

## **Understanding Existence. Heidegger Reader of Pascal**

### **Comprendiendo la existencia. Heidegger lector de Pascal**

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**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to show the crucial role of Blaise Pascal's work for the development of Martin Heidegger's early philosophical project – which lasted until the Turn [*Kehre*] of the 1930s. The scattered but decisive presence of quotes from the French thinker clearly shows how fundamental he was, both methodologically and content-wise, for Heidegger's initial elaboration of the question of Being [*Seinsfrage*] and the Existential Analytic of Dasein [*Daseinanalytik*].

**Key-words:** existence, Dasein, authenticity, diversion, disposedness

**Resumen:** El objetivo de este artículo es mostrar el papel crucial de la obra de Blaise Pascal en el desarrollo del proyecto filosófico temprano de Martin Heidegger, que perduró hasta el Giro [*Kehre*] de la década de 1930. La presencia dispersa pero decisiva de citas del pensador francés muestra claramente cuán fundamental fue, tanto metodológica como conceptualmente, para la elaboración inicial de Heidegger de la pregunta por el Ser [*Seinsfrage*] y la analítica existencial del Dasein [*Daseinanalytik*].

**Palabras clave:** existencia, Dasein, autenticidad, diversión, disposición afectiva

## 1. The human condition between Finitude and Infinity

It is known how scarce Pascalian citations are within Martin Heidegger's works (Raffelt, 2007, p. 189; Guest, 2011, p. 41; Perrin, 2012, p. 41) and how often appear in connection with other major authors – mainly Augustine of Hippo, Max Scheler and Henri Bergson (Birault, 1983, p. 390). If in the years prior to the publication of *Being and Time* there are sparse but theoretically dense quotations from the French philosopher, after the Turn these are more generous, yet extremely more critical towards the author<sup>1</sup>.

Although to date there are still no all-encompassing and systematic studies on the relationship between Heidegger and Blaise Pascal, the similarities between the two authors are evident, so much so that their respective philosophical projects have been described as 'parallel strategies' (Philipse, 2003). On the one hand, the French philosopher offers an anthropology that has at its core the fragility and misery of mankind. Even though man is just «a thinking reed» (Pascal, 2020, p. 1832), he can nonetheless find the true meaning of life by turning towards 'Infinity' (God and Eternity). On the other hand, Heidegger's radical embrace of Finitude as Being-towards-death [*Sein-zum-Tode*] is not necessarily in contrast with the French philosopher's anthropological project. In itself, the Existential Analytic of Dasein can be read as «a more systematic version of Pascal's secular analysis of human existence» (Philipse, 2003, p. 579) that could have taken – as pointed out by Heideggerian student Karl Rahner – two opposite directions: either in an atheistic or a profoundly religious sense (Rahner, 1940, p. 345).

On the basis of this interpretation, we can therefore show the way in which Heidegger resumed in his works several religious and existentialist themes explored by the French thinker, in order to offer a more phenomenologically accessible, 'secular' version of them.

## 2. Pascal's blurred presence: ontology, methodology and the dynamic nature of existence

The presence of Pascal in Heidegger's *Denkweg* can be exemplified by two relatively known biographical anecdotes: the first is that in August 1945, once the Third Reich had collapsed, there were plans to establish a small study group on the French thinker, under the title *L'esprit de géométrie et l'esprit de finesse* (Ott, 1988, p. 323). The second is that, during the 1920s, it is said that Heidegger kept a portrait of Pascal hanging on the wall of his study room in Freiburg, and more precisely a photograph of his death mask

<sup>1</sup> In these cases, Pascal is often accused by Heidegger of not having fully grasped the revolutionary scope of the Cartesian *cogito*. The theme is systematically analysed in several sections of *Nietzsche: Der europäische Nihilismus*, particularly in *Pascal's misinterpretation of the new Cartesian beginning* and in *Pascal's misunderstanding of novelty with respect to the metaphysics of Descartes*. Cf. GA 48, pp. 213-216 and 226-229.

