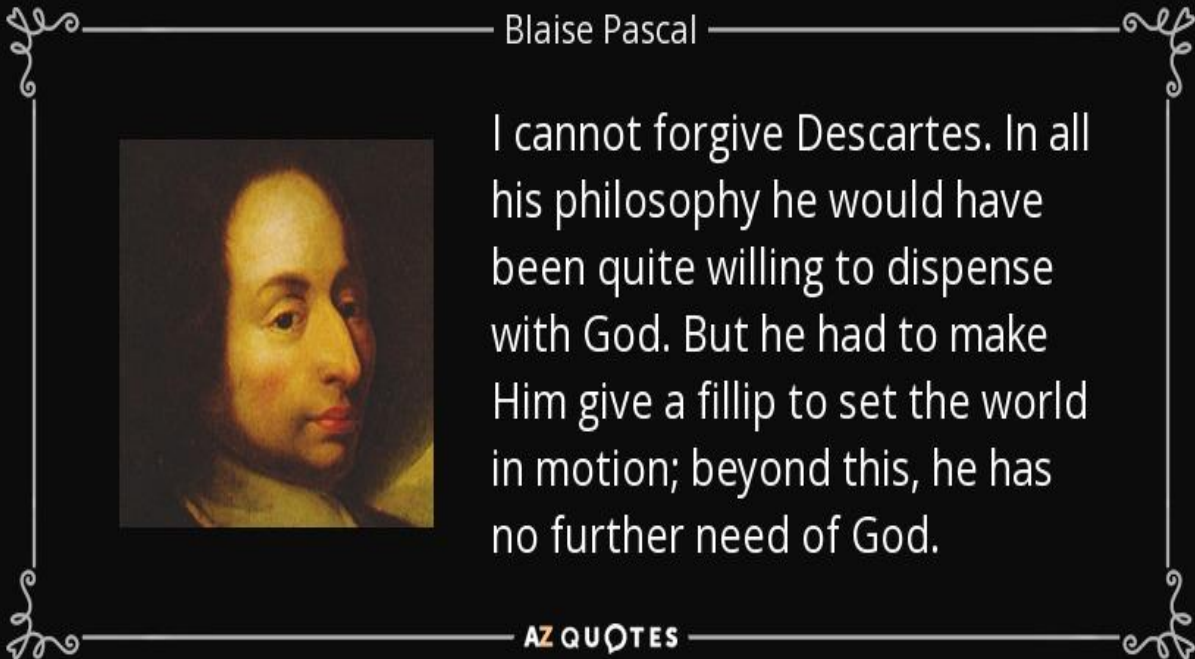# PASCAL VERSUS DESCARTES @ANTHROPOLOGICAL APOLOGETIC

By David Lee Burris, Editor/Contributor

— Blaise Pascal —

I cannot forgive Descartes. In all his philosophy he would have been quite willing to dispense with God. But he had to make Him give a fillip to set the world in motion; beyond this, he has no further need of God.

AZ QUOTES

Pascal and Descartes

- "I cannot forgive Descartes: in his whole philosophy he would like to do without God; but he could not help allowing him a flick of the fingers to set the world in motion; after that he had no more use for God."
- "When the late M. Pascal wanted to give an example of a fantasy for which obstinacy could win approval, he usually put forward Descartes' opinions on matter and space."
- "The late M. Pascal called Cartesianism 'the Romance of Nature, something like the story of Don Quixote.'"

From Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (tr. A. J. Krailsheimer; London: Penguin, 1966), 355-6.

- esprit de finesse (penetrative mind)
  Clear and consistent thinking from a few principles of which people aren't normally aware

- esprit geometrique (analytical mind)
  Thinking on the basis of many maxims known to everybody but which are so numerous and conflicting that they tend to cancel each other out, yielding only confusing and error in the long run.

A Pascalian Critique of Rene Descartes:

Whereas Descartes held our existence is defined as rational, Pascal's view is that our reason is through and through existential. Man is a truth-seeking being. Man needs truth in order to be himself, that is, to live humanely honestly, fulfillingly, reasonably.

Contrast 1 - To Pascal, thought is not so much the dignifying element in human nature as compared to Descartes' "I think, therefore I am." Rather, Pascal regards thought more as a capacity to be exercised and fulfilled than an innate faculty that is self-intuited and self-possessed. In fact, its worth depends entirely on what use is made of it, what its objects and its intentions are. This is clearly stated when Pascal asserts, "All our dignity consists in thought. . . Let us labor then to think well. It is thought which constitutes the greatness of man."

