Pascal's Wafer: The Concept of Piety in Blaise Pascal's Theological Anthropology

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Abstract

The concept of piety occupies a central, if hidden or obscure place in the theological anthropology of Blaise Pascal (1623–1662). Like many aspects of Pascal's thought, piety has a two-sided, paradoxical nature stemming from the broader human condition, a condition marked by—indeed, torn between—misery and greatness. On the one hand, for Pascal, an individual can never, in their earthly existence, achieve a sense of certainty or definitive self-constitution through any act, pious or otherwise, no matter how visible or numerous such acts may be. As a product of the Fall, the human self is "hateful" and perpetually incapable of fulfilling, through its own merits or capabilities, any sense of duty or purity before God. As the means by which the human self is "annihilated," piety hence entails a spirit of endurance and embrace of uncertainty. On the other hand, however, piety does not exclusively entail unceasing, self-annihilating acts. There are also different earthly states of piety—what Pascal refers to as the "beginning," "progress" and "consummation" of piety—that are increasingly "filled" and directed toward a final, heavenly state. There is thus a way in which annihilating acts and vivifying states of piety work in tandem and toward the same end. This simultaneity and synergy of pious acts and states may be discerned in the three orders constituting Pascal's anthropology, namely, those of the body, mind, and heart. Crucially and at each step of the way, this process is dependent on God's action, that is, on grace. As I seek to show, piety, for Pascal, is fundamentally a childlike phenomenon—an act and state simultaneously whereby, rather than a person presenting themselves before God, God presents Himself both before and within the person.

Keywords: piety, act, state, three orders, Jansenists, middle ground

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Introduction

The concept of piety occupies a central, if hidden or obscure place in the theological anthropology of Blaise Pascal (1623–1662). Like many aspects of Pascal's thought, piety has a two-sided, paradoxical nature stemming from the broader human condition, a condition marked by—indeed, torn between—misery and greatness. On the one hand, for Pascal, an individual can never, in their earthly existence, achieve a sense of certainty or definitive self-constitution through any act, pious or otherwise, no matter how visible or numerous such acts may be. As products of the Fall, humans are perpetually incapable of fulfilling any sense of duty or purity before God. The human self is "hateful," being "that residue of original sin … which makes it impossible for man to truly love God" and which is "annihilated" by piety (*Pensées*, fr. 494, n. 4, 6).[1] In this way, piety entails a spirit of endurance and embrace of uncertainty. On the other hand, however, piety does not exclusively entail unceasing, self-annihilating acts. In a letter to M. and Mme. de Roannez discussing why the Christian life should not be associated with sadness and futility, Pascal remarks that "True piety, which is found perfect only in heaven, is so full of satisfactions that with them it fills the beginning, the progress, and the consummation of piety."[2] As evidenced by this quote, there are different earthly states of piety (beginning, progress, consummation) that are increasingly "filled" and directed toward a final, heavenly state—that of "true piety." There is thus a way in which annihilating acts and vivifying states of piety work in tandem and toward the same end. Crucially and at each step of the way, this process is dependent on God's action, that is, on grace.[3] As I seek to show, piety, for Pascal, is fundamentally a childlike phenomenon—an act and state simultaneously whereby, rather than a person presenting themselves before God, God presents Himself both before and within the person.

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[1] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, translation edited by Pierre Zoberman (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2022), 266, 267. This translation—based on Philippe Sellier's 2010 edition of the *Pensées*—will be used throughout the present study.

[2] Blaise Pascal, *Great Shorter Works of Pascal*, translated with an introduction by Emile Cailliet and John C. Blankenagel (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1948), 152.

[3] While Pascal's Augustinian understanding of grace is central to his conception of piety, treatment of this understanding is beyond the scope of the present study.

In making this claim, I will first discuss dynamics and patterns of piety prominent in the seventeenth century, specifically those practiced within or stemming from the Roman Catholic Church. Following this discussion will be an analysis of the group with which Pascal was closely associated, that of the Jansenists at Port-Royal Abbey in Paris.[4] The tenets of major Jansenist figures provide a foundation for understanding Pascal's notion of piety, particularly in terms of the dual nature of piety as an act and a state. Following this section will be the examination of Pascal. My main texts here will be the *Pensées (Thoughts)*—a posthumous collection of fragments which Pascal intended, according to Philipe Sellier, to be his "Apology for the Christian Religion" (hereafter referred to as the Apology)—along with shorter works and letters of spiritual guidance, specifically those written to M. and Mme. de Roannez.[5] Finally, I will conclude by considering how Pascal's framework serves as a corrective to commonly understood notions of piety, and hence why his framework holds importance for us today.

Background: Piety and the Catholic Church in the Seventeenth Century

The dynamics and patterns of piety prevalent in the Catholic Church in the seventeenth century reveal both a consistent and complicated picture. On the one hand, as part of the Counter-Reformation there was a renewed emphasis on piety—particularly in its outward, visible acts and manifestations—in the wake of the Reformation and the Council of Trent. Forms of piety and religious life played integral roles in upholding the Church's authority and institutional status, in enabling the Church to regain ground lost to the Reformers and Protestant groups. Especially critical among these practices were confession and communion, practices that Trent had homed in on and infused with new meaning. As Robert Bireley notes, "For the devout, confession and communion each month or at least four times a year became the standard by the early seventeenth century," and "More frequent confession brought the faithful into regular contact with the clergy and augmented the clergy's role."[6] There was hence a mutual empowerment of both the clergy and laity, piety serving as a bridge between these groups as well as giving way to new forms of devotion and religious life, ones that distinguished Catholics from Protestants. As Birely further describes, "New and revived devotions came to the fore, many associated with confraternities" and entailing practices "such as adoration of Christ present in the eucharist, veneration of the Virgin Mary, and prayer for the souls in purgatory."[7] In these respects, piety signified a visible, almost systematic phenomenon, a tangible site of growth and maturation in Christian living, one that was not removed from worldly existence but rather intimately linked to and indeed determinative of this existence. As seen in the works of figures like Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) and Francis de Sales (1567–1622), the basis of this dynamic was "a world-affirming spirituality," the notion that "God's creation remained fundamentally good even after original sin and humankind's later abuse of God's gifts."[8] This concept would in many ways mark the principal point of division between groups like the Jansenists and the

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[4] It is important to note that the term "Jansenist" was a derogatory term applied by the Jesuits to those at Port-Royal and other followers of Cornelius Jansen (1585–1638), particularly those who embraced the theology—or aspects of the theology—outlined in Jansen's posthumous work *Augustinus* (1640). The Jansenists themselves rejected this label.

[5] David Wetsel, "Introduction," in Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, translation edited by Pierre Zoberman (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2022), xxi-lxxvi.

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[6] Robert Birely, S.J., "Redefining Catholicism: Trent and beyond," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity, Volume 6: Reform and Expansion 1500–1600*, ed. R. Po-Chia Hsia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 145-161.

[7] Ibid., 158.

[8] Ibid., 159.

Church at large, particularly those groups which had attained high levels of power within the Church, namely, the Jesuits.

On the other hand, however, alongside the widespread implementation and realization of new, external forms of pious behavior, there emerged a concern for internal, affective states of piety. Here, a pronounced division existed between the masses and the political and spiritual elites. As R. Po-Chia Hsia notes, this division crystallized around the practices of confession and communion. While the masses largely conformed to the outward, socially and institutionally required dimensions of these practices, they showed little concern for "the minute examination of conscience, the interiorization of sins, and the intimacy of self-revelation."[9] Elite circles such as the *dévots* of Paris, by contrast, gravitated strongly to "the new model of the individual Christian responsible for his own sins before God." Represented by figures like Pascal, these circles "imitated the custom of convents in their rigorous examination of self and quest for sanctification."[10] Indeed, and as Elizabeth Rapley discusses, with groups like the *dévots*, practices once belonging to the convents "'passed into the world.'" Yet as Rapley also highlights, the *dévots* were in many ways a synthesis of the world-negating, cloistered outlook of Jansenism and the more world-affirming, good-works-centered approach of Francis de Sales and other figures.[11] This dynamic only added to the mystique and paradox of the historical situation at large. Critically, this dynamic would anticipate and underpin many themes in Pascal's writings, especially those pertaining to the simultaneous, almost synergistic, negation and affirmation of worldly living and responsibility.

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[9] R. Po-Chia Hsia, *The World of Catholic Renewal, 1540–1770* [Second Edition] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 221.

[10] Ibid., 222.

[11] Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 76.

The position and influence of the Jesuits also reveal some of the main contours and paradoxes characteristic of the divide between elite circles and the masses. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, had stressed the importance of conversion, of turning from one's former ways and inhabiting (or re-inhabiting) a genuine as opposed to merely nominal Catholicism. The Jesuit order hence reflected, early on, a rigorous spiritual program far removed from the casuistical framework advanced by the Jesuits starting around 1600, at which point the Jesuits began to establish a greater presence—particularly in France—and power within the Church. Here, and especially in the setting of confession, the Jesuits largely dismissed conversionary experience and rigorous self-examination as integral elements of the spiritual life, advocating instead the sufficiency of attrition, or fear of punishment—as opposed to contrition, the heartfelt sorrow for one's sins—and utilizing the principle of "cases of conscience" in regulating the moral and religious behavior of the Catholic multitude. As Hsia argues, regulation of said behavior was made difficult by the sheer numbers of the masses.[12] Yet the Jansenists, along with the *dévots*, attacked the Jesuits as facilitating moral laxity, a stance that reached its fullest, most biting expression in Pascal's *Provincial Letters*.

These trends help us discern some of the major fault lines in the dual conception of piety as an act and a state, lines that Pascal and the Jansenists along with other figures and groups—including the Jesuits—would constantly straddle and navigate. Which "phenomenology of piety" took precedence? Which was more likely to lead to salvation, personally and collectively conceived? Of particular importance was the "direction" or orientation adopted by the pious individual—an element that challenged in many ways the commonly held emphasis on filial responsibility, on the direction of oneself and one's deeds toward a higher cause or being. When a person engaged in pious behavior, who were they addressing? God or themselves (or both simultaneously)? Who or what was being presented to whom? What obligation was being fulfilled? The ninth *Provincial Letter* brings many of these questions to the foreground. At one point, Pascal's Jesuit interlocuter makes the following remarks:

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[12] Hsia, *World of Catholic Renewal*, 223.

> As they [the Jesuit Fathers] continually aspire to the greater glory of God, they would like to bring men to a life of greater piety. And because worldly people are usually put off piety by the odd idea of it they have been given, our Fathers thought it extremely important to destroy this initial obstacle. This is where Fr. Le Moyne has won a high reputation by his book on *Easy Piety*, which he wrote in this view.[13]

The interlocuter goes on to draw a distinction between disposition and piety. The former is an entirely inward, natural state characteristic of various individuals, whereas the latter signifies outward acts, ones not contingent on a life of—or disposition toward—austerity and devoutness. The interlocuter contends that piety, while able to be demonstrated by those disposed to austerity and solitude, is meant to be easy and accommodating of worldly life and secular activity. It is not to be "associated with pain and toil" or deemed "the enemy of sport and entertainment," as such conceptions signify the "initial obstacle" to a proper understanding of piety. For the Jesuit Fathers, "'a love of silence and retreat is not common to all the devout,'" being instead "'the result of their disposition more than of piety.'"[14] The interlocuter thus suggests that a separation between inner states and outward acts does not compromise authentic piety. Such a suggestion was abhorrent to the Jansenists and antithetical to their principal teachings. True piety was signified by an unceasing continuity and mutuality between one's internal state and external actions. In accord with the Augustinian underpinnings of Jansenism, this continuity and mutuality stemmed not from one's own merits or capabilities but rather from grace. For the Jansenists, a life of piety encompassed the whole person. As will be shown, Pascal's framework—particularly with regard to the three orders of being (body, mind, and heart)—both affirms and complicates this concept.

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[13] Blaise Pascal, *The Provincial Letters*, translated with an introduction by A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 135.
[14] Ibid., 136.

