Pascal and Spinoza on Salvation: Two Views of the Thinking Reed

"Man is but a reed, the weakest in nature, but a thinking reed"

— Pensees

Margaret D. Wilson

I'm certainly extremely honored to give the keynote talk today. I was a little concerned whether someone in a field as esoteric, one could say academic, as early modern Western philosophy, would have something to say that would be appropriate for an occasion of this nature, but Dr. Holden felt that this was a good time to have an address on a central humanistic issue, and at least I think this qualifies as that.

The seventeenth century is generally regarded as the beginning of the modern era in the history of philosophy. Among the reasons for this designation are the strong new emphasis on the theory of knowledge that characterizes the period, together with the wide acceptance among philosophers and scientists of the mechanistic conception of nature.

While theistic themes remain very prominent in seventeenth century philosophy, views of the relations between God and human life often seem subordinate to scientific or epistemological purposes.

There are, however, two major seventeenth century philosophers whose central concern is human salvation — that is, achieving the right relation with the divine — and who seek to illuminate the intertwined roles of reason and passion in approaching this goal. Both these philosophers are deeply original.

> *"Cheerfulness," Spinoza tells us, "can never be excessive."*

Their conceptions of God, of the human condition, and of salvation itself, are radically different. Perhaps because they stand in essentially different philosophical traditions, and because their works demand quite different techniques of philosophical study, they are not often considered together.

Margaret D. Wilson (center) PhD '65, GSAS Centennial Medalist (1989), Professor of Philosophy, Princeton University.

Today, I would like to present them in relation to each other, with emphasis on both affinities and radical contrasts between some of their central commitments. There is one similarity between Pascal and Spinoza that emerges on the briefest glance at their biographical data, namely their life spans are almost the same, and notably short. Blaise Pascal, the earlier born of the two, lived from 1623 to 1662 in France. He died in Paris at the age of only 39. Benedict Spinoza was born in Amsterdam in 1632, and died in The Hague in 1677 at the age of 44. As the periods of their lives virtually dictated, both were exposed to the scientific, mathematical, and rationalist philosophical thought of Descartes, whose most influential works were published in the late 1630s and early '40s.

Both shared Descartes' profound interest in mathematics and physics. Pascal, like Descartes, was a creative contributor in these areas and, indeed, a mathematical genius. Spinoza had plans for scientific works of his own, but never completed them. They responded very differently to Descartes' metaphysics and his claims to base his system on "clear and distinct" perceptions of reason, thus providing a "firm and permanent foundation" for human science. Although Pascal had respect for reason, he considered the Cartesian conception of firm epistemological foundations quite illusory. In addition, and relatedly, he had little interest in speculative, rationalist metaphysics. Spinoza, on the other hand, accepted with great enthusiasm both Descartes' conception of ultimate rational insights and his metaphysical ambitions, although Spinoza considered the metaphysical and epistemological system Descartes had arrived at to be mistaken in fundamental and far reaching ways.

Both Pascal and Spinoza were subject to strong, though very different, religious influences, which I will sketch in a little detail shortly. There were also other similarities in their personal lives. Both came from prosperous families and had excellent educations; both lost their mothers at early ages; both participated vigorously in major theological and political controversies of their place and time; and both struggled with illness and suffering through many years of their brief but productive lives. I mention these personal factors partly as matters of general interest, but partly also because some of them, particularly the problem of ill health, may conceivably have had an effect on the views I want to discuss.

Pascal was born into a Catholic family. His father was a lawyer and a prominent public official. The family's

religious practices were apparently normally pious but unremarkable until Pascal was in his early 20s. At this time the Pascals came under the influence of the reformist and very controversial, indeed, embattled, Jansenist sect. This influence led to greatly intensified religious interest and religious dedication, particularly in the case of Blaise Pascal and one of his two sisters. In 1654 Pascal had a sudden and profound religious experience involving a vision of Jesus Christ. His most famous work, known simply as *Thoughts* or *Pensees,* consists largely of notes intended as a defense for Christianity.

