

**BEYOND THE DEATH OF GOD:
The Question of Nihilism in Nietzsche and Pascal**

By

Tushar Irani

Colgate University
13 Oak Drive
Hamilton, NY 13346

Phone: 315-228-7000
E-mail: tirani@mail.colgate.edu

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Abstract. This paper examines the claim of Friedrich Nietzsche that the advent of nihilism is upon us, that our moral values have begun to “devalue” themselves. Such an inquiry deals, in part, with the problem of faith in a modern world—with Nietzsche’s notorious declaration of God’s death and his call for a radical reevaluation of all values considered highest. In Section I, accordingly, I analyse Nietzsche’s definition of nihilism as a “transitional” stage lacking aim, unity, and absolute truth. In Section II, my paper shifts focus as it turns retrospectively to the seventeenth century, the beginning of the modern era, when science challenged the faith of Blaise Pascal.

Pascal foresaw the spectre of nihilism about two centuries before Nietzsche and provides us in his Pensées with an interesting riposte—an answer that Nietzsche himself it seems could not accept. This was undoubtedly due to the fact that Pascal’s ethic, supernatural at heart, endorses a mode of faith that remained anathema to Nietzsche’s more earthbound and self-referential variety. My task in this paper, therefore, consists in defending Pascal’s faith in a hidden God as a viable way out of nihilism: as an expression of strength rather than weakness. This is in essence a case for his supernatural ethic and if philosophy should provide us with a solution to nihilism, it is Pascal’s conception of philosophy that this paper will ultimately turn to. In the final analysis, his own “way out” rests on strength of heart: our willingness, through faith, to offer up the self to something greater.

Disintegration characterizes this time, and thus uncertainty: nothing stands firmly on its feet or on a hard faith in itself; one lives for tomorrow, as the day after tomorrow is dubious. Everything on our way is slippery and dangerous, and the ice that still supports us has become thin: all of us feel the warm, uncanny breath of the thawing wind; where we still walk, soon no one will be able to walk.

—Nietzsche, The Will to Power, “History of European Nihilism,” section 57

We are floating in a medium of a vast extent, always drifting uncertainly, blown to and fro; whenever we think we have a fixed point to which we can cling and make fast, it shifts and leaves us behind; if we follow it, it eludes our grasp, slips away, and flees eternally before us. Nothing stands still for us. This is our natural state and yet the state most contrary to our inclinations. We burn with desire to find a firm footing, an ultimate, lasting base on which to build a tower rising up to infinity, but our whole foundation cracks and the earth opens up into the depth of the abyss.

—Pascal, Pensées, fragment 199/72

Consider, then, what being released from their bonds and cured of their ignorance would naturally be like if something like this came to pass. When one of them was freed and suddenly compelled to stand up, turn his head, walk, and look up toward the light, he'd be pained and dazzled and unable to see the things whose shadows he'd seen before. What do you think he'd say, if we told him that what he'd seen before was inconsequential, but that now—because he is a bit closer to the things that are and is turned towards things that are more—he sees more correctly? . . . don't you think he'd be at a loss and that he'd believe that the things he saw earlier were truer than the ones he was now being shown? . . . wouldn't he turn around and flee towards the things he's able to see, believing that they're really clearer than the ones he's being shown?

—Plato, Republic, 515c-515e

Introduction: A Primer On Nihilism

With his own rhetorical flourish, Friedrich Nietzsche's most powerful account of the human condition lies in a series of questions in his parable of the madman in the Gay Science:

Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? (125).¹

These questions trigger the deeper, more profound question of **nihilism**. Nietzsche describes a keen state of *disorientation* here in which we are suspended without hope, without faith, and most importantly, without direction. The “breath of empty space” he describes here is the same “uncanny breath of a thawing wind” that disintegrates human experience in the Will to Power: the uncanny breath of nihilism whistling under our door. We are caught in limbo, in the instability of life, “straying as through an infinite nothing.”

These questions resonate in us, they force us to query our beliefs and our judgments—they force us to *examine ourselves*. In this paper we will explore the manner in which nihilism poses a challenge to our highest values, turning in Section I to Nietzsche's interpretation of nihilism in Beyond Good and Evil, the Gay Science, and the Will to Power. Our analysis involves a close reading of these texts, focusing particularly on the fact that Nietzsche looks beyond nihilism in his works towards a revaluation of all values. In this manner, Nietzsche describes nihilism as a wholly necessary though “transitional” stage that we must all go through—in which our world only *looks* valueless and devoid of meaning. For the fact that remains after the nihilist has finished devaluating our valuations is that he or she still has new, seemingly improved, values to project into the world. Admittedly, this is rather ironic and the problem of Nietzsche's revaluated world has often proved far harder to tackle than his world of nihilism.

