Pascal and the Persistence of Platonism in Early Modern Thought

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Abstract

The following paper argues that Blaise Pascal, in spite of his famous opposition between the God of the Philosophers and the God of “Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” has significant affinities with the tradition of Renaissance Platonism and is in fact a Platonist in his overall outlook. This is shown in three ways. Firstly, it is argued that Pascal’s skeptical fideism has roots in the notion of faith developed in post-Plotinian neo-Platonism. Secondly, it is argued that Pascal makes considerable use of the Platonic notion of an indefinite dyadic principle. Thirdly, it is argued that Pascal’s religious psychology gives a centrality to the body that brings it close to the theurgical standpoint of figures like Iamblichus. Pascal is then contrasted to figures like Cusanus and Pico in that a dyadic principle of opposition is more prominent in his work than a triadic logic of mediation.

Keywords

Pascal, Platonism, Renaissance, dyad, skepticism, humanism, grace, nature

1

Pascal, it is well known, rejected the God of the philosophers for the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. In the process, he has no doubt endeared himself to many who oppose the living and practical faith of the Hebrews to the dead abstractions of the Greeks. It is in this spirit perhaps that he is praised by a contemporary scholar for liberating pure Augustinian Christianity from bondage to its ‘Platonic traces’.¹ Yet I

¹ Thus argues the Evangelical scholar J. K. Smith (2000) p. 140. Smith holds that in Pascal

want to suggest that Pascal's apparent dismissal of the God of the philosophers is misleading if taken at face value. As I hope to demonstrate in the present essay, much of the substance of Pascal's thought is prefigured in the Platonic tradition. In fact, Pascal is even more strictly neo-Platonic than his master Augustine in that he elevates the Good above thought and being in a way that the Bishop of Hippo does not. The God of the philosophers is very much alive in Pascal if by the Philosophers one means, not Zeno or Epictetus, but Iamblichus and Proclus.² Pascal did not pursue erudition for its own sake. His knowledge of the history of philosophy was probably fragmentary. Nonetheless, there is an intellectual tradition to which he belongs and that tradition is clearly Platonic at its base. At the same time as he is a Christian Pascal is also a neo-Platonist.

One can speculate on the reasons for this; perhaps he derived his Platonism from Augustine and somehow read out the rationalism that distinguishes the bishop of Hippo from more intuitive and vitalistic strains of Platonic thought.³ I find this the least likely hypothesis for there seem

the Augustinian self achieves liberation from the 'Platonic traces' that still infect Augustine himself but, as shall appear below, there are Platonic traces aplenty in Pascal as well.

² When Pascal speaks of the Philosophers it is quite clear that he primarily means the Stoics and Sceptics of whom he had read in Montaigne. Plato and Aristotle are scarcely mentioned and Plotinus and Proclus never. Nonetheless, the latter have indelibly marked him through the mediation of Christian sources. Indeed, I would suggest that any attempt to rescue biblical religion from 'objectifying rationalism' that is not simply reactionary will tend to make direct or indirect use of neo-Platonic categories for it is the neo-Platonists who hold to a productive principle prior to thinking. To *reflectively* oppose Jerusalem and Athens is to become a certain kind of Athenian.

³ There is a radical difference between Augustine and Pascal on the question of the hierarchy of the soul and the nature of the first principle (B. Wills; 2006). To put it bluntly, self-reflexive mind is the highest principle for Augustine and will subordinate to reason in the human soul; the soul loves as the intellect knows and God is supreme intellection. For Pascal will is the higher principle and moves to a Good beyond discursive thought and intellection; he is a voluntarist and a vitalist where Augustine is an intellectualist. My argument here is that this reflects the influence of other traditions besides the Augustinian of which figures like Cusanus and Pico are mediators. I also would argue that this distinction characterizes Pascal as a *late* neo-Platonist. Augustine's intellectualism stems historically from Porphyry's simplification of Plotinus' intelligible hierarchy which more closely identified the One with being and mind. Later Platonists such as Iamblichus and Damascius reacted strongly against this trend and reasserted the utter transcendence of the One, Iamblichus asserting a one above unity itself and Damascius refusing any predication whatsoever of the first principle (for an account of the above see Wallis; 1971). Pascal stands