(Löwith, 1940, p. 517). Proof of this can be found in the university course *Logic. The Question of Truth*, where, while focusing on Immanuel Kant's theory of Images, the example offered is the photographic image of Pascal's death mask (GA 21, p. 298).

These anecdotes show how concrete was the presence of the French thinker in Heidegger's life and philosophical research. During the first elaboration of his Fundamental Ontology [*Fundamentalontologie*] as Existential Analytic of Dasein, quotes from Pascal are often found in various university courses and drafts, while analysing methodological, existential and ontological problems. The latter type of mentions can be found in a note in the first chapter of *Being and Time*. Here Heidegger is focusing on an observation from *De l'Esprit géométrique*, according to which it is impossible to define 'being' without implying the defined in its definition:

One cannot attempt to define 'being' without falling into this absurdity: because one cannot define a word without starting with it, *c'est*, whether expressed or implied. So, to define 'being', we should say that *it is*, and therefore use the defined word in its definition (*SuZ*, p. 489 note iv)<sup>2</sup>.

This attests the exceptional status of the primitive term 'being', and emphasises its notable semantic 'surplus'. However, due to its indefinability, Pascal affirms that it is the most general and empty concept of all, therefore falling into the metaphysical prejudice of the classical philosophical tradition – heavily criticised by Heidegger at the beginning of the chapter.

Existential-type mentions can instead be found in several university lectures prior to *Being and Time*, mostly dealing with methodological problems. In order to describe the Motion of Life [*Lebensbewegtheit*], Heidegger deliberately resumes several concepts from Aristotle's practical and theoretical philosophy<sup>3</sup>. While crucially searching for a phenomenologically adequate method for the analysis of existence, in the appendix of the 1923 course *Ontology. The Hermeneutics of Facticity* Heidegger quotes Pascal's *pensée* n° 382:

When all is equally moving, nothing appears to be moving, as on a ship. When all tend to excess [*débordement*], none appears to do so. He who halts draws attention to how the others are carried away, as if he were a fixed point (GA 63, p. 84).

Hence the methodological need for a 'fixed point' – not in the Cartesian sense of a present-at-hand *subiectum* – from which it is possible to 'phenomenologically see' the Motion of Existence. This must happen not 'from the outside' of life, in an attitude of theoretical-epistemological detachment, but within life itself, by *sojourning* there. That means, for Heidegger it is only

<sup>2</sup> The same argument is present also during the 1925 course on *Logic*. Cf. GA 21, p. 64.

<sup>3</sup> For more general studies about Heidegger's 'voracious appropriation' of Aristotle, cf. Berti, 2008, 2010, and Volpi, 2010.

from the Sojourn [*im Aufenthalt*] that the movement of life must become visible in itself: «Motion is visible in the sojourn and from out of this the possibility of countermovement as the genuine way to sojourn. Sojourning and holding out in life itself, in the meaning of its being and of its being an object: facticity» (*Ibid.*, pp. 84-85).

Another methodological reference to Pascal can be found in the draft notes of the 1921-22 course *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle. Initiation into Phenomenological Research*, where an entire section is dedicated to the description of such ‘Fundamental Motion of Life’, i.e. Dasein’s dynamic structure of Care [*Sorge*]: «Life, as caring, lives in a world and, in the manifold ways of the corresponding relations, actualizations, and maturations, cares for the objects encountered in experience at any particular time and cares for the encounters themselves» (GA 61, p. 253). Here Pascal’s quote plays a peculiar role within the phenomenological description of such Motion:

The movedness [*Bewegtheit*] of factual life can be provisionally interpreted and described as unrest. The ‘how’ of this unrest, in its fullness as a phenomenon, determines facticity. On life and unrest [*Leben und Unruhe*], cf. Pascal, *Pens.* I–VII; the description valuable, but not the theory and the project; above all: soul-body, *le voyage éternel* [the eternal voyage], for existentiell philosophy not accessible in that form (*Ibid.*, pp. 254-255).

