PASCALIAN FAITH

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Abstract: Katherine Dormandy's "True Faith" aims both to classify possible modes of relating faith to epistemic norms in terms of three broad viewpoints. I advance two related claims: first, her categorization flattens the epistemological terrain by treating epistemic norms that operate at different levels as if they operated on the same level and thereby distorts the views she categorizes under Anti-Epistemological Partiality; and second, when rightly described, the noetic conflict involved in this view can be understood as waged between epistemic norms of different types and function.

Key Words: Pascal, Faith, Epistemology

1. Introduction

Katherine Dormandy's "True Faith: Against Doxastic Partiality about Faith and in Defense of Evidentialism" is concerned with the role of partiality in religious belief, specifically with the idea that if faith involves a relationship with God and with a religious community, and if relationships are construed as requiring or encouraging partiality toward the other party, then it seems to follow that faith ought to involve partiality toward God and the community of other believers. The paper is focused, in particular, on the idea that faith is better, or more excellent, when it exercises such partiality toward God when there are grounds for doubting God's goodness or existence, perhaps because this displays superior loyalty to the object of faith. Dormandy rejects this idea; instead of partiality, she argues that faith is healthiest and most true

to itself when it shows "respect for evidence" about the object of faith, "even though this may, in a world like ours, mean forming negative beliefs about the object" [Dormandy 2020: 1].

Dormandy's paper specifies several proponents of the "partialist" viewpoint that she rejects. Her principal historical target is Kierkegaard (or perhaps Johannes de Silentio, or Johannes Climacus; she cites works by both of these pseudonyms and does not distinguish Kierkegaard from his pseudonyms, nor the pseudonyms from each other). In so far as the paper translates his views into the language and categories of contemporary epistemology, it is not wholly clear he would sign on to "anti-epistemological partialism" so defined, although it *does* seem evident that he would oppose Dormandy's evidentialism. Kierkegaard's model of the believer as an individual out over "70,000 fathoms" of water who nonetheless remains firm and constant does indeed suggest that Kierkegaard would accept Dormandy's claim that existence will provide many challenges to faith; faith will show its mettle to the degree that it remains firm and constant in the face of the greatest challenges. He has Frater Taciturnus say:

> Spiritual existence, especially the religious, is not easy; the believer continually lies out on the deep, has 70,000 fathoms of water beneath him. However long he lies out there, this still does not mean that he will gradually end up lying and relaxing onshore. He can become more calm, more experienced, find a confidence that loves jest and a cheerful temperament—but until the very last, he lies out on 70,000 fathoms of water.
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> [Kierkegaard 1845: 444–445]

Since Kierkegaard repeats this image both in other pseudonymous writings as well as his own journals, it seems to represent an important image and idea for him; and the image suggests he would judge the difference between the evidentialist seafarer and the faithful seafarer to be a difference between "double-mindedness"—being possessed by a multiplicity of conflicting goals—and faith. The evidentialist seafarer, in constantly adjusting to minute changes in their

epistemic environment, would seem to Kierkegaard to be in danger of being consumed by the constantly shifting sea, lacking a defined personality or concrete content to their life, and thus in danger of coming to no "self" in Kierkegaard's sense, no stable self-conception under which they willed their life, whatsoever [Dormandy 2020: 5].

The complexity of Kierkegaard's authorship, unfortunately, makes it impossible to provide an adequate response to Dormandy's paper on his behalf. Instead, I will follow up on Dormandy's suggestion that the Kierkegaardian believer "takes this doxastic leap" in defiance of negative evidence "in the Pascalian hope, against all probability," that God exists and is good [Dormandy 2020: 5]. However, rather than Pascalian hope, I will focus on Pascalian faith. With the exception of his famous "Wager," Pascal's religious epistemology is not much discussed in contemporary debates about faith. Is Pascal one of Dormandy's targets—is he an anti-epistemological partialist? And if he is one of the targets, does his epistemology provide the Pascalian believer with an answer to Dormandy? In the foregoing, I will address each of these questions. I will argue that Pascal's religious epistemology, while not identical with "anti-epistemological partialism," shares enough with it to come under Dormandy's attack; and that his viewpoint reveals a shortcoming in Dormandy's argument, while also illustrating a better way forward.