Jansenist Piety

Jansenist understandings of piety can be traced in the tenets of select figures at Port-Royal. These figures are Mère Angélique Arnauld (1591–1661), Jean Duvergier de Hauranne, Abbé de Saint-Cryan (1581–1643; hereafter referred to as Saint-Cyran), Antoine Arnauld (1612–1694), and Mère Agnès Arnauld (1593–1672). One of the founders of the convent and its abbess for successive periods (the first beginning at the age of ten), Mère Angélique advocated a "rigorist" and "astringent" notion of piety. As John Conley elucidates, "Rather than a simple reverence for God and respect for sacred things, authentic piety," for Mère Angélique, "fosters a sentiment of adoration so pure that other considerations, even concern for one's life, disappear."[15] We see in Mère Angélique a privileging of the pious state or disposition over the pious act. An individual presents him- or herself before God in a progressively annihilated state. Pious acts are in this way means (specifically, to self-annihilation) rather than ends, for to treat them otherwise is to succumb to self-love. Self-love manifested itself, for instance, through what Mère Angélique termed "*false* devotion," the using of "extra moments of leisure" to "indulge … love for extra prayer" rather than assisting a companion with daily tasks and responsibilities.[16]

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[15] John J. Conley, S.J., *Adoration and Annihilation: The Convent Philosophy of Port-Royal* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 66.
[16] Ethel Romanes, *The Story of Port Royal* (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, W., 1907), 161.

As F. Ellen Weaver highlights, a stress on "simplification and organization" in all facets of convent life, piety included, was particularly characteristic of Mère Angélique. Indeed, this emphasis signaled one of Mère Angélique's gifts and was a principal mark of the broader reforming spirit shared among many of the Jansenists.[17] Pious acts are not isolated, individualistic phenomena but rather collective, visible movements toward greater simplicity and cohesiveness. Moreover, pious acts—together with the state to which these acts aspire—are entirely dependent on grace, on God acting first. Excerpts from a letter to Princess Guéménée illustrate this principle:

> Madame, I humbly ask you to have no anxiety concerning what you have to do [i.e., confession of sins] and to believe that you need neither an examination of conscience nor any other preparation for it other than the real desire God has given you to live for him alone and to follow all the counsels that will be given to you so that you may follow this holy desire … If you had spent an entire year examining your conscience with the most careful attentiveness, before God had touched your heart, you would not have been as prepared and, I would even say, you would not have known your faults as well as you do at this moment without any personal examination of conscience. It is grace alone that can give us such knowledge.[18]

We see in this passage how grace, in salient respects, obviates the need for pious acts—in this case, examination of conscience, penance, and preparation for confession. Grace alone confers on one the knowledge of one's sins along with a sense of contrition. In opposition to "Jesuit spirituality, with its confidence in personally initiated techniques," or acts, "of examination of conscience," Mère Angélique "insists that the immediate experience of graced conversion is the only authentic site," or state, "for the individual to grasp his or her personal history of creation, fall, and redemption."[19] God Himself will orient one to the proper pious state; He will, in a sense, fulfill one's obligation for them. Pious acts will follow rather than precede this orientation. These acts will, over time, "content themselves" with their inherent insufficiency in attaining pious states, in cultivating proper adoration.

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[17] F. Ellen Weaver, *The Evolution of the Reform of Port-Royal: From the Rule of Cîteaux to Jansenism* (Paris: Éditions Beauchesne, 1978), 68.
[18] Conley, *Adoration and Annihilation*, 72.

It is important to note that Mère Angélique's conception, particularly regarding "immediate, graced conversion," may be (and, indeed, has been) liable to abuse. Individuals might claim to have received grace when in reality they merely want to proclaim their justification. When the locus of righteousness is shifted to an exclusively interior, externally unverifiable state, a pious life risks becoming solipsistic and self-certifying. Adequately accounting for and thwarting this risk was (and, in many ways, continues to be) a major challenge for Jansenism, not only in terms of piety and spirituality but as a whole system of belief and praxis. While considerations of Augustinian and Jansenist conceptions of grace—and hence of "graced conversion"—are beyond the scope of this study, one could imagine Mère Angélique responding that proclamation or even internal certification of one's salvation is an act that by necessity reflects self-love, and hence an inauthentic state of grace. Furthermore, rather than abiding in the true, God-given certainty of grace, one will inevitably succumb to human, self-inflicted uncertainty. One will eventually begin to "question incessantly" and to seek "to know" others' dispositions—as well as one's own disposition—attempting to determine whether these dispositions are authentic.[20] While the experience of grace may be "immediate" from a human standpoint, the operation and guidance of grace exceeds the limitations of experience and thus thwarts any need or ability for self-certification and questioning. Nevertheless, Mère Angélique's framework reveals areas for critique and expansion. As will be discussed below, the uniquely consequentialist, act-centered dimensions of Pascal's framework—particularly with regard to the Wager fragment in the *Pensées*—signify direct engagements with these areas.

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[19] Ibid., 73.
[20] Weaver, *Evolution of the Reform of Port-Royal*, 69.

Many aspects of Mère Angélique's framework are discerned in the thought of Saint-Cyran, spiritual director and confessor to the nuns at Port-Royal as well as a friend and patron of Cornelius Jansen. Similar to Mère Angélique, Saint-Cyran taught "absolute self-surrender" and "the necessity of dependence on God alone ultimately and for every … final need of the soul."[21] Yet a point of departure in Saint-Cyran's notion of piety is the emphasis on self-monitoring rather than self-annihilation. There is in Saint-Cyran's understanding a continual refocusing on one's state or disposition. This dynamic pertains especially to one who has chosen a religious vocation. While one is moved, in this refocusing, away from self-concern or worldly attachments, they are further confirmed "in the narrow way" that marks the life of individual Christians as well as "the common life … lead in the Church."[22] Depending on the type of religious vocation pursued, whether lay or clerical, one "needs other dispositions and a greater" or lesser state of "perfection." Pious acts, in these respects, are not entirely passive or self-annihilating, although they remain fundamentally dependent on God-given dispositions, on enhanced states of self-understanding. This concept directly informs Saint-Cyran's stance on communion, which anticipates that of Antoine Arnauld—namely, that in order to receive communion one must constantly examine oneself so as to determine whether one's state or disposition is properly suited for reception of the sacrament. The act of reception, considered in isolation, is of light importance compared with the state or disposition in which reception takes place.[23] If acts by themselves are deemed to hold sufficient weight, disallowing the need for perpetual self-watchfulness, one invites the danger of "falling back" on themselves, of succumbing to the illusion of self-reliance and autonomy.[24] This principle obtained in all acts of devotion and piety, even in simple, daily activities such as Scripture reading—an activity which Saint-Cyran and Mère Agnès Arnauld attached especial importance to. We thus see in Saint-Cyran how piety signifies both a filial, childlike submission and reverence as well as a parental supervision and watchfulness. The pious individual's sense of obligation is effectively two-fold, directed to both God and oneself.

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[21] Romanes, *Story of Port Royal*, 112.

[22] Richard T. Yoder, trans., "Saint-Cyran and the Spiritual Life of Grace," in *Jansenism: An International Anthology*, eds. Shaun Blanchard and Richard T. Yoder (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2024), 88-101.

Antoine Arnauld's understanding of piety in many ways amplifies Saint-Cyran's. We see this amplification at play in *On Frequent Communion*, a reply written, at Saint-Cyran's request, to the Jesuit Pierre de Sesmaisons's *Instruction sur la fréquente communion*. A lauded though immensely controversial work—and centerpiece of Jansenist thought—*On Frequent Communion* stresses the importance of one's disposition when receiving communion, arguing that individuals should refrain from taking frequent communion if they are not properly disposed. Arnauld and Martin de Barcos, who wrote the preface to the work, draw heavily on the Church Fathers in advancing this argument. The following excerpt from the preface, however, sheds light on a distinctive aspect of the argument:

> And certainly, it is clear that our disposition to the Sacraments must be proportionate to the eminence that we encounter there; for the manner by which we must approach a private person or a prince is different according to their different quality. This is what

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[23] Ibid., 93.
[24] Romanes, *Story of Port Royal*, 113.

> renders this disposition immutable according to the theologians, because it has an essential rapport with the substance of the Sacrament, which is immutable.[25]

For De Barcos and Arnauld, one's disposition holds not only internal implications related to one's being and path to (or away from) salvation. Crucially, and more importantly, one's disposition has a direct, outward bearing on the sacrament itself. If a communicant's disposition is not one of proper reverence and awe, the communicant does a form of violence to the sacrament and, by extension, to themselves. This violence only increases the more frequently one performs the act of taking communion. Refraining from frequent communion—an act that De Barcos and Arnauld contend they are not trying to encourage—can thus be helpful for cultivating a proper, purer disposition, one that evinces an essential, immutable "rapport" with the sacrament. Yet it is interesting, in this framework, how acts do not entirely depend on disposition or follow from particular dispositions in an "automatic," passive, or inferior way. The very act of refraining from communion functions to order one's disposition, to open the way for greater rapport with the sacrament. One acts in this way so as to attain greater self-watchfulness, examination, and preparation, to learn "the manner [or state] of approaching" the sacrament.[26] Of course, and in keeping with the underlying tenets shared by the Jansenists, any form of action is made possible by God acting first. As Arnauld makes clear, "acts of faith, of hope, charity, and humility," as well as acts of piety, derive from "a particular gift of the grace of Jesus Christ, which forms them [these acts] into the movements of our hearts."[27] Nevertheless, the framework advanced in *On Frequent Communion* allows—at least implicitly—for a degree of equivalency or shared power (or rapport) between pious acts and states. This element is less evident in the frameworks of Mère Angélique and Saint-Cyran.

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[25] Richard T. Yoder, trans., "Antoine Arnauld on Frequent Communion," in *Jansenism: An International Anthology*, eds. Shaun Blanchard and Richard T. Yoder (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2024), 121-139.
[26] Ibid., 127.
[27] Ibid., 138.

Pious dispositions, moreover, witness their fruits through actions, ones performed in both religious and secular settings. Quoting Augustine, Arnauld says that "'we must recognize as Antichrists all those who confess Jesus Christ with their mouth, and who combat Him with their mores … I do not hear what they say, I see what they do.'"[28] For Arnauld, the majority of people, while quick to criticize and advocate the reform of particular religious orders (like that at Port-Royal), neglect to live out the pious words they utter as well as the acts they—in a rote, frequent manner—perform. In effect, individuals, "believing themselves dispensed" from this obligation "by custom," lack a truly pious disposition, a genuine sense of reverence for the eminence they encounter in the sacraments and in the example of Christ.[29] However, the Church itself is not at fault here. As De Barcos maintains in the preface, "the bishops of the Council [of Trent] … would have been delighted to be able to restore … the discipline of the Church to the highest point … a still more perfect state," had they not "been prevented by the circumstances of the time, so dismal and deplorable."[30] An integral part of the Council's legacy, for Arnauld and De Barcos, lay in its acting in a proactive, pious manner in the face of rampant, growing impiety. Indeed, the Council "did everything it could to reestablish penance" in the true, authentic sense.[31] Through its various maneuvers—theologically, ecclesiastically, politically considered—along with its acknowledgement of the circumstances and existing limitations, the Council was able to preserve the Church's sanctity, the Church's own pious orientation and disposition. Echoing a theme seen in Pascal, Arnauld and De Barcos suggest here how the Church always retains a pious essence and disposition despite the impiety that persists both outside the Church and within its own ranks, groups like the Jesuits signifying this latter presence of impiety. Through the divinely guided acts of Church authorities (like those who presided at the Council), the Church always manages to effectively "hold out" for a better future, to move Christendom toward a still more perfect state.

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[28] Ibid., 137.
[29] Ibid., 136.
[30] Ibid., 128.
[31] Ibid., 127.

