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GREATNESS AND WRETCHEDNESS: THE USEFULNESS OF PASCAL'S ANTHROPOLOGICAL ARGUMENT IN APOLOGETICS

by Robert Velarde

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SYNOPSIS

In the realm of philosophy, Blaise Pascal (1623–62) is perhaps best remembered for his wager argument. In his *Pensées* (thoughts), however, Pascal offered several lines of apologetic reasoning, including what has been termed his anthropological argument. This argument makes the case for Christianity by pointing out that any viable worldview must successfully explain the seemingly paradoxical nature of the human condition. The seeming paradox is that human beings exhibit qualities of both greatness and wretchedness. Pascal argues that Christianity offers the best explanation for this condition based on its teachings that human beings are created in the image of God, yet original sin has tainted their nature.

Pascal realized that it is sometimes necessary to shock a complacent skeptic into paying attention to the seriousness of his or her condition. Depending on the type of skeptic encountered, Pascal would use the anthropological argument to apply “existential shock” to either humble them or exalt them. This same approach is applicable today to belief systems such as humanism and New Age spirituality that exalt human beings or to worldviews such as nihilism that ultimately lead to hopelessness and despair.

Despite some weaknesses, Pascal’s anthropological argument has contemporary apologetic value because it appeals to individuals on a psychological level. It is certainly not a definitive argument for Christianity, but it is a useful one that can be integrated into a line of reasoning that supports the validity of the Christian faith.

Are human beings glorious, exalted creatures with tremendous potential or wretched beings desperately in need of spiritual liberation? Are such seemingly contradictory views of the human condition mutually exclusive or could both perspectives be true? If the latter, does any viable worldview explain this perplexing condition? The seventeenth-century scientist, mathematician, and philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623–62) offers a timeless argument for the truth of Christianity based on what at first glance appears to be a paradox in human nature. Pascal is revered for his scientific accomplishments and he even has a computer programming language named after him. His philosophical pursuits, however, often do not receive the attention they deserve. Pascal’s wager¹ is perhaps his most well-known argument for Christianity, but Pascal has much more to offer the contemporary Christian apologist.

Pascal’s ill health and untimely death prevented him from completing a monumental work on the subject of Christian apologetics. His notes, however, have since been compiled into a collection known as *Pensées* (thoughts). “Pascal’s views hardly constitute an organized system,” writes Richard Popkin. “Most of his works are fragmentary, and he apparently made no effort to put the fragments together.”² In these fragmented yet brilliant writings, Pascal offers cogent insights on such issues as the human condition,

morality, and theology. Pascal's anthropological argument, though not nearly as well known as the wager, offers a unique approach to Christian apologetics and warrants attention.

PASCAL'S ANTHROPOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Pascal's anthropological argument begins with a simple observation: human beings exhibit qualities of both greatness and wretchedness. Such an argument is appealing in a contemporary setting because it begins with an observation of human nature rather than a direct argument for the existence of God, the reliability of the Bible, the validity of belief in the resurrection of Christ, or a variety of other traditional apologetic approaches. The anthropological argument merely seeks to initiate discussion on the nature of the human condition. When certain principles subsequently have been established, it offers an argument pointing to Christianity as the best explanation of the observed condition. D. G. Preston comments on Pascal's overall apologetic approach:

Pascal the empiricist starts with the data, notably the inexplicable phenomenon of mankind: unquestionably corrupt, subject to inconstancy, boredom, anxiety and selfishness, doing anything in the waking hours to divert the mind from human wretchedness, yet showing the vestiges of inherent greatness in the mind's realization of this condition. Mankind is also finite, suspended between twin infinities revealed by telescope and microscope, and aware of an inner emptiness which the finite world fails to satisfy. No philosophy makes sense of this. No moral system makes us better or happier. One hypothesis alone, creation in the divine image followed by the fall, explains our predicament and, through a redeemer and mediator with God, offers to restore our rightful state.³

Pascal's anthropological argument uses a unique approach to Christian apologetics: rather than offering arguments from natural theology,⁴ it is designed to relate to unbelievers at a prudential level of interest. This argument, in fact, offers a sensible observation and appeal to practical judgment based on the available evidence.

Is Pascal's approach relevant today? After all, his argument seemingly rests on doctrines such as humans created in the image of God (*imago Dei*) and original sin (the Fall) — views many perceive as outmoded, mythical, or just plain false. Before we address the question of relevance, let's first examine the argument in more detail.

