Liberal Education: An Insider's Account

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NOTE:

The first formal lecture of the academic year is traditionally given by the dean on the topic of liberal education. It is first and foremost for the benefit of new students, but is meant by extension to give a fresh start to the new student in each of us. Its purpose is to help students and tutors think or think again about some important aspect of the central work of this college.

This lecture was given on Friday, August 26, 1994, in the great hall of St. John's College in Santa Fe. It was followed, as are all formal lectures at St. John's, by a discussion period in which the issues it raises and others related to them are pursued in conversation.

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(This talk falls into two parts connected perhaps by no more than my own interest: The first addresses liberal education; the second is a meditation on a few thoughts from Pascal's Pensees.)

General talk about the liberal arts and the intellectual tradition is helpful and must be undertaken from time to time. And given the obsessive tendency in this country to consider education primarily as job training, we are often forced to make arguments for the usefulness and practicality of our particular kind of liberal education. We must show that it is something more and better than what it has come to in many schools, where majoring in the liberal arts is what students do when they find themselves in college not knowing what to study as they wait for their major to occur to them like a bolt from heaven.

Two poles define our work of education: first, the books, these particular books that link us to the intellectual tradition that has shaped what passes as reality; second, the liberal arts, the mental skills of language and mathematics that one must possess to learn or accomplish just about anything else. *Skill,* of course, is a poor synonym for art because it stresses the habituation of performing a task according to a routine, while leaving out the important something more that we understand by art. This something more involves insight and judgment and cannot be made routine. It may be more helpful to think of the books and the liberal arts not as poles at all, for they are not necessarily opposed. They can be, in fact, relatively friendly one another, like, for example, the positive and negative poles of electricity. Perhaps they are more like stars or constellations that guide and give

light to our work here. At times in the life of the college, we have been guided especially by certain books. At other times the idea of the liberal arts has been in the ascendant—any good book might provide "grist for the mill." In the last ten years there has been less talk about *grist,* and that is probably for the best, though the notion can provide a healthy antidote when we find ourselves becoming myopic about books we clutch too dearly.

The contest between the liberal arts and the specific books of the Western intellectual tradition is a healthy one. Proponents on the side of the liberal arts seem in rather short supply just now. I hope this is only temporary because for this argument to be won simply by one side would suggest a diminution of vitality in our college.

Wherever one stands on this issue, the question remains of how it is that attention to the books and the liberal arts actually produces graduates who are equipped to do good and important work in the world. This claim can be proved for the most part. We sometimes address this issue by saying that we teach people to think. And surely students do learn to think at St. John's, but this too may be a rather unhelpful way to put it. *Thinking* is a much less promising concept to build a case upon than the liberal arts.

These ways of talking about liberal education, describing the ends it serves and its benefits, defending it as something more than the amorphous alternative to a firm college major, and demonstrating its usefulness in the practical world of jobs, are all ways we must often talk. But they are all ways of talking to outsiders, to people who are not involved in the essential work of liberal education, and they seem pale and limp compared to what it is about our work here that holds us the faculty and students spellbound and makes us eager to devote ourselves to it.

It is no exaggeration, or at least not a great exaggeration, to say that everything we study here, every book, every author, every mathematical

theorem and every scientific exploration, every essay, poem, or musical composition holds out to us the promise of opening to our view a deep and rich vein of truth, of insight into ourselves and our world. Tutors in this college enjoy the privilege and reap the satisfaction of returning again and again to the central works of the program with continually deepening insight and following the trail of inquiry beyond what might be considered the fixed part of the program in preceptorials, informal study groups and in work on their own.

For students here, both the four-year undergraduate program and our two graduate programs serve as an initiation, an extensive rite of passage into the life of reflection and thoughtful action. This is far from the extravagant attention that is given these days to the importance of information and especially computerized information. Information, we are told, is power. Access in nanoseconds to googol-bytes of information from sources all around the world is the dream of the information superhighway. No one would dispute that getting information and manipulating it can be useful, profitable, and even, perhaps, good, but processing and controlling information are far from the central concerns of liberal education. We aim not merely to gain information about what Plato and Aristotle, Dante and Machiavelli, Kant and Nietzsche wrote, but, in the activity of grappling with their words, to become ourselves transformed in the way we think and the ways we approach life, in the way we consider ourselves and others.

