

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

**PROBABILITY AND HOLY SCRIPTURE AS
TWO CORNERSTONES OF THE RATIONAL
ESTABLISHMENT OF CHRISTIAN FAITH IN
THE *PENSÉES* OF BLAISE PASCAL**

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Objective of the dissertation, outlining of the theme

The comprehensive objective of my dissertation is to highlight that the exegesis and probability approaches of Holy Scripture are basic and highly interrelated factors in Pascal's fragmentarily preserved apologetic work namely in the *Pensées*, therefore they can be used to build up an interpretation which may integrate genuinely most part of the fragments concerned.

The aim indicated covers mainly interdisciplinary task to be performed. From the point of view of probability here must be integrated Pascal's epoch-making discovery namely the foundation of calculating probability and his logical attempts to catch probability. The theology is represented by the numerous fragments with open or hidden references to a specific biblical section or by real exegeses. Holy Scripture and probability, in my opinion, there are outlines of a philosophically embedded program on the pages of the unfinished apology the object of which is the former and the method is the latter one as well.

As it may be derived out of the sentences above the *Pensées* are not about proving the evidence of God. Let alone that Pascal definitely rejected such efforts (see e.g. 242-244th, 543th, 547th of fragments) the quality difference in his approach is clearly reflected also by his ambivalence of probability. On the one hand, the seizing of probability by logical and mathematical exactness might satisfy the need for similar to geometry frequently idealized by philosophical thinking, on the other hand, probability still remains probability from the point of view its target instead of being proven knowledge. The true nature of probability determined by this ambivalence however marked by rigorous rationality does not lead

obligatory to the *good resolution* but instead of this it is widening the space for subjectivity and believes thus needs these basically as a completion of probability.

This double nature of objectivity and subjectivity, certainty and uncertainty, or even rationality irrationality may be traced in my opinion throughout the whole corpus of the *Pensées*. My dissertation is mainly devoted to show the possible harmonizing of this duplicity in the pascalian epistemology (probability and faith) and in the pascalian apology (reason and heart) as of its specific projection as well. Meanwhile, I providing an alternative option for resolving the contradiction experienced sometimes when interpreting the *Pensées*, i.e. Pascal was a rational or irrational philosopher? At the same time I endeavour to surface Pascal's point of view based in the about the fundamental question behind this problem: is the Christian faith rational or irrational or even what is Christian faith in itself? As I see, the concept of faith emerging in the *Pensées* differs substantially from the concept of faith reflected by pascalian commentaries and that of common understanding respectively. Opposed to the static and idealized faith covered by these concepts the pascalian faith is characterized by doubt and struggle. Nevertheless, this understanding is not depreciated, it becomes rather more enriched and authentic, or even biblical.

While explaining all these problems it will be cleared how do support Pascal's fragments the modern readers about considering the core of the Christian faith.

Outlining of the methods applied

My basic method is the detailed analysis of the texts, first of all the *Pensées* and Pascal's other works. Within this framework I am using the following procedures:

- The clarification of interrelations and basic meaning of Pascalian concepts in question (e.g. terms of probability and calculation of probability, theological terms) by
 - review of history of science (philosophy, mathematics, history of theology) and
 - searching for such parallel statements in the pascalian texts with different terms in question.
- Research for interrelations within the single fragments and between the fragments.
- Research for interrelations within the given fragments and among Pascal's other writings.
- Research for interrelations within the given fragments with biblical sections.
- Research for interrelations within the given fragments and among other author's works (e.g. Augustine, Montaigne) who had a great impact on Pascal.

- Research for interrelations within the given fragments and in Pascal's contemporaries' works (e.g. Descartes, Leibniz).
- And finally synthesize the verified interrelations.

While analyzing the wordings, I will use interpretations of recognized competence and scientific results related to the given points of views, taking care that they will not be able to hide the original thoughts of interpretation.

The strategic method in the explanation of the dissertation is the following: beginning from the widest interpretation of the problems in the *Pensées*. I will stepwise concentrate the focus of the present analysis through examination of Pascal's philosophical attitude, motivation, background of his his Christian dogmatism and exegetic principles of interpretation of the Bible to the substantial topic of my dissertation, namely to the interrelations between the Holy Scripture, the likelihood and the Christian faith represented in the *Pensées*.