THE PARADOX OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

"Greatness, wretchedness," writes Pascal. "The more enlightened we are the more greatness and vileness we discover in man."⁵ Human beings, he argues, exhibit two distinct qualities that appear to be contradictory: we are capable of exalted greatness, but we are also extremely corrupt in our nature. In Pascal's words, "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."⁶ Pascal subsequently paints a less-than-flattering picture of human beings: "What sort of freak then is man! How novel, how monstrous, how chaotic, how paradoxical, how prodigious! Judge of all things, feeble earthworm, repository of truth, sink of doubt and error, the glory and refuse of the universe!"⁷

Commenting on Pascal's anthropological argument, Peter Kreeft writes, "Man is a living oxymoron: wretched greatness, great wretchedness, rational animal, mortal spirit, thinking reed."⁸ "We are a puzzle to ourselves," Thomas Morris notes. "One of the greatest mysteries is in us...How can one species produce both unspeakable wickedness and nearly inexplicable goodness? How can we be responsible both for the most disgusting squalor and for the most breathtaking beauty? How can grand aspirations and self-destructive impulses, kindness and cruelty, be interwoven in one life? The human enigma cries out for explanation."⁹

PASCAL'S "EXISTENTIAL SHOCK" TREATMENT

One of Pascal's apologetic techniques involves what Bernard Ramm refers to as "existential shock." Pascal uses this apologetic technique to awaken skeptics from complacency. Ramm elaborates:

Pascal's use of existential shock was perhaps the biggest weapon in his arsenal. It was an attempt to deal a solid blow to the skepticism and indifferentism of the Frenchmen....

By existential shock we mean Pascal's method of shocking Frenchmen out of their complacency by vivid contrasts, by sharp jabs at frightful inconsistencies, by penetrating analyses of the foolish modes of existence, by pictures of despair placed along side of pictures of grace and redemption. A smug, sophisticated French skeptic must see himself hanging between time and eternity, as a delicate smudge of protoplasm which a piffle of poison could exterminate, as a disposed [sic. deposed] king miserably remembering his former greatness, and as a discontented wretch who suspects that there really is blessed contentment somewhere. But where?¹⁰

The anthropological argument provides an existential shock by calling on skeptics to confront and explain the seeming paradox of human nature that is existentially undeniable. A viable worldview, says Pascal, must account for this dilemma in a manner that is intellectually cogent.

TWO ERRORS IN UNDERSTANDING THE HUMAN CONDITION

In "Discussion with Monsieur De Sacy,"¹¹ Pascal analyzes two errors regarding the human condition. Douglas Groothuis explains, "Pascal claims that merely human philosophies are unable to tell us who we are because they fall into two equal and opposite errors concerning humanity. They either exalt greatness at the expense of wretchedness or they exalt wretchedness at the expense of greatness."¹²

This is evident in the realm of public education in the United States, where children and adults are often taught that human beings are products of chance evolution (naturalism), while various strains of psychology tout the human potential/self-esteem message — that we are creatures of great or even unlimited potential. Kreeft refers to the opposing views as "animalism and angelism" and provides examples of both: "Some examples of 'angelism,' which ignore the concrete, earthy, embodied nature of man, are Platonism, Gnosticism, Pantheism and New Age humanism. Some examples of 'animalism,' which ignore the spiritual nature of man, are Marxism, Behaviorism, Freudianism, Darwinism, and Deweyan Pragmatism....Modern philosophy has lost its sane anthropology because it has lost its cosmology. Man does not know himself because he does not know his place in the cosmos; he confuses himself with angel or with animal."¹³

EXAMPLES OF HUMAN GREATNESS AND WRETCHEDNESS

Examples of human greatness and wretchedness abound. Human wretchedness built and maintained the concentration camps of Nazi Germany, where some six-million Jews were brutally murdered, but it was human greatness that ended the holocaust. More recently, we can point to the infamous attack of 9/11 when Islamic terrorists hijacked four commercial airliners and turned them into deadly weapons. Terrorists bent on the destruction of thousands of human lives indeed exhibited qualities of human wretchedness while those who bravely participated in the rescue efforts in the aftermath of the events exhibited qualities of human greatness.