Our focus in this paper, however, does not concern itself with Nietzsche's “revaluation of all values” per se. Rather, once we have explored his take on nihilism, we examine in Section II how Blaise Pascal essentially *takes on* nihilism in his Pensées. Pascal, we will find, was acutely aware of the problem that nihilism posed in the emerging modern period he was witness to—he too had a system of values to counter nihilistic consequences. If Nietzsche stood in the twilight hours of modernity, then, Pascal stood at its dawning. His task in the Pensées depends on justifying our faith in a hidden God as well as our sense of self in a modern world; Nietzsche's abyss of nihilism, I propose, is analogous to Pascal's abyss between mind and heart in the Pensées. To meet the challenge of nihilism his message appears simple: we must have strength of heart. For the heart, he will argue, is the locus of the supernatural.

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science (GS), translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).

Take I: Nietzsche's Take On Nihilism

Nietzsche's theoretical take on nihilism comes in the Will to Power. There, in section 12(a), he describes nihilism explicitly as a psychological state. An individual passes through three stages, Nietzsche asserts, in reaching this state:

- (i) "When we have sought a 'meaning' in all events that is not there." In this step, we realise that our lives have no **aim**: our world of becoming aspires toward nothing, Nietzsche stresses, and accomplishes nothing. [Lack of desire.]
- (ii) When we realise that there is no **unity** that undergirds our lives, that "no infinitely valuable whole" supports us or "works through" us. At this stage we become dependent on nothing: our belief in an absolute, hidden being evaporates. [Lack of value.]
- (iii) When we are made aware that no all-encompassing **truth** or essence lies outside our world of becoming. This final step opens the door to nihilism: "it includes disbelief in any metaphysical world and forbids itself any belief in a *true* world." [Lack of meaning.]²

Thus we arrive at a "feeling of valuelessness," according to Nietzsche, in which we accept our world of becoming as the only reality accessible to us—the hope of grace, an afterworld, and salvation become empty concepts. We face the fact that our existence might be pointless. The highest values we have had hitherto start to collapse and devalue themselves. This is Nietzsche's abyss of nihilism, where we drift aimlessly with neither direction nor order "as through an infinite nothing"; life becomes a drab affair in which we plod uncertainly through our years, focusing as best we can on our daily toil:

What has happened, at bottom? The feeling of valuelessness was reached with the realization that the overall character of existence may not be interpreted by means of the concept of "aim," the concept of "unity," or the concept of "truth." Existence has no goal or end; any comprehensive unity in the plurality of events is lacking: the character of existence is not "true," is *false*. One simply lacks any reason for convincing oneself that there is a *true* world. Briefly: the categories "aim," "unity," "being" which we used to project some value into the world—we *pull out* again; so the world looks *valueless* (12(a)).³

Nietzsche emphasises that our world begins to look valueless when we "pull out" our values. In these terms we can imagine nihilism as a *birthing process*, and here we note one of Nietzsche's most significant points in the Will to Power: nihilism is a transitional stage. "Now that the shabby origin of these values is becoming clear," he stresses, "the universe seems to have lost value, seems 'meaningless'—but that is only a *transitional stage*" (WP, 7).

² Nietzsche offers us an alternate sketch of nihilism as "the radical repudiation of value, meaning, and desirability" in section 1 of the Will to Power, "Towards an Outline," which I attempt to incorporate here.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power (WP), translated by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).

Why transitional? The suspicion that our lives are meaningless results from a *devaluation* of values, but Nietzsche's far more ambitious project in his works is an "Attempt at a Revaluation of All Values."⁴ This is the "countermovement" that follows nihilism, for Nietzsche insists throughout his writings that he stands "aside and outside" his abyss as a *perfect* nihilist, as one who has "lived through the whole of nihilism, to the end, leaving it behind, outside himself." His mission thus looks to *revalue* all values as much as it looks to devalue them, but since devaluation takes place prior to revaluation and in a state of nihilism, Nietzsche maintains that we must go through a nihilistic process before we look to revalue life. For the advent of nihilism, he claims, is upon us and "the values we have had hitherto thus draw their final consequence."