to me much more direct links between Pascal and non-Augustinian strains of Platonism than can be explained by such a peculiar mental process. Perhaps he was influenced by the tradition of Renaissance Platonism. This latter possibility gains plausibility from the fact that at least one famous passage in the *Pensées* directly echoes the Christian Proclan Nicholas of Cusa. The Paris Oratory readily suggests itself as a source for such influences. Neo-Platonic themes in figures like Bérulle and Condren are widely recognized; though Augustinians in a general sense they are also heavily marked by the alternate tradition of Pseudo Dionysius which elevates the good above being and mystical union above intellection. As Hans Urs von Balthasar point out, Condren in particular was a significant influence on Pascal (von Balthasar 1986; 173-175). Yet, whatever sources he used the fact remains clear; Pascal takes up the skeptical and theurgic side of late antique Platonism and thinks his Christianity within this framework.

This can be shown in many ways but I will limit myself to three. I will examine a. Pascal's elevation of faith above discursive reason b. his use of the Platonic *stoicheia* (the one and the indeterminate dyad) c. his theurgical account of the body and its role in salvation. On all three points I will show that Pascal is elaborating (and sometimes revising) traditional neo-Platonic themes even as he is using them to Christian ends. This can be seen particularly clearly with respect to the last two points for here Pascal's thought and even his language explicitly echoes the Platonism of Nicholas of Cusa. Thus, among the possibilities mentioned above it might be most profitable to explore what traces Cusanus (and through him the tradition of Eckhardt and the Rhineland mystics) may have left on thought of the French Jansenist Pascal. What is more, and there is perhaps a further irony here, there are features of Pascal's discourse (anti-humanist though it is) that call to mind the arch-Humanist Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola, which is surprising given that Pascal makes only one sarcastic

broadly with these latter in affirming a unifying center of the human organism (the heart) which is prior to all discursive mediation and in naming the principle of this unity love or will, which moves beyond thought to an infinite object *above* being which can only be named as *Goodness*. As we shall see, Pascal also stands with the late Platonists in holding that love transcends the opposition of thought and being (and skepticism) *through the body*. Pascal took much from his reading of Augustine but his Platonism is a different thing altogether.

reference to Pico (Pascal 1967: 390). If my argument is successful, it may prove possible to trace a direct line from the Florentine Academy of Ficino and Pico, through the Roman oratory of St. Phillip Neri, to the Paris Oratory of Berulle and on to Pascal. Certainly, significant figures in the intellectual life of 16th century Paris such as Jacques Lefevre d'Etaples and Charles de Bovelles were heavily influenced by Ficino suggesting yet another possible line of influence. Be that as it may, on the level of philosophical principle I hold Pascal to be demonstrably neo-Platonist in crucial aspects of his thought in spite of the fact that in many treatments of Pascal the Platonic tradition is never so much as mentioned. As a caveat however, I would hasten to add that Pascal's Platonism is idiosyncratic *vis a vis* his direct predecessors: where Ficino, Pico and Cusa resolve the principle of dyadic otherness through a variety of 'triadic' mediations Pascal does not. Though echoing their thought at various points his Platonism is a much more 'dyadic' affair for which opposites are not mediated rationally or intellectually but only for the eyes of faith and, indeed, ultimately, only through bodily action.