One might argue, of course, that such examples of human greatness and wretchedness do not necessarily apply to individuals but merely illustrate the presence of greatness and wretchedness in the broader context of humanity. This is not the case, however, for examples of greatness and wretchedness within individuals can be offered as well.

Take, for instance, some philosophical, literary, and musical figures. It is a formidable task to seamlessly interweave complex philosophies into a work of fiction in such a way as to engage the reader meaningfully. Philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Albert Camus accomplished literary brilliance and yet remained in despair. Groothuis cites the example of eighteenth-century French philosopher Jean Jaques Rousseau and his penchant for using his "rhetorical prowess...deceitfully for self-justifying endeavors." It seems Rousseau "would sponge off various wealthy patrons until they found him intolerable and sent the pouting philosopher packing."¹⁴ After such incidents Rousseau would often write remarkable letters to his former patrons filled with well-crafted falsehoods. "Rousseau showed intellectual greatness," observes Groothuis, "even in his concupiscence (in this case, excessive self-love)."¹⁵

Literary great Ernest Hemingway served as an ambulance driver in World War I, wrote many successful and critically acclaimed works, but exhibited the ultimate form of wretchedness by committing suicide. Edgar Allan Poe's alcoholism and alleged drug use led to his premature death, but many of his writings are ingeniously crafted. Carlo Gesualdo, a sixteenth-century composer of Renaissance music and an Italian prince, brutally murdered his wife and her lover. As a composer, Gesualdo demonstrated human greatness, but as a murderer he obviously exhibited human wretchedness. The list of examples is as long as human history.

EVALUATING THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

At first glance, Pascal's anthropological argument appears to muddle the veracity of the Christian faith. This is because the root of the argument appears to be based on a Christian view of Creation and the Fall. Some may even interpret Pascal's argument as circular and claim that it is simply appealing to the Bible as evidence that the biblical explanation of human nature is true. Such accusations, however, fail to examine the anthropological argument in a proper context. Pascal's anthropological argument appeals to the *best explanation* regarding the human condition. Such an argument is *abductive* rather than deductive or inductive. Groothuis explains:

Although one cannot directly test by empirical means the deliverances of revelation on many matters (such as the origin of the universe, the creation of humanity and the Fall into sin), Pascal thought that key theological claims offer the best explanation for the perplexing phenomena of human nature....By adducing evidence from a wide diversity of situations, Pascal argues that the Christian view of humans as "deposed kings" — made in God's image but now east of Eden — is the best way to account for the human condition. In so arguing, he employs an abductive method (that is, inference to the best explanation) similar to that used in much scientific endeavor.¹⁶

In other words, within the confines of his anthropological argument, Pascal is not directly making the case that humans are created in the image of God and are tarnished by their fall into sin. Pascal, instead, is arguing that these Christian doctrines provide the best explanation for the seemingly paradoxical condition of human greatness and wretchedness that we observe.

The case for the validity of the anthropological argument, nevertheless, must address several philosophical issues if it is to succeed. Groothuis offers three claims that Pascal's argument must defend: "(1) that the construal of humanity as having a dual nature is intellectually cogent, (2) that the human condition even needs to be explained, and (3) that the answer provided by the doctrines of humans being made in God's image and of original sin are convincing."¹⁷ We could add to this list (4) that it is necessary to demonstrate that alternative worldviews do not adequately explain the condition of greatness and wretchedness. Space does not allow a thorough analysis and response to these concerns, but each one can indeed be successfully addressed.

CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

The anthropological argument is compelling to contemporary culture for at least three reasons. First, it is compelling on a human level: since it addresses the human condition, it has an immediate and universal application and relevance. Second, American culture in particular is steeped in the exaltation of human goodness via psychology and ideas of human potential. The anthropological argument agrees with such views to an extent, but it acknowledges the paradoxical element of human wretchedness more honestly and offers a viable explanation. Third, many are under the impression that human beings are merely evolved beasts. Pascal recognizes "Man is neither angel nor beast"¹⁸ and puts forth a technique of dealing with those who think too highly of themselves, as well as those who think too lowly of themselves:

If he exalts himself, I humble him.
If he humbles himself, I exalt him.
And I go on contradicting him
Until he understands
That he is a monster that passes all understanding.¹⁹