Spinoza was born into an orthodox Jewish family of Portugese descent. His father was a successful merchant. He had a traditional Jewish education, which included study of the major Jewish scholastic philosophers. Independently of this training, he also began to learn Latin and study Descartes and other contemporary scientists. Like Pascal's, Spinoza's life underwent a major change of a religious nature when he was a little over 20, but it was a change of a very different sort. Spinoza was excommunicated from the Amsterdam synagogue because of his growing reputation as a free thinker and heretic. Subsequently he developed a philosophical system which, while certainly religious in fundamental respects, earned him a wide and lasting reputation as an atheist. Spinoza's major work, of which the full title is *The Ethics: Demonstrated in the Geometrical Order,* was like Pascal's, published only after his death. I've already mentioned that Pascal's *Pensees* is essentially a collection of notes. The text takes the form of a book-length series of numbered passages, a few going on for pages, many consisting of a paragraph or two, many just a few lines, sometimes in truncated, poem-like or list-like form.

Consider, by contrast, Spinoza's *Ethics,* which is presented almost entirely according to the rigorous, Euclidian organization promised by his subtitle. There are numbered definitions, axioms, and theorems or propositions, corollaries, postulates, lemmata, and scholia. Instead of terms like "line" and "angle," however, the definienda of Spinoza's *Ethics* include such concepts as substance, God, idea, emotion, good, and bad. The axioms include, to mention two of the shorter examples, "a true idea must agree with that of which it is the idea," and "man thinks."

Perhaps one should not try to make too much of the wonderful contrast between Pascal's unique mode of expression and Spinoza's. After all, Spinoza did choose the geometrical mode as the final form of exposition for his system, very likely with the intention of matching form to content in certain respects. But we do not know whether Pascal would have worked his "thoughts" into a more conventional form had he lived longer. Still, the contrast of forms certainly does reflect, in a rather fascinating way, substantive contrast in philosophical views.

Both philosophers also stress that as finite and dependent beings, we are subject to endless external emotional influences and disturbances. These perturb our reason and constantly affect our state of mind, our sense of pleasure and misery, in ways we may be powerless to control.

Spinoza conceives the world as a rationally ordered, quasi deductive system. He holds that each of our individual minds is naturally suited and internally driven to understand clearly and distinctly at least the principles of the system of which each mind is a part. In grasping the principles, our mind is also able to deduce at least some of the logical or metaphysical consequences, the true connection of things.

Pascal, on the other hand, emphasizes the constantly shifting perspectives of human cognition, the severe limitations of our reason, and our inability ever to arrive at final knowledge of first principles of things. Just as Spinoza's peculiar world view is appropriately set forth in the form of linear deductive proofs from supposedly evident axioms, so Pascal's is appropriately communicated in the unsystematic, suggestive, mutually correcting fragments in which it happens to have come down to us.

Both Pascal and Spinoza express in their writings a strong sense of urgency about finding the correct values and commitment in life, about being saved, together with an implicit conviction that there is a unique and universal right answer to be found. In an early work, *The Treatise on the Improvement of the Understanding,* Spinoza describes the beginnings of his search for a "new principle" that would enable him to enjoy, as he says, continuous, supreme, and unending happiness. He observed that he found himself in great peril, "like a sick man struggling with a deadly disease," once he realized that fame, riches, and sensual pleasure, the goods commonly sought by men, could provide no lasting satisfaction of this desire. Such lasting satisfaction, he came to see, could "arise only from love toward a thing eternal and infinite that feeds the mind wholly with joy and is itself unmingled with any sadness." This, Spinoza says, we must seek with all our strength as the sick man struggles to find a remedy before death is upon him.

Pascal says man tries in vain to fill his craving for happiness in everything around him, "seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and eternal object." In another *pense* Pascal tersely comments, "by not worshiping the true principle, you are lost."

Spinoza and Pascal seem to agree then that the normal human condition is one of vanity and peril. They agree that every effort should be bent on seeking the true principle that will provide lasting happiness, and that only a thing infinite and eternal will satisfy this deep need. Unsurprisingly, each of them identifies this infinite and eternal object as God.

In a moment, I will examine some of the more specific similarities and some of the radical differences between Pascal's and Spinoza's portrayal of the human condition and of the nature and the grounds of human salvation. First, though, let me underscore the major contrast that exists between their specific conceptions of God.

Pascal's conception is a very much traditional scripture-based Judeo-

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Christian conception. For Pascal, God is an infinite person, distinct from and transcendent of, but acting in, the physical world that he created. Christ is the mediator between man and God, between the finite and the infinite, and

> ***" ...all our dignity consists in thought.... Let us then strive to think well. That is the basic principle of morality."***
> ***—Pascal***

the symbol of our dual nature as angel and beast; as formerly happy, namely before the fall of Adam, and still potentially happy, but as currently unhappy or wretched. We can reach God only by faith and through the gift of grace, not through our natural powers.

