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Blaise Pascal: Politics
as the *différance* of God's will*

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Abstract: Pascal's work is punctuated by a paradox. On the one hand, only a handful of
the texts that constitute it are explicitly political; on the other hand, it is haunted by a
constant political concern. To resolve this paradox, the paper shows that Pascal incites
us to rethink the very definition of politics. Emerging on the basis of a double human
nature marked by the Fall, violence is an ontological problem that arises from the need
to preserve an infinite object for human love. For this reason, its solution lies in affec-
tive self-regulation, which makes politics an exclusively behavioralist field that cannot
be a part of the intimacy of individuals who belong to another order. Thus, Pascalian
politics does no more than serve the same gesture of the divine creation of the human
being that keeps him alive to praise God. Pascalian politics is, then, an indirect way of
realizing God's will: its *différance*.

Keywords: Behaviour, Force, Grace, Justice, Order, Pascal

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Blaise Pascal: La política como *différance* de la voluntad divina

Resumen: La obra de Pascal evidencia una paradoja. Por un lado, consta de pocos textos explícitamente políticos; por otro lado, presenta una preocupación política constante. Para resolver esta paradoja, el autor muestra que Pascal nos impone repensar la misma definición de la política. Pensada a partir de una doble naturaleza humana marcada por la Caída, la violencia es un problema ontológico que surge de la necesidad de conservar un objeto infinito para el amor humano. Su solución política yace en una autorregulación afectiva que hace de la política un campo exclusivamente comportamentalista que no puede entrar en la intimidad de los individuos que pertenece a otro orden. Así, la política pascaliana sirve el mismo gesto de la creación divina que mantiene el ser humano en vida con el fin que pueda alabar a Dios; la política pascaliana es, entonces, un camino indirecto de realización de la voluntad divina: su *différance*.

Palabras claves: comportamiento, fuerza, gracia, justicia, orden, Pascal

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"It is not necessary, because you are a duke, that I should esteem you; but it is necessary that I should salute you."

(Pascal, 1910a, p. 381)

Introduction

Politics as a theme does not figure prominently in Blaise Pascal's work, or—if it does—it does not do so explicitly. While Pascal's political thinking is certainly there to be found, it plays a minor role in his work, at least when compared quantitatively to issues such as Grace, the Fall, the duplicity of human nature, diversion, or the abandonment of humans. The aforementioned should not lead us to overlook his one explicitly political text—the *Discourses on the Condition of the Great* (1910a, pp. 378-382)—; nevertheless, it should be noted that, just as for René Descartes, Pascal's political thought is to be found across various texts which include his *Thoughts,* his *Provincial Letters,* and elsewhere in his correspondence. In fact, as Pierre Nicole—the publisher of the *Discourses* in 1670—observed in his introduction to the piece, a paradox inhabits the entirety of Pascal's work: on the one hand, he constantly alludes to the importance of politics, and claims he would have "willingly sacrificed his life";[1] on the other hand, political texts are conspicuously absent from his work, as if politics as a concern were, to him, at once profoundly crucial and notoriously marginal.

The downplaying of politics in his work gave way to several interpretations. Pierre Nicole himself observed that the absence could be due to either hypothetical texts on politics by Pascal merely being lost or to his never having written down his political thinking. A third option advanced by Nicole was that, in fact, the entirety of Pascal's thinking was ultimately political.[2] It is possible, though, to think of a fourth explanation, one that bypasses biographical or historical circumstances and focuses on concepts. As it has been the case with contemporary thinkers such as René Girard (Vinolo, 2013) or Bruno Latour (Harman, 2014, pp. 9-31), authors who develop a fundamental anthropology often consider politics to be one among many human activities, both ancillary and marginal. An activity which, by virtue of its being directly dependent on anthropology and a mere elaboration on it, does not require lengthy dissertations, as it is completely contained, even if potentially, within anthropology as such. And yet, when it comes to Pascal, this explanation is belied by the fact that many of the political treatises written in the 17th century—such as

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1   "On lui a souvent ouï dire qu'il n'y avait rien à quoi il désirât plus de contribuer s'il y était engagé; et qu'il sacrifierait volontiers sa vie pour une chose si importante." (Nicole, 2011, p. 746).

2   "Il faut donc, ou que ce qu'il a écrit de cette matière ait été perdu, ou qu'ayant ces pensées extrêmement présentes, il ait négligé de les écrire" (Nicole. 2011. p. 746).

those by Hobbes and Spinoza–were a direct result of fundamental anthropologies, which did not preclude these thinkers from writing explicitly political texts.

The quantitatively limited room for politics in Pascal's work must be looked for elsewhere, in more fundamental and essential elements of his work. For a thinker so inclined to Jansenism, earthly life could not be the supreme value: the true purpose in life cannot be–as it was for many philosophers during the 17th century–, to persevere in its being (such was the case of Spinoza, for whom duration became the supreme value of his immanent philosophy (Ramond, 2005)). Nor can it be reduced to fighting for self-preservation, as was the case for Hobbes, for whom self-preservation constitutes both the reason for being as well as the limit of politics.[3] For one who seeks eternal life and sets it as his purpose to reach it, the organization of life in this world is not as important as understanding how to reach eternity: "[...] For Pascal, there are absolutely no exceptions to the statement that all activities connected with the world are infected with its vain and fallen nature".[4] As can be seen, a number of reasons can be invoked to explain Pascal's reduced interest in writing political texts.