2. Pascal on the Disorder of the Human Condition and the Function of Faith

Perhaps the first thing we should do is to seek a vantage point from which we can discern what is at stake in the argument. Here, I think we can begin with a question: Dormandy mentions that the anti-epistemological partialists think that faith issues epistemic norms; why should it do this? Why would a belief issue norms regarding other beliefs? Dormandy says that

this creates two sets of competing norms governing belief. If the evidentialists are right, it is hard to understand this phenomenon except as bad faith or a kind of special pleading on the part of partialists. Reading Pascal, however, suggests a different way of construing this.

Pascal would surely agree that the "epistemic norm mandating respect for evidence" is strict, but insist that *adhering* to it strictly is more difficult than evidentialists like to admit [Pascal 1655; 1671: fr. 85]. Pascal the scientist disproved what his contemporaries largely believed to be an *a priori* truth, the impossibility of a vacuum, and who held that natural science, contra Descartes, can provide only mathematically accurate models of the world's "surface" [Fouke 2003: 76]; Pascal the philosopher was a foundationalist who held that our only fully secure first principles were those whose negations are self-contradictory and that the continuous application of reason to our first premises or assumptions not only exposes uncertainty, it exposes arbitrariness and conventions (see especially the section of *The Geometrical Spirit* titled "The Art of Persuasion" [Pascal 1657–8]). Both Pascal the scientist and Pascal the philosopher depended upon "designing and tackling new problems as if to generate new areas of research within established ones, or inventing new perspectives upon the same objects" [Khalfa 2003: 125]. Establishing epistemic norms beyond this always involves a certain arbitrariness or conventionality; we recognize an indefinite number of other possible perspectives and possible understandings of the world but lack the power to identify which of these is correct. We cannot distinguish between natural feelings and fantasies or conventionalities [Pascal 1670: fr. 455]. In fragment 159, he toys with the radically historicist idea that, our true nature having been lost in the Fall, we are now custom all the way down.

Fathers fear in case the natural love of their children is wiped out. So what is this nature capable of being wiped out?

Custom is a second nature, which destroys the first.

But what is nature? Why is custom not natural?

I am very much afraid that nature is itself only a first custom, just as custom is a second nature.

[Pascal 1670: fr. 159]

In fragment 164 he argues that the accidental character of our origin produces insuperable problems.

The main strengths of the Pyrrhonists—I shall leave aside the lesser ones—are that we can be in no way sure of the truths of these principles, apart from faith and revelation, except that we feel them to be natural to us. Now this natural feeling is not a convincing proof of their truth, since, having no certainty, apart from faith, about whether we were created by a benevolent God, an evil demon, or by chance, it is open to doubt whether the principles given to us are true, false, or uncertain, depending on our origin.

[Pascal 1670: fr. 164]

To arrest this dissolving situation, we need a way of determining a single, authoritative perspective. We could do this by coming to understand the "ultimate purpose," from which we could then derive all of the "names" of things, that is, we could properly determine what each thing really is—and then we would know what was essential, trivial, important, irrelevant, natural, fantasy, and so on [Pascal 1670: fr. 738]. But an examination of possible "ultimate purposes" discredits all but two possible viewpoints: a radical atheism recognizing no ultimate purpose whatsoever, and alongside this the conclusion that that the human mind bears no proportion to the universe, and Augustinian Christianity, which interprets this same disproportion as an enduring disorder resulting from the Fall. "Faith" is understood as establishing a connection with the Divine that allows a person to progressively receive and secure more accurate first principles, including epistemic norms. Faith therefore has a special

cognitive status: (a) it has the right to influence *how* we interpret the world, including our epistemic norms and how to accommodate apparently disconfirming evidence, and (b) it is resilient to being reinterpreted in ways that would hinder it from fulfilling this function of stabilizing our epistemic situation—in the manner, for example, that such functioning would be hindered by negative beliefs concerning whether God exists, is good, and is faithful.

To understand how faith functions in the Pascalian believer's life, we can best begin with how Pascal conceives of the relationship between faith and ethics. We cannot ascertain the correct starting point to judge ethics,[1] but the primary way that grace operates is by transforming our moral feelings so that we will approve of God's law and his purposes.[2] This is because the primary result of the fall—the disorder of our moral feelings—is rooted in our unwillingness to accept God's law and purposes.[3] Knowledge of the ultimate purpose, then, is tied to knowing the proper "names" for things, but, because of original sin, we find the ultimate purpose distasteful and are inherently resistant to defining objects in relation to this purpose. One way of getting at this is to say that the first mark of faith is the experience of heterogeneity in so far as the moral awakening effected by God's spirit introduces division between oneself and the world, but also and more importantly, division within oneself between one's so-called

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[1] "We need a fixed point to judge it. The harbor judges those on board ship. But where will we find a harbor in morals?" [Pascal 1670: fr. 576].