Moving to Mère Agnès Arnauld—the last of the Jansenist figures analyzed—we see how she occupies a middle position between her siblings, being "more mystically inclined than her sister" Mère Angélique and "less polemical than her brother Antoine."[32] Yet this orientation (or disposition) of Mère Agnès is critical for discerning how her conception of piety is perhaps closest to that of Pascal. Mère Agnès understands piety as a kind of "equilibrium" or balance between acts and states. Reflecting on the ideal, day-to-day workings and spirit of Port-Royal, Mère Agnès remarks that "In this house, we try to be in a state of perpetual thanksgiving," and that despite the importance of "prayer, Holy Communion, or spiritual communications … we know that they [prayer, communion, other acts] are not our final end, even though they lead us there … This is why we put God in Himself above all."[33] However, there is also in Mère Agnès's framework an underlying, indeed vivifying acknowledgement that one's state or disposition will always be imperfect, that it will always be yearning for—and, through grace, coming into—greater realization. This acknowledgment is especially pronounced in the practice of Scripture reading. Conley highlights how this practice marks the distinctive, "intellectualist cast" of Mère Agnès's notion of piety. Mère Agnès's "emphasis on the biblical culture acquired by the Port-

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[32] Philip Porter, trans., "Agnès Arnauld and the Spirit of Port-Royal," in *Jansenism: An International Anthology*, eds. Shaun Blanchard and Richard T. Yoder (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2024), 112-120.
[33] Ibid., 117.

Royal nuns" effectively fused an "enlightened piety" with "theological education."[34] Yet Scripture reading does not entail deciphering the text and laying hold of its mysteries. Rather, the "enlightenment" entailed in reading is fundamentally an exercise in—or act of—humility. In this exercise, one acknowledges that many mysteries are "locked away" (and will remain so) and that one must "stop at what they grasp and leave to God the knowledge of what they cannot grasp."[35]

Pious acts thus hold for Mère Agnès a relative autonomy and authenticity. Critically, there is a sense in which pious acts help guard against the "pride and self-love" that emerge from thinking one has attained a state of "perfection higher than" the state currently occupied. Especially in the collective setting of the convent, with each sister working toward the same end, one ought to embrace their imperfect state, as this embrace occasions greater devotedness to "ceaselessly fighting" or acting against imperfection, and in the process cultivates true piety.[36] As one engages in this fight, performing pious acts, they should not think they have become "more austere than the others, or more withdrawn or more solitary." One has instead regathered and refocused their strength so as "to return to the shared spirit" of the convent and its mission.[37] These themes signify salient points of departure from Mère Angélique's emphasis on austerity and self-annihilation, as well as from Arnauld's and De Barco's claim that one's disposition ought to reflect the eminence encountered in the Eucharist—and, if such reflection is lacking, that one ought to withdraw (for a time) from receiving the sacrament. With Mère Agnès, an element of simultaneity and synergy characterizes the relationship between pious acts and states. This element is most at home in the shared, collective setting of the convent—a parallel to the common life of the Church stressed by Saint-Cyran. A general, imperfect state of thanksgiving is upheld while various acts do battle against a range of imperfections. Yet in keeping with Mère Agnès's own disposition, an individualistic, mystical, even clandestine element also obtains. Preserving the integrity of and balance between pious acts and states is "the lack of communication with people within and without," the "practice of the maxim of the prophet: *my secret is for myself* [Isaiah 24:16]."[38] For Mère Agnès, "there is no other joy than to hide oneself in the hiding places of God."[39] It is in these enigmatic, childlike sentiments—of hiding oneself, of the hiding places provided by God (and, indeed, of the places that God Himself hides in)—that we may begin to discern and delineate Pascal's notion of piety.

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[34] Conley, *Adoration and Annihilation*, 147, 148.
[35] Porter, "Agnès Arnauld and the Spirit of Port-Royal," 119.
[36] Ibid., 118.
[37] Ibid., 119.

Pascal

Pascal's notion of piety is continuous with that of his fellow Jansenists in salient respects, particularly in terms of the emphasis on grace as the foundation for any pious act or state. Coupled with this emphasis is a persistent sense of uncertainty and mystery as to how one is "progressing" (or not) in pious living, the answer to this uncertainty and mystery lying far beyond an individual's own actions and powers of discernment. Piety for Pascal is hence a moment-to-moment phenomenon, one in which—as for the Jansenists—the whole person is implicated. The self, as the hateful residual of Original Sin, must be both continuously monitored (as for Saint-Cyran) as well as progressively annihilated (as for Mère Angélique). Unlike the Jansenists, however, Pascal does not seek to address individuals already demonstrating piety in their everyday lives, whether in a religious or secular setting. Pious individuals and the daily activities of said individuals are rather largely assumed and set aside so as to address another audience: that of skeptics and seekers of the Christian faith. As Leszek Kolakowski emphasizes,

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[38] Ibid., 114.
[39] Ibid., 120.

Pascal speaks “not to priests, not to Jansenists or Jesuits, and not to simple believers, well-entrenched in their unreflective faith … but to educated skeptics, incredulous or uncertain.”[40] This element in many ways signifies the thrust of the *Pensées* as well as Pascal’s shorter works and letters of spiritual guidance.

Pascal’s framework marks another major point of departure from the Jansenist conception of piety. This departure is seen principally in the three orders—of body, mind, and heart—that constitute Pascal’s theological anthropology. Pascal remarks in the *Pensées* that there is “an infinite distance between bodies and minds,” this distance being “a figure of the infinitely more infinite distance between minds and charity [i.e., the heart]” (fr. 339, p. 178). As Paul Griffiths contends, “There is no border-crossing *rapport* to connect” the three orders, the content and activity—pious and otherwise—of one order not being accessible or discernable to the others.[41] On the one hand, the scheme of the three orders augments (perhaps “infinitely” so) an individual’s sense of uncertainty. It blurs at a fundamental level any distinction or “rapport” between a pious act and state. On the other hand, however, this scheme offers a nuanced account of the extreme complexity of the human person. Furthermore, in paradoxical fashion and unbeknownst to an individual, this ordering creates a kind of “map” of the pious life. It encompasses and charts, in Pascal’s words, the beginning, progress, and consummation of piety. Here, acts and states are not separated by an infinite distance or rendered indistinguishable, but rather feature simultaneously. Moreover, one’s growth in piety does not occur in an adult-like manner or display clear degrees of “maturation.” Instead, this process is in many ways “regressive” and childlike, reflective of a growing sense of mystery, submission, and awe. For

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[40] Leszek Kolakowski, *God Owes Us Nothing: A Brief Remark on Pascal’s Religion and on the Spirit of Jansenism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 194.
[41] Paul J. Griffiths, *Why Read Pascal?* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2021), 55.

Pascal, the idea of presenting oneself to God—of being able to fulfill one's filial responsibility—is presumptuous and misguided, even indicative of self-love. As one truly "matures" in pious living, this presumption gradually recedes. God, in turn, further discloses and presents Himself both before and within the individual.

Especially for skeptics and seekers, the body is the starting point of a pious life. It is through bodily acts that one may begin to cultivate a pious disposition, to enter a pious state. This concept is seen most explicitly in the famous "Wager" fragment in the *Pensées*. Here, Pascal's skeptic interlocuter wants to remain in a state of indecision and uncertainty; the interlocuter wants to draw out an interior, "rational" debate with himself in which the various "proofs" of God's existence or nonexistence are continuously mulled over and reviewed. The interlocuter contends that "if the person making one choice [in favor of God's existence] and the person making the other [in favor of God's nonexistence] are equally mistaken, they are both mistaken" and therefore that "The right course is not to wager." Pascal responds that "Yes, but you must wager. *That* is not your decision, you are already embarked" (fr. 680, p. 349). The interlocuter has already wagered—already acted—by the mere facts of their existence and daily activities. They are already within a state of wagering, of acting. Now they must make a further, definitive act, one that will have the greatest consequences for their future—one that holds the highest stakes in terms of their soul's future state of either eternal wretchedness or eternal happiness. Crucially, however, wagering is not a one-time, one-and-done act, nor is it exclusively directed to an other-worldly state. Rather, it entails a sequence or extended series of acts, ideally comprising a movement toward a purer, more pious state to be attained in this life. As Michael Moriarty points out, wagering "offers not only the prospect of bliss after death but gains in this life in the form of moral progress."[42] As Thomas Hibbs clarifies, "The accent here is not upon an isolated act of will made in ignorance but upon a journey, the stages of which are marked by the growing intelligibility and increasing happiness of the life of faith."[43] We see in this principle the distinctively consequentialist, aleatory dimension of Pascal's conception of piety. This dimension differs in significant ways from the more rigorist, totalizing and, in a certain sense, static aspects of the Jansenist conception.

Yet since the body is the lowest order, the acts performed by the body are essentially mechanistic or machine-like (hence the Wager fragment's title, "Discourse on the Machine"). Strictly mechanical acts therefore do not make one presentable to God or demonstrate one's purity. All they can accomplish is to reduce one's passions; they begin to remove the impiety with which the self is replete. The climax of Pascal's exhortation in the Wager delineates this dynamic. The interlocuter continues to be entrapped within an "adult," purely rational and intellectual framework for approaching the faith, trying to ascertain whether they can just "take a peek at the cards that have been dealt," whether they can garner more certainty for wagering one way or the other. Feeling the futility of this enterprise—as a result of their passions and (hateful) self-constitution—the interlocuter complains that "… my hands are tied and my tongue is mute. I am being forced to wager, and yet I do not have a free hand; I am being offered no respite. And I was made in such a way that I cannot believe." The ensuing exchange is as follows:

> All this is true. But you might at least learn that your inability to believe—since reason prompts you and yet you cannot do so—comes from your passions. So you want to find faith but do not know the way? You want to be cured of your lack of faith and you are

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[42] Michael Moriarty, *Pascal: Reasoning and Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 369.

[43] Thomas S. Hibbs, *Wagering on an Ironic God: Pascal on Faith and Philosophy* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2017), 162.

> asking for the remedy? Learn from those who once were shackled like you and who now wager all they have. These are people who know the path you would like to follow and are cured of the ill of which you wish to be cured. Do as they did when they started: which was to act in all respects as if they already believed, by taking holy water, having masses said, and so on. Naturally and of itself, this will make you believe, and will tame you.—But that is precisely what I'm afraid of.—Why so? What have you got to lose? But, so as to show you that it leads you there, this is because it diminishes your passions, which are your greatest stumbling-blocks ...—Oh how these words transport me, delight me … (fr. 680, p. 351)

The intellectual pursuit of certainty as well as the need for evidence and proofs—particularly in relation to questions of God's existence—are themselves passions; they are interior and dispositional stumbling blocks. Acts performed by the body work to reduce these passions, to remove the stumbling blocks constituting one's state of unbelief and skepticism. While Pascal does not explicitly mention the sacrament of Holy Communion in the quoted exchange, we see nonetheless a salient departure from the stance of Arnauld and De Barcos, that one refrain from pious acts if one's disposition or interior state does not genuinely comprehend and believe the "eminence" encountered in said acts. For Pascal, by contrast, wagering and acting *as if* one believed will cultivate—"of itself," "naturally" and over time—a more pious disposition and genuine belief. A pronounced degree of "self-conditioning" and "effort," rather than withdrawal and self-monitoring and examination, is involved in this process.[44] The centrality of grace, however, comes into especial relief here, as it would be Pelagian for one to think that their acting contrary to their state of unbelief stems from an autonomous, self-derived choice. In wagering in favor of God’s existence and performing pious acts, one becomes more dependent, more childlike, requiring the aid of grace at each step of the way.

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[44] Michael Moriarty, "Grace and religious belief in Pascal," in *The Cambridge Companion to Pascal*, ed. Nicholas Hammond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 144-161.