What is this final consequence? Nietzsche points out that absolute truth as a static end to learning can never be attained as long as we are living beings; evermore conscious in our modern world that we live in time, and that time runs short, we sense the impossibility of certain knowledge. For as long as we are temporal beings there will always be some knowledge still to be grasped in the future, some sort of wisdom as yet undefined, and if we are so incapable of attaining knowledge in a temporal sense, how can we even begin to imagine knowledge in an eternal sense? Nietzsche suggests that our faith in these cosmological values becomes untenable when we start to question them, when we wonder whether we have fabricated them in an effort to arrive at self-worth. If we regard these highest values as stemming from our own psychological need, they devalue themselves—they are as dependent on *us* as we are on *them*—they can in short claim no sovereign authority and such is their final consequence:

Final conclusion: All the values by means of which we have tried so far to render the world estimable for ourselves and which then proved inapplicable and therefore devaluated the world—all these values are, psychologically considered, the results of certain perspectives of utility, designed to maintain and increase human domination—and they have been falsely *projected* into the essence of things (WP, 12).

When we dwell on this fact, that our values only serve utilitarian ends, we are led into Nietzsche's abyss; nihilism denies us any objective ground of truth and hence *destabilises* us. We start falling away—from faith and self-assurance—and the perfect nihilist lets us drop.⁵ Our whole foundation is rocked: our truths abandon us or else we abandon them as we lose "the center of gravity by virtue of which we lived" (WP, 30). Nihilism is "ambiguous" by its very nature because it thrusts us into uncertainty. When we reach this point, we are at a loss. And yet we have a blank canvas—we are ready to reevaluate ourselves.

⁴ See Nietzsche's preface to the Will to Power, section 4: "For one should make no mistake about the meaning of the title that this gospel of the future wants to bear. 'The Will to Power: Attempt at a Revaluation of All Values'—in this formulation a countermovement finds expression, regarding both principle and task; a movement that in some future will take the place of this perfect nihilism—but presupposes it, logically and psychologically, and certainly can come only after and out of it."

⁵ See the Will to Power, section 21: "And what he [the perfect nihilist] does not do for himself, he also does not do for the whole past of mankind: he lets it drop."

We should note again, therefore, that after all his devaluating Nietzsche finally looks past nihilism. As a doctor of culture and a psychologist of the soul, he has his own remedies to put forward. After our bout of nihilism, he offers us a prescription, a new order of values:

Nihilism represents a pathological transitional stage (what is pathological is the tremendous generalization, the inference that there is no meaning at all): whether the productive forces are not yet strong enough, or whether decadence still hesitates and has not yet invented its remedies (WP, 13).

Once more we see how Nietzsche refers to nihilism as a transitional period which should ultimately give way to a period of reevaluating. Yet an understanding of his reevaluation of human experience has been notoriously more difficult to arrive at than an understanding of nihilism itself. Nietzsche states above that after devaluating our values, we should not presume there is “no meaning at all” to be found in life. Nihilism, we recall, only provides us with a world that “looks” valueless and “seems meaningless.” We must thus be *strong enough* to lay down new values in response to the “inversion of valuations” propounded by a Platonic/Judeo-Christian tradition. Nietzsche takes issue with this inversion throughout his writings. In Beyond Good and Evil he looks to overturn all those values that “degrade” humankind: “the *sovereign* religions we have had so far are among the chief causes that have kept the type ‘man’ on a lower rung,” he declares, “*Stand all valuations on their head—that is what they had to do*” (62).⁶ Through such an inversion of valuations man becomes a “sublime miscarriage,” Nietzsche goes on to say, via “degeneration and atrophy.” Our love of the earthly turns into hatred of the earthly. We are provoked instead to undergo a new, nihilistic birthing process—we are issued with a challenge to seek out a better *conception* of humanity, a new conception and a renewed love of the earthly.

Hence, Nietzsche’s way out of nihilism rests in establishing a new strain of philosophers; those who, “with a creative hand . . . reach out for the future, and all that is and has been becomes a means for them, an instrument, a hammer. Their ‘knowing’ is *creating*, their creating is a legislation, their will to truth is—*will to power*” (BGE, 211). He portrays this new philosopher as an artist-figure, an “overman” with a “will to truth” equal to his “will to power.” Yet what truth can such an individual posit, knowing the untenability of absolute values? Nietzsche underscores the *creative* aspect of his philosopher of the future—does this philosopher, then, create an individual truth to suit his or her own individual needs? Hardly: such truth seems as vulnerable to nihilism as any other highest value.