It should be noted again that the anthropological argument is not the only argument Pascal uses to defend the Christian faith; as such, it is not intended to be the ultimate argument for the veracity of Christianity. *Pensées*, though it is fragmented and incomplete, covers a variety of issues and includes many lines of argumentation. The anthropological argument, nevertheless, provides an existential punch and forces critics and doubters to find a better explanation of the human condition. It provides a unique, psychological approach in convincing a skeptic of the truth of the Christian faith. Writing about Pascal in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, J. Lataste observes:

It is certain that his method of apologetics must have been at once rigorous and original; no doubt, he had made use of the traditional proofs — notably, the historical argument from prophecies and miracles. But as against adversaries who did not admit historical certainty, it was stroke of genius to produce a wholly psychological argument and, by starting from the study of the human soul, to arrive at God. Man is an “incomprehensible monster,” says he, “at once sovereign greatness and sovereign misery.” Neither dogmatism nor pyrrhonism [complete skepticism] will solve the enigma: the one explains the greatness of man, the other his misery; but neither explains both. We must listen to God. Christianity alone, through the doctrine of the Fall and that of the Incarnation, gives the key to the mystery. Christianity, therefore, is truth.²⁰

The application of the anthropological argument in contemporary culture has strong appeal. For example, the New Age movement — more recently referred to as the “new spirituality” or simply “spirituality” — offers an extremely exalted view of humanity. The anthropological argument could easily be applied to those who accept this view. A Christian apologist could agree that humans are great and exalted, but then, as Pascal suggests, the New Ager must be humbled into recognizing the real wretchedness of the human condition. It is one thing for a New Age adherent to declare that sin is an illusion or that moral absolutes do not exist but quite another to provide an adequate explanation for examples of human wretchedness such as the Holocaust.

The anthropological argument likewise may be applied to humanism, which also posits a favorable picture of humanity. The Humanist Manifesto 1, for example, declares that humanity has the power and potential to achieve greatness: “Man is at last becoming aware that he alone is responsible for the realization of the world of his dreams, that he has within himself the power for its achievement. He must set intelligence and will to the task.”²¹ The Humanist Manifesto 2 asserts that it is only a matter of time before this happens: “Humanism...is a moral force that has time on its side. We believe that humankind has the potential, intelligence, goodwill, and cooperative skill to implement this commitment in the decades ahead.”²²

Humanism, however, lacks a cogent explanation of the seemingly paradoxical human condition of greatness and wretchedness. Here is where the anthropological argument may enter in and provide a more reasonable explanation.

DOES HUMANISM ADEQUATELY EXPLAIN THIS CONDITION?

A staunch humanist, of course, will not readily give in to Pascal’s argument. Several objections may be raised, such as (1) human beings exhibit qualities of greatness as a result of highly developed brains and (2) wretched behavior is merely the result of humans having evolved from beasts and still possessing beastly tendencies. Over the course of millions of years of evolution, the humanist would argue, time and chance produced the human intellect, which is capable of greatness. Wretchedness, on the other hand, is an unfortunate side effect of our bestial origins.

Such an argument, however, presupposes that human intellect, allegedly a product of time and chance, is actually capable of *accurate* reasoning. In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis astutely observes, “When you are arguing against Him [God] you are arguing against the very power that makes you able to argue at all: it is like cutting off the branch you are sitting on.”²³ If human reason is a product of chance, how do we know it is reliable? Humanists, who deny that God is the source of human reason, are left sitting precariously on a branch of chance and time with no guarantees that their reasoning is sound.²⁴ In *Miracles*, Lewis remarks, “If all that exists is Nature, the great mindless interlocking event, if our own deepest convictions are merely the by-products of an irrational process, then clearly there is not the

slightest ground for supposing that our sense of fitness and our consequent faith in uniformity tell us anything about a reality external to ourselves.”²⁵ Christianity’s explanation that humans are created in the image of a rational God and thus are rational beings makes more sense than the chance and time explanation of the humanist. In short, the existence of human reason is more adequately explained by intelligent design than by random chance.

On the other hand, if humanists agree that human beings do, in fact, exhibit qualities both of wretchedness and greatness, then they are making a moral claim. From where does their standard of morality come? The existence of such a standard of morality in humans is more adequately explained by creation in the image of a moral God than by the evolution of mere matter.