We study some things because they hold out the promise of helping us make progress with central and compelling questions. Others we study as preliminary and prerequisite to our more far reaching inquiries. To approach the insights of modern mathematical physics, one must develop facility in the techniques of algebra and elementary calculus; to behold the rich intricacy of Plato and Aristotle's work, we must learn some Ancient Greek. Even this preliminary work brings its pleasures, pleasures often unexpected and of at least two kinds: First, there is the pleasure we take in

experiencing the orderliness of such matters as geometrical proof, algebraic solution and grammatical explanation. This is the not-to-be-despised satisfaction of a job well done, of marshaled information, and of grasped principles. Good tools, procedures and habits of approach are indispensable in undertaking the work that is most properly the work of the college.

The second kind of pleasure arises from the fact that more often than one might guess these preliminary studies are themselves the source of penetrating and startling insight. They are elementary in both senses of the word, elementary as in *elementary school*, learning the first things you have to learn, but also in the deeper sense of coming face to face with the most fundamental intellectual constituents. A study of Euclid's *Elements* gives rise to questions about the nature of mathematical objects, both geometric figures and numbers, and of the place of ideal mathematics. Even algebra, which lends itself to being taught as a cook-book exercise, can be a source of deep questions about abstracted formal relations, about issues of consistency and completeness, and about symbolic language in a pure form.

This pleasure arises no less often in language study. Though one may embark on language study as a mere means, careful attention to words and the elements of syntax and etymology yields a rich return in surprising and often far-reaching insights about the nature of language—this lego-like building of linguistic forms that bears a mysterious relation to the realm of thought and provides our access to it.

The work that is most properly our work here, the work that has drawn us all to be here is the opportunity to engage with the authors as they bring all the powers they have to bear on the most pressing and far-reaching questions that inevitably emerge if human beings reflect on themselves and the world.

The stages of discovery are often exhilarating. It is not uncommon to

feel ourselves lifted to a point of transcendent vision philosophic or theological system, like that of Aristotle or St. Thomas, or by a poetic image—Dante's celestial rose, the eyes of Beatrice, or the concentric celestial orbits described by Copernicus. And sometimes philosophy does not choose simply to quarrel with poetry, but the two manage to work hand in hand, as they do in Plato's dialogues, whose beauty and power have arguably not been surpassed in either realm.

The progress of honest and deep inquiry—and it is not worth much if not both honest and deep—is not always uplifting. Often we are confronted with observations, claims and speculations that are profoundly unsettling and do not lead to comfortable conclusions.

The most famous of the three ancient inscriptions in the temple at Delphi urges: Γνῶθι σαυτόν, "know thyself." This modest injunction sums up in a phrase what we work at here, but often summing up is less than helpful, and just its opposite, unpacking or decompressing (though not necessarily deconstructing), is what we most need to do.

The question of self can be taken up from any number of places in our program. It points in markedly different directions depending on who is asking and why. Does the oracle ask me to seek to know myself personally, to discover what it is that is uniquely mine, uniquely me, or rather am I to seek to know myself as a member of the human species, or to know what we are in relation to the world—in relation to everything that is not self?

Our notions of self and our relation to the world are usually provided to us ready-made by the common sense of our particular time and upbringing. This common sense is gained through experiences as we build up a store of convictions about who we are and what our place is in the world. But it is in unraveling this mostly taken-for-granted common sense of ourselves that our business of inquiry begins in earnest. Some ways of taking up a ques-

tion, like ways of picking up a tangled heap of twine, are better than others. The best writers, we find, articulate the questions, setting them at an arm's length where we can more easily see their parts and implications. They open their deepest thoughts to us showing their work and not just their conclusions. They allow us to think through the issues with their help, but for ourselves.