Spinoza, on the other hand, retains a radically nontradtional conception of God, developed from the very beginning of *The Ethics,* even though many of the basic concepts derive from traditional and Cartesian theological metaphysics. For Spinoza, God is infinite and eternal and exists by his own nature, and that is traditional. But Spinoza argues that God is all there is, God and nature, properly understood, are one and the same infinite and eternal being. God's infinite nature is equally expressed by or conceived under the distinct but mutually corresponding infinite "attributes" of thought and extension, of which human minds and bodies are determinate aspects or parts. And this is not traditional. It is an extreme form of monism and also a form of panpsychism, since the attribute of thought expresses the whole essence of God, and, therefore, for every body there is an appropriate "mind."

Every effort is made by Spinoza to avoid anthropomorphizing God. He regards will and purpose as anthropomorphic concepts and denies them of God. Creation he portrays as a blind and necessary sequence of particular things from the essence of God. Furthermore, he maintains a thoroughgoing and rigorous connection of causes throughout nature. Absolutely everything has a necessitating cause. There is no free will in human beings.

This striking contrast in theological commitments forms the background of the main comparisons I want to draw between Pascal and Spinoza. What I want to focus on though, are their respective conceptions of the perilous situation of man in nature, of the correct or authentic reaction of the rational emotional human being to this situation, and of the way to salvation from it.

At the heart of both Pascal's and Spinoza's conceptions of the situation of man in nature is the contrast between man as a finite being with strong egoistic drives, but brief duration and limited powers, and nature as vast, all powerful, limitless, infinite, and completely incommensurable with human purposes. The contrast may seem almost obvious today, but it did involve a major departure from most Greek and medieval thought. It reflects the new Renaissance and Cartesian conception of the universe as infinitely vast and blindly or mechanistically ordered.

Both philosophers maintain that this contrast between our finitude and the infinity of nature implies limitations in our ability to understand physical things, including ourselves. Pascal indicates that all things in nature are connected in such a way that to understand fully any particular individual thing, we would have to understand the whole of nature in its infinite extent and complexity. We would need infinite minds. Pascal writes: "How could a part possibly know the whole? But perhaps man will aspire to know at least the parts to which he bears some proportion. But the parts of the world are all so related and linked together that I think it is impossible to know one without the other and without the whole." Spinoza similarly stresses that considered as finite dependent beings, interacting with many external things, we are restricted to what he calls inadequate conceptions, perceptions that are not clear and distinct. "When the human mind perceives things after the common order of nature [that is, when we are externally affected by things, notably through our senses] it does not have an adequate knowledge of itself nor of its body, nor of external bodies, but only a confused and fragmentary knowledge."

Both philosophers also stress that as finite and dependent beings, we are subject to endless external emotional influences and disturbances. These perturb our reason and constantly affect our state of mind, our sense of pleasure and misery, in ways we may be powerless to control or even to understand. To this extent, it is part of human nature to be "wretched," as Pascal often puts it, or to be subject to the "bondage" of the emotions and of inadequate understanding, in the terminology favored by Spinoza. At the same time, both philosophers stress that it is also part of man's nature to exercise reason. In Pascal's words, human greatness consists in reason and consciousness. At least to a degree, reasons sets us apart from and above the tremendous forces of nature to which we are subject. In a famous and beautiful passage Pascal writes: "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 vapor, 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. Thus all our dignity consists in thought. It is on thought that we must depend for our recovery, not on space and time which we could never fill. Let us then strive to think well. That is the basic principle of morality."

Spinoza, identifying the universe with God and regarding it as thinking

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throughout, would never say simply that man is greater than nature. What he does say, though, is that human reason and higher consciousness give us the ability to transcend, to some degree, "the common order of nature," our daily immersion in the flux of external

impinging causes. Our reason is also evidently superior to the thought possessed by other finite things.
Spinoza also partly echoes Pascal's observation about the basic principle of morality. He writes: "The endeavor to understand according to reason is the primary and only basis of virtue."

Up to now, I've put more emphasis on the similarities of outlook between Spinoza and Pascal than on their philosophical differences. But it is the differences that ultimately seem to me more interesting, and it is these that I mainly want to explore in the remainder of this talk. In this discussion, I'm going to focus on three topics. First, the two philosophers' essentially opposite views concerning the power of our reason to remove us from the state of wretchedness or bondage; second, the different conceptions of happiness or salvation that accompany their respective views on the role of reason; and finally, a related opposition concerning the role and appropriateness of the negative emotion of fear, specifically the fear of death, in human life.