2

The English poet and literary scholar Kathleen Raine pointed out several decades ago that neo-Platonism is a form of excluded knowledge; an 'esoteric' tradition defined as 'other' in the self-constitution of 'secular humanism' (Raine 1977: 4). We have come a long way since the days when the *Edinburgh Review* could devote 30 pages to ridiculing Thomas Taylor for the crime of translating Plotinus. We have come a long way since the days when English scholarship on the Neo-Platonic tradition was, with a few notable exceptions, confined to students of Renaissance literature. We are now perhaps at a point where we can begin to take stock of the mutilations that have occurred in our understanding of the history of philosophy through the aforementioned exclusion. As time is short and the subject long I will confine myself to one example; the widely disseminated perception (adverted to above) that Pascal's philosophy of religion is a kind of pragmatic fideism revealing, supposedly, a Biblicist and Hebraic mindset opposed to the abstractness of 'Greek Speculation'. This seems to me wrong. Pascal may well be opposed to a speculative thought divorced from the practice of life but this does not separate him from any ancient

Platonist; in fact his overall position fits neatly into the vitalist and theurgic side of late Athenian Platonism.⁴

Let me demonstrate this first with respect to the very thing that might be taken to distinguish Pascal most from his late antique forbears: his elevation of faith above reason. Here I must be blunt; there is nothing Pascal says about faith that indicates that it is anything but a highly unified mode of cognition.⁵ It is certainly not an assent to propositions on some external ground of probability out of self-interest, though Pascal himself at times seems superficially to present it this way. It is in fact the kind of knowledge above knowledge that Plotinus sometimes seems to attribute even to the One (Plotinus 1991; V. 4.2). This can be seen by looking at some of the other things Pascal says we know by faith. For instance, he says we have an intuition of the reality of space and time that enables the perception of relations between sensible objects (Pascal, 214). It is something *in light of which* we know something else. Yet at the same time space and time are not themselves objects of discursive apprehension; any length of space is both finite and infinite at once and cannot be thought without producing an antimony for reason. It is a unification of the field of experience but not itself experienced; a ‘one’ outside of the division of subject and object that unites them both. Pascal says this unity is known by the heart as are the principles of number *and* religious faith. As he puts it “C’est le Coeur qui sent Dieu et non la raison” (Pascal, 224). The meaning of this latter is clear; Pascal is saying we have an innate sympathy with our cause (the memory or trace of the Good) which manifests itself as a

⁴ Theurgy may be defined as an attempt to raise the soul into divine union through evoking a sympathetic power resident in material forms and rites. For Iamblichus, the grace of higher Gods descends to us through a power in matter activated by the art of the Theurgist. What is above thought is attained through the co-operation what is below thought (apparently) because of an inner identity between what is most opposed, matter and the Gods. Theurgic ritual is in the final analysis a gracious communication of the demiurgic presencing of the Gods to human agents as our summoning of them is precisely their descent to us. A thorough account of this is given by Shaw in *Theurgy and the Soul* (1995) pp. 45–57. Crucial for our purposes is the fact that this position, contrary to all our stereotypes about ancient Platonic, elevates action above intellectual contemplation as a mode of union. This will be taken up again in Pascal.

⁵ Or, if one likes, a non-cognition that has directly all the presence attained in cognitional awareness yet without the discursive divisions of everyday consciousness or the duality of knower and known still present (as overcome) in intellection.

spontaneous receptivity to what is higher (when it is present by grace) that precedes *ratio*. It is not belief in the sense of *doxa* but the preconscious reversion to cause that the Neo-Platonists, centuries before Pascal, had termed faith.⁶

Indeed, the substance of Pascal's critique of natural theology and his privileging of intuition over discursive reason in our knowledge of God can already be found in Iamblichus' *Mysteries of Egypt*; a text available in Pascal's day through the Latin version of Ficino (from which the work derives its current title). In this text Iamblichus is concerned to defend the practice of theurgy against the rationalistic critique of Porphyry. In one particularly striking passage he rejects the claim that belief in the Gods must be conceded to be more rational than the alternative. This he says is to miss the point entirely for "...an innate knowledge of the Gods is co-existent with our nature and is superior to all judgment and choice, reasoning and proof. This knowledge is united from the outset with its own cause and exists in tandem with the essential striving of the soul towards the Good" (Iamblichus 2004; III, 3). Thus, Iamblichus counsels Porphyry to "...avoid the inclination to one side of an argument rather than another resulting from the balanced antithesis of lines of reasoning, for such a procedure is alien to the first principles of reasoning and tends towards a secondary level of reality such as belongs, rather, to the potentiality and contrariety of the realm of generation" (Iamblichus; III, 3). The meaning of this is clear; knowledge of the first is intuitive and direct because the first is beyond the realm of contingency and potentiality about which discursive reason affirms or denies what may or may not be. Rather, what is prior to us is pervasively present as our cause and formative principle. Accordingly, our relation to the divine life is primarily a spontaneous tending and trusting response to the leading of the Gods whose immanent causal power directly forms and sustains our activities.