Heidegger is thus generally judging Pascal’s anthropology as descriptively valid, but inaccessible for the Existential Analytic of Dasein – at least ‘in that form’ –, due to its metaphysical and religious framework: hence the need for a phenomenological, more ‘secular’ interpretation that can truly highlight Life’s dimension of Facticity [*Faktizität*]<sup>4</sup>.

The role of the French thinker’s work as a primary source for the *Daseinanalytik* emerges also in a short quote within the 1925 lectures *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*. During the analysis of Dasein’s key trait of ‘Ecstasiticity’ (the ‘outside-itselfness’), Heidegger shows in which way this same aspect was examined by Scheler in his anthropology, that is, by resuming it through the Christian notion of Person [*persona*]:

Inasmuch as Scheler sees the person in the unity of acts, which means in their intentionality, he says: the essence of man is the intention toward something or, as he puts it, the very gesture of transcendence. Man is an eternal out-towards [*ein ewiges Hinaus-zu*], in the way that Pascal calls man a god-seeker [*als einen Gottsucher*] (GA 20, p. 130).

The fact that Pascal is cited within the description of one of the most fundamental features of Dasein’s structure is rather remarkable, and clearly

<sup>4</sup> For this reason, Heidegger will find in Aristotle’s practical philosophy a more ‘phenomenologically grounded’ analysis of Dasein. In fact, the final part of the aforementioned quote states: «Rest-unrest; phenomenon and movement (cf. the phenomenon of movement in Aristotle)» (*Ibid.*, p. 255). For more general studies on Heidegger and Aristotle see note 3.

shows how deep was his influence for the development of Heidegger's descriptive categories of existence. This can become even more evident after a brief comparison between a selection of *pensées* and key passages from *Being and Time*'s analysis of Everydayness [*Alltäglichkeit*].

### 3. Inauthenticity and Authenticity: a comparison between *Pensées* and *Being and Time*

The influence of Pascal emerges emblematically during the examination of what Heidegger calls 'Inauthenticity' [*Uneigentlichkeit*], Dasein's 'Fall' into the world and in its own 'things to do'. As stated by philosopher Jean Brun, the Pascalian analyses of Diversion [*Divertissement*] and Curiosity can clearly be found «in the pages that Heidegger devoted to 'Inauthenticity' and the Anyone (*das / Man*)» (Brun, 1992, p. 67). For both authors in fact, when man must face the most fundamental existential questions, he is prey to deep anxiety and incessantly seeks escape in his own worldly concerns. For Pascal, Diversion is not just the pursuit of pleasures in life, but most of all an attempt to become numb through countless activities, thus avoiding becoming aware of human condition's radical misery: «*Diversion*. – Men, unable to remedy death, sorrow, and ignorance, determine, in order to make themselves happy, not to think on these things» (Pascal, 2020, p. 930). This is why the French philosopher reiterates that we do not seek the pleasures of money or gambling, nor the dangers of war or the hassles of office, but «the distraction which amuses us, and diverts our mind from these thoughts [on death and misery]» (*Ibid.*, p. 919). As bluntly stated in the *Pensées*:

*Misery*. – The one thing which consoles us for our miseries is diversion, yet this itself is the greatest of our miseries. For this it is which mainly hinders us from thinking of ourselves, and which insensibly destroys us. Without this we should be weary, and weariness would drive us to seek a more abiding way out of it. But diversion beguiles us and leads us insensibly onward to death (*Ibid.*, p. 931).