Even though he refrains from overtly discussing politics and in spite of the paucity of political ideas throughout his texts, it is possible to reconstruct identifiable, original political theses in Pascal's works. These theses align perfectly with the rest of his philosophy and contribute reasonable explanations for peculiar, and sometimes unexpected, claims such as the prevalence of force over justice, the fundamental role of custom for the legitimacy of the law, or the foundation of the State being laid on the violent victory of a small group of individuals. Many authors have noted the peculiar nature of Pascal's politics, his sense of realism,[5] which cannot be subsumed under naturalistic or contractualist approaches to politics. His approach rather coincides, paradoxically, with the stern and violent nature of Spinoza's political philosophy.[6]

To make this point clearer, it should be noted that politics for Pascal can be described in terms of *lightness* in a double sense of the word: it is light both because it is not fundamental and because it is unfounded. Lightness in politics follows, then, the anti-foundational logic of Pascal's philosophy, be it in the fields of science,[7]

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3   "Fear of oppression, disposeth a man to anticipate, or to seek aid by society: for there is no other way by which a man can secure his life and liberty" (Hobbes, 1998, p. 67).

4   "Since men cannot, in this world, achieve either goodness or truth, then they are obviously unable to set up any wholly satisfactory form of social or political organisation. For Pascal, there are absolutely no exceptions to the statement that all activities connected with the world are infected with its vain and fallen nature" (Goldmann, 2013, p. 274).

5   "Pascal [...] elaborated what is in fact a realistic and penetrating analysis of the social order" (Goldmann, 2013, p. 275).

6   "En dépit de conceptions politiques fort différentes, Spinoza et Pascal partagent une thèse éminemment problématique selon laquelle c'est la force qui fait le droit et qui détermine la justice" (Jacquet, 2007, p. 295).

7   "Hence it appears that men are naturally and immutably impotent to treat of any science so that it may be in an absolutely complete order" (Pascal, 1910c, p. 424)

anthropology,[8] theology,[9] or in the marginal position of the human being in the universe,[10] which stands in radical opposition to the great metaphysical systems of the 17th century and their insistence on foundations.[11] Looking closely into Pascal's politics constitutes, then, a Pascalian gesture in itself: an anti-foundational, anti-metaphysical gesture, since the whole of Pascal's politics follows a logic of the "as if," of exteriority of behavior, of playfulness[12] and theatrics. In sum, a rationally explicable politics even if it is not rationally founded.

I. An Etiology of Violence and the Foundation of the State

In order to understand the ultimate end of politics, as well as its lightness, the problem to which it responds needs to be understood first. Typically, the political philosophies of the 17th century were built on two questions, the answers to which were determined by—and differed depending on—the fundamental anthropologies of the thinkers that espoused them: why do human beings prefer life over death? And why are their lives under threat, thus requiring a political order?

First, political philosophies are conditioned by the reason that causes human beings to want to preserve their lives. The fact that this process is ontological in Spinoza[13] and rational in Hobbes,[14] for instance, differentiates their political philosophies: Hobbes introduces a rupture motivated by rationality between the natural state and the political state; Spinoza, on the other hand, observes an ontological continuity between them.[15] Second, the nature of the obstacles to self-

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8   "For in the end, what is humanity in nature? A nothingness compared to the infinite, everything compared to a nothingness, a mid-point between nothing and everything, infinitely far from understanding the extremes; the end of things and the beginnings are insuperably hidden from him in an impenetrable secret" (Pascal, 1999, § 230, p. 67).

9   As opposed to what can be found in the works of Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche, or Leibniz, no demonstration of the existence of God is to be found in Pascal's, if only for the fact that God belongs to an order outside of the purview of demonstration (See Marion, 2004, pp. 293-306).

10   "It is an infinite sphere whose centre is everywhere and its circumference nowhere" (Pascal, 1999, § 230, p. 66).

11   "Some years ago I noticed how many false things I had accepted as true in my childhood, and how doubtful were the things that I subsequently built on them and therefore that, once in a lifetime, everything should be completely overturned and I should begin again from the most basic *foundations if I ever wished to establish anything firm and durable in the sciences"* (Descartes, 2000, p. 18).

12   "La vraie nature des lois est ludique" (Thirouin, 2011, p. 49).

13   "Every single thing endeavors as far as it lies in itself to persevere in its own being" (Spinoza, 2018, III, 6, p. 101).

14   Jean Terrel convincingly showed that the first movement of the human being in Hobbes is the thorough realization of his desires. It is only after his first rational thought that he comes to understand that, in order to fulfill them, it is necessary first to be alive, thus justifying the rational nature of self-preservation: "Tous les hommes naissent et demeurent immodérés, inclinés par nature à errer sans fin d'un désir à l'autre [...]" (2001, p. 139).

15   "As regards political theories, the difference which you inquire about between Hobbes and myself, consists in this, that I always preserve natural right intact, and only allot to the chief magistrates in every state a right over their subjects commensurate with the excess of their power over the power of the subjects. This is what always takes place in the state of nature" (Spinoza, 1901a, 369).

preservation influences the answer to the question of what is expected of politics, as well as the way in which the question is asked. The fact that there is some danger resulting from rational or passional processes produces two types of answers other than violence and, therefore, two different types of politics.