The anthropological argument also provides hope for those who hold to worldviews that recognize the wretchedness of human nature but shun the inherent greatness that is also a part of that nature. Nihilism, for instance, followed to its logical conclusions, leads to despair — a meaningless existence in a pointless universe, where humans are merely an accidental product of chance and time. Human wretchedness in nihilistic thought is expressed perhaps more so in a philosophical sense (despair), but wretchedness is certainly present in a worldview that offers no real hope. It is at this juncture that Pascal’s anthropological argument can enter in and offer hope to the nihilist — hope that is based on the fact that Christianity offers a superior explanation for the human condition.

THE GENIUS OF PASCAL’S ARGUMENT

Pascal’s anthropological argument is a valuable tool that contemporary Christian apologetics can apply in a variety of ways. As we’ve seen, it is certainly not a definitive argument for the Christian faith (Pascal never intended it as such), but it does provide a certain degree of “existential shock” and an approach that is appealing to individuals on a psychological and personal level.

“Starting an apologetic argument from the point of the human condition is appealing in a psychologized and individualistic culture,” observes Groothuis in reference to Pascal’s argument. “While there is much theological illiteracy and philosophical naiveté today, there is also great interest in the soul, human potential, and spirituality. People may doubt the existence of God, the reliability of the Bible, or the deity of Christ, but they know that they exist, and they desire to understand themselves, their pain, and their possibilities.”²⁶ Pascal’s anthropological argument is well equipped to address such matters.

The genius of the argument is in many respects found in its simplicity. It asks the skeptic of Christianity to provide a more adequate solution to the observable human condition than the Christian doctrines of humanity’s creation in the image of God and the Fall, however unlikely these doctrines may initially seem. The argument, moreover, is not based on the latest scientific theories (though such theories are certainly apologetically useful at times) or on archaeological evidence for the Christian faith — theories and evidence that may change with time. Its appeal, rather, is on an existential, psychological level. It is at this point in Pascal’s apologetic scheme that an argument such as the wager may be offered along with more traditional Christian evidences (what Pascal called “Scripture and the rest”).²⁷

NOTES

1. In short, Pascal’s wager argues that the benefits of wagering on belief in theism far outweigh the consequences of agnosticism or unbelief if theism is true. It is wiser, then, to wager on belief. For an excellent introduction to Pascal’s wager see Douglas Groothuis, *On Pascal* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2003), chap. 9.
2. Richard H. Popkin, *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 6, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan Company and Free Press, 1967), s.v. “Pascal, Blaise.”
3. D. G. Preston, *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), s.v. “Pascal, Blaise.”
4. Natural theology refers to obtaining knowledge of God from nature. Pascal believed arguments for God based on natural revelation lack the force and scope required to lead a skeptic to belief in Christ. It is true that such arguments for God do not immediately lead one to Christ, but they are certainly valuable as part of a broader apologetic approach.
5. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin, 1995), frag. 613, 206.
6. *Ibid.*, frag. 149, 46.
7. *Ibid.*, frag. 131, 34.

8. Peter Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal's Pensées Edited, Outlined and Explained* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 55.
9. Thomas V. Morris, *Making Sense of It All: Pascal and the Meaning of Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 129.
10. Bernard Ramm, *Varieties of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1962), 33.
11. See Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, trans. Honor Levi (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 182–92.
12. Douglas Groothuis, "Deposed Royalty: Pascal's Anthropological Argument," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41, 2 (June 1998): 301.
13. Kreeft, 53.
14. Douglas Groothuis, *On Pascal* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2003), 64.
15. Ibid.
16. Douglas Groothuis, *The History of Science and Religion in the Western Tradition: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Gary B. Ferngren (New York: Garland, 2000), s.v. "Blaise Pascal," 93.
17. Groothuis, "Deposed Royalty," 305.
18. Kreeft, 52.
19. Pascal, frag. 130, 32.
20. J. Lataste, transcribed by Richard Giroux, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 11 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911), s.v. "Pascal, Blaise" (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11511a.htm>).
21. "Humanist Manifesto 1," American Humanist Association, <http://www.americanhumanist.org/about/manifesto1.html>.
22. "Humanist Manifesto 2," American Humanist Association, <http://www.americanhumanist.org/about/manifesto2.html>.
23. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 53.
24. For a detailed defense of Lewis's argument see Victor Reppert, *C. S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea: In Defense of the Argument from Reason* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).
25. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Collier Books, 1960), 105.
26. Pascal, frag. 418, 124.