



## The Contemporary Relevance of Pascal

John McDade SJ

---

### Keywords

Blaise Pascal, Jansenism, Augustinian theology, Original Sin

In Scotland, we say that John Knox was the one who put the smile into Calvinism, and you might be interested to know that a partial anagram of Cornelius Jansenius is *sensus Calvinii in ore*: a taste of Calvin in the mouth. But it seems to me proper to remove from this discussion the question of the ‘heretical’ or ‘sectarian’ character of Jansenism. We need to recognize that there are several Jansenisms, and the sort Pascal was in touch with was the spiritual renewal associated with Port-Royal, in which there was a confluence of streams from Jansenius’s own dry, dialectical writings, Saint-Cyran’s more pastoral and softer spirituality, and the works of the Oratorians, Bérulle and Condren.

The master historian of Jansenism, Lucien Ceysens, has shown that Jansenism had a fractious and older twin brother, ‘anti-Jansenism’, an organised programme of vilification right from the start of the Catholic neo-Augustinian revival after Trent. Just as anti-Modernism flows into the definition of Modernism, so anti-Jansenism is partly responsible for the creation of Jansenism. In both instances, the nature of the ‘heresy’ was as much the product of its opponents as the creation of its adherents. Any proper history has to account for the dialectical processes behind the crystallization of both movements. It seems to me that Jansenism was defined principally by its opponents. The Jesuits, of course, were at the heart of anti-Jansenism, portraying as quasi-Calvinist sectarians those conservative Augustinian theologians who took the Church at its word when it said that Augustine’s teaching on grace was Catholic doctrine, and who engaged in a scholarly retrieval of Augustine’s writings, not to marshal the Church in an alien direction, but in order to provide the Church with a solid basis in positive theology for its Conciliar condemnation of the Reformers.

They were not innovators; they saw themselves as bringing before the Church simply what the teaching of its greatest theological

authority was, with the aim of restoring to the Church fidelity and purity of teaching and life. The Augustinianism Pascal was in touch with, and with which he expressed strong sympathy is best understood as a Catholic Tridentine neo-Augustinianism: his writings on grace show his concern with the meaning of Trent's teaching on grace, and he understands himself to be reading it in conformity with Augustine and to differ from what he regarded as Calvinist distortions, principally, the scale of the effects of the fall, and a failure to distinguish between God's 'permitting' and God's 'willing' human perdition. To avoid the overtones of heresy and sectarianism, I shall speak not of Pascal's Jansenism, but of his Augustinianism.

My discussion will be guided by what I take to be an appropriately big question: what kind of account should we hope for in a Christian theology? If theology is done properly, does it weave a seamless, explanatory cloth, a *theory of everything*? Or, again if theology is done properly, will the account necessarily be incomplete, strange, characterised by shadows and obscurities both divine and created: should it properly be ragged at the edges? A strange beginning you might think, but this seems to me the correct kind of question about Pascal. At the birth of the modern age, Pascal gives us a particularly dramatic way of construing the mystery of God, the history of human freedom and the dialectical relationship between them, which, in a neo-Augustinian way, not only accepts the raggedness but uses it positively. How might his *Pensées* speak to the business of doing theology now?<sup>1</sup>

The thesis of Michael Buckley's study, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, is that the problems start when 16th and 17th century theologians no longer take Jesus as central to the definition of 'God'; his place as the primary, and foundational, revelatory locus is taken by the observed order of the world's design. In the same breath, the resources of religious experience are marginalised from the theological enterprise. So, for apologetic reasons, the evidence for the reality of God must be sought in the cosmos, and religious experience is replaced by observation and ratiocination. The quest for God's self-expressiveness – surely the sole basis of any theology – focuses then on the ordered world, and not the Incarnation and the experience of the praying community created by it. 'The origin of modern atheism in the intellectual culture of the West lies thus with the self-alienation of religion itself.'<sup>2</sup> As Fergus Kerr puts it, modern atheism was 'an

<sup>1</sup> References to the *Pensées* are to two editions with different orderings of the text. L refers to the Lafuma edition translated by Krailsheimer in Penguin (1995); S refers to the Sellier edition badly and incompletely translated by H. Levi in Oxford World Classics (OUP, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> M.J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (Yale University Press, 1987), p. 363.

inside job'. Dawkins and his friends may be atheists, but they're *our* atheists – we bred them and they keep feeding off us, tirelessly.