This Fall in mundanity is what Heidegger calls the mode of 'Average Everydayness' (or Inauthenticity): «Dasein comports itself towards it in the mode of average everydayness, even if this is only the mode of fleeing *in the face of it* and forgetfulness *thereof*» (*SuZ*, p. 69). Fleeing from itself and forgetful of itself, Dasein is then trapped by the anonymous publicity of 'the They' [*das Man*] in the existential modes of 'Idle talk', 'Curiosity' and 'Ambiguity'. Here Heidegger argues – in a noticeably Pascalian manner – that

the supposition of the 'they' that one is leading and sustaining a full and genuine 'life', brings Dasein a *tranquillity*, for which everything is 'in the best of order' and all doors are open. [...] However, this tranquillity in inauthentic Being does not seduce one into stagnation and inactivity, but drives one into uninhibited 'hustle' [*Betriebs*]. Being-fallen into the 'world' does not

now somehow come to rest. [...] [Dasein] drifts along towards an alienation [*Entfremdung*] in which its ownmost potentiality-for-Being is hidden from it. Falling Being-in-the-world is not only tempting and tranquillizing; it is at the same time *alienating* (*Ibid.*, p. 222).

In order to contrast this process of self-alienation, Heidegger aims to develop a secular way of 'salvation'. As noted by theologian Josef Sellmair: «Heidegger wants to redeem man; his doctrine of man wants to be a doctrine of salvation: man does not become guilty by falling away from God, but by falling away from himself, by losing himself to man» (Sellmair, 1934, p. 18). This search for redemption in the secular form of Dasein's Authenticity [*Eigentlichkeit*] – i.e. the regaining of the 'ownmost potentiality-for-Being' – is nonetheless still heavily influenced by Pascal and the Christian tradition, as clearly shown by the phenomenological analysis of the Call of Conscience [*Ruf des Gewißens*].

For the French thinker, Diversion distracts man from his own unique 'dignity', that is, the power of Thinking. Following Augustine, it is only within the innermost solitude of thoughts that the true *homme chrétien* can become open towards the appearance of the Hidden God [*Deus absconditus*]<sup>5</sup>. As stated in the second letter of 1656 to Mademoiselle de Roannez: «This strange secrecy, in which God is impenetrably withdrawn from the sight of men, is a great lesson to betake ourselves to solitude far from the sight of men» (Pascal, 2020, p. 2700). And if for Pascal it is only within solitude that the Silence of God can 'become word', in Heidegger the existential phenomenon of the Call of Conscience shares the same character of 'silent call'. This 'awakes' Dasein from his inauthentic life, *isolating* him and allowing him to then existentially project his own Being-towards-death: «The call dispenses with any kind of utterance. It does not put itself into words at all; yet it remains nothing less than obscure and indefinite. *Conscience discourses solely and constantly in the mode of keeping silent [...] In conscience, Dasein calls itself*» (*SuZ*, pp. 318-320).

This 'personalisation' of the Call is highlighted by Heidegger himself, in contrast to the Patristic tradition that, following a metaphysical approach, 'objectified' the whole phenomenon and used it «as starting-point for explaining [it] as an alien power by which Dasein is dominated [...] a person who makes himself known – namely God» (*Ibid.*, p. 320) – hence the radical separation between the philosophical approaches of *Fundamentalontology* and classic theology.

#### 4. The anti-theoretical and 'alethic' role of Disposedness

In the context of Heidegger's 'laicisation' of Pascalian philosophy, the last aspect that will be here examined is Dasein's other key existential trait:

<sup>5</sup> Contemporary scholars are still debating how profound was the influence of this theme on Heidegger, especially in his later works. Cf. Philipse, 2003 and Guest, 2011.

its Disposedness [*Befindlichkeit*] – which highly emphasises the role of emotions in phenomenology. For both authors, the fundamental mood of Anxiety [*Grundstimmung der Angst*] is the most philosophically predominant in Dasein's life: as we have seen, if the Pascalian man restlessly falls in mundanity in order to not think about his death and misery, likewise Dasein's escape towards the 'Feeling-at-home' characteristic of Everyday Publicness is a flee in the face of *itself*, of its own originary 'Nothingness', «the 'not-at-home' [*das Nicht-zuhause-sein*]; that is, we flee in the face of the uncanniness which lies in Dasein» (*Ibid.*, p. 234).