Contrast 2 - Pascal wishes to rid faith of superstition as well as to purge science of pseudo-theological assumptions. Faith is above reason but not contrary to reason. But a problem arises: How can Pascal accept the view that faith and reason do not have the same object, when he holds that it would destroy faith if doubt were cast on evidences of the senses? When a test for possible heresy is examined, the criteria of factual observation, rational consistency, and doctrinal correctness all come into play. Thus, faith doesn't determine its own truth by a method peculiar to itself, even though Pascal insists on its right to do so. The faith-reason problem is the problem of relationship - not of sheer difference.

There can be no final opposition between truths of the natural intelligible & supernatural-revealed kind, though in practice they should be distinct. However, Descartes antagonizes this view by arguing that while he still agrees with the scholastic formulas distinguishing three kinds of questions:

(1) Those things believed by faith because of revelation (Trinity);
(2) Those which pertain to faith but are also open to rational confirmation (existence of God);
(3) Those belonging to determination by reason alone (such as squaring the circle).

DESCARTES EMPHASIZES THE POWER OF REASON BOTH AS LEADING TO FAITH & ITS SUPPLEMENT BY FAITH.

In contrast, Pascal finds no such compatibility. Though he also uses the traditional distinctions he adds the level of observed fact to the others and regards it as fundamental to both faith and reason.

Contrast 3 = Pascal's criticism of Descartes is he reduces philosophy to a single model; introducing God merely to give a 'little push" in order to the world stated (claiming this is no real God at all); that it offers nothing to man in view of his deepest need & highest hope; it is uncertain because it speaks too confidently of matters only hypothetical to reason. A philosopher is a man not a thinking machine. But also, Pascal rejected Descartes' certainty, the intuition of himself and his thoughts, from which the external world is to be inferred.

Contrast 4 = Pascal's Critical Response to Skepticism: It's contradictory as philosophy but helpful as a tool. Moreover, *isolating human reason from the rest of man & relying on it exclusively, these philosophies fail to reckon with the whole truth about truth.* — Paul Shockley

DOCTRINE OF MAN IN DESCARTES AND PASCAL

It is appropriate to substantiate the meaningful relationship between the positions of Descartes and Pascal as two variants for responding to the demand of the era regarding a holistic vision of man. The analysis of the question of Pascal's attitude to the anthropological dimension of the Cartesian philosophy now comes to the fore. . . It is worth drawing attention to one of Pascal's aphorisms: "I can well conceive a man without any hands, feet, head (for it is only experience which teaches us the head is more necessary than feet). But I can't conceive a man without thought. He would be a stone or a brute." The attributive nature of thinking for him is axiomatic.

Since the significant obstacle to Descartes' philosophical heritage is the thesis of his absolutization of human thinking, its deconstruction is advisable. The thesis about "Discourse on the Method" text as the embodiment of reduced rationalism. We are talking about meaningful continuation of the tradition rooted in the medieval period to interpret human weakness as an essential factor in the evidence. In Descartes, one should pay attention to his interpretation of the existential **status of man as man's middle position in the world**: "I am, as it were, something intermediate between God and nothingness, or between the supreme being and non-being" (Descartes, 1996, page 54). The prerequisite and guarantor of true knowledge for Cartesian is God as the embodiment of positivity. Defining the subject of philosophy as proving the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, he sees it as the cornerstone on which metaphysics and ethics are built.

For Pascal, the existential status of a person is that dramatic split in life that motivates him to clarify the boundaries and opportunities to independently influence one's own destiny. But his assessment of a person's initial position is much more pessimistic and tragic. Man is "between two abysses, infinity and nothing ... man in nature ... Nothing is against infinity, everything is against nothing, the middle between nothing and everything, infinitely distant from the comprehending the edges…" (Pascal, 2009, p. 75). What are the possibilities of man through the mind to influence their own destiny? For the contemporary reading in the positions of both human thinkers as outstanding natural scientists of their time, their interpretation of the boundaries for the theoretical reason is of the greatest interest. As the texts of thinkers convincingly testify, both are not inclined to overestimate a person's ability to be guided by mind and solve their problems through it. Descartes in "Meditations" emphasizes the ambiguity of the content in the concept of rationality, critically evaluating the definition of man as a rational being.

Thought. All the dignity of man consists in thought. But what is this thought? How foolish it is! It must have strange defects to be contemptible. But it has such so that nothing is more ridiculous. How great it is in its nature! How vile it is in its defects! (Pascal, page 259) Concretizing his own vision of the ambivalent position of man, Pascal argues the fallacy of the notions common in his time about the central status of man in the Universe. It's about **the paradox of human nature**, which is deprived of attention at the superficial reception. "What a chimera then is man! What a monster, what a chaos, what a contradiction, what a prodigy! Judge of all things, imbecile worm of the earth; depositary of truth, a sink of uncertainty!"

Is there any constructive way out of this situation?

