

THE APOLOGETIC METHODOLOGY OF BLAISE PASCAL

Phil Fernandes, Institute of Biblical Defense

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) was a French mathematician and scientist who is famous for his work dealing with the pressure of liquids and the theory of probability. He also designed a calculating machine, and, at the age of 16, wrote a book on Geometry which caught the attention of the great mathematician, Rene Descartes.¹

Pascal was a devout Roman Catholic who had a vibrant faith in Jesus Christ.² Towards the end of his life, Pascal began to write and gather notes for a book on Christian apologetics. Unfortunately, Pascal died before he completed the project. A few years after his death the notes were published in a book entitled *Pensees*, which means “thoughts.”³

Since Pascal did not himself complete his task on the *Pensees*, readers must study Pascal’s ideas and attempt to organize them in as coherent a fashion as possible. Notable advancements have been made in this area by Tom Morris⁴ of Notre Dame and Peter Kreeft⁵ of Boston College. In this paper, I will attempt to construct a basic outline of the apologetic methodology of Blaise Pascal. I will also attempt to show the contemporary relevance of the Pascalian method.

PASCAL’S VIEW OF REASON

Pascal was opposed to the use of traditional proofs for God’s existence. He wrote:

The metaphysical proofs for the existence of God are so remote from human reasoning and so involved that they make little impact, and, even if they did help some people, it would only be for the moment during which they watched the demonstration, because an hour later they would be afraid they had made a mistake. (190)⁶

And this is why I shall not undertake here to prove by reasons from nature either the existence of God, or the Trinity or the immortality of the soul, or anything of that kind: not just because I should not feel competent to find in nature arguments which would convince hardened atheists, but also because such knowledge, without Christ, is useless and sterile. Even if someone were convinced that the

proportions between numbers are immaterial, eternal truths, depending on a first truth in which they subsist, called God, I should not consider that he made much progress towards his salvation. The Christian's God does not consist merely of a God who is the author of mathematical truths and the order of the elements. That is the portion of the heathen and Epicureans. (449)

Pascal believed that even if these arguments were valid, few would reason well enough to be persuaded by them. And, even if the arguments persuaded someone, that person would still not be saved. Pascal was concerned with leading people to Christ, not merely to monotheism (the belief in the existence of one God). Therefore, he believed the traditional arguments for God's existence were counterproductive.

Pascal was also opposed to the pure rationalism of Descartes. Pascal realized that there were more ways to find truth than through reason alone. Man could also find truth through his heart. By the heart, Pascal meant what we intuitively know as opposed to what we know through deductive reasoning.⁷ We perceive and believe in God with our hearts. We will with our hearts.⁸ We know first principles through the heart. Pascal not only recognized other ways of knowing besides reason, but he saw that man's reason is often influenced by other factors. Man is not always true to his reason. Pascal's view of reason can be seen in the following quotes:

We know the truth not only through our reason but also through our heart. It is through the latter that we know first principles, and reason, which has nothing to do with it, tries in vain to refute them. The skeptics have no other object than that, and they work at it to no purpose. We know that we are not dreaming, but, however unable we may be to prove it rationally, our inability proves nothing but the weakness of our reason, and not the uncertainty of all our knowledge, as they maintain. For knowledge of first principles, like space, time, motion, number, is as solid as any derived through reason, and it is on such knowledge, coming from the heart and instinct, that reason has to depend and base all its argument. . . It is just as pointless and absurd for reason to demand proof of first principles from the heart before agreeing to accept them as it would be absurd for the heart to demand an intuition of all the propositions demonstrated by reason before agreeing to accept them. Our inability must therefore serve only to humble reason, which would like to be judge of everything, but not to

confute our certainty. As if reason were the only way we could learn!
(110)

The mind of this supreme judge of the world. . . Do not be surprised if his reasoning is not too sound at the moment, there is a fly buzzing round his ears; this is enough to render him incapable of giving good advice. (48)

Would you not say that this magistrate, whose venerable age commands universal respect, is ruled by pure, sublime reason, and judges things as they really are, without paying heed to the trivial circumstances which offend only the imagination of the weaker men? See him go to hear a sermon . . . If, when the preacher appears, it turns out that nature has given him a hoarse voice and an odd sort of face, that his barber has shaved him badly and he happens not to be too clean either, then, whatever great truths he may announce, I wager that our senator will not be able to keep a straight face. . . Anyone who chose to follow reason alone would have proved himself a fool . . . Reason never wholly overcomes imagination, while the contrary is quite common. (44)

