Russell and Nietzsche contra Pascal : a famous and partial ‘History of philosophy’.

Camille Akmut

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Abstract

Bertrand Russell had little love for Pascal – this should be no secret : In *A History of Western Philosophy*, Nietzsche became the ‘anti-Pascal’. A role too perfect for Nietzsche whose relationships with the latter were complex (“I don’t read Pascal, I love him...”, a regular companion).

Introduction

From strange affection, to open strong dislike : such are some of the extremes of the reception of Pascal, who seems to rarely leave anyone cold who reads him.

And, then there is total dismissal yet...

In our context, i.e. the sociology of computer science and technology, Russell plays an important role in the history of Pascal's reception :

This distinguished logician met the creator of 'computers'-turned philosopher with much disapproval; as an unwanted, and denied ancestor.

I - A 'History of philosophy' jumps over a philosopher...

Perhaps the most famous ignorance of Pascal is Russell's.

In his book, the popular *A History of Western Philosophy* there was no place for him : between Descartes and Leibniz, only Spinoza and no one else!

(The table of contents is particularly informative in this regard.)

MODERN PHILOSOPHY

Part I

From the Renaissance to Hume

I	General Characteristics	511
II	The Italian Renaissance	516
III	Machiavelli	525
IV	Erasmus and More	533
V	The Reformation and Counter-Reformation	544
VI	The Rise of Science	547
VII	Francis Bacon	563
VIII	Hobbes's Leviathan	568
IX	Descartes	580
X	Spinoza	592
XI	Leibniz	604

Pascal had never been.

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To Leibniz Russell had dedicated a monograph in his younger years;

Descartes is welcome with open arms :

“Descartes is usually considered the founder of modern philosophy,
and, I think, rightly” — Russell commented.

Yet Pascal had not been entirely erased from this history of philosophy :
He appears in four places, in chapters other than his (non-existent) own;
Of which the following is the most open in terms of Russell’s own assessment
:

“It must be admitted that there is a certain type of Christian ethic
to which Nietzsche’s strictures can be justly applied. Pascal and
Dostoevsky—his own illustrations—have both something abject in their
virtue. Pascal sacrificed his magnificent mathematical intellect to
his God, thereby attributing to Him a barbarity which was a cosmic
enlargement of Pascal’s morbid mental tortures. ...”

Pascal : rejected, because he resembled them so, and abandoned them so.

II - Nietzsche : contra, and with Pascal?

It would be coming closer to the truth to say that the habitual relationships
between Nietzsche and, the dead, Pascal were ones of intellectual exchange :

Nietzsche found useful material in Pascal’s work, based on which he ex-
pounded his own, analogous, ideas.

“The Man of science is quite the paradox (...)

It would be doing the great mass of scholars a great[er] honor to
view them as peasants/farmers [“Ackerbauer”] (...)

Pascal said that people go about their business, and their science
eagerly in order to avoid the questions that solitude would otherwise

raise in them, which is to say the [big, old ones] : Where From? How?

And, for what Purpose?

But, even more surprising is that the very next questions they should be asking aren't [asked], this is to say : Why all this work? Why the urgency? The giddiness, the frenzy? Is it perhaps to pay [rent and such] ["Broderwerb"]?"

In fact Nietzsche seemed to have found this particular thought of Pascal so inspiring that it can be found both in his notes¹, and his published work, the first part of *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*², in re-worked form.

Five years later, Pascal was still on Nietzsche's mind : his thoughts on the "two (kinds of) minds" were this time an object of preoccupation.³

Note Nietzsche is translating from the 'Pensees', which he rarely mentions explicitly, so we do it for him here.

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Yet there were the more critical passages too, of course :

In particular *Morgenröthe* / *Dawn* was full of Pascal references (being itself a collection of 'thoughts' on moralism, its prejudices)...

"Doubt of doubt. "What marvelous pillow doubt is to a solid mind!"

This Montaigne [quote] had always [irritated] Pascal, who more than anyone had needed a good pillow."

(*Morgenröthe*, 46)

"Christianity has the instincts of a hunter when it comes to all those who - somehow - may be brought to despair. Behind them it always hides, and waits." [Pascal as an example]

¹*Nachgelassene Fragmente*, 28, 1873, p. 613.

²P. 203.

³Cf. *Nachgelassene Fragmente...*, 36, 1878, p. 572.

(*Morgenröthe* 65)

In 79, Nietzsche (again without citing the *Pensees*) refers to Pascal's thought on the "shameful I".

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And, finally there's the passage from 'Why I'm so smart' where Nietzsche in a way sums up his ambivalent attitudes towards Pascal :

"I don't just read Pascal, I LOVE him... as the greatest [most informative] victim of Christianity. [killed slowly, first physically, then psychologically]"

(*Ecce Homo*, p. 285)

III - An uncertain Nietzsche "quote"

From the *History of Western Philosophy*, still :

"a very eloquent passage about Pascal (...) deserves quotation, because it shows Nietzsche's objections to Christianity at their best: "What is it that we combat in Christianity? (...): that gruesome way of perishing, of which Pascal is the most famous example.""

The aristocratic B. Russell does not cite a source for this Nietzsche-attributed writing;

We can speculate, but not for long : (Did Russell read German?) Was this a translation of his own?

Its unfortunate origin seems to have been for Russell the highly controversial, partly contested so-called 'Will to Power' volume — as it is known in English — whose Ludovici translation (this other aristocrat of the melancholic kind) corresponds word for word to that rendered here.¹

¹Note there is a similar, but diverging, passage in *Der Antichrist* however. (right at the beginning)

Bibliography, partial

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- ""The Will To Power"". Trans. Ludovici. In : Levy (ed.) Complete works