

## Necessary Error: Pascal on Imagination and Descartes's Fourth Meditation

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One of the most renowned pages of Pascal's *Pensées* offers an astonishing phenomenology of the all-powerful action of imagination in human life. This article retraces the genesis of this text and reassesses the sources of Pascal's conception of imagination. It argues that Pascal builds up his definition of the imagination as an 'anti-theodicy' which carefully recalls and then criticizes the Cartesian 'theodicy of error' and the foundation of the 'general rule' of truth proposed by the Fourth Meditation. In doing so, Pascal undermines the major aim of Descartes's *Meditations*, which is to secure human nature against any doubt as to its intrinsic perfection. Where, according to Descartes, human knowledge is finite yet perfectly secured in its accomplishments when we use the faculties of our mind correctly, Pascal describes imagination as a deceptive faculty that seems to have been given to us specifically to lead us into necessary error.

**Keywords:** Pascal, Descartes, imagination, *Pensées*, *Metaphysical Meditations*, theodicy

### 'The effects of that deceptive faculty'

One of the most renowned pages of Pascal's *Pensées* offers an astonishing phenomenology of the all-powerful and limitlessly pervasive action of imagination in human life which Pascal sums up as follows: 'L'imagination dispose de tout. Elle fait la beauté, la justice et le bonheur qui est le tout du monde.'<sup>1</sup> He goes on to recall the title of an Italian book (*Dell'opinione regina del mondo*) that he has not read but which, he claims, he could easily have written himself. The majority of the long *pensée* entitled 'Imagination' is thus devoted to recounting the effects of what he considers to be a deceptive faculty. Pascal's phenomenology of imagination essentially rests on its power of turning the primacy of intrinsic features over circumstances upside down, denying the dominance of the essential over the accidental.<sup>2</sup> Imagination makes the ornamental functional. Magistrates' red robes and their ermines, physicians' gowns, slippers, and square caps: all that is merely the apparatus, that is to say the trappings, of their profession — yet, this apparatus is also truly necessary. Medicine and law are imaginary sciences but they manipulate

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to fragments collated in Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. by Louis Lafuma (Paris, Seuil, 1962) and *Pensées*, ed. by Philippe Sellier (Paris: Garnier, 1999). Hereafter Sellier ed. numbering/Lafuma ed. numbering; i.e., in this case: S78/L44–45.

<sup>2</sup> See Gérard Ferreyrolles, *Les Reines du monde: l'imagination et la coutume chez Pascal* (Paris: Champion, 1995), pp. 141–54 and Michael Moriarty, *Early Modern French Thought: The Age of Suspicion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 100–10.

such ‘vaines circonstances’ as ‘vains instruments’ (S78/L44) which appeal to and strike the imagination. Therefore, despite their false position (S121/L87), their effects are very real: ‘Par là *en effet* ils s’attirent le respect’ (S78/L44).<sup>3</sup> Nor is the gaze of the philosopher, which seeks only the essential, sheltered from this domination of circumstances: ‘Le plus grand philosophe du monde sur une planche plus large qu’il ne faut, s’il y a au-dessous un précipice, quoique sa raison le convainque de sa sûreté, son imagination prévaudra’ (S78/L44). If reason appears impotent,<sup>4</sup> only force escapes the logic of the accidental and imposes itself as something that is really essential, therefore avoiding any disguise or mask: ‘Les seuls gens de guerre ne se sont pas déguisés de la sorte, parce qu’en effet leur part est plus essentielle. Ils s’établissent par la force, les autres par grimace’ (S78/L44).

‘Voilà à peu près les effets de cette faculté trompeuse’, the speaker concludes towards the end of S78/L44. Yet we can level at Pascal the criticism he formulates against Aristotle for describing (in the *De anima*) only the effects of the soul, which are known by everyone, without saying anything about its essence, origin, and nature, which is the only thing people want to know (S775/L *pensées inédites* VII). In other words, it is worth questioning whether the phenomenology of the *effects* of imagination provided by S78/L44–45 is governed by a definition of the *essence* and *nature* of imagination. The question deserves to be examined all the more because it has gone largely unaddressed by scholars, usually more attracted, distracted, or even stunned by Pascal’s astonishingly vivid portrait of humankind’s imaginary life.

Revealing Pascal’s definition of the nature and essence of imagination requires a two-pronged preliminary investigation. First, I will consider the structure of the argumentation Pascal is developing in S78/L44–45 and retrace its genesis by discussing in some detail the manuscript of the *Pensées*. Next, I will reassess the sources of Pascal’s conception of imagination. Montaigne is certainly here the main influence on Pascal.<sup>5</sup> Yet I shall argue that Pascal’s encounter with the Descartes of the *Metaphysical Meditations* constitutes the polemic referent of Pascal’s reflection. If Montaigne helps Pascal to describe the effects of imagination, Pascal turns to Descartes in order to understand imagination’s essence. In the last part of the article, I will go on to discuss the major implication of Pascal’s doctrine of imagination, which is to propose an ‘anti-theodicy’ opposed to the Cartesian theodicy of error. To grasp the essence of imagination means, for Pascal, conceiving the human mind as inherently unable to reach any ‘certitude de la vérité’ (S164/L131) and ‘a certain habit of not making mistakes whose possession constitutes,

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<sup>3</sup> My emphasis. See Matthew W. Maguire, *The Conversion of Imagination: From Pascal through Rousseau to Tocqueville* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 17–22.