The forms of manifestation of the meaningful relationship in the positions of Descartes and Pascal include their interest in the deep connection of man with God. Paying tribute to the scientific revolution & thinking as the primary means of its development, Pascal, at the same time, connects with the mind of man his self-affirmation as a God-created being. In particular, he warns justifiably against the absolutization of reason and knowledge in their natural science form, since it threatens to destroy both the foundations of religion and human existence: "If we submit everything to reason, our religion will have no mysterious and supernatural element. If we offend the principles of reason, our religion will be absurd & ridiculous". Analyzing the variants of a constructive way out of this tragic situation, he stresses the limitations of formal logic since there are "two extremes" both are equally unacceptable for him, namely to "exclude the reason, accept only the reason" (Pascal, 2009).

For Pascal, the fundamental impossibility of meaningful answers to the key ideological and philosophical questions is undoubted one: "I know neither the one who brought me into the world, nor what the world is, nor what I am, I live in a terrible nescience of everything." The tragedy and hopelessness of human existence are linked both to the inability of a theoretical clarification of those issues that directly determine our vision of the proper foundations of human behavior and their practical implementation. A representative example is the problem of the immortal soul: "As I know not whence I come, so I know not whither I go. I know only that, in leaving this world, I fall forever either into annihilation or into the hands of an angry God, without knowing to which of these two states I shall be assigned."

Pascal focuses on the distortion of basic attitudes. It is about a person's inability to clarify the problem of proper principles, his inability to ascertain the problem of things in human nature, that is, and the "true state" of man. The necessary prerequisite for constructive overcoming the deformation in human nature for Pascal is associated with the reflection of the "man-God" relationship.

Among the related deformations that must be eliminated there are illusory value systems. Understanding the main factors of the deformation in the worldview of his own era, Pascal emphasizes the key role of the time reception method. For him, in particular, the fact of a distorted interpretation of Christianity, which is dominated by the attitude toward preparation for life, is unacceptable. According to it, his contemporaries not only live and enjoy life but intensively prepare for a future happy life, neglecting modernity. The main factor of such deformation for him is caused by the unconscious fear of the present and the use of the possibility to hide from it in the past and in the future. Therefore, Pascal notes with unconcealed regret, "we almost never think about the present", it is "never our goal."

Pascal points to the self-interest of man, that is, his maximum interest in those secular values far from real Christian ones based on understanding of human nature. In listing secular values, he emphasizes the priority of caring to look decent, loyal, and prudent, because people, as a rule, love primarily what can be directly useful to them. Both Descartes and Pascal note unanimously that this naivety in world perception is a weak point in the position of the ungodly.

According to Descartes, atheists do not pay enough attention to the fundamental difference between man and God: "… all the objections commonly tossed around by atheists to attack the existence of God invariably depend either on attributing human feeling to God or on arrogantly supposing our own minds…" (Descartes, 1996, AT VII: 9).

When it comes to our "knowledge of the first principles," although we receive them through rational reasoning, we can't but admit that, strictly speaking, we are talking about "knowledge of the heart and instinct" on which the rationale is based and discourse should be based too. "The heart feels … The principles are felt, the theorems are deduced" and thus "it would be futile and ridiculous for the reason to demand from the heart evidence of its first principles … as it would be ridiculous for the heart to demand from the reason the tangibility of all theorems…" (Pascal, 2009, p. 41).

The completeness of our familiarization with the variant of Pascal's answer to the *demand of the era for the development of anthropology* will be insufficient if we neglect that huge component of human nature, which he and his contemporary calls the imagination. It is a "dominant component of man". Descartes also attributed the capacity of imagination to those key components of human nature, the comprehension of which is a prerequisite for understanding the truth.

Pascal (like Descartes) links the essential deformations of human nature with the imagination, the main function is "a teacher of confusion and falseness, even slier by that he is not always sly…" By concretizing his own vision of the factors and obstacles in forming an objective picture of the world, Pascal focuses on the ability of the imagination. It is with it that he has significant fallacies in understanding…"

"Imagination can't make fools wise, but it makes them happy."

Summing up an excursion into own **phenomenology of imagination**, Pascal (2009) notes the falsity of naive ideas about the rationality of human nature, and the need to take into account its contradictory relationships with sensuality: "But the most powerful cause of error is the war existing between the senses and reason" (p. 22). On the pages of the "Meditations," a contradiction emerges in the form of a confrontation between the sensual knowledge of the bodily things of nature & reason. "I apparently had natural impulse toward many things which reason told me to avoid ..." (Descartes: 77). The logical consequence of recognizing a person's inability to comprehend rationally human nature in its present & proper dimensions for Pascal is the strong belief man must find courage in himself to acknowledge the groundlessness of expectations for a significant improvement in one's position in the universe through reason and optimism expectations connected with it.