The list of results by theses

Thesis 1: To the interpretation of *Pensées* provides a starting point while differentiating the arguments within the Christianity and contextualizing it in Pascal's way of thinking. The relevant track of fragments fits to the latter argument.

In my understanding, in-Christianity argumentation is the representation of specific theological alternatives, or it is also to be confronted with one another within the frame of religious principles considered as evident. Pascal's most of religious works belong to this framework, except the *Pensées*. "*Provincial letters*" or the "*Writings on Grace*" may be mentioned as most obvious examples. They are designed as presuming the acceptance of specific and essential Christian doctrines (e.g. the existence of God). Pascal stands for them as a firmly believer and rather as devoted Jesuit or Augustiner and he is confronting his theological convictions with other Christian viewpoints e.g. that of Jesuits or Calvinists.

The argumentation that contextualizes Christianity as opposed to the above mentioned is the positioning (contextualization) of Christianity in a wider ideological field which can be characterized by the point of view of liberal philosophers of the 17th century. Using this approach, all traditional religious issues can be naturally concerning in this approach, either the existence of God or the classical dichotomy of body and soul as well. Pascal while having contextualized Christianity left behind the framework of religious evidences, and he examines

the Christianity from a wider perspective, quasi looking behind it, at the same time he is preparing the way for outsiders. Meanwhile he seems to be a man searching for truth and suffering from doubts as well.

The relevant track of fragments in the *Pensées* fits to the argumentation that contextualizes Christianity (however, we can find example for in-Christianity argumentation as well). The relevance of the argumentation that contextualizes Christianity emerges exactly from the fact that it shows an additional aspect in comparison with Pascal's other religious works. The author of the *Pensées* recognized that an apologist of his century has to realize and make others to realize Christianity, namely the biblical ideas, from a new and a more universal viewpoint compared with earlier times. It requires a more critical spiritual circle, too.

My dissertation is based on the analysis of those fragments which, on the one hand, refuse the insistence of attempts for proving the evidence of God and of religious evidences, on the other hand, which prefer a universal perspective. Furthermore, I also try to prove the fragments by bringing into light a characteristic phenomenon. It includes the problems of happiness, transience and death occurring in religious context and with reference to God in Pascal's other works, while in the *Pensées* they are represented without reference to God providing a common spiritual platform for everyone independently on their world view orientation.

Thesis 2: Pascal's basic and thinking motivation can be identified with the problem of death, through which he raises a universal question presumably interesting an atheist reader, too.

The seeking of Pascal's final motivation and thinking attitude provides a starting point to the interpretation in the *Pensées*. The image of such an existentialist thinker is outlined about Pascal in the light of fragments whose starting point is the conflict between human desire for original happiness and death. The latter is insoluble at least humanly and within this earthly framework and already destined to fail the former.

My dissertation, first of all, is based on the frequent occurrence of this theme, the drawing up of the numerous linking fragments that cannot be misunderstood, secondly the heat of the argumentation, thirdly the linking biographical notes – an experience near to death and continual ill-health –, and finally the tone revealing the deepest struggles and fears similar to the atmosphere of St. Augustine's Confession. My thesis is also supported by death and

humans' original misery as a conformity with the starting point of apology in Lafuma, Kaplan and Filleau de la Chaise's reconstructions of the *Pensées*.

Pascal with the question of death raises an incomparably more universal problem than were the religious and moral dilemmas in his time. The moralist image created about Pascal who dreamed back into a religious worldorder breakig up because of religious and moral circumstances in the 17th century can be refused in the light of the problem he raises. According to me, the outlined tragic perspective and his commitment to searching for practical solutions provide optics for the interpreter through which the examination of the *Pensées* is expedient. It seems that the characteristics of his apology namely the Scriptures and probability, named in the title of my dissertation as well, were coded in his attitude. On the one hand, the existential problem of humans is superhuman, that is it persumes a solution from God. On the other hand, this solution if it exists at all has to be perceptibly seized within the frames of everyday thinking. This background provides a coincidence between the Scriptures proclaiming the gospel on a transcendent basis and the rational, practical need for the catch of probability in the *Pensées*.

Thesis 3: In the *Pensées* Pascal moves from the rigorous idea of predestination represented in the Augustiner-Jesuit grace doctrine, although not in a demonstrative but in a perceptible way. He shows out the opportunity and responsibility of humans in seeking of God.