It seems that a philosophical/theological theory of everything ends, hubristically, by marginalising God. Buckley's diagnosis of the problem is anticipated by Pascal: '*Descartes inutile et incertain*' (S445; L887). In conversation, he said: 'I cannot forgive Descartes: in his whole philosophy he would like to do without God; but he could not help allowing him a flick of the fingers to set the world in motion; after that he had no more use for God'.<sup>3</sup> He called Cartesianism 'the Romance of Nature, something like the story of Don Quixote'.<sup>4</sup> Pascal's overall diagnosis is that this comprehensive, unproblematic alignment of God, the world and the mind leads people to think that Christianity is about worshipping 'a God considered to be great, powerful and eternal: this is properly speaking deism, almost as far removed from the Christian religion as atheism. . .' (S690; L449). The indubitable Cartesian self, on whose reality everything can be made secure, cannot, for Pascal, bear the weight of the building that Christianity needs to construct.

He does not think that a comprehensive account of this kind can work because the conditions are not operative which would make it possible. It would mean ignoring the fragmentation of the human self, the fragility of human knowing, the ambiguous character of God's presence in and to the world and the dialectic of selective divine grace and human freedom which conditions everything. Whatever is said has to accommodate these chasms. For Pascal, whatever truth we can come to about God is not antecedent to the historical dialectic of sin, election and medicinal grace but is disclosed only within this history. The truth about God arises only within this complex, jagged human history: '...without Scripture, without original sin, without a necessary mediator, promised and arrived, one cannot absolutely prove God, nor teach good doctrine nor good morality' (S221; L.189). Pascal handles these traditional themes not as conclusions to be reached at the end of a process of reflection, but as foundational axioms which enable you to think properly about God and human beings.

Neither does he think that the account of God's action in grace offered by the Jesuit Molinists can work: their confident assertion of an equilibrium of balanced human selfhood constantly in possession of proximate powers which can activate divine grace, would work fine if it were a description of how we were before human sin began; since then, we are shot through, like silk, with concupiscence. So, we are in no position to think either like the Molinists about grace or like the Cartesians about the world, because of the disturbed history

<sup>3</sup> B. Pascal, *Pensées* (Penguin, 1995), p. 330.

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 331.

of which we are still a part and which we continue to write in time. What we can know, then, is necessarily disjointed; it will be made complete not by thinking longer and harder and better, but by recognizing that the discordances are not temporary gaps but integral elements in an historical drama of offer and refusal.

In other words, in reaction to the Cartesian coherent linear narrative of the mind, the world and God, Pascal responds that to think in this way is to ignore the *caesura* by which humanity continues to divide itself from God – the persisting legacy of concupiscence. Just as importantly, it ignores the fact that God's action in relation to the world also exhibits a *caesura* deriving from the mystery of election and predestination. In relation to God, human beings are in partial shadow; moreover, the light that God casts on this chiaroscuro world is partial and selective. Christ, he says, is redeemer of all, but he is not master of all, as though he could cancel the lines of refusal which human beings speak. God's purposes do not override what created freedom throws up, but correspond to its effects.