The new, pious state that one begins to attain through the order of the body—through the acts that “drive the machine towards Christianity”—does not entail intellectual assent and validation, at least in terms of rationally attained proofs and evidence (fr. 680, p. 352, note 12). It rather cultivates habit, which Pascal says “is our nature”; indeed, “Whoever makes a habit of faith comes to believe it, can no longer avoid fearing hell, and can believe nothing else” (fr. 680, p. 352). The more individualized phenomenon of habit eventually merges or falls into line with the broader, inherently social and historical phenomenon of custom, which Pascal says “constrains nature” and indeed “creates all conditions of man” (fr. 527). We see here how habit and custom serve to tame or constrain the passions, to reduce the self-derived and self-perpetuated state of unbelief and skepticism. As seen in the Wager, there is a “natural,” temporal process involved here, in which the individual is “driven toward” Christianity. The acts involved in habit and custom begin to imprint themselves on one’s interior state, to become part of one’s inward disposition. The stumbling blocks begin to be removed; one hence begins to come into a new, childlike state. For Pascal, custom has direct bearing on one’s “choice of a profession,” which is “The most important thing in all of life.” Indeed, “Custom makes masons, soldiers, roofers.” Indeed, by “constantly hearing some professions praised and others excoriated since childhood, we make our choice” (fr. 527). Critical here is the dynamic of witnessing and “wholly immersing” oneself in various customs—in various acts, habitually and ritually performed—which in turn prompts an immediate, childlike, natural choice. Indeed, this dynamic facilitates the beginnings of pious conviction.[45] There is hence an intimate link, for Pascal, between choosing to immerse oneself in the practices (or habits and customs) of the faith and assenting to the truths of the faith.

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[45] Ibid.

Of course, this link itself is far from "customary" since it has implications for the entire person, spanning all three orders and determining the fate of one's soul. Yet through the acts of the body and the influence of habit and custom, one begins to "move in the right direction" in terms of an interior, pious state. In contrast to purely affective conceptions of piety, outward acts are visibly, tangibly demonstrated. Yet more important here is the inward, self-demonstration that is occurring—and, by extension, the new internal state that is emerging—simultaneously. Upon embarking on a pious life, one begins to have what Pascal calls an "inner conversation" with oneself. This conversation is initiated and sustained in large part by the acts one performs as well as by the things one hears from others. Pascal's encapsulation of this dynamic is as follows:

> The way man is constituted, if you keep on telling him he is a fool, he believes it. And by keeping on telling himself, he makes himself believe it. For man carries on an inner conversation with himself, which is vital to regulate properly. *Evil communications corrupt good manners* [1 Corinthians 15:33]. We must keep silent as much as we can, and talk to ourselves only of God, who we know is the truth. That is how one persuades oneself of it. (fr. 132)

The mental constitution alluded to here is, like the physical body, a natural entity that is highly impressionable. As with a child's mental and physical makeup, this constitution is susceptible to evil communications, communications which manifest themselves in improper, immoral acts, in corrupt manners and impious behavior. One therefore ought to keep company with those who genuinely seek one's welfare and desire to assist one—particularly through customary, pious observances—on the path to faith. In keeping with principal Jansenist tenets, there is a high degree of rigor, exertion, and collective responsibility entailed in this process, along with (to invoke Mère Agnès) a persisting state of imperfection, with which one must content oneself. However, and more importantly, while this dynamic—while this "outer" conversation—continues in the order of body and everyday life, the inner conversation must not "grow louder" or become more adult-like and animated. If this occurs, one risks falling back to one's initial state of unbelief and skepticism, where one will once again encounter the burdensome, self-imposed task of seeking rational proofs for God's existence. Instead, through grace, the inner conversation is regulated and quieted. Amidst the continuing pious activity and exertion of the body, an element of rest begins to enter the scene, to punctuate the conversation. A childlike awe and submission begin to set in, as one begins to keep silent and talk to oneself only of God, and thus gradually persuade oneself of the truth which is God.

This is how bodily acts of piety begin to cultivate in the mind—the second order of Pascal's anthropology—a natural (though fundamentally grace-enabled) receptivity to and comprehension of piety's meaning and purpose. Yet here one may easily be deceived into thinking that one is practicing true piety, that one is capable of fully understanding piety's meaning and of making genuine progress in piety (or, perchance, that one has no further progress to make). Pascal calls these individuals superstitious, as they take everything, even matters of ordinary and "empirical fact," to be occasions for piety, as holding religious and devotional significance (fr. 212, note 10). These individuals remain in many ways trapped within the order of the body—the performance of pious acts having gone too far or become too deeply engrained—or do not possess a truly pious disposition altogether. These individuals hence lend validity to the label of "superstitious" leveled at them by atheists and "heretics," the latter term referring to Protestants (fr. 212). This notion informs a crucial concept in Pascal's thought regarding piety—that of "the middle ground" (fr. 210). Those who truly progress in piety are located in this middle ground between atheists and heretics, on the one hand, and the superstitious, on the other. Critically, those in the middle ground do not attempt to flee the *saeculum*, to escape the conditions, dynamics, and obligations constituting everyday, lived reality. This is in contrast to those "who have more zeal than knowledge," who "judge according to a new light that comes from piety" (fr. 124). These excessively pious individuals judge the world around them and engage in self-deification. They attempt to render themselves superior to the world and its affairs. These individuals thus attempt to leave the middle, to leave the world. Yet in doing so these individuals reveal their lack of "a deeper perspective"—a true light that continually fills a pious individual, that continually makes that individual aware of their inability to furnish their own light (fr. 124, 125). In keeping with themes seen in medieval works such as *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Nicholas of Cusa's *De Docta Ignorantia*, a truly pious individual recognizes their inability to determine—by way of their own merits and capabilities—their progress in piety.

One truly progressing in piety thus adopts and, moreover, maintains a childlike disposition or state. They recognize that it is their duty to remain in the middle, that "To leave the middle is to leave humanity," and that "The greatness of the human soul consists in knowing how to remain there" (fr. 452). In the "Letter Urging the Search for God" in the *Pensées*, Pascal delineates what this greatness—this disposition to remain in the middle—entails. The continuous thought and intellectual exertion pertaining to the future state of one's soul ought to stem not from "the pious zeal of a devout spirituality" but rather from "sheer human self-interest and self-love." This self-interest and self-love do not stem from the "hateful I" or self *per se* but rather comprise the "indispensable duty" one has to seek when one is in doubt, no matter how unsettling and unfortunate that doubt may be (fr. 681, p. 357). Here, we see how (true) piety is neither a zeal with which one presents themselves to God nor an entity that annihilates the self in an impersonal, purely external manner. Piety is rather derived from "sheer"—perhaps original or primal, even prelapsarian—self-interest and self-love, conceived in childlike, vulnerable, awe-inspiring and fright-inducing terms. One fulfills one's filial responsibility to God by remaining in the middle, by holding fast to the uncertainty that undergirds the soul's navigation of the world, that fuels the soul's movement toward its final state. The middle entails, in the words of Jennifer Soerensen, "both passive restfulness and active searching," whereby "the child of grace comes to live in an irreducible state of both search and rest."[46] As reflected in Soerensen's remarks, the middle in many ways crystallizes how piety, for Pascal, is simultaneously an act and a state.

Remaining in the middle and carrying on the inner conversation do not entail, however, "going quiet" or ceasing activity. A static, placid state does not eventually put an end to all acts. Rather, and even while no communication or rapport ostensibly exists between the orders of body and mind, the acts performed by the body continue to hold tremendous importance in regulating and sustaining one's middle position (or state) and inner conversation. Custom in particular plays an augmented role here. Pascal is explicit in claiming that "we are as much automata [i.e., bodies or machines] as minds," that "Custom is the source of our strongest and most firmly believed proofs," that custom "inclines the automaton, which drags the unwitting mind with it" and "so persuades us and makes so many Christians." Custom creates what Pascal terms "feeling" or "sentiment," which "acts in a moment, and is always ready to act." This is in contrast to reason, which "acts slowly, and with so many perspectives, on so many principles, which have to be in sight all the time" (fr. 661). Reason, which is largely self-derived and passion-driven—and which was once a principal stumbling block to the skeptic—can only act slowly and deliberately. Reason is in many ways “stuck” in an amorphous state, unsure as to what realm—what middle position or inner conversation—it operates within. By itself, reason is unstable, and if it is the sole support of one’s conviction, that conviction will “ebb and flow” and thus lose its meaning and purpose. Custom, signifying the “immediacy and authority of ‘sentiment,’” must come in to aid reason; indeed, one must “colour one’s whole being with it.”[47] Pascal goes so far as to say that “we must place our faith in feeling; otherwise it will always be vacillating” (fr. 661). Custom and habit fortify one’s position in the middle; they give focus and direction to one’s inner conversation. These principles make clear the mutuality and simultaneity of acts and states—or, perhaps, the operation of quicker and slower forms of acting within a shared, emerging state (of the middle position and inner conversation, and the belief, conviction, and faith nurtured therein). In mysterious and paradoxical fashion, body and mind are, in a sense, not entirely distinct or infinitely removed from one another. Progress in piety involves a kind of interaction and even mutuality of body and mind. Critically, and building on concepts seen in the Wager, not only does one’s body act in the world; one’s mind does too. Both orders are mutually and simultaneously witnessing, receiving, feeling, and choosing. To invoke Soerensen, both orders move within a grace-informed “dialectic” of passive restfulness and active searching.[48]

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[46] Jennifer L. Soerensen, "Search, rest, and grace in Pascal," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 76, no. 1 (August 2014): 19-40, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24709181.

Yet in keeping with Pascal’s anthropology, the mind retains its inherent (indeed, infinite) superiority to (and distance from) the body. The body gradually decays and ultimately succumbs to the natural, physical forces acting on it. Customs are also subject to change and possess a similar evanescent quality. The mind, conversely, wields an enduring power over the natural, spatio-temporal forces acting on it, in that it knows that said forces are acting on it and that it will, along with the body, eventually succumb to these forces. This principle informs Pascal's contention that "It is not in space that I must search for my dignity but in the regulation of my thought … Through space, the universe enfolds me and engulfs me like a speck; through thought, I enfold it" (fr. 145). The regulation of thought, as with the regulation of the inner conversation, hence produces or at least progresses toward a sense of certainty with regard to oneself—specifically, with regard to one's contingent, fallen, utterly grace-dependent condition, one's perpetual state of being unable to attain certainty or knowledge through one's own merits and capabilities. Regulation of thought enables one to bring oneself back to the middle, to position oneself between what Pascal calls the "two infinities" or "abysses"—those "of the infinite and of nothingness" (fr. 230, p. 128). As one regulates their thought, one's thought comes to mirror the way in which the two infinities "meet and come together by their very remoteness" and "coincide in God and in God alone." This coinciding occurs in the middle, between infinity and nothingness; the graced, pious individual's condition thus involves "holding the mid-point between two extremes," a condition that "pervades all" of one's "powers" (fr. 230, p. 130).

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[47] Moriarty, “Grace and religious belief in Pascal,” 156.
[48] Soerensen, “Search, rest, and grace in Pascal,” 22.

In a remarkable section of a fragment, Pascal provides testimony of his own initial—and, in many ways, continuing—struggles in accepting this condition:

> I spent much of my life believing that justice existed, and in that I was not mistaken, for it does exist, insofar as God has been pleased to reveal it to us. But I did not understand it that way, and in this I was mistaken, for I believed that our justice was essentially just and that I had in me the wherewithal to know and to judge it. But I found myself so frequently lacking in good judgment that at last I began to doubt myself, and then others. I have seen changes take place in all countries and in all men. And thus, after many changes in judgment concerning true justice, I realized that our nature is but continuous

> change, and I have not changed since then. And if I did change, I would confirm my opinion. Arcesilaus the Pyrrhonian, who becomes a dogmatist again. (fr. 453)

Although Pascal did not intend these reflections to be part of the Apology, having struck the entire fragment, they nevertheless convey a profound sense of humility (*Pensées*, fr. 453, n. 4). They offer a snapshot of what progress in piety entails. There was a time when Pascal believed justice to be attainable in purely human, social terms. He found himself at this extreme, out of the middle. Then, when he realized that true justice is divinely (and hence gratuitously) revealed, he was able to gradually move into the middle, to take a more pious perspective on the inherently limited, mutable, fallen nature of the human condition and the world within which humans live. Through experience and doubt—both of which signify critical regulatory measures in terms of one's thought and inner conversation—he was able to remain in the middle, to embrace and indeed delight in his condition (or state) of continuous change. Moreover, his act of holding the midpoint of extremes in human nature and social relations conferred a sense of certainty, confirmed him in a state of unchangeability. Hence the poetic quality and paradoxical meaning of the prose: "… I realized that our nature is but continuous change, and I have not changed since then. And if I did change, I would confirm my opinion." These words are not adult, intellectual vacillations but rather childlike, pious affirmations. They reveal an act and state simultaneously, an active search and passive rest—a midpoint occupied and held together by both reason and sentiment. The seemingly contradictory, "remote" aspects of the words are gradually resolved as they find their place in God, in the providential ordering of continuous change amidst ultimate unchangeability. As Douglas Groothuis elucidates, one's condition (or state) of skepticism—in Pascal's case, of pyrrhonist dogmatism—is "not the final condition … It is not a resting place, but a launching pad."[49] Skepticism effectively acts as a catalyst for one's progress in piety, for one's emerging state of confirmation and conviction amidst continuous change—for one's holding the midpoint between extremes, between infinities.