<sup>4</sup> Yet Pascal argues elsewhere that we can (or even we ought to) have recourse to imaginative devices in order to articulate rational demonstrations. See Vincent Carraud, *Pascal: des connaissances naturelles à l’étude de l’homme* (Paris: Vrin, 2007), pp. 235–67; Alberto Frigo, ‘Pascal dans la *Recherche de la vérité* de Malebranche: l’imagination’, *Les Études philosophiques* 95 (2010), 517–34 and *L’Esprit du corps: la doctrine pascalienne de l’amour* (Paris: Vrin, 2016), Ch. 5.

<sup>5</sup> See Bernard Croquette, *Pascal et Montaigne* (Geneva: Droz, 1974), pp. 5–11.

according to Descartes, the ‘greatest and principal human perfection’.<sup>6</sup> Thus, by defining imagination as a ‘*faculté trompeuse, qui semble nous être donnée exprès pour nous induire à une erreur nécessaire*’ (S78/L44), Pascal is precisely denying the possibility of such human perfection.

### **From the effects of the imagination to its nature**

A careful analysis of the manuscript of S78/L44–45 gives some essential clues about its genesis.<sup>7</sup> In a way that is quite typical of several long and more extensively discursive *pensées*, Pascal sets out the text with large margins to the left and the right, using these to complete the first draft or add some notes connected to the body of the text by a reference mark. Moreover, it is possible to identify some ‘pauses’ in the flow of the writing process. Pascal frequently crosses out parts of the text he has just written and replaces them with new developments. Almost in the middle of S78/L44, we find a sort of premature conclusion:

Il faut, puisqu’il y a plu, travailler tout le jour pour des biens reconnus pour imaginaires. Et quand le sommeil nous a délassés des fatigues de notre raison, il faut incontinent se lever en sursaut pour aller courir après les fumées et essayer les impressions de cette maîtresse du monde. Voilà un des principes d’erreur mais ce n’est pas le seul. L’homme a eu bien raison d’allier ces deux puissances quoique dans cette paix l’imagination ait bien amplement l’avantage, car dans la guerre elle l’a bien plus entier. La raison ne surmonte jamais tant l’imagination au lieu que l’imagination démonte souvent la raison de son siège.<sup>8</sup>

Pascal finally deletes these interlocutory and deeply reworked lines in favour of a new start corresponding to the description of lawyers’ and physicians’ appearances (‘Nos magistrats ont bien connu ce mystère. Leurs robes rouges, leurs hermines ...’).

It is pertinent to compare this passage with the end of the *pensée* on imagination (S78/L45), which was also crossed out by Pascal. In the final lines, Pascal enumerates four other principles of errors which condemn human knowledge to permanent uncertainty: old impressions, the charms of novelty, illness, and our own interest. He then concludes: ‘L’homme est donc si

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<sup>6</sup> ‘*Habitu quendam non errandi [...] maxima et præcipua hominis perfectio*’, René Descartes, *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, in *Œuvres de Descartes*, ed. by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, rev. by Pierre Costabel and Bernard Rochot, 11 vols (Paris: Vrin-C.N.R.S., 1964–1974). Hereafter AT, volume number (part number), page number; i.e., in this case: AT VII, p. 62. Translation from *Meditations on First Philosophy with Selections from the Objections and Replies*, trans. by Michael Moriarty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 44.

<sup>7</sup> A reproduction and a diplomatic transcription by Dominique Descotes and Gilles Proust of Pascal’s manuscript (*Recueil des papiers originaux des Pensées de Pascal*, BnF, f. fr. 9202, pp. 361 r/v<sup>o</sup> and 369 r/v<sup>o</sup>) can be found at <<http://www.penseesdepascal.fr/Vanite/Vanite31-moderne.php>> [accessed 4 May 2016]. The genealogical account of S78/L 44–5 that I will offer in the following pages was suggested by (and is intended to confirm) the ‘collage’ proposed by Emmanuel Martineau in Blaise Pascal, *Discours sur la religion et sur quelques autres sujets qui ont été trouvés après sa mort parmi ses papiers*, ed. by Emmanuel Martineau (Paris: Fayard-Armand Colin, 1992), pp. 122–24.

<sup>8</sup> All the passage is crossed out vertically on the manuscript (except two lines ‘Voilà un des principes [...] deux puissances’). I have omitted the ‘variantes d’écriture’ (instant rewritings), crossed out horizontally by Pascal (see the critical transcription by Descotes and Proust at <<http://www.penseesdepascal.fr/Vanite/Vanite31-sav361v.php>> [accessed 4 May 2016]).

heureusement fabriqué qu'il n'a aucun principe juste du vrai, et plusieurs excellents du faux. Voyons maintenant combien. Mais la plus plaisante cause de ses erreurs est la guerre qui est entre les sens et la raison.' Once again, Pascal argues for the need to discover further principles of error, and suggests that one major cause of the fallibility of human reason is the war between opposing faculties of knowledge. In the 'premature conclusion' passage, he highlighted the war between reason and imagination. Here he addresses the conflict in which senses oppose reason. In both cases, Pascal finally rejects such a late-in-the-day development as a dead end. Yet this time, the idea of considering the conflict between two faculties as a major source of error does not allow for a new start in the argumentation, as Pascal perhaps initially intended it to. Indeed, it has quite the opposite effect, and the final lines of the fragment introduce a sort of palinody:

L'homme n'est qu'un sujet plein d'erreur naturelle et ineffaçable sans la grâce. [Rien ne] lui montre la vérité. Tout l'abuse. Ces deux principes de vérité, la raison et les sens, outre qu'ils manquent chacun de sincérité, s'abusent réciproquement l'un l'autre. Les sens abusent la raison par de fausses apparences, et cette même piperie qu'ils apportent à l'âme ils la reçoivent d'elle à leur tour. Elle s'en revanche. Les passions de l'âme troublent les sens et leur font des impressions fausses. Ils mentent et se trompent à l'envi. Mais outre cette erreur qui vient par accident et par le manque d'intelligence entre ces facultés hétérogènes [...] (S78/L44)

According to this new reformulation, the heterogeneity of the faculties is addressed as a *minor* argument in the explanation of human errors. Instead of judging it as the most amusing cause of human errors to be evoked as the higher point of a climax of a discourse on deceptive powers, Pascal here looks at it as a common claim. It deserves only to be mentioned in passing at the beginning of his analysis ('mais outre cette erreur...'), before he moves on to the essential focus of his argument, that is, a form of error that exists *apart from* this error that happens accidentally. This is really a new start, which supersedes the two opening arguments previously abandoned by Pascal in looking for a more essential source of error. The discovery is clearly stated in the circled marginalia, on the left: 'Il faut commencer par là le [ce] chapitre des puissances trompeuses.'<sup>9</sup>

'Commencer par là' therefore means beginning by envisaging a principle of error apart from the accidental occurrence of errors through a lack of understanding between heterogeneous faculties. This is precisely what Pascal does, perhaps without being completely conscious of doing so, in the central section of S78/L44, whilst analysing the power of imagination, 'cette faculté trompeuse, qui semble nous être donnée exprès pour nous induire à *une erreur nécessaire*' (my emphasis). We may even wonder whether the different colour of ink, used by Pascal to write the first lines and the encircled title of S78/L44,<sup>10</sup> suggests that the opening section was added after Pascal had drafted the conclusion and come to see the need for a different beginning. Either way, when he arrived at the end of his long fragment, it seems that Pascal became aware that what he had delivered was less a stunning phenomenology of the *effects* of imagination, than an

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<sup>9</sup> See <<http://www.penseesdepascal.fr/Vanite/Vanite31-diplo369v.php>> [accessed 4 May 2016].

<sup>10</sup> See <<http://www.penseesdepascal.fr/RO-extraits/RO361-369.pdf>> [accessed 4 May 2016].

original comprehension of its *nature* as a principle of non-accidental error, and that this deserved to be considered as the starting point of a ‘chapter’ on the deceptive powers.

To sum up this short reconstruction of the genesis of S78/L44–45, we might say that in his inquiry into the principles and the causes of human error, Pascal is led to two parallel conclusions. These find their ultimate rationale in a lack of understanding between heterogeneous faculties: imagination and reason, on the one hand, and reason and senses, on the other hand. Nevertheless, by finally renouncing such an approach, Pascal is in some ways led to reassess his own previous analysis of the deceiving power of imagination. That is the reason why the chapter on the deceptive powers must ‘begin with this’ (‘commencer par là’), in other words, with a clear distinction between *accidental error* (‘cette erreur qui vient par accident’) due to the faulty interaction of different faculties and the necessary error to which man is led by the action of a single deceptive faculty that seems to have been given to us specifically for the purpose. The initial question is no longer what imagination *does*, then, but what imagination *is*.<sup>11</sup>

### **Descartes’s *regula generalis* and the certainty of the truth**

By finally revealing the very ‘beginning’ of his argument on the deceptive powers, Pascal pinpoints the major issue being addressed in S78/L44–45: that is, the nature of the imagination as a faculty leading to necessary error. However, in doing so, he refers to the source of his discussion of the nature of the ‘*faculté imaginante*’: Descartes; and he also counters Descartes, since to describe imagination as a special mistake-making faculty given to man for this purpose makes it impossible to elaborate a theodicy of the error in the way proposed by Descartes in the Fourth Meditation.<sup>12</sup> It also, in a more general way, undermines the foundation of the ‘general rule’ (*regula generalis*: AT VI, p. 33; *regula veritatis*: VII, pp. 35, 65, 69 and 70) which Descartes develops in the Third and Fourth Meditations.<sup>13</sup> ‘Il me semble que déjà je puis établir pour règle générale, que toutes les choses que nous concevons fort clairement et fort distinctement, sont toutes vraies’, Descartes advances (AT IX-1, p. 27). ‘C’est cette partie dominante dans l’homme, cette maîtresse d’erreur et de fausseté, et d’autant plus fourbe qu’elle

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<sup>11</sup> This evolution takes on a chronological dimension if the first lines of the fragment written in a different ink were added at a later moment. Compare the two opening statements of S 78–L 44: Pascal is moving from the question ‘What does the imagination do?’ (‘C’est elle qui a le grand droit de persuader les hommes ...’) to the question ‘What is the imagination?’ (‘C’est cette partie dominante dans l’homme ...’).