Therefore, turning to the mind and will, Pascal (2009) invokes: "Let us therefore not look for certainty and stability. Our reason is always deceived by fickle shadows; nothing can fix the finite between the two Infinites, which both enclose and fly from it." The only possible manner for human behavior is to admit courageously the inevitability and insurmountability of the tragic aspects and to stoically pass through them. **As the texts of two main French thinkers attest, their position is united by the recognition of the key importance in a personal responsible attitude to life's realities.**

— A. M. Malivskyi

Someone who spends half his life dreaming that he is a king is as happy as that king, who might be dreaming that he is one of his lowly subjects. **The idea that life may be no more than a dream and that God is absent from the natural universe can be found in Pascal's predecessor René Descartes, but Pascal attacked Descartes's philosophy as useless and ineffective. Descartes's search for pure foundations to knowledge, in order to overcome skepticism, was considered contradictory by Pascal.**

Reason cannot justify itself, because we can always keep asking, what is the reason for this reason? According to Pascal, there must be "reasons of the heart" at the origins of all knowledge. There may be an element of religious mysticism here, but less than the phrase suggests. "Reasons of the heart" refers to our capacity to create first principles, such as mathematical axioms. There is no absolute justification for such principles, but we must assume them in order to have knowledge or science of any kind. The skeptical and hypothetical-intuitive spirit is expressed in thoughts on society. The dream of being king already hints at the unreality of legal sovereignty. Pascal regarded all human laws, including those upholding state sovereignty, as fictional. Their only foundation is in force, so we cannot regard them as expressions of natural-theological right. The arbitrariness of law, its lack of intrinsic injustice, is shown in the great variations of law on either side of a changeable border, between humans living in one state and humans living in another state. We cannot regard human societies as conditioned by the ethics and justice of a system of natural right. Our laws themselves emerge from the vanity and self-interest of humans who are driven by the constant urge to have more grandeur than other humans.

The search for grandeur is an expression of the lost grandeur of fallen humanity. The consequence is that societies are grounded on the drive for status, prestige, and recognition. This [thought] can be seen in Pensées, but also the "Writings on Grace," where Pascal establishes the general will of God, in which God wishes to save all humans. He is at the origin of modern anthropology in the broadest sense. — *Internet Search*

From The Christian Research Journal This Insightful Article:

Greatness and Wretchedness:
Usefulness of Pascal's Anthropological Argument in Christian Apologetics

Greatness & Wretchedness

Mohammed Atta

by Robert Velarde
The Usefulness of Pascal's Anthropological
Argument in Apologetics
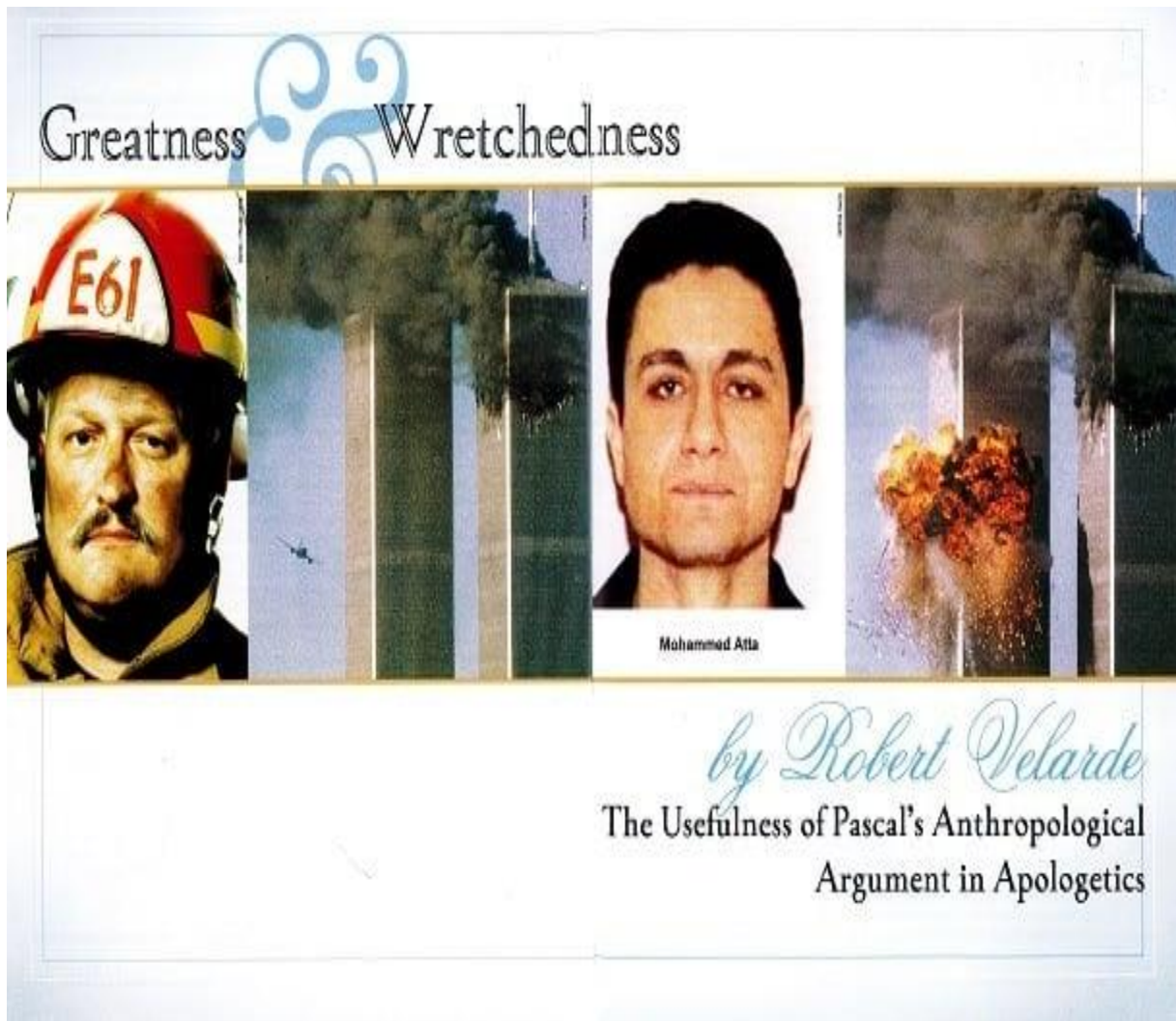
SYNOPSIS