The theme of my dissertation claims the clarification of a question in a vital way that comes from Pascal's relation to Jansenizm. The problem can be seized in the tension which rises between the Jansenist-Augustiner grace doctrine – to be more precise the fact that there is little or any in humans' competence concerning predestination – and the intention of the apology behind that.

In certain respect two factors can be identified in connection with the mentioned grace doctrine. On the one hand, there is divine predestination manifesting itself in giving or denying the so-called efficient grace. On the other hand, we find determination that arises from corrupted human nature (*concupiscentia*). The controlling or getting active of corrupted human nature depend on wheter God gives or withdraws efficient grace. While according to the original idea everything can be dated back to God's mystical decision, it is the human factor, the corrupted nature in many fragments that comes into the foreground in a well-perceptible way.

According to Pascal, the greatness of humans and their most characteristic competence are revealed in the fact that they are able to reflect on their own existence and death, which is their original misery. The mostly convergent group of fragments in the *Pensées* demonstrates that due to the effect of an unavoidable facing with death and misery a reaction is necessarily born in everyone that is everyone makes his/her own characteristic decision. Pascal indicates humans' own competence and their most characteristic decision in the fact whether they start to search for God or his signs. He depicts amusement (*divertissement*) as an overwhelming alternation in order to efface the memory of the basic problem (e.g. risky enterprises, constant heaving and straining and scientific works).

In the central pascalian concept of seeking a massive coherence is revealed that includes the moving from the rigorous predestination doctrine, the emphasis of the corruption of human nature, the pointing out of the aware of death or misery as humans' most characteristic spiritual property, the conducting of motivation necessarily resulting in the former ones and the illustration of humans' real power of decision – and after all the intention of apology can be harmoniously inserted. Pascal, on the one hand, wants to urge those who are negligent in searching for God with the means of teaching and arguing, on the other hand, to help to the goal those who are already in the process of searching.

Thesis 4: The apology of the *Pensées* includes the program of rereading of the Scriptures and its reinterpretation from many aspects. Pascal does not use the source document of Christianity as an absolute authority, but regards that as a working hypothesis that bears its divine marks in itself, if it is indeed a divine revelation.

It can be factually stated that Pascal quotes, explains and paraphrases the Scriptures in most fragments, or uses hidden reference to that. (According to Sellier's estimation at least the quarter of the *Pensées* is about exegesis of the Holy Scripture.) Pascal examines the collection of the source documents of Christianity on the basis of a universal criterion the same criterion that is demanded from most religion and culture as well. He examines that if it indeed has divine origin according to its self-determination, then its proofs can be found in that. In other words, the inspired mark of the Holy Scripture is a working hypothesis which is to be proved by Pascal. Thus he regards the Scriptures as a possible and most significant field of searching for God and as a document of God's (hypothetical) signs.

Thesis 5: The calculation of probability or the mathematical and nonmathematical concepts of probability do not separate hermetically from each other in Pascal's concepts, but they show convergence to a given limit.

The identification of linking pascalian expressions as well as the clarification of their meaning content and their relation to each other are essential from the interpreter's point of view because probability and questions concerning probability have basic role in the apology of *Pensées*.

The expressions under discussion can be divided into two groups. Nonmathematical expressions (basically la probabilité, probable) belong to the first group and expressions with mathematical orientation (basically les partis, la règle des partis) to the second. The meaning content of the latter concept can be identified on the basis of Pascal's preserved mathematical works (first of all his correspondence with Fermat). I examine the meaning of "probabilité" and its derivative in the context of philosophical language use including linking traditions of Pascal's time and the so-called doctrine of probable opinions represented by the Jesuits. I also analyse the relation of "probabilité" to the word "partis".

Though "probabilité" is not exactly addressed in mathematical sense in the *Pensées*, nevertheless certain convergence can be pointed out between „probabilité” and "partis". This convergence is reflected in the following facts:

- the use of both concepts in the topic of religion;
- the indication of both concepts in expressions with identical content and in epistemology (e.g as the means opposed to certainty or to seize uncertain knowledge);
- in case of „probabilité” as well in addition to the mathematical defining of "parties" the need of exact seizing and surpassing the Jesuit probability concept based on authoritarianism can be also identified with the form of logical attempts.