Postmodern readers of the *Pensées* point to the instability of meaning and representation which Pascal uncovers. To complement that, and indeed to place Pascal in a more theological context than his commentators often do, I want to draw attention to the way in which, in the Pascalian narrative, the ambiguity of created existence derives from two related *caesurae*: that created by concupiscence and that deriving from the partial light cast by divine grace and election. Henri Gouhier speaks of Pascal's sense of 'an essential ambiguity in created existence resulting from the very finality which gives meaning to creation. Thus it [the ambiguity] is everywhere: in nature, Scripture, history'.<sup>5</sup> The finality, of course, is the Augustinian separation of the two cities: Christ divides between faith and unfaith, and God divides between those to whom he shows mercy and those he consigns to the judgement they bring on themselves. Henri Gouhier is right to say that the ambiguity in all this 'expresses the mystery of predestination which plays the role of universal axiom in the Pascalian vision of the world'.<sup>6</sup>

'Universal axiom' is the right characterisation. It affects the way in which Pascal handles the question raised by classical theism: does the world reveal God? Pascal argues if it did exist to teach human beings about God, divinity would shine through in a clear way. But it doesn't: there is 'neither a total exclusion nor a manifest presence of divinity'; 'everything bears the character of a God who hides himself'. What should a person see in the world? Pascal answers: 'he must not see nothing at all, but he must not see enough to make

<sup>5</sup> H. Gouhier, *Blaise Pascal: Commentaires* (J. Vrin, 1978), p. 196.

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 193–4.

him think he possesses it. For to know that he has lost [something], he must see and not see: and that is precisely the state that nature is in' (S690; L449).

This dialectic of 'seeing and not seeing' reflects both the *caesura* caused by the present frailty of the human mind, and the even darker mystery of the predestination of some to sight and others to blindness. If within the human interpreter, there is the experience of 'seeing and not seeing', within the human community there is a division between those enabled to see and those who cannot see. Pascal puts it in deliberately Scriptural terms:

There is enough light to enlighten the elect and enough darkness to humble them. There is enough darkness to blind the reprobate and enough clarity to condemn them and make them without excuse. (S268; L236)

He argues that if this hidden God had not revealed himself at all, it would have been open to us either to judge that God did not exist at all, or that we are simply unworthy to apprehend God. 'But the fact that he appears sometimes, and not always, removes the ambiguity. If he appears once, he exists forever. (*S'il paraît une fois, il est toujours.*) Thus the only possible conclusion is that God exists *and* that human beings are unworthy of him' (S690; L448). And these two truths are inseparable.

This dialectic pattern of disclosure and hiddenness, related to the effects of sin and a division within humanity of the elect and the reprobate, extends to Pascal's parallel account of God's revelation in Christ. Let us turn to this because the casual theologian might judge that God's revelation in Christ makes things clearer to everyone. By no means. In his 'sweet coming', Christ appears in a way that enables those who seek him to recognise him, and those who do not seek him to 'be deprived of the good they do not want'; 'God tempered the way he would be known ['qualified our knowledge of him': Krailsheimer] so that he gave visible signs of himself to those who seek him and not to those who do not seek him. There is enough light for those who desire to see, and enough obscurity for those of a contrary disposition' (S274; L149). So the dialectic of revelation and hiddenness is proportionate to the division within humanity of those prompted by grace to seek the face of God, and of those who are left to the consequences of their sin.

Revelation in Christ then is partial, and is conditioned by the history of sin. Why does not God appear to everyone including the most hardened? Pascal says because God *does not want to*: God's action is proportionate to the choice that human beings make. Pascal interprets God's hiddenness as the consequence, not of God's transcendent essence, as it is in John of the Cross and the great mystical tradition, but of God's decision deliberately to withhold himself from some.

Medicinal, efficacious grace, the blood of Christ, does not stream through the cosmos bestowing beatitude on everyone. Here you are at the heart of Pascal's Augustinian legacy and its second central axiom: the election of some to beatitude and the abandonment of others to justice because they have chosen so. Leszek Kolakowski says that 'the bulk of the *Pensées* is not recognizably Jansenist and if we were to remove only a small part of it and ignore the author, we would not have a clue strong enough to state that it is a Jansenist's text'.<sup>7</sup> This is true, but the *Pensées* are not intelligible without Pascal's Augustinian account of human life outside grace, the dialectic of the absolute sovereignty of God and the corruption of human beings which is healed only by divine grace.