In the realm of philosophy, Blaise Pascal (1623–62) is perhaps best remembered for his wager argument. In his *Pensées* (thoughts), however, Pascal offered several lines of apologetic reasoning, including what has been termed his anthropological argument. This argument makes the case for Christianity by pointing out that any viable worldview must successfully explain the seemingly paradoxical nature of the human condition. The seeming paradox is that human beings exhibit qualities of both greatness and wretchedness. Pascal argues that Christianity offers the best explanation for this condition based on its teachings that human beings are created in the image of God, yet sin has tainted their nature.

Pascal realized that it is sometimes necessary to shock a complacent skeptic into paying attention to the seriousness of his or her condition. Depending on the type of skeptic encountered, Pascal would use the anthropological argument to apply "existential shock" to either humble them or exalt them. This same approach is applicable today to belief systems such as humanism and New Age spirituality that exalt human beings or to worldviews such as nihilism that ultimately lead to hopelessness and despair.

Despite some weaknesses, Pascal's anthropological argument has contemporary apologetic value because it appeals to individuals on a psychological level. It is certainly not a definitive argument for Christianity, but it is a useful one that can be integrated into a line of reasoning that supports the validity of the Christian faith.

Are human beings glorious, exalted creatures with tremendous potential or wretched beings desperately in need of spiritual liberation? Are such seemingly contradictory views of the human condition mutually exclusive or could both perspectives be true? If the latter, does any viable worldview explain this perplexing condition? The seventeenth-century scientist, mathematician, and philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623–62) offers a timeless argument for the truth of Christianity based on what at first glance appears to be a paradox in human nature. Pascal is revered for his scientific accomplishments and he even has a computer programming language named after him. His philosophical pursuits, however, often do not receive the attention they deserve. Pascal's wager[1] is perhaps his most well-known argument for Christianity, but Pascal has much more to offer the contemporary Christian apologist.

Pascal's ill health and untimely death prevented him from completing a monumental work on the subject of Christian apologetics. His notes, however, have since been compiled into a collection known as *Pensées* (thoughts). "Pascal's views hardly constitute an organized system," writes Richard Popkin. "Most of his works are fragmentary, and he apparently made no effort to put the fragments together."[2] In these fragmented yet brilliant writings, Pascal offers cogent insights on such issues as the human condition, morality, and theology. Pascal's anthropological argument, though not nearly as well known as the wager, offers a unique approach to Christian apologetics.

PASCAL'S ANTHROPOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Pascal's anthropological argument begins with a simple observation: human beings exhibit qualities of both greatness and wretchedness.

Such an argument is appealing in a contemporary setting because it begins with an observation of human nature rather than a direct argument for the existence of God, the reliability of the Bible, the validity of belief in the resurrection of Christ, or a variety of other traditional apologetic approaches. **The anthropological argument seeks to initiate discussion on the nature of the human condition.** When there have been certain principles subsequently established, it offers an argument pointing to Christianity as the best explanation of the observed condition.