An important work that beautifully and in rather short order takes up the branch of the question that relates self to the world and lays open to our view a handful of the most haunting issues concerning the human plight is Pascal's *Pensées*. Few have achieved such great stature on the basis of as small a number of works or in such a broad spectrum of fields as Blaise Pascal, who was born in France the same year that Shakespeare died and lived only to the age of thirty nine. He made major contributions in fields as far ranging as mathematics and physics, philosophy and theology. Pascal's *Pensées* is an assemblage of notes and observations he intended to use as the basis of an extended defense of Christianity, a work he did not live to complete. These *thoughts* consist of a collection of short observations, often only a paragraph, sometimes just a sentence or phrase, each devoted to an impression or idea. Though he left notes suggesting how some of the pieces were to be ordered and giving the rough shape of the whole projected work, these thoughts were left incomplete at his death and for the most part not formally connected. A reader cannot help but wonder how Pascal would have brought them together. It is an unusual adventure to have before us this shoe-box full of thoughts that do not exactly fit together as a whole and yet yearn for wholeness. Each of them shows genius of insight and expression, and they have not had their edges planed to fit as pieces of a larger work.

To my mind, the most beautiful and unsettling of the *Pensées* is the one entitled "The Disproportion of Man" in which Pascal characterizes the human plight. He asks whether there is any proportion between man and

nature. This seemingly innocent question implies a deeper one about the possibility of giving a rational account of man in relation to the whole of the extended world. A rational account taken in the strict mathematical sense as Pascal intends it here depends on the possibility of forming a *ratio,* which we learn from Euclid is a "sort of relationship with respect to size between two magnitudes of the same kind." Pascal's thought experiment begins literally with an attempt to put man's physical size in a ratio with "the whole of nature." I quote this passage at some length, because, while it is easily summarized in a sentence, the passage achieves much of its power through Pascal's particular way of unfolding the idea:

> Let man then contemplate the whole of nature in her full and lofty majesty, let him turn his gaze away from the lowly objects around him; let him behold the dazzling light set like an eternal lamp to light up the universe, let him see the earth as a mere speck compared to the vast orbit described by this star, and let him marvel at finding this vast orbit itself to be no more than the tiniest point compared to that described by the stars revolving in the firmament. But if our eyes stop there, let our imagination proceed further; it will grow weary of conceiving things before nature tires of producing them. The whole visible world is only an imperceptible dot in nature's ample bosom. No idea comes near it; it is no good inflating our conceptions beyond imaginable space, we only bring forth atoms compared to the reality of things. Nature is an infinite sphere whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere.[1] (88)

[1]Passages from the *Pensées* are taken from the Krailsheimer translation (Penguin, 1966) and are sometimes slightly altered.

He finds, as we confirm with our study of Ptolemy's *Almagest,* that the 7,900 mile diameter of the earth is too small to bear any relation to the sphere of the fixed stars. Even our distance from the sun, some 93 million miles, is too small to be put in a ratio with the sphere of stars revolving in the firmament. This way of speaking is itself a comforting illusion that seems to set a boundary to the vastness of the universe, and the word *universe* shows the effort of language to conceive of the all, the we-know-not-what as a singular something we can encompass with our minds.

Pascal then turns the eye of his imagination to search in the opposite direction:

> Let {man} look into the tiniest things he knows. Let a mite show him in its minute body incomparably more minute parts, legs with joints, veins in its legs, blood in the veins, humours in the blood, drops in the humours, vapours in the drops: let him divide these things still further until he has exhausted his powers of imagination, and let the last thing he comes down to now be the subject of our discourse. He will perhaps think that this is the ultimate of minuteness in nature.
>
> I want to show a new abyss. I want to depict to him not only the visible universe, but all the conceivable immensity of nature enclosed in this miniature atom. Let him see there an infinity of universes, each with its firmament, its planets, its earth, in the same proportions as in the visible world, and on that earth animals, and finally mites, in which he will find again the same results as in the first; and finding the same thing yet again in the others without end or respite, he will be lost in such wonders, as astonishing in their minuteness as the others in their amplitude.