For Pascal, the ever present threat of death or annihilation provides the inescapable background for the problem of salvation. It is death above all that we must be saved from. He writes: "One need not have the most elevated soul to understand that there is not here true and solid satisfaction, that all our pleasures are but vanity, that our hardships are infinite, and that finally death, which threatens us at every moment, must infallibly place us in a few years in the horrible necessity of being eternally either nullified or unhappy." The only possibility of escaping death lies ultimately in faith in God, and indeed, in faith through God's grace, since any efforts of our own must fall short of putting us in that state of faith which is prerequisite for achieving eternal life.

What role, then, is reasoning to play for us, according to Pascal? One thing is certain, Pascal does not have in mind the rational demonstrations of God's existence put forward by Descartes, Spinoza, and many others. He regards such efforts as altogether futile for any serious human purpose. Nor do I think he particularly has in mind the notorious logic of his famous "wager," according to which it is only reasonable to bet on God's existence, staking our finite earthly lives on the possible gain of "an infinity of an infinitely happy life."

The role of reason as Pascal sees it is primarily that of revealing our limitations and helplessness, including the limitations and ultimate helplessness of reason itself. For all his celebration in the *Pensees* of the greatness of human reason, Pascal never completely loses sight of the idea that reason is frail, limited, and ultimately unable to make us at home in the universe, or to answer the root questions about our existence. Reason cannot directly lead us to God or achieve the happiness or salvation that we seek. Its role is to reveal to us our natural weakness, leading us to see that the only solution to the problem of existence is nonrational faith in the Biblical God.

> ***"When I consider the brief span of my life, absorbed into the eternity which comes before and after, the small space I occupy and which I see swallowed up in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I know nothing, and which know nothing of me, I take fright."***
>
> ***—Pascal***

A central and mediating factor in this transition, according to Pascal, is the reaction of fear, or dread, or terror, that the perception of our extreme limitations creates. Pascal sees us as literally caught in the middle. We are suspended, he says, between two abysses: the abyss of the infinitely great, and the abyss of the infinitely small (which was also a new conception in post-Renaissance thought). "Contemplating the whole of nature in her full and lofty majesty," he says, "we realize the earth is a mere speck compared to the vast orbit described by the sun, [while] this vast orbit itself is no more than the tiniest point compared to that described by the stars revolving in the firmament." Finally, "the whole visible world is only an imperceptible dot in nature's ample bosom," he says. "No idea comes near it, it is no good inflating our conceptions beyond imaginable space, we only bring forth atoms compared to the reality of things." That's the abyss of the infinitely great. On the other side lies the abyss of the infinitely small. Considering the smallest thing we know, we must conceive it to contain "an immensity of nature," "an infinity of universes, as astounding in their minuteness, as the others in their amplitude." Pascal concludes, "What is man in nature? A nothing compared with the infinite, a whole compared to the nothing, infinitely remote from an understanding of the extremes. The end of things and their principles are unattainably hidden from him in their impenetrable mystery. What else can he do then but perceive some semblance of the middle of things, eternally hopeless of knowing their principles or their end."

According to Pascal, our physical state of intermediacy has epistemological implications. Physically in the universe, and also as knowing beings, we have no "fixed point." We are "incapable of certain knowledge or absolute ignorance. We are floating in a medium of vast extent, always drifting uncertainly, blown to and fro. Whenever we think we have a fixed point to which we think we can cling and make fast, it shifts and leaves us behind. Nothing stands still for us." In Pascal's view, the accurate assessment of our physical and epistemological status provokes one emotion, fear or dread. Here is one more quotation: "When I consider the brief span of my life, absorbed into the eternity which comes before and after, the small space I occupy and which I see swallowed up in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I know nothing, and which know nothing of me, I take fright." He also writes, "The silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me." Pascal maintains that this true view of the human situation is intolerable to people. As a result, they form many attachments and addictions to divert themselves from thinking about it, and particularly the temporal limitation of mortality. And here is a quotation that is in fact one of my favorites: "We run heedlessly into the abyss after putting something in front of us to stop us seeing it."

Pascal's favorite example of diversions include hunting and gambling,

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but at times it almost seems that he regards almost all normal human activities as falling within this category. In general our efforts to distract ourselves from our grim fate constitute unproductive self-deception. It's better that we keep a firm view of our real situation and deal with it by ultimate religious commitment, the only true realistic solution.