The singular nature of Pascal's answers to these questions offers a way of understanding the entirety of his politics. Unlike Hobbes and Spinoza, it is the field of theology that serves as the basis for self-preservation for human beings in Pascal. One could be led to believe that, for a thinker so close to Jansenism, worldly life may not be as valuable. Nevertheless, we find in Pascal an appreciation of life stemming from God. As established in the XIV *Provincial Letter,* God is the Creator of human beings, and, as such, their lives also belong to him, so that he has a direct right over them: "[…] how dare you usurp the power of life and death, which belongs essentially to none but God, and which is the most glorious mark of sovereign authority?" (Pascal, 1952, XIV, p. 111). Such prerogative is so important that not only is it not possible to take anyone else's life, but the same applies to one's own: "[…] man has no power even over his own life" (Pascal, 1952, XIV, p. 108). As a result, every time a man passes away, his death conveys God's will.[16]

Nevertheless, even if the life of human beings belongs to God, He did not create human beings *in order to* die, but in order to serve,[17] which is why God ultimately wants human beings to live, so that they can worship; it also explains why God protects human communities and values human life: "[…] it has seemed good to His providence to take human society under His protection […]" (Pascal, 1952, XIV, p. 108).

It is because God has an interest in the life of human beings that they should strive to preserve it until the moment He decides to take it. It is man's duty to preserve his own life so as to serve God. Thus, politics and its impulse to pacify appear as a human way to enforce God's will of human self-preservation.

If self-preservation is grounded on theological reasons, however, for what reason would human life ever be threatened, thus justifying the creation of a political order? Part of the debate in 17th-century political philosophy consisted in determining whether the violence of the state of nature emerged from human nature itself or if, conversely, it emerged from socialization and from encounters with other individuals.[18] Pascal provides a way out of this situation by claiming that

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16   "If […] through a transport of grace, we regard this accident [death], not in itself and apart from God, but apart from itself, and in the inmost part of the will of God, in the justice of his decree, in the order of his providence, which is the true cause of it […] we shall adore in humble silence the impenetrable loftiness of his secrets, we shall venerate the sanctity of his decrees, we shall bless the acts of his providence, and, uniting our will to that of God himself, we shall wish with him, in him, and for him, the thing that he has willed in us and for us from all eternity (Pascal, 1910b, p. 331-332).

17   "[…] the depravity of men disposes them to prefer that factitious honour before the life which God hath given them to be devoted to his service […] (Pascal, 1952, XIV, p. 112).

18   "The state of nature is a state in which humanity has a relationship with things, not with one another (or only fleetingly)" (Deleuze, 2004, p. 52).

violence does not come from a single human nature, but from the coexistence of two human natures. Before the Fall, human beings enjoyed a first nature, which was succeeded by the second;[19] It is in the conjunction between the two that violence can be explained, and thus, the need for politics.

The will of the human being is a movement, with its first and main driving force being love;[20] it tends inexorably towards its satisfaction, which represents its true repose. Thus, for Pascal "desire" corresponds to the movement of the will towards its satisfaction, so that every human being aspires to be happy: "All men are in search of happiness. There is no exception to this, whatever different methods are employed. They all aim for this goal" (Pascal, 1999, § 181, p. 51). But such desire has different motivations according to each nature. In the state of innocence, Grace orients it toward God; after the Fall, it is directed toward the human being itself and toward material and symbolic goods.[21]

Before the Fall, in his search for perfection,[22] the human being loved God and loved himself in God, through God, which allowed for an infinite love of himself. Not only did he have access to infinite love, but also to an infinite object of love. After the Fall, such conjunction became complicated. The infinite love of which the soul is capable became oriented toward a finite being–the human being–thus becoming unable to fulfill it completely: "This is the origin of self-love" (Pascal, 1910b, p. 336). The Fall threw man into the void, in a condition of lacking, because his love could no longer find repose or satisfaction in the love of an infinite being who fulfilled him completely.[23] Infinite love, which continues to propel him in spite of the Fall, could no longer be satisfied by a finite object. Thus, infinite love lost its infinite object and is therefore constantly looking for it. Two strategies emerged then to try to satisfy the infinite love lacking an infinite object.

First, so that the infinite love oriented toward the human being can continue to love an infinite being, it is possible to consider taking the human being himself toward an infinite status. If infinite love requires an infinite object, it should suffice for the human being to become infinite. Nevertheless, being aware of his own wretchedness,

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19 "That is the state humanity is in today. They retain some ineffective inkling of the happiness of their first nature, and they are sunk in the wretchednesses of their blindness, and of their concupiscence which has become their second nature (Pascal, 1999, § 182, p. 54).

20 "The intellect believes naturally, and the will loves naturally […]" (Pascal, 1901, p. 78-79).

21 "Concupiscence has become natural for us and has become our second nature" (Pascal, 1999, § 509, p. 122).

22 "Men, who naturally desire what is most perfect […]" (Pascal, 1910b, p. 360).

23 "The truth covered by this mystery is that God has created man with two loves, the one for God, the other for himself; but with this law, that the love for God shall be infinite, that is without any other limits than God himself; and that the love for self shall be finite and relating to God. / Man in this state not only loves himself without sin, but could not do otherwise than love himself without sin. / Since, sin being come, man has lost the first of these loves; and the love for himself being left alone in this great soul capable of an infinite love, this self-love has extended and overflowed in the empty space which the love of God has quitted; and thus he loves himself alone, and all things for himself, that is, infinitely. This is the origin of self-love" (Pascal, 1910b, p. 336).

he cannot directly elevate his own "self" toward a state of infinity. The only possibility is confusing his "self" with the image of his own "self" that he perceives in others. The human being cannot elevate himself without God, but he can elevate his social image by having an impact on the perception of others, which is why the search for esteem is crucial in human beings: "The whole of man's happiness lies in this esteem" (Pascal, 1999, § 30, p. 9). The process of confusing the "self" and the "imagined self" requires two different actions. On the one hand, we should forget the fact that we are nothing compared to God, so as to conceal the ontological wretchedness of the new object of desire (the "self"), which paves the way for the type of diversions that have the forgetting of our own wretchedness as their goal.[24] On the other hand, we should give value to ourselves through a displacement in the perspective from which we perceive ourselves. We would then look at ourselves through the eyes of others in a mirroring process in which we would like to become "[...] everything to everyone" (Pascal, 1999, § 547, p. 128). Such is the basis of vanity in self-love. This mirroring process and the resulting vanity respond to the need to adjust the finite, wretched, hateful "self"[25] to the nature of infinite love, in order to make the former worthy of the latter.