While nihilism may therefore be a transitional stage for Nietzsche, a bridge between lower and higher forms of value, it may only serve as a means to these “higher” ends in a qualified sense. Suppose, for instance, that we resolve to “pull out” the values we have projected into this world in an effort to usher in Nietzsche’s rebirth via cathartic nihilism. Where does this leave us? Ironically, with scientific method.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil (BGE), translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, Inc., 1989).

We remove from our consideration of the truth of things all the utilitarian values that may “prejudice” our outlook. As a result, we gaze upon an order that can be true or false, but not—in the ways we have previously come to know these terms—good or evil. The resolution of adopting this objective gaze, of reserving to it the privilege of *knowing* is enough, in effect, to have murdered God (the being who stood for the intimacy of the connection between knowledge and value).⁷ For Nietzsche, however, the nihilism of this scientific method can only be superficial—his madman doesn’t disprove the existence of God but states instead, almost regrettably, that our *belief* in God is dead—all our values that were removed as projections still remain buried somewhere.

Thus Nietzsche notices that one value alone lingers in our world: the value of truth itself. Now we are faced with a new dilemma. On the one hand, we cannot take our scientific method just one step further and expose the value of truth as another utilitarian projection, since if we have come so far in our search for truth as to embrace a scientific outlook, we are no longer valuing truth in a utilitarian way. (There is, in other words, no discernable connection here between our desire for truth and our own good.) On the other hand, we cannot adhere to our scientific method as it stands, complacently ignoring the question of truth’s value; if we do, we corrupt our will to truth by bending science to the service of other “projected” values. (Here, science becomes the whore of technology.) Scientific method is hardly a cause of nihilism, therefore, and far less of a solution. It is rather a *symptom* of nihilism. Given time, Nietzsche intimates, science too succumbs to nihilistic forces. For this reason the day will come when it will be impossible for conscientious intellectuals to believe objectively in scientific truth:

. . . you will have grasped where I am headed—namely, that our faith in science still rests upon a *metaphysical faith*; that even we knowers of today, we godless ones and anti-metaphysicians, still take even *our* fire from the flame first lit by a faith thousands of years old, that faith of Christians which was also the faith of Plato, that God is truth, that truth is divine. But what if precisely this is becoming more and more unbelievable, if nothing is proving to be divine anymore, unless it be error, blindness, lies—what if God himself is proving to be our longest lie? (GS, 334).

The perfection of nihilism, it appears, is not “absolute nihilism” but something else. Nietzsche hopes to perfect the scientific method—our nihilistic state—in order to *deliver* us from nihilism. He begins to ask: What is the value of truth itself? For if all life is designed for appearance, through error, deceit, dissimulation, and delusion, science is only a degenerate form of morality—it affirms another world, a world of truth, and effectively rests upon a metaphysical faith. Nietzsche suggests that we knowers of today really believe in truth as if it were divine—for him, however, nothing is divine except *untruth*: “error, blindness, lies.” His own god therefore is Dionysus, a god of appearances, while his own brand of *truth* stems distinctively from human power, the (re)creative strength of the philosopher of the future.

⁷ See Nietzsche’s parable of the madman in The Gay Science, section 125.

This value that Nietzsche places in “untruth” (a value no doubt spawned through nihilism) and his portrait of a new “creative” philosopher are both equally and, for him, characteristically ambiguous. Our concluding task for now demands some sort of formula with which we might recognise his new strain of philosophers, those with a “will to truth” equal to their “will to power,” who might prescribe this world with some weightiness after our weightless drifting in limbo. These philosophers of the future must be “strong enough, hard enough, artist enough,” (BGE, 59) to reintegrate, revalue, and recompose: they must have reverence for themselves and for life itself: they must essentially be Yes-sayers. When faced with Nietzsche’s question of eternal recurrence, “Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?” (GS, 341), the philosopher of the future will answer Yes spontaneously in a single self-affirming moment. This is an affirmation of our mortality and an earthly world of becoming: an expression of our will to live. Nietzsche seeks not to establish a metaphysical theory here, but merely posits his doctrine hypothetically; if the question triggered by the eternal recurrence of the same serves as the definitive question of nihilism, our answer reveals a fundamental attitude towards life. We can affirm or deny our humanity but this answer will *deliver* us from nihilism—in the Antichrist, Nietzsche suggests that one’s response to his question becomes a “Formula for our happiness: a Yes, a No, a straight line, a goal” (1).⁸