> For who will not marvel that our body, a moment ago imperceptible in a universe, itself imperceptible in the bosom of the whole, should now be a colussus, a world, or rather a whole compared to the nothingness beyond our reach. (90)

Pascal imagines here a non-atomic world, that is, he imagines himself past the barrier of the atom, the unbreakable element that provided many thinkers with the comforting limit on the small end of the scale that concepts like sphere of fixed stars provides on the large end. Our modern atom is of course a failure in this respect and is no ατομον at all, being made of subatomic particles. In fact, it bears some resemblance to what Pascal imagined. He concludes this part of his case with a plea for humility in the face of our plight, caught as we are in an uneasy and ungrounded middle place:

> Nature, supporting him between these two abysses of infinity and nothingness, will tremble at these marvels. I believe that with his curiosity changing into wonder he will be more disposed to contemplate them in silence than investigate them with presumption.
>
> For, after all, what is man in nature? A nothing compared to the infinite, a whole compared to the nothing, a middle point between all and nothing, infinitely remote from an understanding of the extremes; the end of things and their principles are unattainably hidden from him in impenetrable secrecy....
>
> What else can he do, then, but perceive some semblance of the middle of things, eternally hopeless of knowing either their principles or their end?

The word *semblance* is important here since *middle place* by itself already implies a ratio with the extremes. The very language of mathematics in its efforts to describe the world brings assurance about its comprehensibility. This assurance, if Pascal is correct, is something to which we have no right. After this dramatic imaginary excursion, Pascal uses disproportion with respect to size as a model for the disproportion of our intelligence and our senses:

> Our intelligence occupies the same rank in the order of intellect as our body in the whole range of nature.
>
> Limited in every respect, we find this intermediate state between two extremes reflected in all our faculties. Our senses can perceive nothing extreme; too much noise deafens us, too much light dazzles; when we are too far or too close we cannot see properly; an argument is obscured by being too long or too short; too much truth bewilders us....
>
> We feel neither extreme heat nor extreme cold. Qualities carried to excess are bad for us and cannot be perceived; we no longer feel them, we suffer them. Excessive youth and excessive age impair thought; so do too much and too little learning.
>
> In a word, extremes are as if they did not exist for us nor we for them; they escape us or we escape them. (92)

Pascal then addresses the possibility that, even if one cannot reach the beginning or end, the extremes in any of the objects that our faculties address, one might, at least, aspire to know the parts that can be put in a ratio with man. He responds to this possibility with an argument that "the parts of the world are all so related and linked together...that it is impossi-

ble to know one without the other and without the whole."(93)

He concludes this *pensée* with the further observation that humans are composed of body and soul, matter and spirit, natures radically incompatible, he says, "since there is nothing so inconceivable as the idea that matter knows itself."

Now all of this would be less disturbing if Pascal concluded that we are capable of knowing nothing, or that our pursuit to know ourselves in relation to the cosmos is just a waste of time, but he does no such thing. Actually this *pensée* breaks off abruptly after a tantalizing promise of two additional considerations that would complete "the proof of our weakness."

The disproportion helps us to realize the smallness of the realm of concerns in which we normally live and brings a feeling of insight. But further reflection may call this insight itself into question. To explain this, I must delve briefly into Pascal's observations on our faculties, our powers of knowing. It is important to keep in mind that he does not build a systematic or architectonic account of our mental and spiritual faculties. Instead, he presents us with a handful of trenchant insights that turn upon two or three incisive distinctions which I shall briefly outline.

"We know the truth," he says, "not only through our reason but also through our heart." (58) What he means by reason is fairly clear; reason makes deductions from principles that are supplied to it. (122) The principles, on the other hand, are gotten by the heart. This account is most clear if we are speaking of such matters as mathematics, of which he says, "The heart feels...that there is an infinite series of numbers, and the reason goes on to demonstrate that there are no two square numbers of which one is double the other." (58) The powers he attributes to reason and the heart become more troublesome, as we will see, when he turns them upon philosophical issues.