[2] "To save his elect, God sent Jesus Christ to carry out his justice and to merit with his mercy the grace of Redemption, medicinal grace, the grace of Jesus Christ which is nothing other than complaisance and deflection in God's law diffused into the heart by the Holy Spirit, which, not only equaling but even surpassing the concupiscence of the flesh, fills the will with a greater delight in good than concupiscence offers in evil; and so free will, entranced by the sweetness and pleasures which the Holy Spirit inspires in it, more than the attractions of sin, infallibly chooses God's law for the simple reason that it finds greater satisfaction there, and feels his beatitude and happiness" [Pascal 1655/6: 223].

[3] "This order is necessary to quell the rebellious will, which would otherwise make it impossible to embrace Christian truth" [Pascal 1657–8: 193–4].

"natural" first principles and the truly natural first principles we have begun to receive through faith. But in faith we know the proper names for things; we know that the name for the heterogeneity we experience between God's law and ourselves is "rebellion" and that this division is to be closed by putting those principles that war against God to death.

Thus, the "faith" of the Pascalian believer has a status beyond "belief" or "loyalty" or both of these together. Pascalian faith is also openness to and concurrent commitment to receiving the correct perspective on existence, a perspective that is received progressively and not all at once, and the reception of which is experienced as a division within oneself between apparently natural first principles and truly natural first principles.[4]

3.   The Pascalian Believer: Doubt, Faith, and Epistemic Conflict

Pascalian faith secures a believer's first principles. Regarding any such principle received in faith, there could be doubt whether it has been stated correctly or applied correctly to subsidiary cases and to one's own circumstances. One can well believe that one must "love one's neighbor as oneself" and yet come to doubt whether one really grasps what this means or how it applies. One may even be quite dramatically wrong about what such a principle entails for one's circumstances, to the extent that one may have behaved in a manner opposite to the manner one ought to have acted. One may have failed either through failure of "mathematical" reasoning or through a failure of "intuitive" reasoning. Yet what faith cannot doubt is what the

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[4] E.g., "There are therefore two natures in us: one good, the other bad. Where is God? Where you are not. And *the kingdom of God is within you* (Luke 17:21)" [Pascal 1670: fr. 509]; and "But fantasy is like and not like feeling, so that we cannot distinguish between these opposites. One person says my feeling is fantasy, another that his fantasy is feeling. We need a rule. Reason is available, but is pliable in any direction. And so there is no rule" [Pascal 1670: fr. 455].

person has adopted as "the ultimate purpose": that God is good and that he exists. *Those* beliefs form the core of the corrective perspective one has adopted; and if they are abandoned, they are abandoned all at once, and thanks to the strictness with which the Pascalian believer interprets demands of respect for evidence, the individual must revert to what Melville's Ishmael called the "colorless all-color of atheism" [Melville 1851: 198]—a world with no privileged vantage points, where all possible perspectives are subjective projections upon a fundamentally meaningless chaos.[5]

Pascalian faith, then, cannot easily be subsumed to the kind of case Dormandy envisions. For conflicts between faith and evidence are not precisely conflicts of belief with evidence. The initially inexplicable fact that faith is associated with its own epistemic norms is due, according to the Pascalian believer, to faith's being a received as a perspectival corrective. Her conflict is waged between evidence and the interpretive framework through which she understands the world, including that evidence. The beliefs that God exists and is good cannot be continually weighed against new evidence and adjusted through some indefinite series of finite corrections, because such an approach is appropriate when bringing evidence to bear on beliefs, but not when bringing evidence to bear on an interpretative framework.

