explicit level, they still fail to attain this ultimate goal. Thus, in the fullest sense, no desire is ever finally satisfied, and so humans are trapped in a state of restless longing. This constant longing is what engenders further desires:

Since nature makes us unhappy whatever our state, our desires depict for us a happy state, because they link the state in which we are with the pleasures of that in which we are not. Even if we did attain these pleasures, that would not make us happy, because we would have new desires appropriate to this new state [L639/S529].

In order to stop the cycle of desire, people must be oriented toward the true fixed point in morals, God or Christ, the ultimate good. Instead of reorienting our fundamental idea of the good, however, we continue to pursue limited goods as if they were ultimate. Speaking about the universal quest for happiness, Pascal writes,

A test which has gone on for so long, without pause or change, really ought to convince us that we are incapable of attaining the good by our own efforts. But example teaches us very little. No two examples are so exactly alike that there is not some subtle difference, and that is what makes us expect that our expectations will not be disappointed this time as they were last time. So, while the present never satisfies us, experience deceives us, and leads us on from one misfortune to another . . . [L148/S181].

People do not understand why they remain deeply unsatisfied even when their immediate desires are gratified. They fail to see that the problem lies in the fact that their desires are oriented toward comprehensive goods that are false.

Suppose I believe that a successful career will bring me lasting happiness. I succeed at one job after another, all of which fail to make me happy. Pascal's point is that I will not treat these specific experiences as falsifications of the general claim that a successful career brings lasting happiness. Instead, I will likely focus on the situational particularities of each and imagine that the general claim remains valid. (I was not happy at this job because of the boss; I was not happy at that job because of the salary, and so forth.) I exploit the fact that each situation is slightly different in order to preserve an interpretation of happiness that does nothing more than constantly engender a new set of soon-to-be-frustrated desires. As Pascal succinctly puts it, "What causes inconstancy is the realization that present pleasures are false, together with the failure to realize that absent pleasures are vain" (L73/S107).

In sum, one's felt desires and day-to-day wants are instrumentally ordered toward the satisfaction of deeper desires for more comprehensive goods. Moreover, there is a direct relationship between the way we value beloved objects and the way we see them, which affects the beliefs we form about them. Because love is always a more or less comprehensive stance toward the world, it influences the way we perceive things and thereby influences our beliefs about them. When we love something, we not only respond to its value, we also invest it with value. One way we do this is by imagining it in its ideal form—as bigger than life, wonderful, and perfect. We thereby imaginatively invest beloved objects—paradigmatically the self—with a psychic sheen that reinforces our loving attachment to them.

It seems simple enough to say that we fail to evaluate moral goods properly because the will is fallen, but the point of the theory of the divided will is not just the truism that we must choose among incompatible moral goods and that we often choose poorly. The claim that our wills are incoherent is better understood as the claim that *we* are incoherent precisely to the extent that we cannot make sense of

ourselves. The theory of the divided will therefore captures the feeling of seeming alien to oneself and the concomitant sense of puzzlement that such self-estrangement is even possible. To say that we are estranged from ourselves is just to say that our actions and our beliefs are often in fundamental conflict. Our loves and desires help shape our beliefs (see L539/S458 above). It follows that if we have incoherent desires—as we do, according to Pascal—then those incoherent desires can only shape our beliefs incoherently. Our beliefs must split along the same fault line as our wills; incoherent selves with incoherent wills can only have incoherent beliefs. The theory of the divided will, therefore, sets up a whole range of intra-psychic conflicts wherein a single human subject is wracked by action divided against action, belief divided against belief, and action divided against belief. It is no surprise, therefore, that the moral life is rife with self-deception.