<sup>12</sup> See Jean-Luc Marion, *Questions cartésiennes II: sur l’ego et sur Dieu* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1996), pp. 49–83; Thomas M. Lennon, ‘The Fourth Meditation: Descartes’s theodicy *avant la lettre*’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes’s Meditations*, ed. by David Cunniff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 168–85; Zbigniew Janowski, *Cartesian Theodicy: Descartes’s Quest for Certitude* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000) and for two recent, opposite readings of the Cartesian theory of judgment and error in the Fourth Meditation, see Gilles Olivo, *Descartes et l’essence de la vérité* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2005) and Emanuela Scribano, *Angeli e beati: modelli di conoscenza da Tommaso a Spinoza* (Bari: Laterza, 2006), pp. 161–94.

<sup>13</sup> The *regula generalis* of the Third and Fourth Meditations is redesignated as *regula veritatis* in the Fifth Meditation.

ne l'est pas toujours, car elle serait règle infaillible de vérité si elle l'était infaillible du mensonge. Mais étant le plus souvent fausse, elle ne donne aucune marque de sa qualité, marquant du même caractère le vrai et le faux', Pascal replies, opposing to a *general rule of truth* a *non-general rule of falsehood*. Some lines of the *Entretien avec M. de Sacy* and of S164/L131 show Pascal quite carefully recalling and then criticizing the Cartesian foundation of the *regula generalis*. These texts deserve to be discussed briefly here, before we return to the fragment on imagination and propose a more detailed analysis of its relationship with the theodicy of error of the Fourth Meditation.

In his polemic exchange of 1647 with the Jesuit Étienne Noël about the experiments relating to the vacuum, Pascal recalls a 'universal rule' for retrieving the truth: a proposition can be recognized as true only if it is either a self-evident principle and axiom or if it is deduced from something which is itself self-evident. In the first case, the truth we 'see' appears so clearly and distinctly by itself to the senses or to the reason, as far as it is the object of the one or of the other, that the mind has no way to doubt its certitude. There is no reason for doubting the certainty of the axiom 'if equals are added to equals, the sums are equal' which is clearly and distinctly conceived. And this is true too of propositions which follow as well-proven from the axioms.<sup>14</sup> The young Pascal here is quite an orthodox reader of Descartes, namely of the *Principia philosophiae* that he evokes in the letters to Noël, and of the *Meditations*. The *règle universelle* elucidated by Pascal in fact reformulates the methodological consequences of the 'general rule' deduced by Descartes from the *cogito* in the Third Meditation.

However, such a 'general rule' must be proved in order to validate the generalization of this principle, i.e. the very fact that evidence and truth correspond to each other 'like the two sides of a single phenomenon',<sup>15</sup> from the certainty of the *cogito* to the certain affirmation of any other clear and distinct knowledge. In fact, the general rule falls prey to the harvest of doubts exposed in the First Meditation: the 'preconceived opinion of God's supreme power' which 'might have endowed me with such a nature that I could be deceived even about those things that appeared supremely obvious' and 'about matters that I think I intuit with the eye of the mind as evidently as possible', as the simplest and analytic truths of mathematics and the axioms connected to them.<sup>16</sup> What if an all-powerful God has created the human mind such that we can be deceived every time we assent to a proposition which it is (psychologically) impossible (or we have no reason) to doubt? What if God has condemned us to an invincible error about matters that look utterly evident?<sup>17</sup> The atheist is in no safer position. There may certainly be some

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<sup>14</sup> Pascal, *Œuvres complètes*. ed. by Jean Mesnard, 4 vols (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1964–1992), II, p. 519.

<sup>15</sup> Marion, p. 342.

<sup>16</sup> 'Sed quoties hæc præconcepta de summa Dei potentia opinio mihi occurrit, non possum non fateri, siquidem velit, facile illi esse efficere ut errem, etiam in iis quæ me puto mentis oculis quam evidentissime intueri' (AT VII, p. 36, trans. Moriarty, p. 26). Cf. AT VII, p. 21 and for the doubt on axioms AT VIII-1, p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> The question of the relationship between the doubt of the First Meditation and the doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths is beyond the scope of this article. For a survey of the debate, see Denis Kambouchner, *Les Méditations métaphysiques de Descartes* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2005), pp. 207–38; Scribano, pp. 161–84; and

people who would prefer to deny the existence of an all-powerful God, rather than believing that all other things are uncertain.<sup>18</sup> Yet, Descartes replies, let them suppose that is ‘by fate or chance or a continuous sequence of things’ (*‘seu fato, seu casu, seu continuata rerum serie’*) that they have come to be what they are. Since to be deceived appears to be some kind of imperfection, the less powerful the ‘source of our being’ (*‘originis meae author’*), the more probable it is that we will be perpetually deceived (AT VII, p. 21). The fictional concept of ‘an evil spirit, supremely powerful and cunning’ (*‘genium aliquem malignum [...] summe potentem et callidum’*, AT VII, p. 21), trying in all ways to deceive us, at the end the First Meditation, sums up all these factors that undermine the certainty of the truth as it is clearly perceived. In order to remove the doubt which imperils the legitimacy of our natural inclination to spontaneously convince ourselves that what we clearly perceive and we judge indubitable is true, Descartes examines, in the Third and Fourth Meditations, whether there is a God and whether he can be a deceiver. He sums up his position in the Fifth Meditation: ‘Après que j’ai reconnu qu’il y a un Dieu, parce qu’en même temps j’ai reconnu aussi que toutes choses dépendent de lui, et qu’il n’est point trompeur, [...] en suite de cela j’ai jugé que tout ce que je conçois clairement et distinctement ne peut manquer d’être vrai’ (AT IX-1, p. 55).<sup>19</sup>