Second, the adjustment between infinite love and a finite object can also take place through the accumulation of goods external to the "self". Because infinite love cannot be satisfied even by God (because of the Fall) or by the ontological poverty of the "self," perhaps its infinite nature can be satisfied by another infinity: the infinite accumulation of goods. Even though objects are finite, it is possible to think of reaching infinity through their infinite accumulation, thus satisfying an infinite love.[26] In this case, the purpose is to reach a potential infinity through an infinite accumulation of finite entities. Such is the basis of the second form of self-love: self-love of essential comfort.[27]

Through these two types of self-love, desire and will attempt to fulfill the void left by God after human beings turned away from Him: "[...] there was once within us true happiness of which all that now remains is the outline and empty trace [...] Man tries unsuccessfully to fill this void with everything that surrounds him [...]" (Pascal, 1999, § 181, p. 52). Now, these two desires do not coexist independently: the possession of

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24 "Not having been able to conquer death, wretchedness, or ignorance, men have decided for their own happiness not to think about it" (Pascal, 1999, § 166, p. 44).

25 "The self is hateful" (Pascal, 1999, § 494, p. 118).

26 "[The springs of action] of the will are certain desires natural and common to all mankind, as the desire of being happy, which no one can avoid having, besides several particular objects which each one follows in order to attain, and which having the power to please us are as powerful, although pernicious in fact, in causing the will to act, as though they made its veritable happiness" (Pascal, 1910d, p. 401).

27 For Pascal, "essential comfort" always means that pleasure emerges from goods that are unrelated to esteem (See Lazzeri, 1993, p. 12, n. 28).

goods also increases the value of our social image, and then, it reinforces our esteem and the recognition we may expect from others. That is a hopeless search, however, because neither the value of our social image nor the infinite accumulation of finite things can occupy God's place or compare to his infinitude: "This infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite, immutable object, that is to say, God himself" (Pascal, 1999, § 181, p. 52).

These two desires (for goods and for esteem) explain the emergence of violence, as they serve as the basis for yet another desire: the desire for domination. The mechanism through which one searches for recognition moves the entirety of humanity, which has two consequences. First, because recognition is relative–in that being recognized always means being more so than someone else–, its process is infinite, so that if others strive to achieve it, we must do the same to maintain our own level of recognition, which is measured through comparison, and therefore, through a process that generates envy. Because being recognized always implies being more so than someone else, we necessarily engage in processes of comparison and competition. Second, because competition is the main driving force behind human beings after the Fall, its outcome is much more important than the preservation of one's own life, which opens the way for a fight to the death: "The sweetness of fame is so great that whatever we pin it to, we love, even death" (Pascal, 1999, § 71, p. 16). Because what is at stake in the search for esteem is the infinitude of love, the fight for our value in the eyes of others is more important than the fight for our lives and our self-preservation.

Thus, the desire for domination, a source for violence in the state of nature, emerges from the need to dominate others to be able to control the source of our social image and add the highest value to it so that it can come close to the infinite object of our desire before the fall: "Pascal recognized the true basis of any social or historical life: the desire which every man has to be 'esteemed' […], to be 'recognised' […]" (Goldmann, 2013, p. 275).[28] Envy emerges in this context and justifies violence–first, because every fraction of esteem that someone else enjoys amounts to a fraction that is missing from us; second, due to its comparative nature,[29] possessing something is not as important as keeping others from enjoying it.[30] The emergence of generalized violence in the Pascalian state of nature can be

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28 As Goldmann points out: "[…] for Pascal, man is essentially a social being, and the need to be esteemed by his fellows is a fundamental part of his nature" (Goldmann, 2013, p. 276); it should be noted, however, that such a need for esteem is part of his second nature.

29 We can observe here the importance of Pascal in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's work, as the latter places comparison at the core of his philosophy by means of the opposition between self-likeness and self-love (See Olivo-Poindron, 2010).

30 Pascal confirms this in the negative: "the universal good which we all desire could not lie within any single thing which can be owned only by one person and which, if it is shared, causes more distress to its owner over the part the owner is denied than enjoyment over the part the owner has" (Pascal, 1999, § 181, p. 52).

explained, then, by the Fall and the break-up of the union with an infinite object that may satisfy our love.

II. The Self-Regulation of Affect and the Emergence of Common Norms

The anthropological basis of violence in the double nature of the human being cancels out the possibility of natural sociability because what is natural—due to the Fall—is for everyone to compete with each other. In such a competitive environment, the other appears as a means or as a tool to achieve the double goal every human being has: to run away from the nothingness that he is and to come closer to a higher level of being, in order to become an object that may satisfy an infinite love.