5. Suggestions for Further Research

This brief sketch of Pascal's views about moral judgment and moral reasoning suggests several fruitful lines of further research. Here I will mention three. First, as I have already noted at several points, important historical and philosophical work remains to be done on Pascal's status as a forerunner of contemporary ethical theorists. In particular, social intuitionists like Jonathan Haidt often look for inspiration from David Hume, or even Aristotle, without ever recognizing that Pascal is an even closer cousin to their own work (Haidt and Bjorklund 2008). I envision a series of focused comparisons between Pascal and contemporary ethical theorists. Ideally, such comparisons would not be purely historical. They would also allow Pascal to challenge contemporary ethicists on their own terms by revealing gaps in their thinking. For example, Pascal is able to wed his social-intuitionist ethics to a full-blooded account of moral and axiological realism, something that Haidt, at least, finds himself unwilling or unable to do.²⁹

Second, I have focused on the perceptual and axiological aspects of Pascal's ethics because he regards ethics and aesthetics as closely linked. Many contemporary thinkers, especially those working in the "continental" tradition, agree.³⁰ Accordingly, Pascal provides a concrete resource from which they may draw. For example, he argues that

²⁹ See, for instance, his interview with Tamler Sommers in *The Believer*, in which—at least, in my judgment—he finds himself a bit flummoxed at his inability to dismiss questions about what grounds moral truths (Sommers 2005).

³⁰ For important foundational statements of this idea, see Gadamer 1989, 480–91; Lyotard 1994, 23–29. See also the work of Richard Kearney, especially 1995, 2003. The move to rejoin ethics and aesthetics is not confined to continental philosophy, however. See Adams 1999.

divine grace operates on the soul by overwhelming it with aesthetic delight, which causes it to love spiritual goods over carnal goods.³¹ This view may resonate in interesting ways with contemporary discussions about the ethics of receptivity to the Other, or the overwhelming power of the ethical sublime.

Finally, although he recognizes that the imagination is central to the moral life, Pascal's thought challenges the sometimes facile claims of contemporary narrative ethicists and those who would look first to the "narrative imagination" for moral renewal.³² Pascal reminds us that the imagination is not just the locus of individual creative genius and speculative possibility. It is also a socially constructed repository for the (often immoral) dispositions and values of the wider world. Far from being the initial launching pad for moral critique, the imagination is often itself the faculty most in need of such critique. Furthermore, Pascal would remind us that reorienting the moral imagination is no simple matter. Certainly it is not just a matter of reading the right novels, imaginatively identifying with the right moral exemplars, or trying to dream up new possibilities for moral community. Because the imagination is socially constructed, reorienting the imagination requires something like a massive program of counter-habituation, comparable to becoming a native member of a wholly new society. In short, reorienting the imagination would require something that looks quite a lot like an ongoing program of religious conversion. Pascal therefore sounds an important note of caution about the moral possibilities of the imagination.

With this article, I have tried to show that Pascal is an important moral philosopher who deserves to be studied alongside other early modern ethical theorists. For too long, English-language scholarship on Pascal has confined itself primarily to arguments about the cogency of the wager, or, at best, to discussions of his supposedly fideistic religious epistemology, but Pascal is a multifaceted thinker. He deserves to be the object of a body of scholarship that ranges as widely as his own thought.³³

³¹ This is the *delectatio victrix* (victorious delight) of Jansenist Augustinianism. For language that suggests the *delectatio victrix*, see Pascal's "Writings on Grace" in Levi 1995, 243 and his "On the Conversion of the Sinner" in Cailliet and Blankenagel 1948, 118–20. The source of this idea in Augustine may be found in *De peccatorum meritis et remissione* 2.19.33 and *De spiritu et littera* 1.29.5. See also Moriarty 2003b, 148; Gouhier 1986, 71–81; and Magnard 1991, 248.

³² Without a detailed engagement with the writings of others, this assertion barely rises to the level of an accusation, let alone an argument. Since I lack the space to support it, I judge it best to pass over its specific targets in silence.

³³ I wrote parts of this paper as a William Rainey Harper dissertation fellow at the University of Chicago Divinity School, and I wrote the final version as a postdoctoral

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