He also makes a distinction between the *esprit de géométrie* and the *esprit de finesse.* These are usually translated as the *mathematical mind* and the *intuitive mind,* which is not so bad, except that *esprit* is only partially captured by the English *mind. Mind* suggests that these are subdivisions of reason, which Pascal rather clearly does not intend. *Esprit de finesse* gets at something close to heart. The two overlap, though they are not simple synonyms. "The heart," claims Pascal in one of his most famous passages, "has its reasons of which reason knows nothing." (154) The *esprit de finesse* he describes as "having good sight": it is a mode of right thinking that is not mediated by logical steps as are those conclusions reached by the geometric mind. Pascal is quite clear that both kinds of *esprit* are sources of truth, and that at least some of what we think we know we actually do know.

Over against these he places the imagination, which he calls a second nature in man and the greatest source of error: "It is the dominant faculty in man, master of error and falsehood, all the more deceptive for not being invariably so." (38) If it always produced falsehoods, at least that could be counted on, but, he says, "it sets the same mark on true and false alike." (38) The upshot is that the spiritual or mental faculties of man are unreliable. Reason works perfectly well in grinding out conclusions but has no insight about principles. The *heart* provides us with principles, but false heart-felt impressions not easily separated from truths are produced also by the unreliable imagination.

Yet, according to Pascal, it is reason that is the source of man's greatness, reason confronting its own limitations. In the disproportion Pascal claims that we know this negative thing, we are aware of our dismal plight lost between the two infinities. It is melancholy insights like this that set us apart from the beasts and give us what small dignity we have, small but not insignificant: "Man's greatness comes from knowing he is wretched." (59) *Greatness* may not do as well for the French *grandeur* here as it might if it could be combined with *majesty* and *importance.* He epitomizes man:

> What sort of freak then is man! How novel, how monstrous, how chaotic, how paradoxical, how prodigious! Judge of all things, feeble earthworm, repository of truth, sink of doubt and error, glory and refuse of the universe![2](64)

Realization of our wretchedness is the deepest insight we can reach by our own powers according to Pascal's account. Though this realization is what makes us great, it is also a thought we cannot bear. Our usual way of not bearing it is to pursue any diversion that will take our mind from this pained perplexity at the center of our being. He says,

> What people want is not the easy peaceful life that allows us to think of our unhappy condition, nor the dangers of war, nor the burdens of office, but the agitation that takes our mind off it and diverts us. That is why we prefer the hunt to the capture. (68)

This completes my brief summary of Pascal's articulation of the problem. I hesitate before taking up his solution to it, which is a rather specialized strain of Catholic orthodoxy. His grim observations about the plight of man have continued to stir interest among readers, many of whom have little patience with his Christian response. Surely it would be more comfortable to stay on the philosophical side of the field, where one can maintain a respectful distance than to cross over into theological and religious territory. It is a curious state of affairs that theology, once regarded as the queen of the sciences, and which makes perhaps the largest claim to universality is considered in our pluralistic and eclectic age the domain of personal

[2]This passage seems clearly to have provided the basis of Alexander Pope' s famous lines in the *Essay on Man*, though he turned the image to another purpose.

opinion, private and for the most part excluded from the arena of public conversation. A sound historical account can be given for how it is in America that emphasis in education came to fall on the practical and useful, and the search for ultimate ends was put aside. And this has produced many good effects. At present, however, the accepted public attitude toward these matters has become extreme. To say anything about a religion, and especially a religion not one's own, is risking a step into the legal quagmire of discrimination. The safe course on these matters is silence. I mention this neither to lament our pluralism nor to pine for an earlier age of universal religion, but rather to note the importance of including these matters in the realm of public discourse. I note also the genuine difficulty of doing so.