However, this also suggests an interesting possibility to which Dormandy may be entitled to restrict her claim—conflicts generated *within* the framework, when, e.g, it is through faith that one learns that "God is good" is to be understood in terms of the character of Christ, above all as exemplified in his ministry of healing, his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount,

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[5] "I have never judged something in exactly the same way. I cannot judge a work while doing it: I have to do as painters do, and stand back, but not too far. How far then? Guess" [Pascal 1670: fr. 476].

and in his willing self-sacrifice at Golgotha, but then finds evidence that resists interpretation under this understanding. For example, one may understand "God is good" precisely in this fashion, and because one understands God to be good in this way, find some aspects of existence inexplicable and difficult to square with this understanding. However, even thus restricted, it would not follow that what is required is a finite adjustment to one's belief that "God is good" precisely in the sense that we see the character of God in the life, ministry, teaching, and death of Christ. Making such adjustments would simply demolish the framework. Moreover, if faith really is "the gift of God," as Pascal insists, and not "the gift of reason" [Pascal 1670: fr. 487], then perhaps resistance to faith is actually futile. For perhaps it is only possible to resist God's grace for a certain amount of time and to a certain degree, in which case, perhaps the Pascalian believer who engages in making such adjustments will only involve themselves in a painful internal conflict, which could have been avoided by addressing their doubts and cognitive dissonance in a different, better manner.

Then what may the Pascalian believer do when such doubts arise? Pascal says "But it is at least an inescapable duty to seek when one does doubt" [Pascal 1670: fr. 681]. I propose that this should be understood in terms of the example of Job. What Job does is morally, emotionally, and intellectually complex: he simultaneously shows faith in God and demands that God answer his doubts. In demanding that God answer his charges, he neither comes to doubt God's existence nor God's character, but instead rests within the relationship of faith that he has with God. Within this relationship what is required of Job is to understand the world in terms of God's laws and character. Yet although such a project must always involve some conflict and uncertainty, it is possible for that conflict to become so pronounced, so marked by

cognitive dissonance and emotional chaos, that the believer must say to God: "You must answer this!" Job consistently makes this demand of God and shows faith in believing that God can and will answer him. Job's righteousness here is important because it is the reason why he is justified in thinking that the reason for the conflict he experiences is not the expected conflict due to the division between "flesh" and "spirit" but something rather different, something that God must answer for him. The Pascalian believer, then, experiences doubt, but he gives God the benefit of the doubt.

Perhaps it is worth asking why Job, and likewise the Pascalian believer, feels it is both necessary and justified to ask God to answer himself. The Pascalian believer will say that she acts like a friend presented with apparent evidence of betrayal, evidence that is impossible to just dismiss, who demands that the friend explain herself precisely with the hope that she *will* answer the evidence successfully; the Pascalian believer demands that God appear so that he can defend himself.[6] Any relationship requires a degree of harmony, and that harmony has to be restored even if there is no real wrongdoing, even if the misunderstanding is rooted in the necessary disproportion of finitude to infinitude.[7] But faith means believing, no matter how

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[6] It is natural to feel that in bringing ones doubts or accusations before God, one is sinning. It is therefore worth noting that there is another way of translating the famous statement in the New Testament book of Hebrews "Let us then boldly approach the throne of grace." The phrase usually translated "boldly" or "with confidence" is παρρησία, which political philosophers might recognize as the Greek term for freedom of speech, meaning frankness, openness, or even license of tongue. Perhaps the currently favored translations offer powerful hope to those oppressed by knowledge of their own faults; yet the more literal translation might offer even greater hope to those whose doubts center on their anger over what God has allowed his world to become. To such persons, the verse promises that they can approach God with whatever they have to say.

[7] "If there is a God, he is infinitely beyond our comprehension, since, having neither parts nor limits, he bears no relation to ourselves. We are therefore incapable of knowing either what he is, or if he is. That being so, who will dare to understate a resolution of this question? It cannot be us, who bear no relationship to him" [Pascal 1670: fr. 680].

loudly one demands that God show himself, no matter how great the conflict between one's

evidence and the character of God revealed in Christ, that God can answer such charges.[8]

Human beings, given our condition, cannot avoid sometimes or even often doubting. "But it is

at least an inescapable duty to seek when one does doubt" [Pascal 1670: fr. 681] because,

although "God is a hidden God," "those who seek God will find him" [Pascal 1670: fr. 635].

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[8] "[The Bible] says, on the contrary, that God is a hidden God; and that since the corruption of nature, he has left men in a blind state from which they can emerge only through Jesus Christ, without whom all communication with God is barred. … those who seek God will find him" (fr. 644).

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