⁶) This is what makes Pascal so crucial for the vitalist tradition of French thought that stretches from Maine de Biran to Bergson and forward to post-Modernism. For him, thought depends directly on the self-organizing spontaneity of the will that can never be reflexively present to itself. Life itself determines us to acceptance of the first principles of reason and number because it is through 'beliefs' that we constitute ourselves as living organisms. This is why for Pascal both rationalism and skepticism are futile; life cannot transcend itself to judge itself but cannot suspend the innate force of its operations either.

The later Platonists were quite happy to call this spontaneous tending faith and Proclus rates it higher even than the intellectual virtues (see Wallis 1972; 154-155).

This return to the self and its ground through the hyper-intuition of faith is for Pascal a reversion from the sensible. (Seemingly) unlike Iamblichus, he takes up (and radically sharpens) what Gregory Shaw has termed the a-cosmic attitude in Plotinus. (Shaw 1997; 10,11) Pascal takes up from Augustine the melding of the Hebraic myth of the fall with the Neo-Platonic concept of the *tolma* or original daring of what would be outside the One. We have fallen into division from ourselves and into subjection to external nature through a turning towards self and away from our source. This turning is grounded in an act of pride or hubristic self assertion. Remarkably, Pascal presents this as a fall into dominance by the dyadic principle of the great and the small: “Car enfin, qu’est-ce que l’homme dans la nature? Un néant à l’égard de l’infini, un tout à l’égard du néant, un milieu entre rien et tout” (Pascal, 390). We have fallen into the infinity of external space, whose silence terrifies us, because we cannot apprehend its extremes. What is more, the infinity of space contains an infinity of possible relations between particulars, which means that there is no whole through which any part can be understood. In a sense, each thing is the unknowable infinity of the whole manifested at a given point. The result is skepticism through the endless deferral of knowledge.⁷

⁷ The dyadic principle not only ceaselessly doubles the realm of nature (every link in the chain leads to another) but humanity and nature themselves form a double; nothing in nature is in exact proportion to anything else nor is the human mind in proportion to the infinity of the great and small. We are other to the endless otherness of the natural. In fact, the human being that doubles the ceaselessly doubled nature is itself double, divided between glory and abasement, certainty and doubt. Thus he asks (in Krailsheimer’s rendering) “Is it not clear as day that Man’s condition is dual?” (Pascal (1979) 131).

This point is illustrated even in Pascal’s soteriology: it is the humility-in-greatness of the incarnation that equalizes and tempers the disparity of the great and the small that expresses itself destructively in human pride and wretchedness (Pascal (1967) 383). Thus, the humility of God in the incarnation unites the human with itself and with the divine by imposing a limit or mean on two extreme terms.

Another striking illustration of Pascal’s dyadic thinking can be found in his account of the principles of truth and error. In his arguments in support of skepticism Pascal emphasizes again and again that knowledge depends upon a mean (as in the ideal point for viewing a picture) of which our situated faculties are almost invariably in excess or defect.