Pascal is certainly aware of the necessity (and the difficulty) of proving the *regula generalis* (AT VII, p. 15). The point is clearly stated in the fragment S164/L131, which develops some lines from the *Entretien avec M. de Sacy*.<sup>20</sup> In the latter, Pascal attributes to Montaigne the hyperbolic doubts of Descartes:<sup>21</sup>

[Montaigne demande] si nous avons en nous des principes du vrai, et si ceux que nous croyons avoir, et qu’on appelle axiomes ou notions communes, parce qu’elles sont conformes dans tous les hommes, sont conformes à la vérité essentielle; et puisque nous ne savons que par la seule foi qu’un Être tout bon nous les a donnés véritables, en nous créant pour connaître la vérité, qui saura sans cette lumière si, étant formés à l’aventure, ils ne sont pas incertains; ou si, étant formés par un être faux et méchant, il ne nous les a pas donnés faux afin de nous séduire; montrant par là que Dieu et le vrai sont inséparables, et que si l’un est ou n’est pas, s’il est certain ou douteux, l’autre est nécessairement de même.<sup>22</sup>

Pascal summarizes here the three hypotheses that Descartes evoked about the origin of our nature and our knowledge: a God which is said to be supremely good, an all-powerful and deceiving

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Charles Larmore, ‘The First Meditation: Skeptical Doubt and Certainty’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes’s Meditations*, pp. 48–67.

<sup>18</sup> See Janowski, ‘How to Read Descartes’s First Meditation’, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 35 (1997), 327–31.

<sup>19</sup> Cunningness and deception contradict the true idea of God who possess all the perfections: see AT VII, pp. 51–52, 53, 62; *Principia philosophiae*, I, §§ 29, 30, 43 (AT VIII-1, pp. 16, 21) and Olivo, pp. 179–84.

<sup>20</sup> For two different hypotheses about the chronology of S164/L131 and the *Entretien*, see Philippe Sellier, *Port-Royal et la littérature*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Paris: Champion, 2010), pp. 141–56, and *Entretien avec M. de Sacy*, ed. by Pascale Mengotti-Thouvenin and Jean Mesnard (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1994), pp. 125–26.

<sup>21</sup> See Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, ‘Pascal devant le doute hyperbolique de Descartes’, in *Chroniques de Port-Royal* 20–21 (1972), pp. 104–15; Vincent Carraud, *Pascal et la philosophie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1992), pp. 84–87; and Moriarty, pp. 102–03.

<sup>22</sup> *Entretien*, pp. 106–07.

God, and the action of fate or chance or a continuous sequence of things. Pascal merely modifies the second hypothesis slightly, merging the figure of the *malin génie* with that of an all-powerful yet deceiving divine creator. Yet, in the same way as Descartes, Pascal maintains that the possibility of rejecting our doubt about the certainty or uncertainty of our knowledge of the simplest truths rests on our cognition of the author of our being. The Cartesian source is exploited again in S164/L 131, where the doubt expressed in the First Meditation is referred to by Pascal as the most powerful argument of the Pyrrhonists:

Nous n'avons aucune certitude de la vérité de ces principes<sup>23</sup> — hors la foi et la révélation — sinon en [ce] que nous les sentons naturellement en nous. Or ce sentiment naturel n'est pas une preuve convaincante de leur vérité, puisque, n'y ayant point de certitude hors la foi si l'homme est créé par un Dieu bon, par un démon méchant ou à l'aventure, il est en doute si ces principes nous sont donnés ou véritables, ou faux, ou incertains, selon notre origine.

Nevertheless, while recalling the question formulated at the beginning of the Third Meditation about the limits that the harvest of doubts of the First Meditation imposes on the *regula generalis*, Pascal is also radically rejecting the answer proposed by Descartes. Certainty of the truth of the principles does not rest on a demonstration of the existence of God, founded on his 'idea', but on faith and revelation. Descartes was right: the status of our principles and of an utterly evident knowledge as much as the possibility of being certain of their truth depend on our origin, more precisely, on the nature of the author of our origin (AT VII, p. 21). 'The possession of a certain knowledge' is not possible until man 'has come to know the author of his being' because he is 'still ignorant as to whether he may have been created with the kind of nature that makes him go wrong even in matters which appear most evident'.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, in order to dismantle the doubts about the certainty of truths we clearly and distinctly perceive, Descartes demonstrates that God exists, that everything, including the human mind, depends on God, and that God is no deceiver. The *regula generalis* is thus 'deduced' from this knowledge of the 'author of our origin' (AT VII, p. 70). However, according to Pascal, such a knowledge cannot be assessed by philosophical demonstration: it depends only on faith and revelation. The *regula generalis* is not guaranteed by a clear and distinct knowledge of God and therefore, in this respect, Pascal is led to contest its general application. This is confirmed by the example Pascal evokes in the following lines of S164/L131, revealing once again the Cartesian origins of his discussion. The doubts concerning sleeping are resolved, in the closing lines of the *Meditations*, by recalling that, since God is no deceiver, it follows inescapably that we are not deceived when we clearly and distinctly perceive a difference in coherence and constancy between the

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<sup>23</sup> Here Pascal is possibly thinking more of primitive notions and indefinable words than of axioms.