Be humble, impotent reason! Be silent, feeble nature! Learn that man infinitely transcends man, hear from your master your true condition, which is unknown to you. Listen to God. (131)

Descartes. . . we do not think that the whole of philosophy would be worth an hour's effort. (84)

The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing. (423)

It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason. That is what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by the reason. (424)

It is important to note that Pascal is not an irrationalist. He recognizes that reason has its place; still, he reminds us that there are other ways of finding truth besides reason:

Two excesses: to exclude reason, to admit nothing but reason. (183)

Reason's last step is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things beyond it. It is merely feeble if it does not go as far as to realize that. If natural things are beyond it, what are we to say about supernatural things? (188)

If we submit everything to reason our religion will be left with nothing mysterious or supernatural. (173)

It is apparent that Pascal is not a fideist. He believed there was a place for reason in religious discussions. Still, he was not a pure rationalist. He differed from Descartes in that he did not believe that man could find all truth through reason alone; he did not believe man could deduce everything from one point of rational certainty. Pascal respected the role of reason in knowing truth; but, he also recognized that reason has its limits.⁹ Pascal was willing, as we shall see, to use reason to defend the Christian Faith. Still, he recognized man to be more than a thinking machine. Man comes complete with prejudices, emotions, a will, and a vivid imagination. The whole man must be evangelized, not just his mind. According to Peter Kreeft, "Like Augustine, Pascal knows that the heart is deeper than the head, but like Augustine he does not cut off his own head, or so soften it up with relativism and subjectivism and 'open-mindedness' that his brains fall out."¹⁰

Before reason can get started certain things must be presupposed. However, unlike modern presuppositionalists, Pascal held that these first principles could be known with certainty through the intuition of the heart. The Cartesian attempt to prove everything by reason alone was totally futile from Pascal's perspective. First principles are self-evident truths recognized intuitively by the heart. They cannot be proven by reason; they must be assumed in order for a person to even begin to reason.

Pascal was a man before his time. He saw where Descartes' rationalism would lead man. When pure rationalism (which characterized much of modern philosophy) failed to produce the answers expected of it, it eventually collapsed into skepticism and irrationalism (post-modernism). This was due to the failure to recognize the limits of reason.

The time is now ripe for Pascalian apologetics. When pure rationalism is scorned (even if it should not be), Christian apologists must learn to speak to the hearts, as well as the minds, of men. And we can learn this art if we sit at the feet of Blaise Pascal.

PASCAL'S WAGER

In my estimation, the next step in the Pascalian apologetic is known as Pascal's wager. Some believe that Pascal's wager is the climax of Pascal's case for Christianity; but I believe this is mistaken. Pascal first tells his readers that we do not use our reason in an unbiased way. Then he uses his wager argument to show that the wise man will be biased for God's existence *before* looking at the evidence. After showing that humans do not use their reason in an unbiased manner, Pascal pleads with his readers to wager their lives on God:

. . . let us say: 'Either God is or he is not.' But to which view shall we be inclined? Reason cannot decide this question. Infinite chaos separates us. At the far end of this infinite distance a coin is being spun which will come down heads or tails. How will you wager? Reason cannot make you choose either, reason cannot prove either wrong. . . Yes, but you must wager. There is no choice, you are already committed. Which will you choose then? . . . Let us weigh up the gain and the loss involved in calling heads that God exists. Let us assess the two cases: if you win you win everything, if you lose you lose nothing. Do not hesitate then; wager that he does exist. . . . And thus, since you are obliged to play, you must be renouncing reason if you hoard your life rather than risk it for an infinite gain, just as likely to occur as a loss amounting to nothing. . . . Thus our argument carries infinite weight, when the stakes are finite in a game where there are even chances of winning and losing and an infinite prize to be won.
(418)

Pascal tells his readers that we must wager our lives on either God existing or God not existing. Reason, due to its limitations, cannot make the decision for us. We cannot avoid choosing sides; for, to not wager is equivalent with wagering against God.

If you wager on God, there are only two possible outcomes. If He exists, you win eternal life. If He does not exist, you lose nothing. However, if you wager against God existing, there are also only two possible consequences. If He does not exist, you win nothing. But, if He does exist, you lose everything.

Therefore, since you have nothing to lose and everything to gain, the wise man will wager that God exists. Pascal is not trying to rationally prove God's existence with this argument. Instead, he is attempting to persuade the

unbeliever that it wise to live as if God exists, while it is unwise to live as if God does not exist. Pascal believed that everyone who sincerely seeks God will find Him (Jeremiah 29:13).