It is important to note that contrary to what is sometimes asserted, this is not the Copernican universe, it is the (technically) geo-centric but spatially infinite universe described by Cusanus.⁸ What is more, this absence is also an externalized divine presence. As Pascal says “C’est un sphère infinie dont le centre est partout, la circonférence nulle part. Enfin c’est le plus grand caractère sensible de la toute-puissance de Dieu, que notre imagination se perede dans cette pensée” (Pascal, 390). Thus, God is like the point who moves at infinite speed and thus in all directions at once so that the dyadic principle is assimilated to the infinite potency of the One. God is the ceaseless productivity of self-othering difference.

It is at this point that the echoes of Cusanus’ thought as expounded in his opus *On Learned Ignorance* become most overt. In this work Cusanus teaches the unification of all extremes in God so that the poles that compose the great and the small, the maximum and the minimum, are two identical expressions of the limitless enfolding power of the One (Cusanus 1981; 8–9). What is more, Cusanus holds that it is only in ‘learned ignorance’ that this co-incidence of opposites is apprehended. He is in fact something of a (mitigated) skeptic for it is only in the equality or self-enfoldedness of the one (the *logos*) that there is any conformity of measure and measured (Cusanus, 58). Outside the One, the power of dyadic difference separates knower from known yet this difference is in fact Unity itself externalizing its own inner polarity.⁹ In the passage examined above

As he so memorably puts it “Trop et trop peu de vin; ne lui en donnez pas, il ne peu trouver la vérité; donnez lui en trop, de même” (Pascal 75). Thus, the Platonic notion of the great and the small or indefinite dyad can be seen operating simultaneously on multiple levels in Pascal’s thought.

⁸ Pascal says “...regarde cette éclatante lumière, misse comme un lampe éternelle pour éclairer l’univers; que la terre lui paraisse come un pointe au prix du vaste tour que c’est astre décrit... (my italics)” (Pascal (1967) 390). Clearly this image is geo-centric though if nature really is an *infinite* sphere there is properly speaking no center, as Cusanus notoriously argued (for the history of this metaphor see Dietrich Mahnke *Unendliche Sphäre und Allmittelpunkt*).

⁹ It should be noted that though Cusanus speaks of Unity as the first principle he also holds that Unity is intrinsically triadic for Unity is itself in relation to itself; there is in the One equality or self identity and relation-of-equality to its measure (or union) (Cusanus (1985) pp. 14–15). Thus, Cusanus holds the unity of God to entail a trinity. It should be noted as well that, in spite of the ‘dyadism’ indicated above Cusanus’ deepest account of the ‘contracted maximum’ of nature is triadic for dynamic unfolding is a three-fold process

it is evident that Pascal is taking the same view: the infinity of space is God's externalized form, God unites and contains the extremes so externalized and all finite knowing is governed by the difference that is the expressed form of infinite unity. As he puts it, in language that could come straight from Cusanus, "Ces extrémités se touchent et ce réunissent à force de s'être éloignées et se retrouvent en Dieu, et en Dieu seulement" (Pascal, 390). Pascal, however, finds a deeper skepticism in this doctrine than his German predecessor. For Cusanus the intellect (as the created image of God's infinity) apprehends the identity of extremes as (at the same time) the supreme measure of finite things and this permits an approximative kind of knowing on the discursive level (Cusanus, 5). Pascal, however, seems to reject any such mediation; *nous* does not bridge the gap between a divided discursive reason and the One so that the result (for the mind) is the *epoche* of Montaigne and the Pyrrhonists (for an extended discussion of this see Wills; 2006).

What is the way back from self-othering externality to the One that is its productive ground? For Pascal it is the otherness itself. God embodies his wisdom in the person of Christ, in the other itself, and so gathers the other back to the One by an identity of opposites. Christ we approach through the material medium of sacramental religion. Indeed, matter itself as closest to the one moves back more fully and directly than mind. Religion is a bodily affair for Pascal for the same reason as for Iamblichus, the sympathy between the highest and the lowest and the secret unification of all extremes. At this point one can see that Pascal's Gnostic Jansenism is subverted by an impulse he shares with the magical and alchemical interests of Ficino and Pico della Mirandola (though Pascal's only reference to the latter is slighting). Pushing Plotinian a-cosmism to the extreme he has attained to the standpoint of something like theurgy.