The foundation of political order, however, cannot rely on such a naturalistic ground, which would presuppose an original difference in human beings that may justify a natural hierarchy among them. For Pascal, all human beings are naturally equal, both in terms of their bodies and their minds; or, to be more exact, there are no differences so profound that they may justify and serve as the basis for a hierarchy in the political field. It is not a matter for Pascal, as a mathematician and a physicist, of erasing the difference between gifted men and ordinary humans. Nevertheless, throughout *Of the Geometrical Spirit,* he repeatedly claims that every science must begin by offering definitions of words which are clear and precise. Nevertheless, such a process of definition throws us back into a regression towards infinity which can only be stopped through non-deductive knowledge: the knowledge of principles: "[...] the knowledge of first principles such as space, time, movement, numbers is as certain as any that our reasoning can give us. [...] The principles are felt, and the propositions are proved" (Pascal, 1999, § 142, p. 36). Thus, as much as deductive abilities on the part of scientists may differ, they are always based on the ability to feel that remains the same for every human being.[31] Nature has offered a definition for words such as "time" or "space" that are common to all human beings, so that we may understand them without a further need to define them: "there are some words incapable of being defined; and, if nature had not supplied this defect by a corresponding idea which she has given to all mankind, all our expressions would be confused" (Pascal, 1910c, p. 426). Regarding cognitive abilities, then, their difference is not natural difference, so that an original hierarchy could be justified; it is simply a matter of how they are used and how they have been used.

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31 "Thus, in pushing our researches further and further, we arrive necessarily at primitive words which can no longer be defined, and at principles so clear that we can find no others that can serve as a proof of them" (Pascal, 1910c, p. 424).

The same could be said of physical abilities. As someone who suffered throughout his life due to illness, Pascal knew well enough that there are differences in what human beings can do with their bodies. Nevertheless, no difference in physical ability can justify a political hierarchy because bodies do not reflect any type of political status: "Your soul and your body are, of themselves, indifferent to the state of boatman or that of duke; and there is no natural bond that attaches them to one condition rather than to another" (Pascal, 1910a, p. 379). The Fall caused human beings to become so distanced from God that the finite distance between them seems now minimal and insignificant: "Within the scope of these infinities all finites are equal [...]" (Pascal, 1999, § 230, p. 70). Consequently, the differences entailed by the political order cannot be grounded on a natural hierarchy.

And yet, they cannot be grounded either on a pact, as they are in the case of Hobbes–whose work Pascal read (Zarka, 2016, p. 234)–, since the three concepts needed for building a theory of the social pact (human nature, natural Law, and laws of nature) are all questioned by Pascal. (1) Human nature, for Pascal, is divided into two natures; in fact, what Hobbes calls human nature cannot be reduced to the way Pascal understands the second nature resulting from the Fall. For Pascal, instead, there are more than two human natures: rather, there is an infinite dissemination of human natures: "How many natures there are in us!" (Pascal, 1999, § 681, p. 162). (2) The same goes for natural Law: equality among human beings does not reside in a common law, but in a common distance from God after the Fall. (3) Finally, while Pascal claims in his XIV *Provincial letter*,[32] that there are in fact laws of nature, in his *Pensées*, which he wrote later, he precludes the possibility of getting to know them, be it through feelings or through reason: "No doubt there are natural laws, but our fine reason having been corrupted, it corrupted everything" (Pascal, 1999, § 94, p. 24).

On what grounds, then, can a political order be created if not on natural hierarchies or inequalities emerging from a contract? The answer for Pascal is as cold as it is realistic: the political order is created by force and is kept by imagination.

Unlike Hobbes, the pre-political moment for Pascal is not a state of loneliness on the part of human beings. Even in this first moment, there are already some "parties,"[33] i.e., groups of humans who confront each other to assert their dominance. Consequently, in the end, one of these parties imposes itself by force: "Men will doubtless fight till the stronger party overcomes the weaker, and a dominant party is established" (Pascal, 1910e, § 304, p. 107). Force establishes an

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32 "Such are the principles of public safety and tranquility which have been admitted at all times and in all places, and on the basis of which all legislators, sacred and profane, from the beginning of the world, have founded their laws. Even Heathens have never ventured to make an exception to this rule […]" (Pascal, 1952, XIV, p. 109).

33 "Let us then imagine we see society in the process of formation. Men will doubtless fight till the stronger party overcomes the weaker" (Pascal, 1910e, § 304, p. 107).

order in the first place, which explains why the first laws are those that allow for the dominant group to legally reproduce their power and to legitimate what was earned by force: "the masters, who do not desire the continuation of strife, then decree that the power which is in their hands shall be transmitted as they please" (Pascal, 1910e, § 304, p. 107). At this early stage, politics appears as nothing more than the continuation of war through legal means, since the early laws are nothing more than the justification, legitimation, and continuation of a correlation of forces that existed between the original parties in the pre-political state.

Nevertheless, even if an order can be established initially by force, it is not enough to ensure the perseverance in its being. Because the first laws that regulate the transmission of power reflect the interests of the party that won the war, they cannot be maintained by simple force. For an order to be stable, it requires that somehow the laws that it imposes be accepted by those ruled over through them; it is in this process of acceptance that imagination emerges.