<sup>24</sup> 'Cum postea recordatur se nondum scire, an forte talis naturæ creata sit, ut fallatur etiam in iis quæ ipsi evidentissima apparent, videt se merito de talibus dubitare, nec ullam habere posse certam scientiam, priusquam suæ authorem originis agnoverit', Descartes, *Principia philosophiæ*, I, § 13 (AT VIII-1, pp. 9–10) in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, ed. and trans. by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–1991), I, p. 197, translation slightly modified.



experiences of the dream-world and those of reality (AT VII, 89-90). Yet on the contrary, according to Pascal, ‘personne n’a d’assurance — hors de la foi — s’il veille ou s’il dort’ (S164/L131).<sup>25</sup>

### **A special mistake-making faculty**

The establishment of the *regula generalis* is not totally achieved in the Third Meditation. According to Descartes, true knowledge of God makes it impossible to think he deceives us about matters we know in a clear and distinct way, but there remains a form of deception from which God needs to be freed: that which is suggested by the existence of the errors of our judgments; for, if it is incompatible with divine goodness to have created us such that we are perpetually deceived, it seems equally inconsistent with that quality to permit us to be sometimes deceived (AT VII, p. 21).<sup>26</sup> The Fourth Meditation thus sets out to show that human fallibility is compatible with divine omnipotence and truthfulness. Descartes is led, first of all, to reject a hypothesis that allows God to be accused of being responsible for giving us a ‘faculty of making mistakes’ (*errandi facultas*) (AT VII, p. 54). Since nothing coming from God can positively be directed to falsity and we have in us a real faculty for knowing the truth and distinguishing it from the false, then if this faculty weren’t directed to the truth, when used correctly, God (having given it to us) could be rightly considered as a deceiver (AT VII, p. 144).

Descartes rejects this hypothesis is rejected by recalling, on the one hand, the truthfulness of God, and, on the other hand, the nature of error, which is not something real dependent on God, but simply a deficiency. We are constituted as a ‘medium term between God and nothingness’ (*medium quid inter Deum et nihil*’, AT VII, p. 54) and in so far as we have, in a way, a share of non-being, it does not seem so strange that we should be deceived. The finitude of our nature is sufficient to justify the presence of error. Descartes concludes thus:

Je n’ai pas besoin pour faillir de quelque puissance qui m’ait été donnée de Dieu particulièrement pour cet effet, mais qu’il arrive que je me trompe, de ce que la puissance que Dieu m’a donnée pour discerner le vrai d’avec le faux, n’est pas en moi infinie (AT IX-1, p. 43).

The analysis of the nature of errors in the central part of the Fourth Meditation will thus explain how *it happens* that we make mistakes (‘il arrive que je me trompe’) by showing that they are grounded in the disparity which exists between the powers of understanding and will, the one being finite, the latter infinite. In sum, human errors do not require the existence of a ‘special

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<sup>25</sup> The Cartesian background of the argument is confirmed, in the following lines, by the expression: ‘On croit voir les espaces, les figures, les mouvements’ recalling Descartes’s standard formula (*‘extensio, figura, motus’*; see AT VII, p. 75; VIII-1, p. 33). A sentence from S164/L131, crossed out by Pascal, suggest a quite paradoxical, or even playful use of Descartes’s criterion of coherency, as applied not only to a single man but also to a community, in order to distinguish dreaming and non-dream experiences: ‘Et qui doute que si on rêvait en compagnie et que par hasard les songes s’accordassent assez ce qui est ordinaire et qu’on veillât en solitude, on ne crût les choses renversées.’ On the limits of the Cartesian criterion of continuity, see S653/L803.

<sup>26</sup> See Janowski, ‘How to Read Descartes’s First Meditation’, pp. 325–27.

mistake-making faculty' (*errandi facultas*) given by God in order to be explained. They are derived simply from a 'cause of error or falsity' (*erroris aut falsitati causa*) (AT VII, p. 54; 62. Cf. AT VIII-1, p. 17), which is the finitude of our nature, and more specifically, an incorrect interaction between the will and the understanding. The *regula generalis* is thus safe and the error is simply a voluntary (and therefore, in a way, a morally condemnable) violation of it.

Pascal's definition of the imagination, when seen as a response to the first lines of the Fourth Meditation, takes on the character of an anti-theodicy. On the one hand, by describing imagination as a 'faculté trompeuse, qui semble nous être donnée exprès pour nous induire à une erreur nécessaire' (S78/L44), Pascal is exactly envisaging the hypothesis of a God-given mistake-making faculty (AT IX-1, p. 43). The result would be, according to Descartes, a divine deception to which man would be forever condemned, and this is precisely the necessary error we are led to by the power of the imagination. On the other hand, Pascal argues that apart from error that happens accidentally, through a lack of understanding between heterogeneous faculties, there is another form of error, possibly more radical because it is neither accidental nor the result of the misuse of two different intellectual powers, both perfect in themselves. In doing so, Pascal quite explicitly reacts against the Cartesian narrative of the interaction between the will and the understanding. Starting from the conviction that, in so far as we are created by the supreme being, there is nothing *within us* by which we can be deceived or led into error ('il ne se rencontre, de vrai, rien en moi qui me puisse conduire dans l'erreur', AT X-1, p. 43), Descartes concluded that it was necessary to look for a cause of error or falsity within the human way of judging, rather than for a mistake-making faculty that was a special faculty of the human mind. Pascal, on the contrary, recognizes in our natural errors the effects of an *errandi facultas*, a 'faculté trompeuse', which is a dominant part *in humankind* ('cette partie dominante dans l'homme') and therefore master of error and falsity (S78/L44).