This is clear from the conclusion of the well-known fragment concerning the wager. If one assumes that Pascal is an 'intellectualist' in the sense of attempting to move his reader to a conclusion by means of rational

involving potency, connecting necessity and activity (love) as a principle of union (Cusanus (1985) p. 77). Indeed, for Cusanus there is no duality that is not also implicated in connection so that the skeptical implications of his doctrine are sharply mitigated: though there is no perfect identity (on the finite level) there *is* between knower and known a progressive approximation through images and heuristic analogies. Pascal does not take any of this up; as a general rule, if something is Trinitarian Pascal drops it.

persuasion then the conclusion of this section is puzzling indeed for Pascal says that the conclusion of our intellectual doubt must be to return to the automatism of the body. Yet this is clearly what Pascal says: "Vous voulez aller à la foi, et vous n'en savez pas le chemin... apprenez de ceux qui ont été liés comme vous... ce sont gens qui savent ce chemin que vous voudriez suivre... suivez la manière par où ils ont commencé: c'est en faisant tout comme s'ils croyaient, en prennant de l'eau bénite, en faisant dire des messes etc. Naturellement même cela vous fera croire et vous abêtira" (Pascal, 343).

It might seem morally shocking after all we have been told about the grandeur and misery of man to find out that it gets us nowhere if we are not willing to become machines like the animals. If, however, one assumes that some aspects of the material bear a closer relationship to divinity than mind does it makes perfect sense.¹⁰ The whole person *can* in this context be turned around by undertaking certain material actions. The way up is the way down and the road to the highest passes through the lowest. These are hermetic principles common to Iamblichan neo-Platonism *and* to the alchemical tradition. By what precise route they reached Pascal I do not know. His only reference to hermetic thought is slighting yet the resemblance is too close to ignore. Again though, Cusanus suggests himself as a possible source for the hermetic notion of the identity of opposites seems directly implied by the doctrine that the great and the small are identical in the One and that the absolute maximum corresponds to the absolute minimum.¹¹

¹⁰ Or perhaps that matter is a modality of God? No one to my knowledge has yet made a case for Pascal's pantheism nor shall I be sticking my neck out that far in this essay. Suffice it to say that I am not absolutely convinced that the *dieu égaré* is not in fact absent by a kind of subtle pervading omni-presence as the infinity of spatial extension. The terror of the infinite spaces is perhaps just the terrifying majesty of God in the form of its omni-presence. Newton held that space was the *sensorium* of God; might Pascal have held something similar? Indeed might this mode of dyadic externality be thought of as a kind of negative polarity in the divine balancing the (inscrutably) gracious God of Christian revelation?

¹¹ This identification of extremes has a Christo-logical content for Pascal; Christ is the unity in whom the extremes of greatness and misery (again the great and the small) so destructively opposed in the human are harmonized and contained. As true God Christ both embodies and is beyond all extremes; his greatness is his humility and his suffering his power and glory etc. Cusanus too has a Christology centering on the notion of a triad

3

Here too Pascal's pessimism and anti-humanism may join up with its polar opposite; the humanism expressed with such force and clarity in Pico's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. For both it is in action, practical, magical or sacramental that the infinite trans-formative powers locked in the material realm are unleashed. What is more, we find in Pico the same elevation of charity above intellect (Pico 1971; 228)¹² and an analogous emphasis on dyadic othering such as we have noted in Pascal (Pico, 225). For Pico the dignity of the human lies not *within* the order of creation but in a freedom that lies outside of it and is open to participation in all created forms and to union with God beyond all created forms (Pico, 224-225). Humans occupy no place and everyplace in the order of creation because they are radically indeterminate (yet all containing) and thus self-transcending (Pico, 225). They are *other* to all that is because they are potentially anything that is. Yet far from being radically anarchic, Pico finds he can enfold this freedom within the Christian Platonic tradition of the Pseudo-Dionysius, as well as within Cabbalistic Judaism, Islam, Zoroastrianism and Hermeticism (Pico, 223).