D. G. Preston comments on Pascal's overall apologetic approach:

Pascal the empiricist starts with the data, notably the inexplicable phenomenon of mankind being unquestionably corrupt, subject to inconstancy, boredom, anxiety and selfishness, doing anything in the waking hours to divert the mind from human wretchedness, yet showing the vestiges of inherent greatness in the mind's realization of this condition. **Mankind is also finite, suspended between twin infinities revealed by telescope and microscope, and aware of an inner emptiness which the finite world fails to satisfy.** No philosophy makes sense of all this. No moral system makes us better or happier. One hypothesis alone, creation in the divine image followed by the fall, explains our predicament and, thru a redeemer and mediator with God, offers to restore our rightful state.[3]

Pascal's anthropological argument uses a unique approach to Christian apologetics: rather than offering arguments from natural theology,[4] it is designed to relate to unbelievers at a prudential level of interest. This argument, in fact, offers a sensible observation and appeal to practical judgment based on the available evidence.

Is Pascal's approach relevant today? After all, his argument seemingly rests on doctrines such as humans created in the image of God (imago Dei) and Adam's sin (the Fall) — views many perceive as outmoded, mythical, or just plain false. Before we address the question of relevance, let's first examine the argument in more detail.

THE PARADOX OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

"Greatness, wretchedness," writes Pascal. "The more enlightened we are, the more greatness and vileness we discover in man."[5] Human beings, he argues, exhibit two distinct qualities that appear to be contradictory: we are capable of exalted greatness, but we are also extremely corrupt in our nature. In Pascal's words, "Man's greatness and wretchedness are so evident that true religion must necessarily teach us that there is in man some great principle of greatness and some great principle of wretchedness."[6] Pascal subsequently paints a less-than-flattering picture of human beings: "What sort of freak then is man! How novel, how monstrous, how chaotic, **how paradoxical, how prodigious!** Judge of all things, feeble earthworm, repository of truth, sink of doubt and error, the glory and refuse of the universe!"[7]

Commenting on Pascal's anthropological argument, Peter Kreeft writes, "**Man is a living oxymoron**: wretched greatness, with great wretchedness, rational animal, mortal spirit, thinking reed."[8] "We are a puzzle to ourselves," Thomas Morris notes. "One of the greatest mysteries is in us….How can one species produce both unspeakable wickedness and nearly inexplicable goodness? How can we be both responsible for the most disgusting squalor and most breathtaking beauty? How can grand aspirations and self-destructive impulses, kindness and cruelty, be interwoven in one life? The human enigma cries out for explanation."[9]

PASCAL'S "EXISTENTIAL SHOCK" TREATMENT

One of Pascal's apologetic techniques involves what Bernard Ramm refers to as "existential shock." Pascal uses this apologetic technique to awaken skeptics from complacency. Ramm elaborates:

Pascal's use of existential shock was perhaps the biggest weapon in his arsenal. It was an attempt to deal a solid blow to the skepticism and indifferentism of the Frenchmen....

By existential shock we mean Pascal's method of shocking Frenchmen out of their complacency by vivid contrasts, by sharp jabs at frightful inconsistencies, by penetrating analyses of foolish modes of existence, by placing pictures of despair along-side pictures of grace and of redemption. A smug, sophisticated French skeptic must see himself hanging between time and eternity, a delicate smudge of protoplasm which a piffle of poison could exterminate, as a disposed deposed king miserably remembering his former greatness, and as a discontented wretch who suspects there really is blessed contentment somewhere. But where?[10]

The anthropological argument provides an existential shock by calling on skeptics to confront and explain the seeming paradox of human nature that is undeniable. A viable worldview, says Pascal, must account for this dilemma in an intellectually cogent manner.

TWO ERRORS IN UNDERSTANDING THE HUMAN CONDITION

In "Discussion with Monsieur De Sacy,"[11] Pascal analyzes two errors regarding the human condition. They either exalt greatness at the expense of wretchedness or exalt wretchedness at the expense of greatness."[12]

This is evident in the realm of public education in the United States, where children and adults are often taught that human beings are products of chance evolution (naturalism), while various strains of psychology tout the human potential/self-esteem message — that we are creatures of great or even unlimited potential. Kreeft refers to the opposing views as "animalism and angelism" and provides examples of both: "Some examples of 'angelism,' which ignore the concrete, earthy, embodied nature of man, are Platonism, Gnosticism, Pantheism and New Age humanism. Some examples of 'animalism,' which ignore the spiritual nature of man, are Marxism, Behaviorism, Freudianism, Darwinism, and Deweyan Pragmatism. . . **Modern philosophy has lost its sane anthropology because it has lost its cosmology. Man does not know himself because he does not know his place in the cosmos;** he confuses himself with angel or animal."[13]

EXAMPLES OF HUMAN GREATNESS AND WRETCHEDNESS

Examples of human greatness and wretchedness abound. Human wretchedness built and maintained the concentration camps of Nazi Germany, where some six-million Jews were brutally murdered, but   it was human greatness that ended the holocaust. More recently, we can point to the infamous attack of 9/11 when Islamic terrorists hijacked four commercial airliners and turned them into deadly weapons. Terrorists bent on the destruction of thousands of human lives indeed exhibited qualities of human wretchedness while those who bravely participated in the rescue efforts in the aftermath of the events exhibited qualities of human greatness.