The mirroring effect we have described explains once again the emergence of norms. It should be noted that, anthropologically speaking, we are trapped inside processes where we seek recognition. Now, within a political system, the State distributes the highest honors, and it is to be expected that the greatest recognition, quantitatively speaking, will be granted by a majority. Consequently, there will be two types of individuals. Those who—unaware of the grounds on which the State is built—will believe that the laws are just in themselves and will therefore subject to them: they will act mimetically on grounds of ignorance. But one could imagine that other individuals—knowing full well that laws are not grounded on any transcendental sense of justice, but on the pure contingency of force—will rebel against the political order. Nevertheless, as Pascal points out, they represent no threat to the political order either, since they will rationally follow the law, even if they know they are not just, as a result of their goal to be recognized. As Spinoza explains in his *On the Improvement of the Understanding,* whomever wishes to be recognized, i.e., acknowledged by a human group, must paradoxically subject himself to their norms.[34] If we want to be acknowledged by a society that values force, we must then be strong; if, conversely, we want to be distinguished in a society that values compassion, we must show compassion toward our fellow men, since it is always the group which dictates the standards for differentiation, distinction, and therefore, esteem. The same goes for Pascal. There is a rational self-organization of the political order that is based on the fact that, regardless of what one may think, in order to be esteemed by someone, it is necessary to do something the other finds worthy of esteem, thus subjecting oneself to their standards. Pascal states this in the negative when he explains that rebelliousness

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34   "[In the pursuit of the highest good] Fame has the further drawback that it compels its votaries to order their lives according to the opinions of their fellow-men, shunning what they usually shun, and seeking what they usually seek" (Spinoza, 1901b, p. 4).

drives one away from the esteem of human beings and that to be more esteemed, one has to obey the laws, i.e., conform to respect what society deems worthy of esteem.[35] Since everyone strives for esteem, for there to exist common norms, it is only a matter of there being a great number of individuals thinking that the laws are just, thus abiding by them so that everyone is rationally inclined to respect them, through a process of rational counter-productivity of difference.[36] According to this process, paradoxically, in order to differentiate oneself, it is necessary to imitate one another, thus converging into the abidance of norms and commonality of behavior.

The mechanism through which the political order emerges appears to conform to the notion of lightness we have presented before. First, because it has no real basis except for the contingency of force within a human group. But, especially, because lightness[37] appears in the process of perseverance in the being of order which is based only on the mirroring process and the search for esteem on the part of all human beings. This explains why a law does not persevere in its being because it is just, but because of the opposite: because it is a law (regardless of its content) that is perceived as just so that everyone subjects themselves to it to gain recognition so that it may, therefore, persevere in its being. Far from any metaphysical foundation, the only political basis for the political order is its very existence: "Following reason alone, nothing is intrinsically just; everything moves with the times. Custom is the whole of equity for the sole reason that it is accepted. That is the mystical basis of its authority" (Pascal, 1999, § 94, p. 24).

III. Politics as the Distribution of Sensitivity

Lightness as the *de facto* foundation of the political order results in a very idiosyncratic understanding of political relationships not just between rules and those ruled over, but also among the latter. These relationships are justified in a differentiation and externalization process, which accounts for Pascal's understanding of politics as well as their field of action.

As explained in the *Discourses on the Condition of the Great,* political power must be thought based on the categories of chance and contingency.[38] Just as a shipwreck survivor who happened to arrive at an island whose inhabitants seemingly recognize in him their long-lost king, thus giving him power, so do politicians enjoy a power that has

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35   "But it would not be difficult to make them understand how mistaken they are in courting esteem in this manner" (Pascal, 1999, § 681 p. 162). The French text explicitly uses the word *estime*, which is translated into other languages (such as Spanish) as merely "good opinion" (See Pascal, 2011, p. 516).

36   We have observed the same mechanism both in the works of Spinoza and Adam Smith (See Vinolo, 2016)

37   "Whoever wanted to examine the reason for this [the justness of the law] would find it so feeble and lightweight […]" (Pascal, 1999, § 94, p. 24, emphasis ours).

38   "you find yourself in the world at all, only through an infinity of chances" (Pascal, 1910a, p. 408).

been given to them for contingent reasons. Such contingency results, first, from the force that emerged as the winner in the original establishment of power through filiation laws,[39] but it also results from having been born into a family that belongs to the ruling class,[40] or the fact that one was born in a country that decided to be ruled by one system of government among others, and which grants political power to one group among others:[41] "this right which you have, is not founded [...] upon any quality or any merit in yourself which renders you worthy of it" (Pascal, 1910a, p. 379). Nevertheless, the fact that its foundation is the result of chance does not take away any legitimacy to power; on the contrary, as a result, it can be identified and defined, both on the part of the rulers and of those ruled over, so that the modes of reality may be appropriately distributed. Politics for Pascal is subjected to the logic of distinction and hierarchization of orders: "The infinite distance between body and mind points to the infinitely more infinite distance between mind and charity, for charity is supernatural" (Pascal, 1999, § 339, p. 86). Politics rules in the order of the bodies, so it can only rule over them and demand a certain behavior of them; thus, the social order as well as peace may be maintained.