The temporal dimensions—and, by extension, pious implications—of holding the midpoint are especially pronounced in Pascal's letters of spiritual guidance. In one letter to M. and Mme. de Roannez, Pascal outlines how society perpetuates a harmful and impious preoccupation with the future. In thinking about the future, a phenomenon that "is nonexistent" and something that one "may never live to see," one essentially projects themselves into nothingness.[50] In the process, one's thought—the defining feature of one's personhood and dignity—is rendered powerless and purposeless. One's thought ought to instead concentrate on the present, the only realm that can be grasped and navigated by the mind. In the vein of piety, the present signifies something that one "reckons" with and is obliged to. It presents "the bounds within which one must live both for one's salvation and for one's own repose."[51] Pascal encapsulates his exhortation to M. and Mme. de Roannez in the following passage:

> I foresee troubles as well for that person[52] as for others and for myself. But when I find myself involved in such cares I pray God to keep me within my bounds; I collect myself, and I find that I am failing to do various things to which I am obligated in the present. In doing so, I am dissipating myself in futile thoughts of the future; I am not at all obliged to attend to these; on the contrary, I am under obligation not to attend to them. It is only for

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[49] Douglas Groothuis, *On Pascal* (Australia: Wadsworth, 2003), 53.
[50] Pascal, *Great Shorter Works of Pascal*, 153.
[51] Ibid.
[52] The "person" referred to here is unnamed, although this person's involvement in what Pascal calls "a thorny affair" (*Great Shorter Works of Pascal*, p. 153) seems to be a principal occasion for the letter's composition.

> want of knowing how to understand and study the present that we have made a pretense of studying the future.[53]

Several critical and fascinating elements surface in this passage. On the one hand, we see some potential shortcomings of Pascal's framework, specifically regarding the ways in which his framework fails to explicitly account for the narrative, sequential aspects of piety. One could say that the present is always drawing its meaning from—or is even defined altogether by—the past and dissolving (or "dissipating") into the future. Striving to live in a purely vertical, eternal present—or middle realm or state—without the horizontal, sequential components and acts entailed in pious living in many ways obscures how an individual can be seen to grow or progress in piety. Such a conception, to a certain extent, deprives piety of its obligatory, filial essence. Pascal directly alludes to this sense of obligation in the quoted excerpt—indeed, such a sense informed his writing the letter along with his desire to see M. and Mme. de Roannez grow in piety. Said growth garners intelligibility through past, present, and future acts, through a narrative or sequence which extends beyond the "bounds" of the present.

On the other hand, however, this passage conveys the simultaneity of pious acts and states as well as the rapport between the orders of body and mind. This rapport favors acts over states, such that an individual progressing in piety is not reduced to a static, purely vertical, present-confined state. Rather, over time, one is further recalled to oneself, to one's filial responsibility and fundamentally childlike constitution and condition, a constitution and condition discerned most clearly and holding the most weight in the present. The bodily, present acts one performs—and the obligation one has to continue performing said acts—effectively draw the mind back to its proper place and function, to its middle position or state. They

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[53] Pascal, *Great Shorter Works of Pascal*, 153.

“remind” the mind of the past while grounding the mind in the present. Importantly, the mind is not closed off to the future, that realm into which the whole person constantly enters and of which a pious person is constantly aware, particularly in terms of the final state of one’s soul. Rather, the mind is prevented from becoming lost (or “dissipated”) in the future, of leaving the present and projecting itself into nothingness. Present acts, in this way, effectively “reach out” over the infinite distance separating the body and mind, prompting the mind to re-present itself to and re-focus on immediate, tangible, daily obligations. In this process, the mind grows in its ability to study and understand the present. As the pretense of studying the future diminishes, the mind acquires more equanimity, achieves more of an equilibrium between active search and passive rest.

In these respects, there is significant interplay of the horizontal and vertical, temporal and eternal dimensions of piety. Prayer is especially central here. Through grace, one gradually learns to pray better, to more earnestly seek God’s assistance in bringing oneself back to the present, in “keeping oneself within one’s bounds.” Prayer not only demarcates and strengthens the boundaries of the present but also redirects and sustains the mind over time, in a past, present, and future sense. This dynamic both recalls and augments concepts pertaining to the Wager. The act of wagering is born out of a past and present state of unbelief and skepticism, along with an anticipation of one’s future condition, of the final state of one’s soul. Yet wagering is fundamentally a continuing, present act which, coupled with prayer, does not let the mind wander off to the future or question whether or not the wager will hold. The future is thus left in God’s hands. Progress in piety—and fulfillment of one’s obligations—hence entails allowing the future to gradually present and further disclose itself before one. In a childlike manner, rather than seeking out or “planning for” the future, one lets the future seek them out.

This principle is especially crucial in relation to the heart, the third order of Pascal's anthropology. As Pascal says in the *Pensées*, there is an "infinitely more infinite" distance separating the heart from the mind than that separating the mind from the body (fr. 339). The level of rapport between the orders thus shrinks even more drastically. Indeed, Pascal maintains that the purposes of the orders are altogether different—the mind's purpose is "to instruct" whereas the heart's (or charity's) is "to inspire." The mind operates through "principle and demonstration," whereas the heart "consists … of a digression on each point that relates to the conclusion, without ever losing sight of it" (fr. 329). The "conclusion" referred to here is Christ, to whom everything relates and of whom nothing—or no "point," however seemingly digressive or contrary to principle and demonstration—ever loses sight. In another fragment, however, Pascal provides a scheme in which the orders and their respective functions are placed side by side and even constitute a kind of sequence or unified purpose:

> There are three ways to believe: reason, custom, inspiration. The Christian religion, which alone has reason on its side, does not admit as its true children those who believe without inspiration. Not that it excludes reason or custom. On the contrary. But we must open our minds to the proofs, confirm them through custom, and offer ourselves in humility to inspirations, which alone can bring about a true and salutary effect. *Lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect* [1 Cor 1:17]. (fr. 655)

This fragment suggests a kind of "bridging" dynamic between the three orders, a dynamic discerned through one's growth in piety. Through custom and proof, body and mind are the two orders most mutually reinforced. Together, their activity prepares or disposes one to "offer oneself in humility to inspirations"—to look toward, if not fully comprehend or enter, the order of the heart. Yet this bridging process does not occur on a purely abstract level, particularly in light of the infinitely expanded—and, apart from grace, unbridgeable—distance between the mind and heart. This process rather possesses a concrete, tangible essence. Scripture embodies this essence, and hence could be said to signify the ultimate means by which the orders are bridged. Engagement with Scripture reflects a bodily, sensory, ritualized act whereby one reads, receives, and meditates on the Word. As Conley points out, this act was central to daily life at Port-Royal, so central that it constituted a form of "biblical piety" distinct from piety more generally conceived. This unique form of piety—an especial point of emphasis in Mère Agnès's spiritual program—"required more than prayer and spiritual illumination," necessitating "formal theological instruction on the mysteries of faith."[54] The male solitaires affiliated with Port-Royal, whom Pascal would frequently visit and correspond with following his second conversion experience in 1654, similarly emphasized Scripture reading as a daily practice. Scripture reading was a principal—if not *the* principal—way in which one's mind was, through habit and custom, opened to the proofs of Christianity. The simultaneous imprinting of the Word on one's body and mind was in many ways exemplified by Pascal, who was "to know" the Scriptures "one day almost by heart."[55]

Yet in departure from many Jansenists and other solitaires, Scripture reading for Pascal was an intensely analytical process that required both intellectual commitment and epistemic humility. The extent to which one could approach or present oneself to Scripture as an authentic, capable seeker and expositor of religious truth was, in many respects, severely limited. On the one hand, the pronounced sense of interiority and interpretative inability that characterizes Pascal's understanding could be said to overlook the collective, communal necessity and potency of Scripture reading, as well as diminish the authority and shepherding capacity of communal and ecclesial leadership. In contrast to Mère Agnès, Pascal does not (at least explicitly) acknowledge the individual and collective benefits of seeking out and "'profiting from'" the interpretative and exegetical "'light of others,'" particularly in relation to the more enigmatic parts of Scripture, parts which perhaps could be further understood through collective efforts.[56] For Pascal, the inherently, in many ways eternally mysterious state or "disposition" presented by Scripture—a state or disposition that ought to be mirrored by the reader of Scripture—could be said to overtake and, in a certain sense, obviate the interpretative act, individually and collectively conceived.

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[54] Conley, *Adoration and Annihilation*, 148.

[55] Emile Cailliet, *The Clue to Pascal* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1943), 53.

On the other hand, however, Pascal never advocated for the removal of Scripture reading and theological learning from communal, ecclesial, and historical frameworks. For the entirety of his life (and especially toward the end), Pascal was a faithful member of the Catholic Church. As implicit in the fragment quoted above (fr. 655), it is not as if the acts and customs involved in Scripture reading and exegesis eventually cease, such that readers and those seeking Christian truth gradually "go quiet" and begin to isolate themselves off from the community and Church. Mutual, collective, visible unveiling of scriptural truth continues, particularly in the orders of body and mind. The mind especially must be continually opened; it must perpetually witness and absorb the continual change and interplay of ideas, customs, and habits that characterize human endeavor and the world at large. This is how the mind is secured and strengthened in its middle position and constitution, yet also how it is enabled to look toward—and perhaps even glimpse—the order of the heart. The distinction with Pascal's framework lay in its pointing beyond mere habituation and biblicism, features that were especially prominent among groups like the *dévots* and the Jansenists. Nevertheless, the influence and insights of others remain, for Pascal, instrumental in regulating and shaping one's inner conversation and helping one navigate various intellectual challenges. These influences and insights facilitate one's progress in piety and the bridging of the orders, particularly those of the mind and heart.

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[56] Conley, *Adoration and Annihilation*, 148.

This notion is evident in the *Exchange with M. de Sacy on Epictetus and Montaigne* (hereafter referred to as the *Exchange*), a conversation set down by Nicolas Fontaine after Pascal's death and involving Pascal and Le Maistre de Sacy, a prominent theologian of Port-Royal.[57] Here, we see Pascal seeking the light of others with regard to scriptural understanding, situating himself in a communal reading context and authoritative framework. His study of the writings of Epictetus and Montaigne prompted his attempt to discover how differing philosophies may be reconciled, and cast in a new light altogether, by the truth of the Gospel. We see the fruitfulness of this attempt—for both Pascal and M. de Sacy—in the following excerpts of the conversation:

> [50] "The Gospel reconciles these contradictions by means of a wholly divine art: unifying everything in them that is true and dispelling everything that is false, it transforms them into a truly heavenly wisdom in which the differences that were incompatible in those human doctrines are reconciled. The reason for this is that those worldly sages [Epictetus and Montaigne] placed the contraries in the same subject: one attributed greatness to nature, while the other attributed weakness to the selfsame nature, and this simply could not be sustained; whereas faith teaches us to put them in different subjects, since everything that is weak belongs to nature, and everything that is powerful to grace …

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[57] *Exchange with M. de Sacy on Epictetus and Montaigne*, in Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, translation edited by Pierre Zoberman (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2022), 491.