Pascal attempts to show his readers that the wise man will be biased for God, not against God. He knew that human reason is limited and fallible, and that we do not use our reason in an unbiased manner. Through his wager argument, Pascal tries to convince his readers that, since we will use our reason in a biased manner, there are good reasons to be biased in favor of theism, and no reason to be biased for atheism.

The wager argument is Pascal's attempt to convince the nonbeliever to seek God. Pascal wrote:

. . . there are only two classes of persons who can be called reasonable: those who serve God with all their heart because they know him and those who seek him with all their heart because they do not know him. (427)

Richard Creel illustrates the strength of Pascal's wager with the following words:

It would not be irrational for me to continue to search a lake and its environs for a child that I concede, along with everyone else, has almost certainly drowned. If you ask me if I believe that the child has drowned, then I will say "yes"—but I will add that I hope that my belief is false and that I think that my continued efforts to find the child alive are justified by the great good that would obtain were I to succeed. . . . In conclusion, when God is thought of as infinitely perfect goodness, it seems consummately rational to hope that there is a God and to live as though there is, as long as there is no conclusive proof that there is not.¹¹

Once we recognize that we need to wager our lives on God, we are ready to examine the evidence for Christianity. It is at this point that Pascal discusses existential (i.e., psychological) and historical evidence for Christianity.

THE PARADOX OF MAN

Pascal believed that only the Christian religion rightly explained man's nature. Man is both wretched and great. Many religions recognize man's greatness, but fail to see man's wretchedness. The New Age movement is an example; man is God and sin is an illusion. Other religions accept man's wretchedness but ignore his greatness. Secular Humanists consider man to be an animal; Behaviorists view man as a machine. Only Christianity sees man for what he really is—man is both wretched and great. Pascal concludes that the Christian doctrines of Creation and the Fall alone adequately explain the paradox of man. Pascal believed that man's greatness could be explained in the fact that man was created in God's image. And he argues that man would not understand his wretchedness unless he had some remembrance of a former greatness from which he had fallen. Pascal wrote:

Man is only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed. There is no need for the whole universe to take up arms to crush him: a vapour, a drop of water is enough to kill him. But even if the universe were to crush him, man would still be nobler than his slayer, because he knows that he is dying and the advantage the universe has over him. The universe knows none of this. Thus all our dignity consists in thought. (200)

Man's greatness comes from knowing he is wretched: a tree does not know it is wretched. Thus it is wretched to know one is wretched, but there is a greatness in knowing one is wretched. (114)

All these examples of wretchedness prove his greatness. It is the wretchedness of a great lord, the wretchedness of a dispossessed king. (116)

Man's greatness and wretchedness are so evident that the true religion must necessarily teach us that there is in man some great principle of greatness and some great principle of wretchedness. (149)

Man is neither angel nor beast. . . (678)

There are in faith two equally constant truths. One is that man in the state of his creation, or in the state of grace, is exalted above the whole of nature, made like unto God and sharing in His divinity. The

other is that in the state of corruption and sin he has fallen from that first state and has become like the beasts. . . (131)

For a religion to be true it must have known our nature; it must have known its greatness and smallness, and the reason for both. What other religion but Christianity has known this? (215)

The dilemma of man, that he is both great and wretched, is easy to document. The gap between animals and man is too great for evolution to adequately explain. No animal species will ever produce a Plato or Aristotle. Yet, the cruelty of man waged against man is unheard of in the animal kingdom. No animal species will ever produce a Hitler or Stalin. Only Christianity with its doctrine of creation and the fall can adequately explain both aspects of man. Twentieth-century Christian apologists such as Francis Schaeffer¹² and Ravi Zacharias¹³ continued the Pascalian tradition by using man's greatness and wretchedness as evidence for Christianity.

THE HUMAN CONDITION

Pascal sees the human condition as ultimately a one-way road to death. Death is a fact from which all men try to hide; nonetheless, it is a fact. We will all eventually die. . . and we know it. However, we live as if we will never die. The words of Pascal are haunting:

Imagine a number of men in chains, all under sentence of death, some of whom are each day butchered in the sight of the others; those remaining see their own condition in that of their fellows, and looking at each other with grief and despair await their turn. This is an image of the human condition. (434)

It is absurd of us to rely on the company of our fellows, as wretched and helpless as we are; they will not help us; we shall die alone. (151)

The last act is bloody, however fine the rest of the play. They throw earth over your head and it is finished forever. (165)

Let us ponder these things, and then say whether it is not beyond doubt that the only good thing in this life is the hope of another life. . . (427)

We desire truth and find in ourselves nothing but uncertainty. We seek happiness and find only wretchedness and death. (401)

God alone is man's true good. . . (148)

All men will die, and they know they will die. Yet, they do not all live lives of despair. Pascal explains how man copes despite his hopeless condition.