Pascal's strictures on the ability of finite creatures to deal cognitively with infinite reality are applied even more strongly when it comes to knowledge of God. God, he says, is infinitely beyond our comprehension: We can have no rational knowledge of either His existence or nature, but must rely on faith and revelation. Pascal also remarks that even if philosophers were successful in providing a rational proof of the existence of God, the deity thus established would be irrelevant, presumably because he would be an abstractly conceived entity, a mere first mover, insufficient to answer to the terror of human existence.

Spinoza's philosophy provides a quite different atmosphere. This point can made succinctly by quoting just one theorem from one of the later parts of *The Ethics*. "Cheerfulness," Spinoza tells us, "can never be excessive." That is, you cannot be excessively cheerful no matter how cheerful you are. An underlying reason for this difference of outlook is, I think, found in the fact that Spinoza does not consider finitude, not even the finitude of our lifespans, as intrinsically frightening once a sound, rational perspective on reality is attained. And this fact, in turn, has an underlying explanation in Spinoza's thought. Unlike Pascal, Spinoza believes that our reason is capable both of discovering first principles, and thereby of providing us with a fixed point in the universe. It is capable, in fact, of providing knowledge of God, of God's existence and nature. "The human mind," Spinoza writes, "has adequate knowledge of the eternal and infinite essence of God." Further, as we mature in our intellectual efforts, Spinoza holds, we are able to relate more and more things to our knowledge of God, that is, God or nature. We come more and more to see the world he says, under the aspect of eternity, which is the natural perspective of rational understanding. And this is to say, in part, that we see more and more things in their necessary connections with the fixed and common principles that reason reveals to us. This progress in our understanding of the world includes, as an important component, increased insight into ourselves, our passions, and our situation in nature. This self-understanding, in turn, makes its contribution to our transition from bondage to freedom, for it brings with it a substantial control over the negative affects or emotions. "A passion," Spinoza writes, "ceases to be a passion as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it."

> ***"The principle that guides me and shapes my attitude to life is this: No deity or anyone else but the envious, takes pleasure in my weakness and misfortune..."***
>
> ***—Spinoza***

Fear of death is largely banished as a bad, unnecessary, and inappropriate emotion. It is dismissed as the result of mere inadequate and immature understanding of ourselves and our relations to infinite nature. Rational understanding itself brings salvation directly, according to Spinoza's philosophy. As we come to know things under the aspect of eternity, and reduce to a large degree the sway of our passive emotions over us, we experience our highest state of joy, which Spinoza alternately refers to as "contentment in oneself" or "the intellectual love of God." This state can be achieved in our present life. It doesn't strictly presuppose redemption from death in the sense that St. Paul, Pascal, and other more traditional religious thinkers had in mind. But in as much as it involves us in the perspective of eternity in a very intellectual way, it undoubtedly has kinship with more traditional notions of salvation as eternal life or immortality.

Pascal believes that a correct and reasonable perception of our position in the universe naturally and appropriately produces terror. This reaction is connected with the impossibility of firm knowledge of either first principles or "extremes": the incomputability of our natural existence in terms of reason and purpose, and with the inevitability of death. As he sometimes remarks, the world is a dungeon in which we are isolated; a permanent death sentence may well be passed on us. We must lay aside our diversions, confront our rationally based fear, and then seek God through faith.

Spinoza would regard Pascal's outlook as unenlightened, morbid, and weak. He writes in *The Ethics*, "certainly nothing but grim and gloomy superstition forbids enjoyment. Why is it less fitting to drive away melancholy than to dispel hunger and thirst? The principle that guides me and shapes my attitude to life is this: No deity or anyone else but the envious, takes pleasure in my weakness and misfortune, nor does he take to be a virtue our tears, sobs, fearfulness, and other such things that are the mark of a weak spirit. On the contrary, the more we are affected with pleasure, the more we pass to a state of greater perfection, that is, the more we necessarily participate in the divine nature. Therefore it is the part of a wise man to make use of things and to take pleasure in them as far as he can, but not to the point of satiety, for that is not taking pleasure. It is, I repeat, the part of a wise man to refresh and invigorate himself in moderation with good food and drink as also with perfumes, with the beauty of blossoming plants, with dress, music, sporting activities, theatres and the like in which every man can indulge without harm to another." It's almost a direct reply to Pascal's account of diversions.