A ruler must demand that the position he occupies be respected from the outside, but he cannot demand that others believe this position is related to his own personal qualities. An ambassador must demand to be greeted using the title "Your excellency," but he cannot expect that the fact of being called so also demands of us to think that he is in fact excellent. This creates a rupture in the exteriority of the political order of the bodies and the intellectual order of the minds. The ruler, then, would always do well to distinguish between "[...] two kinds of greatness: for there is greatness of institution, and natural greatness" (Pascal, 1910a, p. 380). Natural greatness creates esteem within the self, as it is associated with internal qualities of individuals. A mathematician deserves to be esteemed intimately and within the self as a result of his qualities in the field of the mind. An army man deserves to be admired as a result of his excellence in the order of the bodies. Natural greatness is independent from what human beings deem worthy; it is "[...] independent of the caprice of men, because it consists in the real and effective qualities of the soul or the body" (Pascal, 1910a, pp. 380-381), which is why they deserve to be intimately, profoundly, and intentionally esteemed. Conversely, political greatness is instituted; it does not exist outside of the political system that guarantees its existence and makes it real: "Greatness of institution depends upon the will of men who have with reason thought it right to honor certain positions, and to attach to them certain marks of

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39 "The masters [...] decree that the power which is in their hands shall be transmitted as they please. Some place it in election by the people, others in hereditary succession, etc." (Pascal, 1910e, § 304, p. 107).

40 "Your birth depends on a marriage, or rather on the marriages of all those from whom you descend. But upon what do these marriages depend? A visit made by chance, an idle word, a thousand unforeseen occasions" (Pascal, 1910a, p. 378).

41 "In one country the nobles are honored, in another the plebeians: in this the eldest, in the other the youngest. Why is this? because thus it has been pleasing to men" (Pascal, 1910a, p. 380).

respect" (Pascal, 1910a, p. 380). Hence, it is not that this kind of greatness deserves no respect; it deserves "the respect of institution" (Pascal, 1910a, p. 381), which is manifested through the external respect, materialized in one's behavior, toward the position each one occupies according to a purely political logic of hierarchization. One should, then, respect ceremonies, forms of worship, meetings, and honors that are manifested in the outside; however, no ruler can demand that this respect be transformed into esteem.

The same holds true symmetrically for those ruled over. While they must in fact obey the political order, such obedience should only be observed in their behavior, that is, externally. They must abide by the law, rituals, and political hierarchies, but no one can force them to esteem the people they respect externally.

This situation explains the two forms of pathological behavior on the part both of rulers and those ruled over. These suggest a confusion regarding the two orders and a misunderstanding of politics. The ruler runs the risk of mistaking his greatness of institution for natural greatness. The ruler is to split himself into two and adopt a "[...] double thought" as a result of which he can demand respect in the political field even if he knows that respect does not translate into esteem, which is based on a natural quality.[42] The same applies to those ruled over. There is no problem in kneeling before a king: we kneel before them because we respect them, not because we esteem them: "It is a folly and baseness of spirit to refuse to them these duties" (Pascal, 1910a, p. 381). At play here, once again, is the light nature of politics: we kneel without believing in the superiority of the king. We simply do it because the social order embodied by the king guarantees peace.

We may thus imagine two kinds of pathological behavior on the part of the people. First, it is possible for some people to think of politicians as truly great and naturally superior; conversely, some others will not respect them because they know full well that none of them is naturally superior. Both attitudes rest on the ignorance of what politics means, and as different as their attitudes are, they reveal a symmetry resulting from a confusion between natural greatness and greatness of institution. What is then, for Pascal, the right attitude? It is to obey precisely because one knows that greatness is nothing more than greatness institutionalized by the social order, as respect does not imply esteem: "The rank and file honour people of high birth. Those of middling intelligence despise them, saying that their birth is an advantage of chance, not of what they are. Clever men honour them, not in the way the rank and file do, but from deeper motives"[43] (Pascal, 1999, § 124, p. 31).

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42   "[…] you should have a double thought, like the man of whom we have spoken, and that, if you act externally with men in conformity with your rank, you should recognize, by a more secret but truer thought, that you have nothing naturally superior to them" (Pascal, 1910a, p. 379).

43   The French text is more precise as it does not speak of a deeper motive, but of a thinking from behind (*la pensée de derrière),* suggesting an altogether different form of thinking (See Pascal, 2011, p. 206).

One could think, then, that politics for Pascal implies an absolute conformity on the part of citizens before their rulers, regardless of what the law establishes, thus definitely nullifying the category of "legitimacy" and substituting it for that of "legality." To a certain extent, such complete conformity does exist, and is in fact so important that—as in Spinoza—[44] political (i.e. external) obedience may lead a Christian man to obey irrational legislation: "True Christians nevertheless obey these madnesses, not because they respect them, but only the order of God which, to punish men, has subjected them to these madnesses" (Pascal, 1999, § 48, p. 12). Still, there are limits to obedience and to the power of rules; but these limits do not result from higher values or from a legitimacy that is external to the political field. Conversely, they result from a deeper understanding of what politics entails.

First, there is a limit to political power that occurs between orders. Political power, regardless of how strong it may be, how authoritarian it may be, is limited to its field, which is the order of the bodies; for that reason, it cannot impose anything outside of its purview. It may force someone to kneel before a God, but not to believe in Him; it may force someone to hail the queen, but not to love her; it may force someone to attend a ceremony where a poet will be awarded a medal, but not to admire his poetry. Everything rests here on the need to have a double thought: one that rules over our outside behavior; the other, which lies hidden and defines who we admire: "We must have deeper motives <*une pensée de derrière*>and judge everything by them [...]" (Pascal, 1999, § 125, p. 31). Consequently, a politician cannot impose a State religion,[45] aesthetic, or science. For Pascal, the desire to extend political power beyond its order amounts to tyranny. There should be, then, a limit to political power, which consists in reminding it that its reach and foundation within its order is contingent: "Tyranny is wanting to have something in one way when it can only be had in another" (Pascal, 1999, § 91, p. 22). Justice entails, then, respect to the orders and forces each individual to be aware of the world in which one is acting. Scientific conviction is not the same thing as political conviction, morality is not politics, and faith is not reason. To each field corresponds a specific world which carries with itself its own relationship of justice with the objects of said world, which opens up the possibility of talking about justices, instead of a single justice. Consequently, we have associated the first limitation to political power as being "between orders", as it relies on the fact that each order delimits the other, and that interferences between orders are impossible. Just as it is useless to prove that God exists, or try to prove

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44 "[...] if a man, who is led by reason, has sometimes to do by the commonwealth's order what he knows to be repugnant to reason, that harm is far compensated by the good, which he derives from the existence of a civil state" (Spinoza, 1887a, III, 6, p. 303).