> [52] “I beg your pardon, Monsieur,” M. Pascal said to M. de Sacy, “for having allowed myself, in front of you, to get so carried away into the realm of theology, instead of remaining within philosophy, which was my sole subject; but the subject led me there imperceptibly, and it is difficult to avoid entering that realm, whatever truth one is dealing with, because it is the center of all truths—as is perfectly clear in the present instance, since it so visibly embraces all the truths that are to be found within these two doctrines [of Epictetus and Montaigne] …”
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> [54] M. de Sacy could not prevent himself from telling M. Pascal at this point that he was surprised to see how well he was able to interpret things. He pointed out to him at the same time that not everybody possessed the art, as he did, of bringing to those readings such wise and elevated thoughts. He told him that he resembled those skillful doctors who, thanks to the clever way they have of mixing the most powerful poisons, are able to extract from them the most potent remedies.[58]

We can trace in these passages a kind of shared enlightenment, a sense of mutual instruction and inspiration. Much of the dialogue comes from Pascal, who reveals both the further knowledge or proofs his mind has been opened to along with the “imperceptible,” unintended, gratuitous manner in which his mind has been led into the realm of theology and the Gospel witness. On one level, Pascal “catches himself.” He asks for M. de Sacy’s pardon upon realizing that he has strayed from the subject at hand (philosophy). Yet on another level, Pascal lets himself be led further into theology, deeper into Scripture and “the center of all truths”; he yields to the instructional, dialogical, inspirational dimensions of the conversation. We hence discern a dynamic in which a state—of new knowledge, of deepened appreciation for theology and

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[58] Ibid., 510-511.

Scripture—converges or operates simultaneously with an act, that of entering further into certain realms as well as gleaning further instruction and inspiration from an authority like M. de Sacy.

There is, moreover, a fundamentally childlike, awe-inspired dimension undergirding the conversation, one that affects both Pascal and M. de Sacy. While M. de Sacy is said to typically refrain from interjecting in his various and sundry conversations with different individuals of differing intellectual and spiritual capabilities and dispositions, here he cannot help but remark on Pascal's extraordinary synthesizing powers, on Pascal's ability to bridge different disciplines and orders of meaning. Importantly, though, and as Fontaine relates in the preface to the *Exchange*, while "M. de Sacy found everything he [Pascal] said … to be entirely accurate" and "observed with pleasure the strength of his mind and his way of talking," M. de Sacy "saw nothing new in either." Fontaine goes on to provide M. de Sacy's remark that, although Pascal arrived at the same truths seen in Augustine and the Church Fathers, Pascal "'finds those truths surprising' … 'because he has never seen them anywhere else, whereas we are used to seeing them time and again in our books.'"[59] These sentiments reveal, on an immediate level, the pronounced differences—in certain respects, unbridgeable gaps—between the philosophical, scientific inclinations and reading habits of Pascal and the biblically steeped, tradition-saturated practices and constitution of Port-Royal. In one sense, Pascal simply arrived where Port-Royal had been—and would remain—for the duration. Yet in a deeper sense, by virtue of offering "nothing new," Pascal brought a fresh, childlike perspective and posture to bear on patristic and scriptural material. He in many ways bridged the divide between his own intellectual and pious proclivities and those of Port-Royal by re-infusing an element of surprise and wonder into familiar texts, ones read and interpreted time and again. As M. de Sacy saw and felt on a deep, inner level, Pascal reflected in his private, personal habits as well as his communal, interpersonal engagements—his inward and outward conversations—a synthesis, simultaneity, and synergy of instruction and inspiration, of ongoing acts of the mind and emerging states of the heart.

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[59] Ibid., 498.

In these respects, the *Exchange* highlights how, for Pascal, being a pious reader of Scripture does not mean becoming gradually devoid of interpretative and exegetical ability or isolated from communal and authoritative contexts. The analytical, exertional thrust of Scripture reading rather dispels the illusion of possessing an autonomous, merit-based interpretative capacity or of being able to bring anything "new" to the text or present "another truth" to the center of all truths. Scripture presents itself to the individual and community. To think that it is the other way around is presumptuous and impious. As Emile Cailliet elucidates, Scripture "shows the way to bring about a transformation of heart."[60] This way encompasses acts of further reading and instruction along with states of deeper mystery and transformation. It hence integrates or bridges the orders, principally those of the mind and heart. In a reprise of Soerensen's theme involving the dialectic of active search and passive rest, one's mind is opened to the proofs as well as offered in humility to inspirations, the latter of which alone are capable of conferring a salutary and salvific effect.

As repeatedly emphasized by Pascal in the *Pensées* and other works, the proofs contained in theology and Scripture do not stem from reason or derive from principle and demonstration. Reason, principle, and demonstration are proper to science and mathematics but not to theology and biblical interpretation. To conflate these realms would be to commit a fundamental and dangerous error, the mind becoming untethered from its middle position and course. While the mind must be open to receiving the proofs—to undergoing continuous change and being confirmed and strengthened in that change—the discipline of theology itself, unlike science and mathematics, "inhabits a realm of closed revelation whose bounds are traced by the closed canon of the Bible" (*Pensées*, fr. 201, n. 4). Jan Miel captures these concepts:

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[60] Cailliet, *Clue to Pascal*, 55.

> Rational proofs of truths of religion are as much an absurdity as theological proofs of the truths of mathematics or physics. The only proof of Christianity is the history of Christianity: a history with sufficient signs for us to understand it if we will, even though the signs are necessarily ambiguous.[61]

The history of Christianity, and the signs that underpin and suffuse it, cannot be studied from an external, "objective" standpoint but rather only from within the closed system of Scripture. One who engages Scripture hence presupposes, or at least seeks, the truth of revelation. One also accepts the dates and periods recorded in Scripture as authentic. As David Wetsel emphasizes, Scripture is at the root of Pascal's "vision of the world and history, a vision in which the Bible not only stands at the centre, but also limits the scope of the inquiry."[62] Yet the history delineated in Scripture is not merely instructional; it is not a linear survey of past events and peoples, one that simply solicits inquiry and "leaves open" to the reader what meaning may be discerned for the present and future. Neither, critically, is this history entirely straightforward, bridging all gaps and resolving all discrepancies. As Miel highlights, the signs with which history is replete are *necessarily* ambiguous. Mystery and paradox are built into history, in many ways signifying the essence of history—and hence the essence of Scripture. In light of this, we see how the mind, when engaging history, occupies a bounded, scripturally confined, middle position or state. At the same time, however, the mind is—in act-like, childlike fashion—further opened to certain signs and mysteries. Through grace, the mind gradually moves from a state of ambiguity to one of clarity, from one of instruction to one of inspiration. It begins to walk along the bridge leading to the heart.

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[61] Jan Miel, *Pascal and Theology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), 152.

[62] David Wetsel, "Pascal and holy writ," in *The Cambridge Companion to Pascal*, ed. Nicholas Hammond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 162-181.

The necessarily ambiguous thrust of Scripture not only limits the scope of the inquiry but also brings to light the nature—or state—of the inquirer him- or herself. Scripture does not allow itself to be understood by all. It safeguards its mysteries from being universally accessed. This principle directly aligns with Pascal's—and the Augustinian tradition's—understanding of the "hidden God" (*Deus absconditus*). God hides Himself in Scripture, providing signs or figures that point to His presence without literally or fully disclosing it. There is a direct parallel here to the Eucharist—a parallel discerned by the truly pious—in which the substance of Christ is hidden beneath the accidents of bread and wine. Indeed, "the Eucharist itself" is "a figure of the glory for which they [Christians] aim" (fr. 301). The notion of the *Deus absconditus* informs Pascal's sentiment—punctuating the *Pensées* as well as his letters and shorter works—that "There is enough light for those who truly wish to see, and enough obscurity for those who have the opposite disposition" (fr. 274). In one sense, figurative and literal reading signify the boundaries of a kind of middle position, one with a balance of light and obscurity. As Pascal suggests, a figure itself moves between "absence and presence, pleasure and displeasure" (fr. 296). Yet unlike other realms with which the mind engages, Scripture—being a closed, divinely authoritative and determinative system—does not facilitate continuous change or mere oscillation between light and obscurity, presence and absence. In this way, while one progressing in piety occupies a middle position in relation to Scripture, one does not remain in the middle. One is rather gradually moved (by grace) into further light, into further clarity, being able to recognize and follow the threads of various signs or figures. One's mind is gradually "pulled" out of the middle and into the heart of Scripture. In this simultaneity of act and state, one's mind is effectively turned toward the hidden God, toward Him who underpins—and, ultimately, unifies—the clarity and obscurity.

Being able to discern the figurative, hidden, divine elements in Scripture is thus key to bridging the orders of mind and heart. The prophecies in the Old Testament are especially crucial here. The prophecies epitomize the figurative; they provide the clearest indication of the *Deus absconditus*. As Wetsel discusses, the prophecies essentially distinguish between the elect and the damned, serving as "'visible signs' only for those whose hearts, fixed on things heavenly, are oriented towards a figurative understanding of them" while remaining "veiled" for "those who aspire to things temporal" and who will hence "have their hearts blinded" by the figures.[63] When reading the prophecies, the elect—those progressing in piety—recognize that the prophecies point to or signify things beyond themselves. The damned, conversely, despite all their attempts to understand the text, remain entrapped by the literal and historical (and hence obscure or veiled) nature of the prophecies. In this manner, the prophecies reflect and sustain the balance created by Scripture between "enough light for those who truly wish to see" and "enough obscurity for those of the opposite disposition"—between those whose minds are, through grace, able to be touched by the heart and those who remain trapped within the mind, who remain confined to literal, purely intellectual readings.

Critically, however, while drawing the mind out of the middle, the prophecies do not point to many different things or truths, such that the mind is pulled in many directions. Rather, the prophecies preserve the integrity and ordering of the pious individual and authentic reader of Scripture by pointing to one, common truth. Pascal makes this principle clear:

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[63] Ibid., 167.

> You cannot compose a good physiognomy without reconciling all our contrarieties, and it is not enough to reconcile a sequence of congruent qualities without reconciling the contrary ones. In order to understand the meaning of an author, one must reconcile all the contrary passages. Thus in order to understand scripture, one must have one meaning that reconciles all contrary passages. (fr. 289)

The prophecies reflect the shared "physiognomy" of the pious individual and Scripture. Since both the individual and Scripture are replete with contrarieties—with clarity and obscurity, indeed with necessary ambiguity—there needs to be a single principle or phenomenon reconciling these contrarieties. This principle is not located in the immediate, literal texts of the prophecies but rather in what these texts point to or act as figures for. The range of persons, events, and prophets themselves, moreover, confirm rather than deny this principle. In line with Pascal's notion of "perpetuity," a multiplicity of persons, events, and prophets is necessary to preserve and fortify—until the proper time for disclosure—the true principle, "the true religion" that "has always existed on the earth" (*Pensées*, p. 168, n. 1). In this way, when a pious individual reads the prophecies, they gradually home in on the one, reconciling principle that is figured.

Engagement with the prophecies hence reflects, for the pious individual, a continual sense of "progress" and "looking ahead," of penetration beyond the printed word. On the one hand, and in keeping with the order of the mind, this dynamic embodies the analytic, layered, exertional enterprise and middle position that constitute Scripture reading. On the other hand, however, it is not as if the mind becomes more intellectually robust or mature when engaging the prophecies. The mind does not become, in adult-like, progressive fashion, "better" or "sharper" at spotting and deciphering the various figures. Rather, as it discerns the figures and looks in the direction the figures point, the mind becomes more docile, in many ways more childlike. An element of rest "mixes in" with the activity, attenuating an exclusive focus on exertion, on strictly intellectual attempts to render the mysteries "understandable." This process is indicative of the mind establishing a rapport with and beginning to give way to the heart. This yielding occurs due to the immensity and singularity—indeed, the miraculous essence—of the principle (and paradox) to which the prophecies point. This principle is Christ himself. Christ is the embodiment of the *Deus absconditus*, being "as hidden in profane history as he is in the Eucharist" (*Pensées*, fr. 369, n. 31). Yet, at the same time, he is "the event that fulfilled" the prophecies and the reality of whom the prophecies "are the greatest proof" (fr. 368). In a particularly noteworthy fragment, Pascal makes the following remarks:

> Had a single man written a book predicting the time and circumstances of the coming of Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ had come in accordance with these prophecies, this would carry infinite weight.
>
> But there is even more here. Here is a succession of men during four thousand years, constantly and invariably following one after another to foretell this same coming. Here is an entire people proclaiming it. They have endured for four thousand years in order to give testimony as one to their certainty of it, from which they cannot be diverted by whatever threats and persecutions made against them. This is wholly on another scale. (fr. 364)

The distance, described here in terms of "weight" and "scale," between the first, hypothetical scenario—of one person making the true prophecy—and the second, actual scenario—of a succession of prophets along with an entire people making and witnessing to the same prophecy—echoes and, furthermore, parallels the distance between the mind and the heart. One's mind is wont to situate the essence and implications of the prophecies within the first scenario due to that scenario's more logical, "tidy" nature. The mind cannot fathom crossing over—traversing the infinitely more infinite distance—to the second scenario, which defies all beliefs and expectations. Yet the visible and invisible, instructional and inspirational dimensions of the prophecies facilitate this very crossing, this very bridging. They create a rapport between the mind and heart. Having opened an individual's mind to the proofs (historical, literal, figural) and confirmed the proofs through custom (of reading and meditating, of conversing with others), the prophecies now enable the individual to offer themselves in humility to the full inspiration afforded by the heart. In this process—in this passage—the pious individual learns what it means to prophesy, which is "to speak of God, not by outward proofs, but from an inward and IMMEDIATE sense" (fr. 360).