Pascal says that '*Il faut avoir une pensée de derrière, and juger de tout par là, en parlant comme le peuple*' (S125; L91). I take '*pensée de derrière*', which Krailsheimer translates as 'deeper motives', to mean the 'master thought' of axioms and principles, in the light of which everything is judged. If we try to identify Pascal's '*pensée de derrière*', it can only be an Augustinian version of grace and salvation, a structure of Augustinian axioms which underpins Pascal's handling of religious matters.

If I am right in saying that Pascal's '*pensée de derrière*' is the double *caesura* of inherited concupiscence and limited predestination, then in addition to the existential anxiety he paints for the freethinker lost in the cosmos, there is a more fundamental anxiety surrounding existence: whether election and the grace of perseverance will be available to a person. Hence his advice that everyone in the world is obliged to live in the belief that they are 'of that small number of the elect...and to believe the same of every person on earth, leaving to God the impenetrable secret of the division of the elect from the reprobate' (*Écrits sur la grace*, Treatise, 36). To live 'as though' one may be saved and to aspire to a morally and spiritually perfect life, under the shadow that in the end the grace may not be forthcoming which will effect salvation: that wager casts a deeper shadow than Pascal's better known wager about the existence of God.

What then of revelation? Does not this remove God's hiddenness? Pascal's reply is that the more God becomes revealed, the greater the degree of hiddenness. The fourth letter which Pascal wrote to Mlle Charlotte de Roannez, a young woman thinking of entering the convent at Port-Royal, is a remarkable and surprising account of the progressive disclosure of God in direct proportion to the degree of divine concealment. You should know that it was written after Pascal's niece was healed by the touch of the Sacred Thorn at

<sup>7</sup> L. Kolakowski, *God Owes us Nothing: A Brief Remark on Pascal's Religion and the Spirit of Jansenism* (University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 194.

Port-Royal and that the date of the letter was the anniversary of the day on which the community of Port-Royal established the Institute of the Blessed Sacrament. The importance of this context becomes clear:

There are so few people to whom God makes himself manifest by such extraordinary means [the healing miracle of the Sacred Thorn at Port-Royal] that we should profit from these occasions, since he comes out of his hiding place in nature [*il sort du secret de la nature*] which covers him for no other reason than to stir up our faith to serve him as ardently as we know him with certainty. If God disclosed himself continually to human beings, there would be no merit in believing him; and if he never disclosed himself, there would be little faith. But usually he hides himself, and he only rarely reveals himself to those whom he wants to draw into his service.

He remained hidden under the veil of nature which conceals him from us until the Incarnation; and when he had to appear, he hid himself even more by covering himself with humanity. He was even more recognizable when he was invisible than when he made himself visible. And finally, when he wanted to fulfil the promise he made to the Apostles to remain with us until his final coming, he chose to remain in the most strange and most obscure hiding place of all, the species of the Eucharist. This sacrament is called by St John in the Book of Revelation 'a hidden manna' (2.17); and I think that Isaiah saw him in this condition when he prophesied, 'Truly, you are a hidden God' (45.15). That is the last hiding place where he can be. The veil of nature which covers God has been pierced by several non-believers, who, as St Paul says, 'have recognized an invisible God in visible nature' (Rom 1.20). Heretical Christians have known him through his humanity and adore Jesus Christ, God and man. But to recognize him under the species of bread, that is the distinguishing mark of Catholics alone: we are the only ones whom God enlightens to that extent.