45 "The way of God, who disposes all things gently, is to implant religion into our mind through reason and into our heart through grace. But to want to implant it into our mind and heart with force and threats is to implant not religion, but terror" (Pascal, 1999, § 203, p. 60).

one's love for another, it is useless to impose internal esteem or love for rulers in the field of politics.

But in addition to this limitation "between orders," there are also limitations "within an order." Because one order does not interfere with the other, political power is limited by the borders of what it can do. Beyond knowing whether the State should do something, it should be noted that there are things that it simply cannot do. Thus, Pascal observes the way in which Galileo's censorship on the part of the Church was a mistake. As much as one wants to censor it, scientific truth will impose itself in the field of science, regardless of what the Church can do as the State: "It was to [...] little purpose that you obtained against Galileo a decree from Rome condemning his opinion respecting the motion of the earth. It will never be proved by such an argument as this that the earth remains stationary [...]" (Pascal, 1952, XVIII, p. 165). Likewise, the State cannot have an influence over the way one loves or reasons, as it only can expect of its citizens a certain type of behavior. There is an entire sphere of human life, internal and intimate, with which politics cannot interfere, not even through tyrannical power, pointing once again the lightness of politics in Pascal's work.

Conclusion

We can see, then, how politics works for Pascal, and to what extent it can be rationally explained, even though it may not have a rational basis. Its lightness points to a single objective: to guarantee peace. Each individual may think, experience, or feel as they wish, provided that their behavior abides by positive law. Such is the basis of politics for Pascal: if politics had a goal other than peace, it would make no sense for Pascal to pay so much attention to respect for positive law, even if it is irrational.

In fact, Pascal himself states so explicitly: "The worst evil of all is civil war" (Pascal, 1999, § 128, p. 32). One could offer biographical explanations for this fear of civil war and the resulting appreciation of peace. Similar associations have been advanced for major philosophical works. Some have tried to prove that Hobbes' philosophy is based on his experience of childhood violence.[46] Some others attribute Spinoza's transition from the *Theologico-Political Treatise,* which ascribes to politics the goal of attaining freedom,[47] to the *Political Treatise,* in which politics should simply guarantee safety and peace,[48] as a result of his having witnessed the De Witt brothers' lynching.[49]

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46 It is said that Hobbes's birth was induced prematurely as they feared an imminent invasion by the Spaniards; it is as if fear had been the foundational and original passion in Thomas Hobbes's life (See Moya, 2011).

47 "In fact, the true aim of government is liberty" (Spinoza, 1887b, XX, p. 259).

48 "Now the quality of the state of any dominion is easily perceived from the end of the civil state, which end is nothing else but peace and security of life" (Spinoza, 1887a, V, 2, p. 313).

49 Spinoza denounced the lynchers as the ultimate barbarians (*ultimi barbarorum)* (See Nadler, 2018, p. 356). "His true ultimi

Pascal's position in favor of peace could also be explained in terms of his childhood experience of trauma as a result of the repression of a tax-related uprising—*La révolte des Nu-Pieds*—in Normandy, in 1639 (Petit, 2023, pp. 23-27).

Nevertheless, interesting and plausible as these interpretations may be, they remain unverifiable, and correspond more to the field of psychology than to philosophy. For that reason, it is necessary to explain in a philosophical manner the constant and repeated repulsion that Pascal experienced against civil war,[50] [51] which leads him to conceiving of politics as the field that must guarantee peace.

Politics is given a single, behavioristic, external goal, maybe somewhat disappointing due to its lightness, because God did not create humans so that they died. While it is true that He created them mortal, it does not mean that they should die in battle against each other. For that reason, preserving the life of human beings is a value, as it responds to God's will. Therefore politics in Pascal's work serves a God-given role (Albiac, 2007), not because it has any metaphysical foundations, as God does, but simply because politics appears as the lightest way to comply with God's will of persevering in the being of humans. Once again, it is the anthropology of the Fall that explains politics. After we turned away from God, only some especially pious individuals could directly fulfill God's will; not everyone is capable of doing so. For that reason, politics serves as an indirect, easy way to make everyone live up to the reason why human beings were created. If not everyone will be able to understand, at least let everyone obey. Everyone will abide by God's will without knowing, thinking they are responding to their exclusively individual interests. Politics is, thus, the displacement of God's will, its mediation, as well as its mediatization; quite literally, its *différance*.

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barbarorum would become the book in which he worked since then and until his death: his Tractatus politicus" (Albiac, 2011, p. 228, translation ours).

50   "Reason can do no better, for civil war is the greatest of evils" (Pascal, 1910, § 320, p. 111).

51   It is noteworthy that when Derrida analyzes the mystical foundation of power and justice, he immediately resorts to Pascal, as if in their anti-metaphysical quest, both Derrida and Pascal agreed on the unfounded nature of every justice and every law (See Derrida, 1992, pp. 11-14).

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