For Nietzsche, then, a man who pitted his whole life against those who use belief, truth, and ideology as a crutch, the perfection of nihilism is *faith*—not in a metaphysical and supernatural “out there” but in the here and now—in our human ability to conceive, cherish, and adore our creations. At heart, he advocates a fundamental faith in one’s own self and humanity: “Reverence for oneself; love of oneself; unconditional freedom before oneself” (AC, Preface). In this vein we can now examine the idea of nihilism in Pascal’s Pensées—how this writer met the challenge of the abyss and how he prematurely issued Nietzsche with a rejoinder through a “supernatural” ethic. This thinker, equally prone to passion and equally concerned with faith, hence serves as a foil for Nietzsche as a thinker who espoused an entirely different *object* of passion and faith.

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, The Antichrist (AC), translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1982).

Take II: Pascal Takes On Nihilism

Pascal foresaw the spectre of nihilism in the modern era, about two centuries before Nietzsche, and provides us in his Pensées with an interesting riposte. Throughout his writings, Nietzsche rails against one establishment in particular: the Christian faith. It is fitting, then, that we now turn to a text that defends Christian belief and which at the same time can be read as addressing the problem of nihilism. From the outset, Pascal's aim in the Pensées looks to justify the idea of a hidden God and establish a notion of self in the modern world:

What can be seen on earth indicates neither the total absence, nor the total presence of divinity, but the presence of a hidden God. Everything bears this stamp. . . .

He [man] must not see nothing at all, nor must he see enough to think that he possesses God, but he must see enough to know that he has lost him. For, to know that one has lost something one must see and not see: such precisely is the state of nature (449/556).⁹

Such, indeed, is the state of nihilism. Imagining the “presence of a hidden God” involves contradiction; as such, this paradox undermines established meaning. We cannot see God completely and yet we cannot see nothing at all: we realise that we have *lost something*. This is another one of nihilism's key junctures—we are at a loss—we look and yet cannot see. We get the sense that we are drifting and suspended between extremes. As Pascal states fluently in his finest exposition of the nihilistic condition:

. . . extremes are as if they did not exist for us nor we for them; they escape us or we escape them.

Such is our true state. That is what makes us incapable of certain knowledge or absolute ignorance. We are floating in a medium of a vast extent, always drifting uncertainly, blown to and fro; whenever we think we have a fixed point to which we can cling and make fast, it shifts and leaves us behind; if we follow it, it eludes our grasp, slips away, and flees eternally before us. Nothing stands still for us. This is our natural state and yet the state most contrary to our inclinations. We burn with desire to find a firm footing, an ultimate, lasting base on which to build a tower rising up to infinity, but our whole foundation cracks and the earth opens up into the depth of the abyss (199/72).

In one sense, Pascal sees our human condition as incapable of certain knowledge—in another sense, we are incapable of complete ignorance. We are caught midway in the flux of the moment and this is our natural state, evermore tenuous, uncertain, and anxious. Nietzsche's account of nihilism in his parable of the madman springs to mind here. There he states that we are “straying as through an infinite nothing”; Pascal depicts our condition likewise as “floating in a medium of a vast extent.” The two thinkers differ, however, when posing their *solutions* to nihilism. For where Nietzsche calls for new values from new philosophers, Pascal rests his faith in a hidden God and sees a way out of nihilism through love.

⁹ Blaise Pascal, Pensées, translated by A.J. Krailsheimer (Suffolk, England: Penguin Books, 1995). Two copies of the Pensées are used by scholars. References are to the First Copy, followed by a “/” and then the Second Copy.

Pascal begins his argument here by stating that sincere notions of faith and love are essentially lacking in the human spirit. He suggests above that our “burning desire” thus far has been more in keeping with those who build a pedestal to God on rocky foundations: as in the legend of Babel, our desire for God stems from a self-centred impulse; this impetus, as Nietzsche establishes, seems valuable only as a utility. When we acknowledge this, our ground starts to disintegrate and we are left drifting. Pascal, therefore, has his own abyss to show us and yet he also has his own way out:

I want to show him [man] a new abyss. I want to depict to him not only the visible universe, but all the conceivable immensity of nature enclosed in this miniature atom (199/72).