Pascal makes a passionate plea for the rightness of one and only one view. I am not at all sure how we can give him a fair hearing, a hearing that leaves open the possibility that he may be right, without falling back immediately on our own predispositions. We may be disposed favorably or we may oppose his view in a variety of ways, as atheists, agnostics, as religious but non Christian, or, in what can be the most extreme form of opposition, as proponents of opposing Christian interpretations. And yet our exploration will come up short if we do not make every effort to put aside these difficulties and hear his full account.

The central points of Pascal's Christianity can be gathered under the following headings which I will take up in order: how one finds God, what kind of god Pascal's search leads to, how the paradoxes can then be addressed, and the sort of religion this implies.

Mainstream Catholicism begins with reasonable proofs for the existence of God that argue from the design and order of the world, from the need for an ultimate mover in the chain of physical causes, and from the necessity of a non-contingent being on whom contingent beings like us depend. Pascal is not impressed by any of these. To his way of thinking, God demonstrated

by these means cannot bear a significant relation to human beings. Nor is he impressed by a god whose necessity is established on the ground of reasonable or logical perfection. For Pascal the most compelling argument for the existence of God is the very unreason that reason by his account inevitably reaches. He says, "All those contradictions which seemed to take me furthest from the knowledge of any religion are what led me most directly to the true religion." (146)

It is when the pride of mind has been broken as mind comes up against its limitations that the heart can be opened to faith: "The way of God, who disposes all things with gentleness, is to instill religion into our minds with reasoned arguments and into our hearts with grace." (83) Pascal is clear that man cannot choose faith, but is free only to choose a way of living that is not incompatible with faith. Faith can be provided only by God speaking to man through the heart. The "reasoned arguments" are of the probable sort. They are not, as he says, absolutely convincing. They serve not as proofs, but provide corroborating evidence.

Pascal's God is a God who hides himself, a *deus absconditus*, who only makes himself visible to those who have humbled themselves, who have confronted the disproportion and have realized what a poor instrument human reason is. Facing the abject plight of man becomes a necessary step for man to take in finding his true place as a creature of God:

> ...it is not only right but useful for us that God should be partly concealed and partly revealed, since it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness as to know his wretchedness without knowing God. (167)

In Jesus, Pascal finds the necessary link, the person of God to whom human beings can relate. In Pascal's view the suffering of man in the state

of contradiction is a mere shadow of the ironic plight of Jesus. It is by meditating on his condition that man can better know his own. Pascal describes the nature of Christ's mediation by saying, "Jesus is a God whom we can approach without pride and before whom we can humble ourselves without despair."(98)

This much granted, and it is quite a lot, the contradictions surrounding the plight of man can be explained. The condition of being vile and at the same time great is not just remedied but glorified by Pascal's Christian account:

> Christianity is strange; It bids man to recognize that he is vile and even abominable, and bids him want to be like God. Without such a counterweight his exaltation would make him horribly vain or his abasement horribly abject. (133)

The imagination as a "second nature" can be accounted for by the doctrine of original sin, that sin committed by the first parents of the human race, the effects of which were visited upon all their descendants. Original sin is itself a doctrine that defies reason, for its justice (if indeed it offers any) is not human justice. The fallen condition of man after original sin contrasts with his original unfallen state and to a redeemed state to which he may aspire through Christianity. Imagination is the untrustworthy nature man is left with in his fallen condition, a rival to his true nature.

Pascal's approach to Christianity leads to a religion that provides salvation for the worthy few, an elect who, though they cannot make themselves worthy, can at least choose (as he argues in another famous passage called "The Wager") to put themselves in a position to be made worthy of God's grace. His argument for faith from despair is a long way from a faith like that described by St. Thomas in which reason plays a more constructive part. Love, openness, acceptance, forgiveness of one's neighbor are of little importance in this view. And it is difficult to see how it could be otherwise,

beginning as Pascal does with the disproportion of man and all that follows from it. The blame is always placed squarely on man: "Men have shown themselves so unworthy that it is right for God to refuse to some, for their hardness of heart, what he grants to others by a mercy they have not earned."(79)

I have presented only the main lines of Pascal's account. An extended study would show many more interesting sides and implications and would lead invariably to Pascal's relationship to the whole history of Christian interpretation and to the quarrels he undertook with contemporaries who differed from his views. These positions are elegantly argued in his *rovincial Letters*. My task here, however, after giving Pascal a fair hearing both with reason and the heart, is to step back and ask what about his question, his way of addressing it, and his solution are of any importance to us, here, now. This is not a time simply to praise a great book. If we are to make the question our own, we dare not flinch at pressing Pascal, and at the most sensitive points. I should like to comment briefly on three issues, the problem of distraction, the disproportion image and reason, and finally, the question of self.