Thus, the last Pascalian quotes will address the fundamental role of affectivity in Heidegger's philosophy. The French thinker, following the tradition of Patristics, deeply insisted on the 'emotive access' towards the knowledge of divine things. In itself, this has a noticeably anti-theoretical trait that inevitably captured Heidegger's interest in expanding the phenomenological method in order to allow – following Scheler – a purer vision of emotional phenomena. Hence, paragraph §29 of *Being and Time* is entirely dedicated to Disposedness, and in a note is quoted a passage from Pascal's *The Art of Persuasion*:

And thence it comes about that in the case where we are speaking of human things, it is said to be necessary to know them before we love them, and this has become a proverb; but the saints, on the contrary, when they speak of divine things, say that we must love them before we know them [*il faut les aimer pour les connaître*], and that we enter into truth only by charity; they have made of this one of their most useful maxims (*Ibid.*, p. 492 note v).

For Heidegger, Pascal's anthropological project is here in direct opposition towards the purely intellectualist foundation of René Descartes' *cogito* – whose deconstruction was one of the main objectives of the German philosopher. The quote is complemented by a passage from Augustine's *Contra Faustum*, according to which «one does not enter in truth except through charity [*non intratur in veritatem nisi per charitatem*]» (*Ibid.*). This clearly shows in what sense Heidegger took from the Christian tradition the idea according to which the human relationship with Truth [*alétheia*] is primarily mediated by moods, in stark contrast with the 'Cartesian' Phenomenology of Pure Conscience developed by his master Edmund Husserl. As stated in the same paragraph of *Being and Time*, for the onto-phenomenological method emotions have primacy over purely cognitive and intellectual acts: «Pure beholding, even if it were to penetrate to the innermost core of the Being of something present-at-hand, could never discover anything like that which is threatening» (*Ibid.*, p. 177).

This mode of originally affective access to the world is also highlighted in *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*, in the context of a severe critique of Descartes' metaphysics. While describing Dasein's structure of In-being [*In-Sein*], Augustine and Pascal are praised for having identified what comes *before* any theoretical act:

They called that which actually knows not knowing but *love and hate*. All knowing is only an appropriation and a form of realization of something which is already discovered by other primary compartments. Knowing is rather more likely to cover up something which was originally uncovered in non-cognitive compartment (GA 20, p. 165).

This echoes Scheler's essay *Liebe und Erkenntnis*, which also begins with a Pascalian citation from the *Discourse on the Passion of Love*: «For love and reason are but the same thing» (Pascal, 2020, p. 2854). For Scheler then, moods are not a psychic phenomenon alongside others, but rather allow a 'primary discovery' of truth – and, as underlined by Heidegger, this is also valid for the theoretical attitude: referring to Aristotle's quote from *Metaphysics* according to which man began to philosophise only after all his primary needs were satisfied, the German philosopher states in *Being and Time* that

Yet even the purest *theoria* [theory] is not entirely devoid of emotional tonality; has not left all moods behind it; even when we look theoretically at what is just present-at-hand, it does not show itself purely as it looks unless this *theoria* lets it come towards us in a *tranquil* tarrying alongside..., in *rastóne* [comfort] and *diagogé* [recreation] [*Metaph.*, I 2, 982 b 22] (*SuZ*, p. 177).

Every theoretical act has therefore an underlying mood – even though of mere 'tranquillity' –, and this clearly shows the structurally 'alethic' role of Disposedness in Dasein's existence as 'factual' Being-in-the-world.

In conclusion, there is no doubt that Pascal's anthropology was essential for Heidegger's elaboration of the basic concepts of his Existential Analytic of Dasein. However, some hermeneutical problems remain open: 1) the need for a deeper, all-encompassing and systematic study of Pascal's quotes in the entire *Gesamtausgabe*; 2) the question whether Heidegger's interpretations of Pascal were philologically and historically correct – since it is known how often he misinterpreted key concepts of both ancient and modern philosophers.

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