We can add to these considerations the secret of the Spirit of God hidden in Scripture: for there are two complete senses of Scripture, the literal and the mystical, and the Jews, stopping only at the first, do not think there is another sense and do not think to look for it. Similarly, the impious, seeing natural effects, attribute them to nature, without thinking that there is another agent, and, like the Jews, seeing a perfect man in Jesus Christ, do not think to look for another nature: 'We did not think that it was he', as Isaiah says (53.3). Similarly heretics, seeing the perfect appearances of bread, do not think to look there for another substance. All things cover some mystery; all things are the veils which cover God. Christians ought to recognize him in everything. (*Lettre IV à Mlle de Roannez*)

I have already indicated to you the importance of the *caesura* caused by God's selectivity of some to bear the revelation. This is a key text in the Pascalian canon which offers a hermeneutic



of history after humanity begins its history of sin which twists our nature in such a way that God cannot be seen. Yet, in response to our condition, there is a simultaneous process of divine self-disclosure in direct proportion to hiddenness whereby God enables some to come to faith in him. The key is that when there is a self-revelation of God, there is in the same moment a self-concealment. In this letter, Pascal affirms:

- God hides himself and discloses himself under the veil of nature where a limited number of pagans have known how to discover him.
- God hides himself and discloses himself in Scripture in which Jews were able to discover him, but not pagans.
- God hides himself more deeply in the Incarnation and discloses himself; there neither pagans nor Jews have recognised God in the humanity of Christ; this only Christians can do.
- God hides himself and discloses himself in the Eucharistic species; Christian heretics do not recognise him under the species of bread, that is proper to Catholics alone.<sup>8</sup>

I take this passage to be one of the clearest expositions of Pascal's Augustinian '*pensée de derrière*', by which he judges everything. The drama is presented from the side of God, in a downward movement of partial, selective, hidden disclosure, culminating in the Eucharistic species, and the consequent restriction of those who come to know God. Here God is known, not through the reason but through the heart, and Pascal's writings on the primacy of '*le coeur*' over '*l'esprit*' need to be read, not as distinguishing 'feeling' from 'thinking', but rather the attentive presence of *intellectus* as opposed to *ratio*. Pascal's treatment of the revelation of the *Deus absconditus* needs to be read in the light of the Augustinian, devotional and sacramental aspects expressed in this letter.

At this point, you might feel that it is right to turn to the obverse of this movement, that of humanity in its problematic relationship to this selective self-revelation of God. Here you may well feel that we are on more familiar territory. Those wonderful sections of the *Pensées* that everyone reads as existential cameos of the human condition is Pascal '*parlant comme le peuple*', illustrating Augustinian teachings in an untechnical and popular way, as he had done in matters of grace and moral teachings in the *Lettres Provinciales*. Pascal's analysis of boredom and diversion is designed to open the eyes of free-thinkers to what Pascal takes to be the Catholic/Augustinian teaching about the way we are when we are without God. 'Man is so unhappy that

<sup>8</sup> Cf., Gouhier, *op. cit.*, p. 188ff.



he would be bored even if he had no cause for boredom...’ (S168; L136). In place of classical theistic apologetics, Pascal turns to psychology, anthropology, to the instability of what we might know, to the character of the interpreting subject as a ‘*monstre épouvantable*’, a fluctuating, unstable centre of fragmentary knowledge and feeling.

Open your eyes to the disorder, Pascal is saying, see how we are ‘lost in the cosmos’, caught between two infinities beyond our grasp, the infinitely vast and the infinitely miniscule. It is beyond our reason to situate ourselves in a world whose physical extremes we cannot determine, and we are so shot through with instability, consistently unable to think the way we want to think and feel the way we want to feel, that only an *inexplicable* account can do justice to the way we are, and Pascal does not shirk from pointing us towards the abyss.