The Dyadic principle of human freedom is (for Pico) the secret teaching of all religious wisdom, whether of Moses, Mohammad or the *Chaldean Oracles*. Yet this freedom is the supreme Christian principle for it is also the openness of finite being to the infinite freedom of divine love, which transforming reason and moral judgment assimilates to us the highest ranks of angels (or living patterns of realized spiritual activity), the Seraphs (love), Cherubs (rational contemplation) and Thrones (practical

embracing an absolute maximum (God), a contracted maximum (the world) and a maximum at once contracted and absolute, the God-manhood of Christ. I cannot however, enter into a discussion of this here as Cusanus' Christology is as profound as it is difficult. The interested reader may consult the third book of *On Learned Ignorance*.

¹²⁾ At least in the *Oration*: in that work the cherubic activity of contemplation is merely preparatory to the infusion of the seraphic love which unites the soul to God (Pico (1971) p. 228). Elsewhere Pico defends the traditional Thomist view of the priority of intellect to will. Yet vacillation on this question seems to have been rife in the Florentine Academy. Ficino himself changed his mind about it at least twice though he never returned to the Thomist view from which he began. Moreover, his best known works, such as the *De Amore*, fall within his most voluntaristic phase. An excellent account of this is given by Albertini "Intellect and Will in Marsilio Ficino" (2002).

judgment) (Pico, 227-228). This assimilation occurs by means of a three-fold spiritual process (purgation, illumination and perfection) that mirrors in ascending order the three-fold descent of the one in its giving of itself as finite (hierarchical) order (Pico, 228-229). The higher we ascend up this ladder the more spontaneous and undetermined we are with respect to what is lower and the more we imitate the divine freedom itself of which the created order is an expression. Yet there is order still for dyadic freedom (the freedom to be other and to make other), for the structure of reality itself is the highest embodiment of freedom as proceeding from what is most radically undetermined in itself (God) in a scale of descending forms (each undetermined with respect to what is below). Pico, like Cusanus, is a Platonist and as a Platonist recognizes a dyadic moment in the unfolding of a manifold from the one. However, as we shall see shortly, his philosophical standpoint is not 'dyadic' taken as a totality. To recognize a dyad is one thing, to be 'dyadic' is quite another.

This may be illustrated by a passage from the short treatise *On Being and Unity*. In this work Pico cites Iamblichus to the effect that prime matter is duality "...because duality is the first multiple and the root, as it were of all other multiplicity." However, he is careful to point out that even this prime multiplicity is a multiple because it is unified. "Still, prime matter does not entirely escape any more from the category of unity than from that of being. The same form that imprints being on it, also imposes unity" (Pico 1943; 13-14). Thus, the 'dual' or 'matter' is not a separate, distinct principle on its own but *within* unity and being. Similarly, for Cusanus, "...the number two is the first separation and the cause of separation; for two is the first separation" (Cusanus, 13-14). Yet the inequality that obtains between the comparatively great and small is enfolded within the identity or unity of extremes in the absolute maximum/minimum (Cusanus, 8-9). Further, any inequality of the great or the small is the excess or defect of a prior equality (Cusanus, 13). The dyadic, multiple, different or unequal depends in every way on the One of which it is the unfolding. Thus, the dyad is really the power of the one expressed as *unified difference*.