My thesis is also supported by the following fact that "probabilité" was already incorporated in the terminology of probability calculation at the time of Pascal's contemporaries' works.

Thesis 6: Pascal shows out an unconventional ideal of rationality in probability. However, faith becomes a necessary point of cognition because it completes probability to certainty subjectively.

The novelty of pascalian ideal in rationality can be shown out in the understanding the ambivalence of cartesian evidence-based principle and the probability concept outlining in Pascal's works. While from the point of view of determination probability includes obvious

understanding, thus it is proper to descartian criteria; it means partial knowledge from the point of view of the thing it directs towards. Pascal thus leaves behind the descartian framework. Intermediate knowledge complying with rigorous criteria can be realized opposed to the two states of cognition striving for pure evidence, namely whether understanding takes place or not. Due to the pascalian probability "perhaps" becomes accepted in cognition beside the "yes" and "no" answers idealized by clear rationality.

According to the references of direct or indirect fragments probability that is our uncertain knowledge can be completed to certainty by personal faith. Thus objectivity and subjectivity get into organic contact in pascalian epistemology. We can regard faith not as certain but rather a personal relation to things that can be caught by probability. The subject of probability becomes certain due to faith subjectively that is faith is regarded certain by the person who practices that.

Thesis 7: "Reason" and "heart" as central pascalian concepts represent the antropological reflection of the epistemological construction of probability and faith in the *Pensées*.

A bi-polar construction similar to the base formula of cognition can be recognized in Pascal's antropological concepts. In first-approximation this antropological dichotomy can be most clearly identified with the well-known pascalian concepts of "reason" and "heart". Reason and faith from antropological point of view can be regarded as corresponding to the duality of probability and faith closely belonging together. Knowledge acquired by reason points to the assessment of probability while heart to a personal, subjective statement which is complemented with the former. Thus in the *Pensées* reason and heart are not necessarily contrary to each other similarly to the elements of his epistemological construction, but they can be factors that complete each other and corporate mutually. Therefore, objectivity and subjectivity or the pascalian symbiosis of rationality and irrationality can be also identified with antropological concepts in the *Pensées*.

Thesis 8: Pascal presents Christianity as cognition from a certain point of view, which is based on the same construction of probability and faith, like other similar cognitions with different subjects.

In Pascal's opinion, the Scriptures can be made the object of empirical examination (this examination is reflected in many fragments as was previously mentioned in thesis 4). In

epistemological sense the positive statements of the Bible can be identified with the input of probable consideration for the basis of rational Christian faith in the *Pensées*.) The numerous historical descriptions or the style of the gospel are among them. The arguments, to be precise probability, are derived from them which are not compulsory but can be brought to support Christian religion.

The complementarity of duality in the case of probability and faith functions methodically similarly in Christian religion like in case of cognitions with other subjects. To put it in other words: it can be said on the basis of the outlining picture of the *Pensées* that faith in Christ can be determined as one of the cases of our believes interlinking all aspects of life, however a special and most significant case.

Thesis 9: The 233th fragment including the wager argument, beside its accepted interpretations focusing on the combination of the possible results of wager in connection with the existence and non-existence of God, allows such an interpretation where Pascal integrates into the argumentation the aspect of probability in addition to the aspect of result. At the same time the linking section of the fragment illuminates the biblical background of the wager.

The wager-argument is one of the most well-known and most debated sections of the *Pensées* which does not reveal anything closer from God, as it does not argue for it, or it does not try to convince of God's existence but operates only with the results of the wager – its possible gain or loss. Agnosticism concerning the existence of God, or in other words the fifty-fifty per cent probability rate is made as a starting point by the introductory question of the wager and the metaphor of tossing a coin. "»God is, or He is not.« But to which side shall we incline? Reason can decide nothing here. Reason can decide nothing here. There is an infinite chaos which separated us. A game is being played at the extremity of this infinite distance where heads or tails will turn up. What will you wager?"¹

Having explained the wager-argument focused mainly on results Pascal's conversationalist reacts in the following way: "»I confess it, I admit it. But, still, is there no means of seeing the faces of the cards?«"² Pascal's fragmentarily preserved respond to that is: "Yes, Scripture and the rest, etc."³ In my opinion, this short question and the answer for it has huge importance

¹ Pascal, Blaise: *Pensées*; translated by: W. F. Trotter; in: *Great Books of The Western World – 33*. Pascal; Copyright in the U. S. A., 1952, by Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

though analyses have not attached great importance to them. The conversationalist, by all means, is inquisitive to specificate the possibility of the starting probable rate by looking behind the game. As if he said he would easily wage if he knew something closer about the existence of God. Pascal mentioning the Scriptures refer to the fact that it is possible to look behind the game, which is to assess the probability of results more accurately than fifty-fifty per cent by the Scriptures.