Similar to the way in which Nietzsche has particular values to prescribe for the nihilistic condition, Pascal also offers us a prescription. His values, as we shall see, derive from strength of heart.

Fragment 308 of the Pensées outlines this “strength of heart” through a metaphysical analysis of three orders of human greatness. Pascal begins the passage by considering the immeasurable difference between **carnal**, **intellectual**, and **spiritual** values:

The infinite distance between body and mind symbolizes the infinitely more infinite distance between mind and charity, for charity is supernatural (308/793).

Pascal describes “charity” as supernatural; such an impulse, he tells us, correlates with greatness of soul, wisdom, and the heart. For this reason, charity exceeds the bounds of the world, which Pascal associates exclusively with carnal and intellectual desire. He states that if we think we understand the abyss between body and mind, we still have only an inkling of the abyss between mind and heart; that if we rest on our laurels with earthly delights, which pertain only to our mortality, we still cannot grasp the eternal:

For the will of man is divided between two principles: cupidity and charity. It is not that cupidity and faith in God are incompatible, nor that charity and earthly blessings never go together, but cupidity makes use of God and delights in the world, while charity does just the opposite (502/571). [Emphasis added.]

Pascal’s assertion is crucial here if we are to understand his take on the nihilistic condition. He suspends our human will between two principles, **cupidity** and **charity**, and these principles derive from profoundly different conceptions of self. In fragment 308, he ranks carnal and intellectual greatness under a cupiditous will: the former as a cupiditous desire for wholeness, the latter as a cupiditous desire for autonomy. While a *cupiditous* will focuses on the self and implies “hardness of heart,” a more noble, *charitable* will focuses on God as the true object of one’s desire, reflecting wholehearted devotion. Thus in imagining an ideal self, Pascal’s third order of spiritual greatness comes into play. This greatness alone will be allied with charity, not as a “selfless” will, but as *an offering of one’s self to another*. In Pascal, the abyss of nihilism becomes analogous to the abyss between mind and heart—a great gulf indeed since it reflects the abyss between cupidity and charity—the infinite space between self and other, between humanity and the divine.

Faith obtained through the lens of cupidity, then, can at best provide us with selfish well-being; charity, however, as a “purer” form of love, truly points toward something other than the self—in Pascal’s view, God. For cupidity *exploits* God and mortal delights on earth, he intimates, whereas charity does just the opposite: a loving will that does not have the self as its object taps into a spiritual sense of greatness without manipulation of another but with genuine adoration.

Pascal clearly distinguishes two types of desire here which correspond with two objects of passion. A cupiditous desire has the self as its object, while a charitable desire has another as its object. Where the former reflects upon the earthly expressing carnal or intellectual greatness, the latter is an expression of spiritual greatness and delves into the supernatural. Interestingly, Pascal only ever credits himself with “intellectual” greatness throughout the Pensées and suggests quite provocatively that philosophers too betray this cupiditous desire:

Philosophers. . . . they too wanted to be loved and admired by men and do not realize their own corruption. . . . if their only perfection lies in persuading men, without compelling them, that there is happiness in loving them, then I say such perfection is horrible. Why, they have known God and their sole desire has been, not that men should love him, but that they should stop short at them! They have wanted to be the object of the happiness which men desire (142/463). [Emphasis added.]

Pascal claims that very few have been filled wholeheartedly “with the desire to love,” establishing philosophy’s downfall here in a desire to be the object of humanity’s happiness. This is the philosopher’s claim to fame, he implies, with a will that relishes in cupidity.¹⁰ For if philosophy should be the love and not simply the possession of wisdom, the question arises: what sort of love should a philosopher display? Caught drifting aimlessly between two poles, knowledge and ignorance, and in the face of nihilism, Pascal anticipates Nietzsche’s self-referential faith and at the same time critiques it—the perfection of our nihilistic state for him too is *faith*, but the *object* of his passion lies mystically beyond the self as it does beyond our mortality. In this way, Pascal champions a faith in God at the threshold of the human heart, the locus of the supernatural.

¹⁰ Akin, for example, to Thrasymachus’ will in Plato’s Republic, and the rhetor’s in the Gorgias. Although Nietzsche advocates a self-referential faith, I have a harder time ascribing him with this “will,” for the line between cupidity and charity often seems to blur in his writings. (See Conclusion.) We would however surely not place Socrates in this cupiditous category of the philosopher, for if one figure stands out alone in history with a charitable spirit, it is he. To find a more fitting portrait see Pascal’s description of a “wise ignorance” in fragment 83/327:

. . . it is in the state of natural ignorance where man really belongs. Knowledge has two extremes which meet; one is the pure natural ignorance of every man at birth, the other is the extreme reached by great minds who run through the whole range of human knowledge, only to find out that they know nothing and come back to the same ignorance from which they set out, but it is a wise ignorance that knows itself.