One might argue, of course, that such examples of human greatness and wretchedness merely illustrate the presence of greatness and wretchedness in the broader context of humanity.

This is not the case, however, for examples of greatness and of wretchedness within individuals can be offered as well. Philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Albert Camus accomplished literary brilliance and yet remained in despair. Literary great Hemingway served as an ambulance driver in World War I, wrote many successful and critically acclaimed works, but exhibited the ultimate form of wretchedness by committing suicide. Edgar Allan Poe's alcoholism and alleged drug use led to his premature death, but many of his writings are ingeniously crafted. The list of examples is as long as human history.

EVALUATING THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

At first glance, Pascal's anthropological argument appears to muddle the veracity of the Christian faith. This is because the root of the argument appears to be based on a Christian view of Creation and the Fall. Some may even interpret Pascal's argument as circular and claim that it is simply appealing to the Bible as evidence that the biblical explanation of human nature is true. Such accusations, however, fail to examine the anthropological argument in a proper context. Pascal's anthropological argument appeals to the *best explanation* regarding the human condition. Such an argument is *abductive* rather than deductive or inductive. Groothuis explains:

Although one cannot directly test by empirical means the deliverances of revelation on many matters (such as the origin of the universe, the creation of humanity and the Fall into sin), Pascal thought that key theological claims offer the best explanation for the perplexing phenomena of human nature….

By adducing evidence from a wide diversity of situations, Pascal argues that the Christian view of humans as "deposed kings" — made in God's image but now east of Eden — is the best way to account for the human condition. In so arguing, he employs an abductive method (that is, inference to the best explanation) similar to that used in much scientific endeavor.[16]

In other words, within the confines of his anthropological argument, Pascal is not directly making the case that humans are created in the image of God and are tarnished by their fall into sin. Pascal, instead, is arguing that these Christian doctrines provide the best explanation for the seemingly paradoxical condition of human greatness and wretchedness that we observe.

The case for the validity of the anthropological argument, nevertheless, must address several philosophical issues if it is to succeed. Groothuis offers three claims that Pascal's argument must defend: "(1) that the construal of humanity as having a dual nature is intellectually cogent, (2) that the human condition even needs to be explained, and (3) that the answer provided by the doctrines of humans being made in God's image and of sin are convincing." We could add also (4) that it is necessary to demonstrate that alternative worldviews do not adequately explain the condition of greatness and wretchedness.

RELEVANCE TODAY OF THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

The anthropological argument is compelling to contemporary culture for at least three reasons. First, it is compelling on a human level: since it addresses the human condition, it has an immediate and universal application and relevance.

Second, American culture in particular is steeped in the exaltation of human goodness via psychology and ideas of human potential. The anthropological argument agrees with such views to an extent, but it acknowledges the paradoxical element of human wretchedness more honestly and offers a viable explanation. Third, many are under the false impression that human beings are merely evolved beasts. Pascal recognizes that "Man is neither angel nor beast"[18] and puts forth a technique of dealing with those who think too highly of themselves, as well as those who think too lowly of themselves:

If he exalts himself, I humble him.
If he humbles himself, I exalt him.
And I go on contradicting him
Until he understands
That he is a monster that passes all understanding.[19]

It should be noted again that the anthropological argument is not the only argument Pascal uses to defend the Christian faith; as such, it is not intended to be the ultimate argument for Christian veracity. The anthropological argument, nevertheless, provides an existential punch and forces critics and doubters to find a better explanation of the human condition. It provides a unique, psychological approach in convincing a skeptic of the truth of the Christian faith.

Writing about Pascal, J. Lataste observes:

Man is an "incomprehensible monster," says he, "at once sovereign greatness and sovereign misery." Neither dogmatism nor pyrrhonism [complete skepticism] will solve the enigma: the one explains the greatness of man, the other his misery; but neither explains both.

The application of the anthropological argument in contemporary culture has strong appeal. For example, the New Age movement — more recently referred to as the "new spirituality" — offers an extremely exalted view of humanity. The anthropological argument could easily be applied to those who accept this view. A Christian apologist could agree that humans are great and exalted, but then, as Pascal suggests, the New Ager must be humbled into recognizing the real wretchedness of the human condition. It is one thing for a New Age adherent to declare that sin is an illusion or that moral absolutes do not exist but quite another to provide an adequate explanation for examples of human wretchedness such as the Holocaust.