Of course, for the Platonic tradition as a whole it is a question whether the Good or One, as productive, is ever in any simple sense 'itself' without at the same time expressing itself in its 'other'. The dyad need not, ultimately, be conceived a second principle but the generous productivity

of the One itself: the One in the super-abundance of its power and perfection ‘others’. The One, as *infinite*, might then be thought of as beyond static self-enclosure (which is a limitation) and thus as ecstatically self-communicative; being most one it is the original dyadic freedom to be other. It is especially in the Christian Platonist tradition carried forward by Pico and Cusanus (with their grounding in the Dionysian *corpus*) that this freedom to be *dyadically* other expresses itself *triadically* in a procession of the multiple from the unified and back in a reciprocal movement of giving and return. This is not the productivity of a first which, as it were, spills out into an indefinitely ramifying (and terrifying) multiplicity (a mere ‘sublime’) but a productivity that sustains the other in relation to itself in an order of love; there is a going out but also a mutuality and return that mirrors and complements it. For these thinkers the descending ‘grace’ of God’s creative love through the angelic, human and material creation is at one and the same time the erotic dynamism of each of these orders towards the higher and of the whole scale of nature towards God. What descends from the One as its externalized other remains the One in this externalized mode such that its outward movement is also its return: difference is expressed within the context of identity and connecting order. What is *other* than its source remains even within this difference inwardly identified with it. Thus, as Cusanus argues (Cusanus, 16), both the difference of the One from itself (its self-expression in the Son) and its difference from the creation it grounds and sustains is the expression of the absolute equality and connection of maximal unity. The supremely unified goes out from and returns upon itself as the supremely unified multiple, the maximal *triad*.

It is, I suspect, the absence of this moment of return as constitutive of an integral created order that separates Pascal from Cusanus, Ficino and Pico, as much as he may share a common language and background with them. There is a return for Pascal but it is an *annéantissement*, an obliteration of the natural before a terrifying yet unintelligibly gracious absolute. In Pico, as we saw, the return is the very process of creation itself considered from another angle; nature fulfills itself in God, the human infinity in the divine. It is triadic self-communication as principle of the divine and the natural that allows for mediation and a sustained relation of grace and nature. Yet Pascal, as a more strictly dyadic Platonist must oppose them absolutely. For him, there is an immediate and paradoxical fusion of charity

and mechanism, of gravity and grace through the secret identity of all opposites. This is what we see in the strange conclusion of the wager argument. There is however, no teleological created structure mediating these differences; nature apart from the immediate light of faith is precisely the loveless, soulless, impersonal system of relations described by the modern science Pascal himself did so much to found. This is why humanity is linked to the divine not by reason but by what is simultaneously both above and below reason.

In conclusion, it seems very clear to me that neo-Platonic and other 'esoteric' traditions have left their footprints on the *Pensées* of Pascal. I have illustrated this with respect to the Pascalian account of faith and the role of the body in Pascal's economy of salvation. Most crucially, I have illustrated the vital role that the Platonic notion of an indefinite dyad or principle making for otherness and difference plays in the structure of his thinking. I have suggested that one source for Pascal's thinking in this matter is Renaissance Platonism, which has strongly dyadic elements. However, if Pascal has taken up the dyad from figures like Cusanus and Pico he has dropped the triadic mediating principles that characterize their work at the deepest level and indeed contain the principle of 'otherness' within an intelligible created structure that can be loved and known. Thus, Pascal's Platonism becomes a skeptical and world denying anti-humanism. That this transformation has scarcely been noticed is, I suppose, due to the fact that neo-Platonism is supposed to have died with the Renaissance. I also suspect that Pascal has admirers who would not welcome the kind of associations I think I have uncovered. Anti-foundationalist fideism of the present day is not conspicuously marked by an admiration for Hermeticism and magical thinking. Yet Pascal is often taken up from this perspective. I submit that in the process he is distorted and that his thought is not always so easy to distinguish from these excluded traditions. However dismissive he might be of figures like Pico or Hermes he shares with them a number of key concepts and at times even echoes their language. Moreover, if his relationship to the Platonism of the Renaissance is often polemical, this is not to be reduced to a simplistic opposition between Biblical faith and Greek philosophy. While this may well (to some degree) have been how Pascal framed the issue for himself, it remains the case that, in philosophical terms, he opposes a dyadic philosophy of otherness to the triadic mediation of nature and

grace typical of medieval and renaissance thought. To this extent, his thought remains bound up with the logic and history of Platonism whether he was conscious of this fact or not.

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