Filleau de la Chaise’s testimony is important here: in his report of the long lecture Pascal gave at Port-Royal in 1658 of his projected Apology for Christianity directed at free-thinkers – sections of the *Pensées* are drafts of this Apology – he says that Pascal ‘wanted to recall men to their hearts, that they should start by getting to know themselves’. Everyone, he says, will be ‘terrified by what he has discovered in himself and will see himself as a monstrous collection of incongruous parts’, and will not be able to doubt that ‘a nature so full of contradictions (*contrariétés*), both double and unique, as he feels, could be a simple effect of chance, or have come as it is from the hands of its author’. Human nature will be felt to be so problematic that it can only be explained, or better, *experienced*, in ways which make the doctrine of original sin the only adequate account. Pascal acknowledges the offence of this doctrine to reason; but how can reason be a qualified judge of the matter, since its operations are impaired precisely by our fallen condition? If the eyes of everyone are defective, how could we tell? We are, Pascal thinks, inexplicable without original sin, but this unreasonable doctrine is needed if we are to do justice to the way we are:

You should therefore not reproach me for the unreasonable nature of this doctrine, because I put it forward as being unreasonable. But this folly is wiser than all the wisdom of human beings, *sapientius est hominibus* (I Cor 1.25). For without that what will we say that Man is? His whole condition depends on this imperceptible point. And how could it be perceived by our reason, because it is a thing contrary to our reason, and reason, far from discovering it by its own methods, draws back from it when presented with it? (S574; L695)

It is an astonishing thing that the mystery which is most distant from our knowledge, that of the transmission of sin, is a thing without which we can have no knowledge of ourselves. Because there can be no doubt that nothing shocks our reason more than to say that the sin of the first man made guilty those who, so far from that source,

seem incapable of taking part in it. This contamination seems not only impossible to us, but also quite unjust. For what is more contrary to the laws of our wretched justice than eternally to damn a child with no will of its own for a sin in which the child had so small a part to play that it was committed six thousand years before the child came into existence? Certainly nothing shocks us more deeply than this doctrine. Nevertheless, without this most incomprehensible of all mysteries we are incomprehensible to ourselves. The knot of our condition was twisted and turned in that abyss, so that man is more inconceivable without this mystery than this mystery is conceivable to man. (S.164; L131)

It is no surprise then that the way he handles his material exhibits a disruptive pattern which, in the *Pensées*, he describes as '*Renversement continuel de pour et contre*' (S127). In his early *Entretien avec M.de Sacy*, he discusses 'the two greatest apologists for the two most famous philosophical sects in the world, the only ones based on reason'. (You may be surprised to find that they are identified as Epictetus and Montaigne.) Typologically, they represent the conviction that there is a God, the sovereign good to whom we ought to relate, and the contradictory insight that we cannot know God's existence sufficiently clearly to be able to locate the sovereign good in him. Can both be right? Yes, says Pascal, both are correct, but as they stand they are mutually exclusive. What he wants to do is show that they make sense only when they are set in an Augustinian framework. Their truth is apportioned to the *deux états* of history, before and after the Fall. Their error is in not seeing that the optimistic account of human *grandeur* belongs to our initial state, and the pessimistic account of human *misère* to our present condition:

It seems to me that the source of the errors of these two sects is not to have known that the condition of man at present differs from that when he was created, so that one [Epictetus], noting some traces of his first greatness, ignoring his corruption, treated nature as healthy and in no need of a healer, which leads to the summit of pride; while the other [Montaigne], experiencing our present misery and ignoring our initial dignity, treats nature as necessarily infirm and beyond repair, which makes him despair of reaching a true good . . . .

They cannot stand alone, because of their faults, nor can they be united because of the opposition between them, and in this way they cancel each other out and annihilate one another (*ils se brisent et s'anéantissent*) to make room for the truth of the Gospel. It is this which harmonises (*accorde*) the contradictions by a completely divine art, and uniting what is true and casting aside what is false, it makes of them a truly divine wisdom in which those opposites which were incompatible in human teachings are brought into agreement (*s'accordent*) . . . . Faith teaches us to attribute them [the contradictory truths] to different subjects: all that is weak belongs to nature, all that is strong belongs to grace. That is the new and astonishing union which

God alone can teach and which he alone can bring about, and which is only an image and effect of the ineffable union of two natures in the one person of a Man-God.<sup>9</sup>