The anthropological argument likewise may be applied to humanism, which also posits a favorable picture of humanity. The Humanist Manifesto 1, for example, declares: "Man is at last becoming aware that he alone is responsible for the realization of the world of his dreams, that he has within himself the power for its achievement. He must set intelligence and will to the task."[21] The Humanist Manifesto 2 asserts humankind has the potential, intelligence, goodwill, and cooperative skill to implement this commitment."[22]

Humanism, however, lacks a cogent explanation of the seemingly paradoxical human condition of greatness and wretchedness.

DOES HUMANISM ADEQUATELY EXPLAIN THIS CONDITION?

A staunch humanist, of course, will not readily give in to Pascal's argument. Several objections may be raised, such as (1) human beings exhibit qualities of greatness as a result of highly developed brains and (2) wretched behavior is merely the result of humans having evolved from beasts and still possessing beastly tendencies.

Over the course of millions of years of evolution, the humanist would argue, time and chance produced the human intellect, which is capable of greatness. Wretchedness, on the other hand, is an unfortunate side effect of our bestial origins.

Such an argument, however, presupposes that human intellect, allegedly a product of both time and chance, is actually capable of *accurate* reasoning. In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis astutely observes, "When you are arguing against Him [God] you are arguing against the very power that makes you able to argue at all: it is like cutting off the branch you are sitting on."[23] If human reason is a product of chance, how do we know it is reliable? Humanists, who deny that God is the source of human reason, are left sitting precariously on a branch of chance and time with no guarantees that their reasoning is sound.

In *Miracles*, C.S. Lewis remarks, "If all that exists is Nature, the great mindless interlocking event, if our own deepest convictions are merely the by-products of an irrational process, then clearly there is not the slightest ground for supposing that our sense of fitness and our consequent faith in uniformity tell us anything about a reality external to ourselves."[25] **Christianity's explanation that humans are created in the image of a rational God and thus are rational beings makes more sense than the chance & time explanation of humanists.**

In short, the existence of human reason is more adequately explained by intelligent design than by random chance. If humanists agree human beings do exhibit qualities both of wretchedness & greatness, then they are making a moral claim. From where does their standard of morality come?

The existence of such a standard of morality in humans is more adequately explained by creation in the image of a moral God than by the random evolution of mere matter.

The anthropological argument also provides hope for those who hold to worldviews that recognize the wretchedness of human nature but shun the inherent greatness that is also a part of that nature. Nihilism, for instance, followed to its logical conclusions, leads to despair — meaningless existence in a pointless universe, where humans are merely accidental product of chance and time. Human wretchedness in nihilistic thought is expressed perhaps more so in a philosophical sense (despair), but wretchedness is certainly present in a worldview that offers no real hope. It is at this juncture that Pascal's anthropological argument can enter in & offer hope to the nihilist — hope based on the fact that Christianity offers a superior explanation for the human condition.

THE GENIUS OF PASCAL'S ARGUMENT

Blaise Pascal's anthropological argument is a very valuable tool that contemporary Christian apologetics can apply in a variety of ways. As we've seen, it is certainly not a definitive argument for the Christian faith (Pascal never intended it as such), but it does provide a certain degree of "existential shock" and an approach that is appealing to individuals on a psychological and personal level.

"Starting an apologetic argument from the point of view of the human condition is appealing in a psychologized and individualistic culture," observes Groothuis in reference to Pascal's argument.

"While there is much theological illiteracy and philosophical naiveté today, there is also great interest in the soul, human potential, and spirituality. People may doubt the existence of God, the reliability of the Bible, or the deity of Christ, but they know that they exist, and they desire to understand themselves, their pain, and their possibilities."[26] Pascal's anthropological argument is well equipped to address such matters.

The genius of the argument is in many respects found in its very simplicity. It asks the skeptic of Christianity to provide a more adequate solution to the observable human condition than the Christian doctrines of humanity's creation in the image of God and the Fall, however unlikely these doctrines may initially seem. The argument, moreover, is not based on the latest scientific theories (though such theories are certainly apologetically useful at times) or on archaeological evidence for the Christian faith — theories and evidence that may change with time. Its appeal, rather, is instead on an existential, psychological level. It is at this simple point in Pascal's apologetic scheme that the more traditional Christian evidences (what Pascal called "Scripture and the rest") might be offered.[27]

— Blaise Pascal —

I cannot forgive Descartes. In all his philosophy he would have been quite willing to dispense with God. But he had to make Him give a fillip to set the world in motion; beyond this, he has no further need of God.

AZ QUOTES