The consequence of this denial of the Cartesian theodicy of error is the impossibility of founding the *regula generalis* and thus of proving that all the things we clearly and distinctly perceive are true. According to S78/L44–45, any certainty of the truth is undermined by the action of the imagination.<sup>27</sup> The imagining faculty is all the more deceptive because is not always so: 'Car elle serait règle infaillible de vérité si elle l'était infaillible du mensonge. Mais étant le plus souvent fausse, elle ne donne aucune marque de sa qualité, marquant du même caractère le vrai et le faux' (S78/L44). If imagination is a faculty given to us specifically to lead us into necessary error, the essence of misapprehension consists in not being aware of it, so there can be no room for any 'mark', even negative, leading to the distinguishing of true evidences. To the Cartesian *regula generalis*, which is general and therefore infallible, Pascal opposes a rule which deals with 'the most part' and provides no real criterion of truth.

A reassessment of Pascal's doctrine of the imagination in the light of its Cartesian background allows for a better understanding of two issues raised by S78/L44–45. First, Pascal

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<sup>27</sup> For a more general presentation of Pascal's views on the nature and the limits of human natural knowledge, see Frigo, *L'Évidence du Dieu caché: introduction à la lecture des Pensées de Pascal* (Mont-Saint-Aignan, Presses universitaires de Rouen et du Havre, 2015), pp. 113–25.

appears to turn the Cartesian hierarchy of happiness and knowledge upside down. In a letter to Princess Elisabeth of which Pascal was most certainly aware,<sup>28</sup> Descartes asks himself whether it is better to be happy in imagining the goods one possesses to be greater and more valuable than they are and not knowing or considering those that one lacks, or to consider and know their just value, and therefore to become sadder (AT IV, pp. 304-5). The solution runs as follows: joy is not the supreme good, and we should distinguish the possession of all those goods whose acquisition is dependent on our free will and the satisfaction of the mind which results from that. However, as knowing the truth is a greater perfection to strive for, it is better to be less content and to have more knowledge. Descartes concludes in the following terms:

Aussi n'est-ce pas toujours, lorsqu'on a le plus de gaieté, qu'on a l'esprit plus satisfait. [...] Ainsi je n'approuve point qu'on tâche à se tromper, en se repaissant de fausses imaginations; car tout le plaisir qui en revient, ne peut toucher que la superficie de [l']âme, laquelle sent cependant une amertume intérieure, en s'apercevant qu'ils sont faux (AT IV, pp. 305-06).

The knowledge of the truth, however sad it may be, is accompanied by a form of satisfaction that is the only real happiness. In the same way, false imaginations never really satisfy, nor are completely free of bitterness. Yet, what then happens if all access to the truth is denied and an imagining faculty leading us into necessary error governs all our perceptions? It would therefore be possible to dismiss the priority of knowledge over happiness and satisfaction, disjointed from the truth, would be the only criterion of choice. This is precisely what the nature of imagination renders possible, according to Pascal: '[L'imagination] ne peut rendre sages les fous, mais elle les rend heureux, à l'envi de la raison, qui ne peut rendre ses amis que misérables, l'une les couvrant de gloire, l'autre de honte' (S78/L44). The satisfaction the imagination provides is the only criterion when the true and the false are impressed by the same mark. No inner bitterness will blight the happiness of men feeding on false imaginations: condemned as they are to necessary error, all perception of the falsehood of their representation is excluded.

Second, the analysis of the nature of imagination outlined by Pascal in S78/L44–45 leads him to undermine the Cartesian concept of human perfection. The major aim of Descartes's *Meditations* was to secure human nature against any doubt as to its intrinsic perfection.<sup>29</sup> At the end of the *Meditations*, there is no more room within the hypothesis for an absolute falsity, or for any doubt that the mind would be unable to reach the truth by its own forces.<sup>30</sup> According to Descartes, when 'we suppose there to be a conviction so firm that it cannot in any way be

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<sup>28</sup> The letter was published by Clerselier in *Lettres de M. Descartes* (Paris: Angot, 1657), pp. 33–44. In a letter of July 1658, Sluse thanks Pascal for the 'civilités avec lesquelles vous m'offrez les *Lettres* de Monsieur Descartes et les *Œuvres* de Monsieur Schooten, que j'ai vues il y a six mois' (Sluse to Pascal, 23 July 1658, in Pascal, *Œuvres complètes*, IV, p. 268). For a detailed discussion of Pascal's reading of this letter, namely in S743/L978, see Laure Verhaeghe, 'L'Exemple du premier cartésien: l'interprétation pascalienne de la générosité', *Revue philosophique de la Hongrie* 59 (2015), 91–106.

<sup>29</sup> See AT VII, pp. 70, 77.