Pascal observes that the majority of men distract themselves from facing up to the daunting issue of who we are by such occupations as risking life and limb hunting animals they would not be willing to receive as a gift. Gaming and hunting, I suppose, are bad enough forms of distraction, but the most foolish of all, according to Pascal, are those who learn merely to impress others. This sin of pedantry, not an especially deadly sin, unless tedium can kill, is the specific sin of the academy. It poses as inquiry, but in fact stifles genuine pursuit of the questions:

> Likewise others sweat away in their studies to prove to scholars that they have solved some hitherto insoluble problem in algebra.... Then there are others who exhaust

> themselves observing all these things, not in order to become wiser, but just to show they know them, and these are the biggest fools of the lot, because they know what they are doing, while it is conceivable that the rest would stop being foolish if they knew too. (70)

Pascal surely has a point, but, nevertheless, the question of how best to use our time remains perplexing, and it does not seem true to me that we are invariably wasting ourselves in useless diversion if we do not spend every minute either moldering in our rooms over our fundamentally unhappy plight, or praying in thankfulness for God's mercy. Only one by one can we decide what our main work is, to distinguish what constitutes appropriate rest and recreation, from what should be avoided as mere diversion.

It is appropriate, next, to inquire into the source of the disproportion image. Pascal says at least twice that it is produced by his imagination, which immediately casts some doubt on its truthfulness. Reason also plays a large part as it is built on a series of deductions based on a handful of questionable premises. The analogical extrapolation from man's physical size to the capacity of his senses seems to follow well enough, but the further analogy that describes the human mind in the same terms is open to question, particularly if we understand mind as Pascal describes it. Of course, Pascal would criticize the approach I am taking just now as overly reasonable.

The largest questions of philosophy, of our nature and our place in the scheme of things, as he points out, when left to reason by itself lead to skepticism. The heart, on the other hand, really does grasp fundamentals, but it is powerless to probe or question them. Pascal offers the example: "We know that we are not dreaming, but, however unable we may be to prove it rationally, our inability proves nothing but the weakness of our reason, and not the uncertainty of all our knowledge." (58)

Sometimes in reading Pascal, I wonder if he does not give up on reason too quickly, too easily. I would like to think he sets out the disproportion in all candor and innocence, but I cannot help but suspect that his strong impulse to defend his own particular kind of Christian faith may be driving his imagination to invent a picture of horror as the alternative. He states his not-so-hidden agenda clearly in a note for organizing the *Pensées:*

> First part: Wretchedness of man without God.
> Second part: Happiness of man with God.
> otherwise
> First part: Nature is corrupt, proved by nature itself.
> Second part: There is a Redeemer, proved by Scripture. (6)

On the other side of this issue, it must be said in Pascal's favor that few have pursued reason as successfully in the practical world and in the world of mathematics as he himself. He invented and built the first mechanical calculating machine, made fundamental discoveries in the area of fluid statics, and wrote a seminal essay on the conic sections. And yet when it comes to the realms of epistemology and theology, he does not seem willing to give reason its due, but moves perhaps too quickly to a position of despair.

A danger here is that we too will be encouraged to give up abruptly on reason. Where reason comes up short for Pascal is in approaching knowledge of the fullest, most comprehensive kind. There are whole arrays of lesser knowledges that are well within human grasp, and moreover that are well worth the effort required to master them. I think that only when we have earned the right, as Pascal has, if not by making major contributions in science, mathematics and theology, at least by studying them in a disciplined way, should we dream of putting reason aside. For the mean time, I think we should stand back in awe that human logic and human intelligence, frail as they may be, have managed to go so far and see so much.