Miel elucidates how Pascal's conception of the heart is thoroughly biblical, "designating the seat of all the faculties of the soul, whether volitional, affective, or intellectual."[64] Such a consummate, all-encompassing, divinely created entity or order may only be filled by God. Indeed, Pascal contends that Christ "truly came with the brilliance of his own order" (fr. 339, p. 179). Apprehending this phenomenon involves both thought and the absence of thought, an act and state simultaneously, and stems directly from Christ's own life and example, which Pascal captures beautifully: "Jesus Christ said great things so simply that he seems as though he had given no thought to them, and yet so clearly that we easily see what he thought about them. Such clarity combined with such spontaneity is remarkable" (fr. 340). In the order of the heart—the site of the consummation of piety—one is again placed in a kind of middle realm or position, between thought and no thought, clarity and spontaneity, act and state. However, and in distinction from that occupied in the order of the mind, this new middle position is not occupied and navigated by oneself alone, but rather by Christ as well. The consummation of piety hence involves, at a fundamental level, the extirpation or annihilation of the “hateful I,” of the human self. While said annihilation is fully realized only in death, the individual effectively learns to make room for Christ’s self. In childlike fashion, one further yields to the movements and presentations of Christ that occur both before and within oneself, that govern one’s outward acts and dispose one to a particular, inward state.

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[64] Miel, *Pascal and Theology*, 158.

Critically, however, the heart does not reflect the “final stage” or state that one reaches after having “mastered” the orders of body and mind. In keeping with Pascal’s anthropology, an infinitely more infinite distance still separates the heart from the other two orders. This concept accentuates the utter dependency on grace characteristic of the third order and, by extension, the consummation of piety. The bridge constructed by the prophecies and Scripture is completed only by God. An individual, however pious, may never live to see this completion. The “immediate” aspect of the “inward and immediate sense” entailed in prophesying signifies something not able to be framed within earthly, temporal terms. “Immediate,” by divine standards, can—and, for Pascal, does—encompass an extended duration of time, even a whole lifetime. True piety, at each stage (beginning, progress, consummation) and within each order (body, mind, heart), hence works at the intersection of the temporal and eternal. This is especially true with regard to the heart and informs Pascal’s understanding of conversion. Contrary to common notions of conversion as well as what one’s mind—or, specifically, one’s imagination—leads one to believe, conversion is not an instantaneous phenomenon. As Pascal remarks, “Men often mistake their imagination for their hearts: and they believe they have been converted as soon as they start thinking about conversion” (fr. 739). Conversion is in many ways unique to the heart. It reveals the inherent limitations—and, indeed, deceitful capabilities—of the mind, of the attempt to claim full rapport between the intellect and heart. Since the heart is at an infinite remove from the mind and is itself an infinite, all-encompassing space, the process of conversion exceeds all temporal boundaries the mind seeks to impose on the process.

Pascal outlines these concepts in a fragment that was for a long time unknown prior to being discovered by Jean Mesnard in 1960:

> It is good to encourage people who have been renewed internally by grace to undertake works of piety and of penitence proportionate to their capacity, because both grace and works are preserved by the proportion that exists between the goodness of the works and the spirit in which they are carried out. When you constrain someone who is not yet renewed internally to extraordinary works of piety and penitence, you spoil both, since the man corrupts the works by his malice, and the works overwhelm the weakness of the man, who is unable to bear them. It is a bad sign to see a person performing outwardly from the very instant of conversion. The order of charity must take root in the heart before performing good works outwardly. (fr. 772)

This fragment presents both a complex and clarifying picture. As Wetsel points out, there seems to be a disjunction between this fragment and Pascal's advice to the skeptic in the Wager. In the latter, Pascal suggests that pious acts—albeit ones done in rote, mechanistic fashion—ought to precede inner conversion. In reducing the passions and imprinting themselves on the mind, these acts properly dispose one to a state in which conversion may take place. In the above fragment, conversely, Pascal maintains that external acts always follow, rather than precede, inner conversion.[65] There thus appears to be, in this fragment, an emphasis on and privileging of pious states, ones of internal renewal. We are recalled to Arnauld's and De Barcos's stance in *On Frequent Communion*, as Pascal advances a similar cautionary framework in which one must be constantly attuned to their inner state or disposition when performing pious acts. There is a salient parallel between Pascal's language of "extraordinary" works of piety and De Barcos's sentiment regarding the "eminence" encountered when receiving communion—and, by extension, the damage one can do both to oneself and to the act if one is not in a state that matches the act's extraordinariness and eminence. Wetsel suggests that the acts mentioned in the Wager ("taking holy water, having masses said, and so on") are mere "works of self-mortification" that "do not fall under the category of 'extraordinary' works of penitence," works which include receiving communion and "undertaking austere fasts and a strict regimen of prayer."[66] The lower, self-mortifying and passion-reducing works occur prior to conversion, in the orders of body and mind, while the more extraordinary, eminent ones occur after conversion, after charity has taken root in the heart and hence furnished one with the proper capacity by which to perform these latter works.

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[65] David Wetsel, *Pascal and Disbelief: Catechesis and Conversion in the* Pensées (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 354.

We get a glimpse of what the "moment" of conversion looks like in "Writing on the Conversion of the Sinner" (hereafter referred to as "Conversion of the Sinner"), written by Pascal in the wake of his second conversion experience. Here, the soul occupies a state of awe and contrition in which it beholds its own finitude and wretchedness in the face of the Creator's "boundlessness" and mercy. The soul has moved beyond "habitual piety" and the various "rewards" stemming from pre-conversion acts, now only "adoring Him in silence" and allowing charity to take root in the heart. Only after adoration and silence does the soul "raise ardent prayers" and "begin to act."[67] This state of the converted soul largely thwarts any temporal framings or designations, the period of adoration and silence remaining ambiguous and being determined only by God. Moreover, and in departure from the fragment quoted above, the soul seems utterly incapable of acting during this period. There seems to be little to no balance or simultaneity in terms of a state of inner renewal and a series of acts undertaken in proportion to this state. No acts, habitual or extraordinary, can adequately match this state or be performed concurrently with it. Acts can only follow this state in a passive or necessary manner.

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[66] Ibid., 353, 354.

[67] Pascal, *Great Shorter Works of Pascal*, 120.

Indeed, and in keeping with Pascal's and the Jansenists' understanding of grace, this state is achieved through no act or merit of one's own, including, to a large extent, seeking and partaking of the sacraments. As Wetsel notes, "Not once during the course of the Apology sketched by the *Pensées* do we see Pascal urging the *chercheur* [seeker] to attempt to attract inner Grace by returning to the sacraments."[68] This shows how Pascal's framework potentially overlooks the efficacy of the sacraments as well as (and as discussed earlier) the importance of the pious individual's location within an ecclesial and communal context. Regardless of what state of religious life or conversionary experience one may be in, the acts one performs through the assistance and witness of the Church possess an autonomy and validity, a collective, confirmatory power through which one's growth in pious living may be discerned and charted. The external unverifiability and temporal ambiguity of conversion hence potentially render Pascal's understanding liable to dangers—ones seen in Mère Angélique's framework—of self-certification and justification in terms of one's salvation.

On the other hand, however, the quoted fragment highlights the necessity of external—indeed, a kind of parental—guidance in matters of conversion. This guidance is provided by ecclesial authority as well as communal and one-on-one interaction and spiritual direction.

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[68] Wetsel, *Pascal and Disbelief*, 353.

Pascal holds, furthermore, that there are external, visible “signs” of spiritual misdirection, signs stemming from the “spoiling” of both acts and states. In contrast to Arnauld’s and De Barcos’s (and many of the Jansenists’) understanding, the convert is like a child, largely unable to discern how to properly self-monitor and refrain from certain pious acts, to distinguish between true and false conversion. In being “constrained to perform”—or being led to believe themselves capable of performing—certain acts, the convert runs the risk not only of diminishing the eminence of the acts but also being “overwhelmed” by the acts. The integrity of both acts and states, of the pious life as a whole, is thus preserved and sustained by a kind of perpetual conversion process. In this process, importantly, the activities and states of body and mind are not drastically altered, nor do they go silent or shift entirely off course in terms of one’s pre-conversion state. Marvin O’Connell elucidates this principle in relation to Pascal’s own conversion:

> He remained a savant—a philosopher in the broad sense—whether he liked it or not. His conversion pierced him to the roots of his being, but it did not, it could not, lead him to disparage the powers of a mind that had unlocked so many secrets of mathematics and physics … What he did now see clearly was an analogy between the scientific work he had done all his life and the spiritual work his newly found zeal pointed him toward in the future.[69]

For Pascal, and again contrary to popular notions, conversion does not entail a “rebirth” of oneself, a complete discarding of one’s former life. One rather, to a significant extent, remains oneself while undergoing continuous change. We saw this in the fragment quoted earlier (fr. 453), in light of the constant change—yet ultimate confirmation and unchangeability—Pascal experienced regarding notions of justice. The grace-derived phenomenon, the fundamental act-state simultaneity of *perpetual* conversion enables the "analogies" and, to a certain extent, bridges between orders (the scientific and the spiritual, the mind and the heart) to come further into view and point one along a particular path. The scenario described in "Conversion of the Sinner," along with the lower and higher acts of piety bracketing such scenarios, punctuates and fills rather than interrupts or impedes the process. This idea is in many ways built into the very nature of the *Pensées*, a work which "consists not only of fragments but of lacunae." These lacunae, these (more or less infinite) spaces between thoughts, yearn to be filled with religious experience, with "the unsaid" and, indeed, unspeakable.[70] In light of these concepts, true conversion militates against self-certification and justification. It resists the imposition of temporal parameters on conversion, along with the presumption that one has the choice or autonomy to refrain from pious acts or isolate oneself off from community and the Church.

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[69] Marvin R. O’Connell, *Blaise Pascal: Reasons of the Heart* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 110-111.

As one undergoes conversion, one finds oneself conformed to Christ's image and example. To employ Pascal's language, one gradually comes to say (and do) great things so simply that it seems as though one had given no thought to these things, and yet so clearly that one easily recognizes their thoughts about these things. This aspect of conversion, being unique to the heart, signifies an augmentation and surpassing of the analogy dynamic cited by O'Connell. One's self is not a mirror or imitator of Christ's self, nor is it joined to Christ's self in such a way that both selves occupy the same space. The self is rather progressively overtaken and annihilated by Christ. Indeed, Pascal's "Augustinian perspective" regarding the "hateful I" and the annihilation of the self "could not be more different than that of modern Christian thinking," as well as modern thought in general.[71] Yet as Wetsel clarifies, the self is not the entirety of the human person. The self is rather “that ‘mauvais levain’ [“evil leaven”] … which the Fall *added* to original human nature.”[72] There is thus a sense in which, for Pascal, an individual—while “infected” by the residual of Original Sin (i.e., the self)—may still, through grace, embark on the pious life and seek the restoration (and consummation) of one’s nature. As Dawn Ludwin discusses, this restoration requires a “grafting” of Christ’s self onto one’s heart. This grafting “rends the heart … creates a wound, cut, or ‘fissure’ in the self through which God may enter.”[73] In keeping, however, with the paradoxical, childlike essence of the heart, one gradually comes to love the graft, the “being who is in” oneself “and who is not” oneself (fr. 471). The clarity and spontaneity, thought and absence of thought indicative of Christ’s being and presence gradually ease the burden and sadness periodically experienced throughout the pious life, especially at the beginning.[74] As one progresses in piety, one sees the emptiness and evil characteristic of the self—specifically, of what Pascal calls the “diversions,” or vain, pleasure-inducing activities prompted by the self (fr. 168, p. 98).