<sup>30</sup> See AT VII, pp. 143–5. See Sergio Landucci, *La mente in Cartesio* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2002), pp. 30–7; and Scribano, pp. 189–94.

uprooted [...], this conviction is precisely the same as the most perfect certitude'.<sup>31</sup> Human nature is not essentially corrupt and nor is it created by God with an inherent faculty which leads us to necessary error: human certainty (*humana certitudo*) is finite in its extension, yet unshakable when founded on the evidence of natural light (*lumen naturalis*). In this respect, the *regula generalis* paves the way to the achievement of a human perfection that asks for no supernatural help in order to be reached. This is the final result of the inquiry of the Fourth Meditation:

Car quoique je remarque cette faiblesse en ma nature, que je ne puis attacher continuellement mon esprit à une même pensée, je puis toutefois, par une méditation attentive et souvent réitérée, me l'imprimer si fortement en la mémoire que je ne manque jamais de m'en ressouvenir, toutes les fois que j'en aurai besoin, et acquérir de cette façon l'habitude de ne point faillir. Et [...] c'est en cela que consiste la plus grande et principale perfection de l'homme (AT IX-1, p. 49).

By describing imagination as a deceptive faculty, which seems to have been given to men specifically to lead them into necessary error, Pascal is denying the possibility of human perfection proposed by Descartes. Imagination makes any access to certainty impossible and undermines the legitimacy of the infallible rule of truth. In doing so, it shows that the nature of man is not only fallible but also essentially faulty, as Pascal states in S78/L44: 'L'homme n'est qu'un sujet plein d'erreur naturelle et ineffaçable sans la grace.'<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusion

The phenomenology of the imagination, so vividly sketched in S78/L44–45, is governed by a major philosophical statement about the limits of human knowledge. Pascal here writes his own Fourth Meditation 'on truth and falsity'. Human errors do not happen only accidentally through a lack of understanding between heterogeneous faculties, as Descartes suggests when he describes the relationship between the finite power of the understanding and the infinite one of the will; nor are they always corrigible by paying attention to the 'general rule' of truth. According to Pascal, in addition to this cause of error there is also a *facultas errandi* which we have been given so that we may be led into necessary error. Such a hypothesis, discarded by the *Meditations* on the basis of divine truthfulness and the limited yet perfect nature of our faculty of judging, implies a denial of the integrity of human nature. If, according to Descartes, the greatest and most distinctive perfection consists of acquiring a certain habit of *not* making mistakes, human nature as

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<sup>31</sup> 'Supponimus enim persuasionem tam firmam ut nullo modo tolli possit; quæ proinde persuasio idem plane est quod perfectissima certitudo' (AT VII, p. 145, trans. Moriarty, p. 94).

<sup>32</sup> A discussion of the place of Pascal's account of imagination within the argumentative strategy of the *Apology of the Christian Religion* he was preparing is beyond the scope of this article. See Frigo, *L'Évidence du Dieu caché*, pp. 91–99 and Pascal, *Discours sur la religion*, pp. 248–50.

described by Pascal in S78/L44–45 is therefore to be considered as essentially and intrinsically imperfect.

Two implications of the forgoing analysis might usefully be spelt out in conclusion. The first is that the genealogy of S78/L44–45, sketched above, suggests the value of a close reading of Pascal's manuscript. Early, crossed out versions and marginal changes bear witness to the textual evolution of the *Pensées*, but they also provide some essential clues about their internal argumentative logic. In this respect, reading Pascal's texts through their various compositional states allows for a deeper and more nuanced understanding not only of their struggle for form but also of Pascal's 'struggle for concepts' (as it were), sometimes unmasking the implicit target of his argumentation. The second is that Pascal's critique, in his account of the imagination, of Descartes's theodicy of error casts further light on Pascal's various modes of encounter with Cartesian thought in the *Pensées*. Much work has been done on this subject in recent years, as scholars have analysed extensively various of Pascal's different approaches, ranging from his repetition of Cartesian theses to his dismantling of Descartes's metaphysics and his conceptual subversion of some major issues of Cartesian philosophy.<sup>33</sup> My reading of S78/L44–45 suggests that Pascal sometimes adopts a further strategy, which has been labelled by Emmanuel Martineau as 'le phénomène des commencements cartésiens',<sup>34</sup> according to which Pascal starts from a Cartesian conceptual framework in order to chart the way more effectively towards a new thesis which, ultimately, appears non-Cartesian or even anti-Cartesian. In most of these cases, Pascal finds the starting point for his argument in a thesis that Descartes rejects. As we have seen, Pascal's definition of the nature of the imagination constitutes an anti-theodicy resting on the hypothesis dismissed by Descartes in the Fourth Meditation. A quite similar strategy guides Pascal's analyses of the logic of *divertissement*;<sup>35</sup> it operates, too, in the fragments he devotes to the human quest for *gloire*.<sup>36</sup> One of the most telling modes of Pascal's (anti-)Cartesianism sees him less openly dismissing or subverting Descartes's concepts than singling out one element of Cartesian philosophy and developing it into an original argument.

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<sup>33</sup> See Marion, *Sur le prisme métaphysique de Descartes* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1986), pp. 293–369; Carraud, *Pascal et la philosophie* and Moriarty, pp. 100–50.

<sup>34</sup> Pascal, *Discours sur la religion*, p. 248.

<sup>35</sup> See S 168; 637 / L 136; 773.

<sup>36</sup> See S 30; 707; 564; 653 / L 411; 470; 685; 806.