The most important issue we are left with is whether the question of our place in the scheme of things and the question of our mortality or possible salvation are still live questions. Or is it possible, on the other hand, that these questions that seemed to Pascal and many others to be the central concern, can be seen from our present vantage point as either not important, or completely beyond our competence? A third possibility may look like this: We were not troubled by these questions until we learned about them, and now they eclipse in importance all the other ways we may have had for addressing the question of who we are.

Pascal is right to warn us against the danger of skepticism on the one hand and dogmatism on the other. Some are persuaded in just the way he would have hoped, but many will find his solution implausible or quaint. Whether or not we are able to agree with him, his work opens the question to us rather than closing it off. That is to say, the question can be seen to have more facets, more avenues of approach, having been in his hands than it had before him, and it is therefore a richer object of inquiry for us. The greatness of this work derives from the fact that whether we agree with Pascal or not, the issues have been taken deeper by his work, and we are wiser from this benefit of his example and his company. Having engaged with Pascal, having seriously tried on these thoughts of his, we cannot help but be more thoughtful about the issues, more gentle in our approach.

Have I made any progress with the injunction of the Greek wise men to know myself? Pascal sums up his view in a somewhat dark, ironic, and yet playful thought: "One must know oneself, even if that does not help in finding truth, at least it helps in running one's life, and nothing is more proper." (49) Other writers taking up the problem from other sides will expose more facets of the question. Shakespeare's Hamlet sees knowing himself as a question primarily of understanding oneself with respect to moral action in the world. Of King Lear, of whom it is said, "he hath ever but slenderly known himself," one wonders what knowing himself would have

entailed; it seems to involve knowing the extent and limits of one's power as a king, how deeply one can know another, and what these kinds of knowledge require of the self. In the hands of the philosophers, the *self* risks being lost altogether. Hume argues persuasively that we are mere bundles of perceptions, that there is no unitary self as we ordinarily think. Kant makes a valiant effort to save the *self* by inventing a "transcendental unity of apperception." Nietzsche criticizes this effort as empty name calling—you cannot bring something into being, he says, merely by inventing a name.

Still other authors, such as Miguel de Unamuno, one of the most prominent Spanish philosophers of our century, meditates deeply in the very manner of Pascal, finding through the heart insights that bear the stamp of deepest conviction. The persistence of his consciousness, his self as he knows it, and not merely an abstract removed consciousness, but his consciousness as it exists, housed in his very flesh and bone, is his most fundamental realization. Utter conviction about his own immortality, as it collides with all the conclusions inevitably produced by reason, leads him to a tortured and uncomfortable faith even more vexed than Pascal's.

Though I must bring this talk to an end, by no means do I wish to bring it to a tidy conclusion. In your introductory voyage through the program, you will read books that hold out to you many possibilities for addressing the question in its larger form: What is it to be human, and how are we related to all that is not us? Perhaps the best way of addressing the smaller form of the question, what does it mean to know this particular self I call me, will come by paying attention to your deepest reactions to the writers. With which of them do you naturally align, which take you deeper? Which of them seem to have it wrong? Asking these questions over time can help us discover our own personal grain. It is hard to know what words or metaphors are best for getting at this. Perhaps Keats was onto something by describing this world as a "vale of soul making"; our selves

taking shape as we make our way through.

After beginning to work at these possibilities, it becomes clear—and only this much may be clear—that addressing the injunction to know thyself is really the work of a lifetime. Liberal education as seen in its own terms and not described, as it so often must be, in the service of something else, is the initiation into the life of seeking insight into such questions as this one that I have briefly introduced about the self, and the nexus of questions in which it is bound. The secret of liberal education properly understood is that by pursuing these questions, and we all do it in our own peculiar way, we do not merely accumulate information, but ourselves undergo profound transformations as we grapple with the great authors of our tradition through the fertile interchange of ideas in the fellowship of learning.