We’d be hard pressed to find a better portrayal of Socrates. In these terms, he truly attained in his life the spiritual greatness Pascal describes in the Pensées: Socrates’ ultimate offering of self is a *deliverance* of self to his polis.

Nietzsche outlines in his scheme of nihilism a system that lacks aim, unity, and absolute truth. Pascal's argument in the Pensées, while not tackling Nietzsche's categories directly, still seeks to infuse our lives with aim and meaning by securing our faith in a hidden God. Nietzsche considered this supernatural faith a decadent subordination of our humanity, but the Pensées need not be read in these terms. In the midst of nihilism and a feeling of valuelessness, a charitable will provides us with a focused outlook. "Charity" in this sense is neither altruistic duty nor ascetic self-denial; as opposed to cupidity, charity serves as an expression of self that includes another through sustained love. As philosophy should ideally be a love of learning, then, so too should we look beyond ourselves towards a greater unknown. In effect, this is the crux of Pascal's faith in a hidden God and his own solution to nihilism.

Such a spiritual conception of an unknown beyond results in a miscarriage of humanity for Nietzsche, a denial of our world of becoming and an expression of weakness: a *misconception* he seeks to remedy. Along these lines Pascal's ethic might certainly seem to degrade our mortality, but was this his intention? He claims we may only know faith through God's "hiddenness"—if we can grasp this paradox as he invites us to we grasp the meaninglessness that nihilism represents. Yet we also transcend nihilism. We imagine the apprehension of an absolute being (or truth) as an *unveiling*, a most intriguing concept since it presupposes a veil—a veil of ignorance, perhaps.¹¹ And ignorance here in an affirmative sense, in recognition that as beings living in time we can never cease learning when there remains some sort of wisdom in the world, still unseen, awaiting our insight and discovery. Our mortal condition does not limit us in this respect—the veiled hiddenness of God/truth serves to *temper* our knowledge—we are fully conscious of our mortality and yet we embrace it.

While Pascal's supernatural ethic indeed shifts the focus of our passion to an "otherworldly" non-self realm, we now see how this faith in a hidden God can truly work to inspire a sense of human self-worth and hence counter Nietzsche's claim that any faith in a supernatural beyond degrades our humanity. For faith in Pascal's terms, as an offering of self, makes room for love within the bounds of human life—far from a denial of our earthliness, this spiritual, charitable will accepts another into our world of becoming. In this fashion, we allow for the fact that we might love and learn about God or any other object of desire *through* our earthliness and over time. We develop a love of learning; we learn to love.

¹¹ This is consistent with the Greek interpretation of truth as *alçtheia* in Plato's dialogues and in Presocratic thought as a whole, an idea that Martin Heidegger focuses on in his landmark work, Being and Time (see §44). Stemming from the root words "to reveal" and "to remember," *alçtheia* is arrived at through recollection, through an unveiling. "Truth" in this sense evokes an inborn need we have within us to learn, to search for meaning through thought, judgement, expression, and in so doing draw out the mysteries of life: to (dis)cover.

Conclusion: Beyond Nihilism

“We know the truth not only through our reason,” Pascal maintains, “but also through our heart (110/282). . . . It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason. That is what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by reason” (424/278). While we may not attain absolute knowing, we can learn to love. Historically, Nietzsche was very familiar with the *Pensées* and had a great deal of respect for Pascal, though he ultimately regarded him as corrupted by Christian nihilistic values. My overview of nihilism in this paper has chosen a retrospective analysis of the topic to draw a distinct difference between Nietzsche’s self-referential faith in human becoming and Pascal’s supernatural faith in a hidden being. There is wisdom, I believe, in both thinkers’ outlooks and although we have observed their differences we should also consider how they need not be viewed as mutually exclusive.