MAN'S RESPONSE TO HIS HOPELESS CONDITION

Pascal states that man responds to his hopeless condition in three ways: diversion, indifference, and self-deception. Rather than admit human wretchedness and death and look for a cure, we would rather ignore the human condition and lie to ourselves. Pascal wrote concerning diversion:

Diversion. Being unable to cure death, wretchedness and ignorance, men have decided, in order to be happy, not to think about such things. (133)

If our condition were truly happy we should not need to divert ourselves from thinking about it. (70)

We run heedlessly into the abyss after putting something in front of us to stop us seeing it. (166)

I can quite see that it makes a man happy to be diverted from contemplating his private miseries by making him care about nothing else but dancing well. . . (137)

Contemporary society has multitudes of diversions. Television, radio, computers, the theater, sports events, and our careers are just a few of the many ways we can occupy ourselves so as to keep our focus off of our wretchedness and inevitable death. If the NFL went on strike this football season, would church attendance increase? We need to remind our fellow man that eternal matters are of more importance than the temporary pleasures of this life.

Recently, I saw a truck with a bumper sticker which read, “Everyone needs something to believe in. . . I believe I’ll have another beer.” Pascal was right; man diverts his attention through temporary pleasures to hide the truths he wishes to ignore.

Indifference is another way in which man avoids dealing with his coming death:

The immortality of the soul is something of such vital importance to us, affecting us so deeply, that one must have lost all feeling not to care about knowing the facts of the matter. . . Thus the fact that there exist men who are indifferent to the loss of their being and the peril of an eternity of wretchedness is against nature. With everything else they are quite different; they fear the most trifling things, foresee and feel them; and the same man who spends so many days and nights in fury and despair at losing some office or at some imaginary affront to his honour is the very one who knows that he is going to lose everything through death but feels neither anxiety nor emotion. It is a monstrous thing to see one and the same heart at once so sensitive to minor things and so strangely insensitive to the greatest. (427)

The roar of a crowd at the Super Bowl is deafening, but place that same crowd into a church, and there will be only silence. They are passionate about the outcome of a football game, but indifferent concerning the eternal things of God.

The unsaved man not only ignores the horror of his wretchedness and impending death through diversion and indifference. He also chooses to deceive himself and others in an attempt to hide from the truth:

Self-love. The nature of self-love and of this human self is to love only self and consider only self. . . it takes every care to hide its faults both from itself and others, and cannot bear to have them pointed out or noticed. . . For is it not true that we hate the truth and those who tell it to us, and we like them to be deceived to our advantage, and want to be esteemed by them as other than we actually are? . . . people are more wary of offending those whose friendship is most useful and enmity most dangerous. A prince can be the laughingstock of Europe and the only one to know nothing about it. (978)

Blaise Pascal saw that the use of reason alone would lead few, if any, to Christ. Pascal realized man is ruled more by his passions than by his

reason. Therefore, his apologetic methodology focused on shaking men out of their indifference and removing their diversions. His apologetic reminds men that eternal issues are of far greater worth than mere temporary ones. Pascal did not try to reason men into the kingdom; he attempted to sway men to desire Christianity to be true. He encouraged men to earnestly seek the God of the Bible. Modern society is based more on pleasures and desire than on reason. Therefore, Pascal's method of defending the faith has great potential in our day.

Abstract argumentation is not appealing to most people. Pascal recognized that man would rather discuss the concrete things of everyday life. Therefore, Pascal started his apologetic where most people would feel comfortable—with the person himself. Then Pascal would attempt to take the person out of their comfort zone by revealing the hidden, unattractive truths (such as wretchedness, death, and self-deception) about the person. All this was done to reveal to the person the shallowness of this life and the need for the eternal things of God.