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[70] Charles M. Natoli, *Fire in the Dark: Essays on Pascal's* Pensées *and* Provinciales (Rochester, New York: The University of Rochester Press, 2005), 109.

[71] Wetsel, "Introduction," in Pascal, *Pensées*, lxi.

One nevertheless retains, until death, a residual need for the self and the worldly attachments stemming from self-love. One also, furthermore, feels a self-derived pressure and anxiety to cultivate one’s pious image, to present oneself as pure and as fulfilling one’s obligations. Yet it is He who has rooted Himself in the heart who makes the true and definitive presentation. As this presentation unfolds both before and within oneself, one encounters what is, at first, perhaps the greatest and most terrifying display of the two abysses, of infinity and nothingness. The stakes here, in the order of the heart, are infinitely higher than in the order of the mind. The wager has entered a new phase. In a well-known fragment, Pascal’s interlocuter conveys what this inner state looks like, remarking how "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me" (fr. 233). The reply the interlocuter receives in the fragment immediately following, however, differs from other replies seen in the *Pensées*. In contrast to that seen in the Wager, for instance, this reply is not given by one who was once a skeptic and now believes. Rather, charity itself speaks. It both meets the interlocuter where he is and lifts him to a higher plane. It is clear and spontaneous, proceeding from no thought yet conveying the profoundest thought. It says, "Take heart: it is not from yourself that you should be expecting it; but, on the contrary, it is by expecting nothing from yourself that you must expect it" (fr. 234). We see here a pronounced simultaneity of act and state—indeed, an amplification of filial obligation. On one level, the interlocuter has a passive obligation, in that he should not expect anything of salvific merit from himself. Yet this does not reflect a "quiet" state or a sinking into resignation and inactivity. There is rather a simultaneous, fundamentally active posture at play here, as the interlocuter *must* expect nothing from himself in order to receive the certainty, consolidation, and grounding that comes through Christ. It is in the negative, in a childlike naivete and negation of himself—in terms of adult, self-centered expectations and presumptions—that the interlocuter attains the positive.

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[72] Wetsel, *Pascal and Disbelief*, 124.
[73] Dawn M. Ludwin, *Blaise Pascal’s Quest for the Ineffable* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 137.
[74] Pascal, *Great Shorter Works of Pascal*, 152.

In another notable, longer fragment, we could say that Pascal, the interlocuter, and Christ all speak at certain points. Within this collective, ultimate "state" of conversation—and, moreover, conversion—we discern a simultaneous movement or activity between all three orders, and hence between all three stages of piety (beginning, progress, consummation). First, the body and the reduction of the passions are invoked: "We implore the mercy of God, not so that he leave us to enjoy our vices in peace, but so that he release us from them" (fr. 751, p. 441). One begins to be released from vice through adult-like, mechanistic performance of pious acts, particularly those lower forms of piety. Then, and only then, a more intellectual musing, an activity of the mind—along with an implicit sense of awe and mystery—may unfold: "If God gave us masters from his own hand, we should of course have to obey them joyfully. Necessity and the course of events are infallibly such masters" (fr. 751, p. 441). At this point in the fragment, we see the one progressing in piety holding a middle position, taking comfort in the continuous change and confirmation—and hence "mastery"—conferred by necessity and the course of events. Then, punctuating and fulfilling this necessity and trajectory, Christ speaks:

> Console yourself, you would not be seeking me, if you had not already found me.
>
> I thought of you in my agony, I shed these drops of blood for you.
>
> It is tempting me rather than testing yourself to wonder whether you might do right in some hypothetical circumstance. I will do it within you if it occurs.
>
> Let yourself be guided by my rules. Look how well I guided the Blessed Virgin and the saints, who let me act through them …
>
> Your conversion is my affair. Do not be afraid, and pray with confidence as if for me.
>
> I am present with you in my word through the scriptures, in my spirit through the Church and through inspiration, in my power through the priesthood, and in my prayer through the faithful …
>
> I am a better friend to you than so and so, for I have done more for you than they have, and they would not suffer what I have suffered at your hands and would not die for you when you were being unfaithful and cruel, as I did and as I am prepared to do and as I do in my chosen ones and in the Blessed Sacrament. (fr. 751, p. 442)

These words epitomize the interplay of clarity and spontaneity, thought and no thought, act and state. The sequence of sentiments and "spaces" between sentiments signify a kind of exercise in or demonstration of piety. They constitute the peak of both the inner and outer conversation, the point where consummation is glimpsed, even touched (if not yet fully realized). On the one hand, this is a thorough glimpse "'from inside,'" from the internal seat of the heart.[75] On the other hand, however, one's gaze is not "fixed" on this seat, not trained on it as if in a state of pure contemplation. Such a one-way orientation is indicative of self-love. It leads one to think about conversion, to "wonder whether one might do right" and thus tempt Christ. One must rather let Christ act through them, let oneself be guided by his rules. Indeed, one must "Look" not only inward but also outward, to historical—though nonetheless enduring, indeed eternal—exemplars of piety ("the Blessed Virgin and the saints") as well as to the visible and invisible, revealed and hidden channels for pious living ("the scriptures … the Church and … inspiration … the priesthood … the faithful … my chosen ones and … the Blessed Sacrament").

In many respects, and in salient departure from the Jansenist framework, the need for self-monitoring and internal deliberation drops out altogether, as conversion becomes—in perpetual, yet more consummate fashion—Christ's affair. Critically, however, this does not mean one becomes a kind of puppet. Rather, a consequentialist, navigational, awe-inspired—in essence, childlike—element remains integral. Pascal's (and, perhaps, the interlocuter's) reflections toward the end of the fragment intimate the abiding presence of this element:

> Lord, I give you everything …
>
> I see in myself an abyss of pride, of curiosity, of concupiscence. There is no link between me and God or between me and Jesus Christ the Righteous. But he has been made sin for me: all your scourges fell upon him. He is more wretched than I am. And yet far from

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[75] Kolakowski, *God Owes Us Nothing*, 195.

> loathing me, he considers himself honored that I go to help him. But he has healed himself and will heal me all the more surely.
>
> I must add my wounds to his and ally myself to him, and he will save me by saving himself.
>
> But I must not add any more in the future. (fr. 751, p. 443)

We see here, on the one hand, a definitive choice to give everything to Christ, to "go and help him." There is an imperative to act, to "add one's wounds to his and ally oneself to him." On the other hand, however, this is not a typical or straightforward call-and-response dynamic. A middle position—a simultaneity of act and state—obtains, a hesitancy (indeed, a restraining impulse) in terms of going to extremes; hence the last line: "But I must not add any more in the future." Here, the pious individual—now in (nearly) consummate form—could be seen as a child, as one who takes their parent's hand and begins to walk forward, to take tentative steps. With each step—each of which encompassing its own beginning, progress, and consummation—one both beholds and becomes like the being who is in oneself and who is not oneself.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that piety, for Pascal, signifies an act and state simultaneously, whereby, rather than a person presenting themselves before God, God presents Himself both before and within the person. This concept reveals piety to be a fundamentally childlike—though in no way childish—phenomenon. Beginning with a survey of the historical and theological context of Pascal's framework before examining prominent Jansenist figures and then Pascal himself, this study has attempted to shed light on the distinctiveness of Pascal's understanding. Assuming the centrality of grace and using the scheme of the three orders—and the correlation of said orders to the three stages of piety—I have tried to show the simultaneity and synergy with which Pascal's framework holds together acts and states, exertion and rest, the adult-like and childlike. The rapport and bridging dynamics between the three orders furnish the pious individual with a kind of sequence of the pious life, a set of coordinates by which one may discern their middle position, that between misery and grace. This process instills neither certainty nor (excess) self-scrutiny but rather awe and wisdom, wisdom which "returns us to childhood" (fr. 116).

Locating the potency of Pascal's framework in the childlike has not been to suggest that piety is ultimately a reductive, regressive, or whimsical phenomenon. The childlike is, indeed, far from "easy piety." As Pascal makes clear in a fragment later on in the *Pensées*, there are "hardships in embarking on a pious life," the "impiety that remains" in an individual—particularly through worldly attachments and diversions—signifying a grave and (apart from grace) insurmountable obstacle (fr. 753). In the same fragment, Pascal likens a pious individual "to a child whose mother snatches it from the arms of thieves." This child "must love, in the suffering it endures, the loving and legitimate violence of her who procures its freedom, and hate only the imperious and tyrannical violence of those who hold on to it unjustly." Perpetual conversion entails perpetual war, internally and externally conceived. From a collective, institutional standpoint, the Church potentially signifies both the child and the mother, the protected and the protector, the one being withdrawn from and the one doing battle against the "false peace" engendered by the world (fr. 753). There is also, moreover, a pronounced individual, personal element to Pascal's analogy, Pascal himself suffering tremendously throughout his life and succumbing to chronic illness at the age of 39. Yet as Gilberte Périer, Pascal's sister, relates in her moving (and strongly hagiographic) *Life of Monsieur Pascal*,

Pascal’s protection and freedom were nevertheless procured. Gilberte notes how Pascal, according to one priest who visited him during his “‘final illness,’” displayed an “‘extraordinary simplicity’” and peace of mind. Gilberte goes on to provide the remarks of another priest who routinely visited Pascal and who “frequently said: ‘He is a child. He is as humble and as submissive as a child.’”[76] This simplicity, humility, and submission did not, of course, signify the final state. Rather, they constituted a means of further alliance with Christ—of the filial obligation to add one’s wounds to Christ’s, yet not add any more in the future.

Pascal’s notion of piety challenges us to reconsider what defines pious presentation of oneself. His notion serves in many ways as a corrective to commonly held assumptions regarding piety, in that it sees piety not only as something demonstrated and fulfilled but also as something experienced and consummated. Presentation of oneself is not unidirectional, derived from one’s merits or capabilities, or done only within temporal and communal boundaries. To think otherwise is indicative of self-love, presumption, and impiety. The orders of being, and the infinite spaces between orders, rather allow—indeed, oblige—one to also be presented to, precisely by the being who is both in oneself and not oneself. This dynamic occasions not inward withdrawal, quietude, and isolation, but rather further activity, guardianship, and conversion. As Romano Guardini elucidates in relation to the lasting importance of Pascal’s thought, “love … not only means reacting to value, but becoming active towards it”; love involves both acting in and being disposed to further alliance with the one who is love.[77] It is in this vein that Griffiths characterizes Pascal as, “for the most part … a poet of delight.”[78] While it may be a dubious enterprise to ascribe any one characteristic to any part of Pascal’s person and legacy, there is certainly a poetry, presentation, and, indeed, piety of delight at play in Pascal's framework. These elements encompass and navigate the unhelpful as well as meaningful and enduring components of the framework, effectively making the framework into a perpetual, unfolding conversation, one occurring on both an inner and outer level (or order). In fulfilling our obligations to Pascal—and, by extension, to the one whom Pascal beheld both before and within himself—we must not merely react to but become active toward this conversation and presentation. Only when we become as little children (Mt 18:3; see *Pensées*, fr. 116, n. 3) may we take heart, may we see that the conversation and presentation have been initiated for us—that our conversion is His affair.

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[76] *The Life of Monsieur Pascal: By His Sister Gilberte*, in Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, translation edited by Pierre Zoberman (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2022), 33.
[77] Romano Guardini, *Pascal for Our Time*, trans. Brian Thompson (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), 133.
[78] Griffiths, *Why Read Pascal?*, 125.

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