According to the conversation mentioned above, the turning point in the line of the 233th fragment integrates the aspect of probability into the argumentation that is the existence of God has a greater probability than the starting fifty per cent. Moreover, it illuminates the biblical background of the wager which thus is harmonized with the biblical orientation characteristic of the whole pascalian apology.

Thesis 10: According to Pascal, in the case of most people the different believes, for instance Christian faith among them, are not born because they have rational arguments or probability but because they impressed by them. It is very frequent that people look for rational proofs subsequently. Therefore, Pascal purposely made an attempt to raise their interests and thus influences the non-rational side of cognition in the *Pensées*.

The pascalian apology focuses mainly on Christianity as the rational element of cognition that is to show the probability of the statements of the Scriptures. He, however, takes into consideration the possibility of a frequent and lifelike change in order which means that in many cases it is faith that is borned first, and then it might be followed by its objective establishment, that is by a reckoning with probability. It is not the rational argumentation but impression that has a key role on such occasions when faith is formed. Many fragments show that Pascal endeavoured to raise interests in people and to find the possible ways of reaching faith and heart directly. These can be called together Pascal's aesthetic attempts – emphasizing that this is a broader aesthetic understanding including also a beauty with ethical and chatartic characteristic.

As apology is verbal communication therefore Pascal's aesthetic attempts group around the problem of rhetoric. Eloquence (l'éloquence), style (le style) language and way of speaking (le langage) and spelling (la manière d'écrire) can be mentioned as his own linking terms. The first three expressions are present in more fragments as categorizing headings also emphasizing the importance and systematic dealing with the topic indicated by them. We can

find general, systematizing and similar expressions among the connecting fragments which make statement to each concrete wording.

Printed or for printing officially accepted publications by the author regarding the Thesis:

- The *Pensées* of Pascal and the Jansenist teaching about grace. Searching for God as humans' most characteristic decision; *Vigilia*, 2009/10., p. 722-730.
- Pascal's thinking attitude in the light of motivation and abstraction – or death and reasons of clarity; *Világosság*, 2009, www.vilagosság.hu, online publikációs felület, p. 1-13.
- Pascal's relationship to the Scriptures, the principles of biblical interpretation and tradition criticism in the *Pensées*; *Theologiai Szemle*, 2010/1., p. 29-34.
- *God's signs* in the *Pensées* of Pascal; *Sola Scriptura Teológiai Szakfolyóirat*, 2010/1., p. 42-52.
- The Christian religion as cognition and the idea of the hiding God in the *Pensées* of Pascal; *Nagyerdei Almanach*, 2010/1., www.nagyalma.hu, archívum, p. 1-18.
- The biblical background of pascalian wager argument – or how can we look behind the most important "game"?; *Különbség*, 2010/1., p. 139-148.

Further printed publications on other subjects by the author:

- Ethical relationships between Prothagoras' 1st fragment, Kant's Categorical Imperative and Jesus Christ's golden rule; *Sola Scriptura Teológiai Szakfolyóirat*, 2008/1., p. 30-38.
- Body and soul – or parallelism as a possibility for biblical interpretation; *Sola Scriptura Teológiai Szakfolyóirat*, 2008/2., p. 26-31.

Conferences and lectures on the subject of the Thesis

- Who is convinced by Pascal's wager argument? An unconventional interpretation of the 233th fragment; The conference titled "The Bible and human thinking", *Sola Scriptura Theological College, Department of Systematic Theology*, 2008. 05. 16.
- The gleaming of the Bible in Pascal's wager – or how can we look behind the most important "game"?; *International Bible Symposium, John Wesley Theological College, Institute for Studies of Religion*, 2009. 05. 28-29. (the publication of the study volume is in process)
- Course on Pascal's biblical interpretation; *Sola Scriptura Theological College*, 1st semester 2008-2009