HISTORICAL EVIDENCES FOR THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

Pascal is not a traditional apologist, for he rejects the traditional arguments for God's existence. But, he is also not a fideist or a presuppositionalist, for no fideist or true presuppositionalist would provide historical evidences for the Christian faith:

Prophecies. If a single man had written a book foretelling the time and manner of Jesus' coming and Jesus had come in conformity with these prophecies, this would carry infinite weight. But there is much more here. There is a succession of men over a period of 4,000 years, coming consistently and invariably one after the other, to foretell the same coming; there is an entire people proclaiming it, existing for 4,000 years to testify in a body to the certainty they feel about it, from which they cannot be deflected by whatever threats and persecutions they may suffer. This is of a quite different order of importance. (332)

Advantages of the Jewish people. . . This people is not only of remarkable antiquity but has also lasted for a singularly long time, extending continuously from its origin to the present day. For whereas the peoples of Greece and Italy, of Sparta, Athens, Rome, and others

who came so much later have perished so long ago, these still exist, despite the efforts of so many powerful kings who have tried a hundred times to wipe them out. . . They have always been preserved however, and their preservation was foretold. . . (451)

. . . Thus instead of concluding that there are no true miracles because there are so many false ones, we must on the contrary say that there certainly are true miracles since there are so many false ones, and that the false ones are only there because true ones exist. (734)

Proofs of Jesus Christ. The hypothesis that the Apostles were knaves is quite absurd. Follow it out to the end and imagine these twelve men meeting after Jesus' death and conspiring to say that he had risen from the dead. This means attacking all the powers that be. The human heart is singularly susceptible to fickleness, to change, to promises, to bribery. One of them had only to deny his story under these inducements, or still more because of possible imprisonment, tortures and death, and they would all have been lost. Follow that out. (310)

The Apostles were either deceived or deceivers. Either supposition is difficult, for it is not possible to imagine that a man has risen from the dead. While Jesus was with them he could sustain them, but afterwards, if he did not appear to them, who did make them act? (322)

Pascal was willing to use historical evidences as proof for the Christian faith. He viewed the prophecies that Jesus had fulfilled and the preservation of the Jewish people despite centuries of persecution as strong evidence for Christianity. Pascal considered miracles, especially Christ's resurrection from the dead, to be valuable ammunition for the arsenal of the apologist. Pascal did not tell unbelievers to "just believe." He gave them evidence for the truth of Christianity. Still, he refused to use reason alone; his apologetic attempted to reach the whole man, not just his mind.

CONCLUSION

Blaise Pascal had a unique apologetic methodology. He was not a traditional apologist, for he denied that the traditional theistic proofs would persuade nonbelievers. He was not a fideist, for he defended the faith. And,

he was not a pure presuppositionalist, for he used psychological and historical evidences to prove the truth of Christianity. At best, Pascal's methodology could be classified as a type of psychological apologetics.¹⁴ For he attempted to speak to the entire man, not just his intellect.

Though I appreciate and utilize traditional arguments for God's existence, I believe that the apologetic methodology of Blaise Pascal should not be ignored. Pascal has much to offer the contemporary Christian apologist. Every apologist can benefit from examining Pascal's insight into man's fallen nature, his identification of the limitations of human reason, and his desire to convert people to Christianity, not merely monotheism. Studying Pascal's apologetic methodology, and incorporating aspects of it into our own apologetic ministry, can make our defense of the faith more effective.

Today, many people are not concerned about finding rational truth. But, they are very concerned about their existential experience. Many people seek meaning in life; they also want their deepest desires to be satisfied. At the same time, many people are reluctant to admit their faults. Therefore, the Pascalian apologetic methodology has great potential for contemporary society, for Pascal forces us to look at ourselves in the mirror. He forces us to see ourselves as we are: wretched, miserable people who will all eventually die. Pascal then tugs at our hearts and declares to us that only in Jesus can life have meaning. Only in Jesus can we find satisfaction and forgiveness. Only in Jesus can death, our greatest enemy, be defeated. Pascal beseeches contemporary man to wager his life on the God of the Bible. He calls us to seek God with all our being, for Pascal knows that if we seek Him with all our being, we will find Him. And if we find Him, we win eternity.

ENDNOTES

¹*The World Book Encyclopedia* (Chicago: World Book, Inc., 1985), vol. 15, “Blaise Pascal,” by Phillip S. Jones, 167.

²Thomas V. Morris, *Making Sense of It All* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 8.

³Ibid., 10.

⁴Ibid., *passim*..

⁵Peter Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), entire book.

⁶Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer, (London: Penguin Books, 1966). (Number of Pensee listed in parenthesis after quote.)

⁷Kreeft, 228. See also Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* vol. IV (New York: Image Books, 1960), 166-167.

⁸Kreeft, 228.

⁹Morris, 183.

¹⁰Kreeft, 235.

¹¹Richard E. Creel, “Agatheism: A Justification of the Rationality of Devotion to God,” *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 10 (January 1993): 40, 45.

¹²Francis A. Schaeffer, *Trilogy* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1990), 109-114.

¹³Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God?* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1994), 133-145.

¹⁴Gordon R. Lewis, *Testing Christianity’s Truth Claims* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1990), 231-253.