This is a text which aims at progressive illumination: his first strategy is to separate Epictetus and Montaigne according to the classical Augustinian axiom of the two states of humanity. This corresponds to a distinction between the moral evils of 'pride' and 'despair' – corresponding, of course, to the '*grandeur*' and '*misère*' of our fallen condition. Then, from a perspective of the instability of meanings which 'annihilate each other', he presents the gospel and divine wisdom as the sole scheme which can affirm, restore and accommodate them in a tensive structure, without cancelling them out. Fragmentation and semantic instability are retained, not cancelled. These contradictory fundamental propositions can hang together, within a revelatory *Aufhebung*. He then shifts from the relation of contradictory propositions to the relation of grace and nature in our present state. Finally, he points to the union of the natures in Christ. In fact the text can be read in a 'downward' movement, from the perfect synergy of the divine Logos and the human nature in Christ to the synergy of efficacious grace in empowering the fallen will, to our present dislocated experience of ourselves outside the action of grace. Surely what he is doing here is what is signalled in *Pensée* 36, which, if it is not read in the light of these concerns, remains a *ferverino*:

Not only do we not know God except through Jesus Christ, but we do not know ourselves except through Jesus Christ. We know life, death, only through Jesus Christ. Outside Jesus Christ, we know neither what our life is, nor what our death is, nor what God is, nor what we ourselves are. (S36; L417)

The arts of the mind for Pascal are those in which duality, diversity, contradiction, antithesis and instability are acknowledged, retained and directed towards the one centre, Jesus Christ, who is the *telos* of the fragmented multiplicity of fallen created existence. His is the order of charity, which Pascal distinguishes from the order of *esprit* which proceeds by proofs and demonstrations: hence the failure of Cartesianism (S339; L308). The procedure proper to the order of charity, he says, 'consists principally in digressions on each point which relates to the end, so that this shall be kept always in sight' (S329; L298). (It is interesting that the start of this sentence invokes Augustine as an exponent of this approach.) Hence theology, keeping an eye always on the end, the *telos* that is Jesus Christ, can elaborate asymmetrical digressions on the 'disproportions' of our condition, and indeed it must do so if it is to be done properly, because we

<sup>9</sup> 'Entretien avec M.de Sacy, 32–4' in B. Pascal, *Œuvres Complètes* III, ed. J. Mesnard (Desclée de Brouwer, 1991), pp. 152–4.

are in no position to establish a measured proportion at the level of knowledge between God, the world and ourselves.

Pascal incorporates into his narrative elements of instability, fluctuation of meaning, dark holes and surds like original sin, inescapable horizons of selective grace and predestination, divine concealment, existential uncertainty; and he makes them work positively in the overall scheme. It is as though he places a shifting, variable, grid over human life which allows for the uncertainty that seems to characterise our '*clair-obscur*' world. And, of course, when it hits that grid, the divine light is also, analogously, partial, unsteady and wavering.

When Jansenius wrote that 'theology is a discipline of memory, and not of understanding (*entendement*)'<sup>10</sup>, he was pointing theologians towards the authority of the Fathers over the work of clever innovators like Lessius and his fellow Jesuits. But he was also curtailing and defining the range of explanation proper to theology. If several currents in postmodernism seem to be freeing us today from the Enlightenment agenda, it is instructive to look at a writer who, at the birth of modern rationalistic explanation in religion, diagnosed the methodological problem more acutely than most, anticipated remarkably some modern treatments of the instability of the self and its language, recognized that dialectic and contradictions are a necessary part of an adequate theological account, and outlined an approach, rooted in the categories of Augustinian theology, which, in order to be adequate, wove a deliberately rough cloth.

*John McDade SJ*

*Principal*

*Heythrop College*

*Kensington Square*

*London W8 5HQ*

*Email: j.mcdade@heythrop.ac.uk*

<sup>10</sup> J. Orcibal, *Jansénius d'Ypres (1585–1638)* (Etudes augustiniennes, 1989), p. 295.