For Spinoza, these enjoyments are not distractions or diversions from reflection on our true grim circumstances, but admirable accessories to the life of reason, which is in itself a life of enjoyment. Fear of death itself is only a result of that bondage to our passions that belongs to our finite state, yet can be partly overcome by self-understanding and the rational contemplation of God or nature. Our goal should be to recognize that it arises from inadequate ideas and to banish it (that is, the fear of death), so far as possible in our lives. Spinoza says, "he who is guided by fear, is not guided by reason." Still more emphatically, he writes, "a free

man thinks of death least of all things, and his wisdom is a meditation of life not of death." The "proof" of this proposition, in the geometrical order, runs as follows: "A free man, that is, he who lives solely according to the dictates of reason, is not guided by fear of death, but directly desires the good, that is, to act, to live, to preserve his own being in accordance with the principle of seeking his own advantage. So he thinks of death least of all things, and his wisdom is a meditation upon life." In another proposition he writes, "the greater the number of things the mind understands by [reason], the less subject it is to emotions that are bad and the less it fears death." It seems clear that Spinoza is rejecting as a misconception and moral weakness Pascal's terror-stricken reaction to his own situation in the unfathomable infinities of space and time.

It is difficult, of course, to formulate sensible evaluative comparisons when dealing with such far reaching and general outlooks as I have been sketching here. I would like, nevertheless, to conclude with a few brief critical reflections.

The central problem for Spinoza's position is that he does not provide a clear or persuasive account of the notion of absolute rational insight on which it depends. As far as I can see, he does not make plausible his claim that such insight can accomplish even the partial banishment of fear and other negative emotions. Further, his notion that rational meditation on the necessary but purposeless sequence of things under the aspect of eternity will yield perpetual joy, while no doubt inspiring, appears in the end as personal and uncommunicable as more traditional expressions of religious experience.

In some respects, Pascal's position seems the more accessible and believable. True, Pascal may have exaggerated the impossibility of human beings fathoming by sense and reason the infinities of nature. Our powers of extending our knowledge have not proved so easily daunted or radically hedged as Pascal apparently imagined. But it seems to me, he still looks to be more nearly right than Spinoza and some of the other seventeenth-century rationalists in his claims about reason. Pascal's denial that reason can establish a fixed point, an absolute foundation for knowledge, still seems a reasonable

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view. It is echoed, in fact, in such diverse contemporary trends as so-called anti-foundationalism, which is dominant in contemporary theory of knowledge, and recent appreciative studies of Nietzsche's perspectivism. And of course, it is still easy to approve Pascal's implicit rejection of the Spinozistic notion that scientific understanding can somehow permanently remove the existential difficulties that may trouble us.

On the other hand, and here I merely express an impression, Spinoza's ideal of the free man, meditating on life and taking great pleasure in his own mental and physical powers, seems to possess at least much of the strength and nobility, the mental health, one is tempted to say, that Spinoza ascribes to it. Conversely, Pascal's dismissal of so many of the ordinary occupations of life as objectionable diversions from thoughts of death and finitude is surely extreme, reflective of the morbid otherworldliness that has understandably been criticized as an objectionable feature of many Christian ideologies.

With respect specifically to their treatments of the emotion of fear, on which I focussed to some extent, it seems to me that Pascal's and Spinoza's positions equally depend on insufficiently supported and very dubious claims. There is no rational compulsion to agree with Pascal that fear is the authentic reaction to our finite human position, and that the enjoyments of life are merely self-defeating diversions from confronting our fearful state. But one may also find uncompelling Spinoza's opposite claim that fear is a passion tied to inadequate understanding which the life of reason will allow us to remove and transcend. And I maintain, although I have not tried to argue it here, that such arguments as Spinoza offers for his position, and he does offer arguments, are utterly unsuccessful.

Finally, it's interesting to notice that, even for Spinoza, this negative passion appears to have provided a crucial impetus for his conversion from the pursuit of worldly satisfactions as ultimate ends, to his quest for a more profound good. For surely, fear, and not mere rational assessment of circumstance, is implicit in his autobiographical portrayal to which I alluded earlier, of the awareness of great "peril" that resulted, it seems, in his philosophical conversion. One might even suggest that in emphasizing this feature of his personal conversion, Spinoza implicitly grants an important instrumental role for a negative emotion that is effectively denied in his developed philosophical position.

Spinoza says, "he who is guided by fear, is not guided by reason."

On this interesting point then, there may be less divergence from the outlooks of Spinoza and Pascal than initially meets the eye, although of course, one mustn't lose sight of the crucial fact that the resulting drive for salvation is directed in the former, to the understanding of an imminent and apparent God, and in the latter, to faith in a transcendent and hidden principle.