Nietzsche underscored what was empty, uncritical, and decadent in interpretations of the good life in his time—especially the moral interpretation. Noticing that we often appeal to our moral values and belief systems for convenient support, he aimed to devalue such faith: to expose its purpose as artificial, its basis as nihilistic, and hence facilitate a *renewed* faith in our earthly humanity. Any philosophy or belief system that detracts from this goal can only degrade the self, he believed, and weaken our spirit. Through his suspension of human will between cupidity and charity, however, and his metaphysical division of human greatness into three orders, Pascal offers us a solution to nihilism through faith in God. Recognising that we often have little more than our own self-preservation in mind when espousing moral values, he too in some measure looked to reevaluate the way in which we promote these highest principles. For Pascal, nihilism is revealed in the infinite distance between one’s self and the object of one’s desire, between humanity and the divine. Despite all the hopeless desperation and aimlessness that this nihilism precipitates, however, he describes true faith as a function of love. Thus, he shows us how love has a supernatural and uniquely spiritual aspect—how the station of this love rests in the human heart and how its expression as faith is in fact the hardest test of strength we can be called upon to take as human beings.

This solution to nihilism seeks not to debunk Nietzsche’s philosophy; as I hope has been made clear, my reading of Pascal has been deeply informed by my reading of Nietzsche. The two thinkers are alike in questioning the real impetus behind supposedly “objective” pursuits of God and truth. They are further alike in grounding their philosophies in faith despite an abyss of nihilism and sloughs of despair. Ultimately, then, the difference in their visions rests in their outlooks. Whereas Pascal formulates an expression of faith in terms of one’s devotion to God, Nietzsche’s final allegiance is to the self—his own faith, hope, and love rest in his devotion to humanity’s *self-creating* potential. This inference leads us to a tantalising suggestion: might Pascal’s “charity” as a supernatural faith be Nietzsche’s will to untruth, and “cupidity” with its focus on the self be his will to truth? If this were the case, it would be simple to conclude here that Nietzsche’s faith is not only self-referential but self-centred, that his philosophy advocates autonomy and individualism by endorsing a narcissistic (and indeed cupiditous) way of life.

Although such a reading of Nietzsche is popular and would certainly explain his thoughts on the Pensées, it would be remiss not to observe here that even he, like Pascal, remains intensely aware in his writings that the act of loving is a learning process:

In the end we are always rewarded for our good will, our patience, fairmindedness, and gentleness with what is strange; gradually, it sheds its veil and turns out to be a new and indescribable beauty. That is its thanks for our hospitality. Even those who love themselves will have learned it in this way; for there is no other way. Love, too, has to be learned (GS, 334).

Nietzsche himself anticipates our line of reasoning. Though it is common to detect an element of narcissism in his work, we also see here how the need to love a strange and veiled “other” was a lesson he sought to learn. These are the moments when we can appreciate the interplay in Nietzsche between cupidity and charity. He states that even when the object of our desire is the self, here too must we persist in a loving process of discovery, and it is no mere coincidence therefore that he directs his own desire towards his writings—his very own human creations, indicative of his passion and his faith. At once a part of him, they live on today as the greatest testimony to his faith in remaining *apart from* him: refined out of existence as his silent beloved and immortalised through a process of self-discovery.

Comparing this process to Pascal’s thoughts on self-knowledge, we find a point of contact between Nietzsche’s nihilistic method and the Pensées. Our study here has been devoted in large part to the way in which these thinkers believe nihilism can: (i) generate a better awareness of self; and (ii) reinterpret notions of God, truth, and morality. In conclusion, we might now consider the role that a philosopher should play in this (essentially Socratic) practice of self-discovery, and how a nihilist can only take us so far. For if, as Nietzsche and Pascal seem to suggest, nihilism raises a real question of self-knowledge, it follows that the self who poses this question cannot be in complete control of the manner or circumstances in which the question is asked. This is why nihilism cannot be *used* as a means to an end, for the nihilist, as we have seen, “lets us drop” and leaves us—fragmented—with questions. It remains our own task to pick up the pieces: to have, according to Nietzsche, the strength of will to strive on with faith in ourselves; and in Pascalian terms, strength of heart, the willingness to offer up ourselves to something greater in the form of God, truth, or any other absolute—to have faith in another. In this way, philosophy might not simply persuade us to serve higher rather than lower values, but helps us *pursue* our values with an alternate sense of self: a self that accepts and includes but does not consume the other. Whereas a point of knowing really serves as an endpoint, an act of loving serves as a point of departure. As long as philosophy (*philo-sophia*) remains a love of wisdom, therefore, the good philosopher must simply be the good lover. By this token alone we gain access to the supernatural.

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