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# *Threefold Functions of the Heart in Pascal's View and Their Relations to the Nature of Human*

HASAN AHMADIZADE – MAHNAZ ALIREZAEAN

## 1. Introduction

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) authored just two books and a few brief treatises, though the basis of his thinking and personality must be sought in *Pensées*. Some scholars and even critics of Pascal's view have taken this book into account as a representation of French genius and one of the most impactful works of thought in Europe, alongside the Bible;<sup>1</sup> to the extent that in praise of Pascal, Nietzsche writes: "I do not read Pascal, but I love him, as the most instructive victim of Christianity".<sup>2</sup> Among Western thinkers, Pascal is often cited as an advocate of natural theology;<sup>3</sup> however, by studying the *Pensées*, we come to the realization that his main purpose is to that "[i]t is the heart which perceives God and not the reason. That is what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by the reason".<sup>4</sup> Pascal is not satisfied with mere rational faith for believers, yet he considers it possible; he desires the human body and soul, or in other words the human mind and heart, to be both convinced and at peace, and this, according to him, is impossible unless through a man's heart.

Pascal intends to notify everyone that the truth and basis of man are not in his mind or reason but rather in his heart. Therefore, he writes regarding the heart of man, not solely his mind or reason. Pascal takes the heart into

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- 1 Ernest Mortimer, *Blaise Pascal: The Life and Work of a Realist*, New York (NY): Harper and Brothers 1959, 183; Thomas S. Eliot, *Introduction to the Pensées*, New York (NY): E.P. Dutton and Co. 1958, xix.
  - 2 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, London: Penguin Books 1979, 57.
  - 3 Alban J. Krailsheimer, *Introduction to the Pensées*, London: Penguin Classics 1980, 49.
  - 4 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, rev. ed., trans. Alban J. Krailsheimer, London: Penguin Classics 1995, 848.



consideration as the most important part of man and the closest to his existence.<sup>5</sup> In answer to the question of certainty, the question of faith, and the question of human truth, he only refers to the heart. As a result, in the present article, we aim that in *Pensées*, Pascal holds heart as the most important and fundamental part of man which, from his viewpoint, also shapes human truth.

## 2. *Pensées* and Challenges in Its Analysis

Before putting forth the main subject of this paper, it is necessary to point out the obstacles on the path to interpreting and analyzing what Pascal expresses in *Pensées*. In Christian philosophy and theology, Pascal is not ranked as equal to philosophers like Aristotle or Thomas Aquinas, because he did not offer a precise philosophical theory that could be considered one of the key theories and topics in philosophy. Rather than providing arguments to persuade reason and wisdom, Pascal considers the man's heart. This is why there is no logical or argumentative order in *Pensées*, as seen in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* or Thomas's *Summa Theologica*. Indeed, this unpredictability and lack of logical order in Pascal's discussions in *Pensées* is something that he himself notices in the introduction of the work: "I will write down my thoughts here without any order or a predetermined plan. My purpose will be presented in a random confusion throughout this book."<sup>6</sup>

Pascal intends to write a defense of the Christian faith; a faith that can only be attained by the heart of man. However, it remains unclear to what extent Pascal's lack of logical order, as well as the unpredictability of *Pensées*, was intentional and deliberate, and to what extent we can attribute these to the fact that the book was left unfinished. The incompleteness of *Pensées* can be seen in the dispersal of some issues raised therein, which also remained unfinished, to a point that Guardini compares *Pensées* to a workshop that has been abandoned in a state of confusion.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, providing a comprehensive interpretation of the book calls for special attention and reflection. Undoubtedly, when it comes to the heart, Pascal writes down enough in *Pensées* for the reader to grasp a coherent analysis and interpretation of the discussion. However, he uses the word in various ways and contexts that render it difficult to gain a comprehensive sense and understanding of the heart in *Pensées* which covers all its functions mentioned throughout the book. He often regards the

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5 Romano Guardini, *Pascal for Our Time*, New York (NY): Herder and Herder 1966, 130.

6 P. Blaise, *Pensées...*, 532.

7 R. Guardini, *Pascal for Our Time...*, 13.

heart as a power or ability of human beings but sometimes he also considers it an aspect of human nature.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, when he writes about the Bible, he refers to the heart in the sense given in this book, and this causes greater difficulty in interpreting *Pensées* because, in the Bible, the heart is used in a variety of senses and meanings.

One of the obstacles in accurately understanding what Pascal meant by the heart is that in *Pensées*, he sometimes took the heart as synonymous with the will, as he writes: "The heart loves and chooses."<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Pascal refers to the heart as the 'intuitive mind', which has a prime function in the realm of faith. Thus, it seems that in *Pensées*, the heart has a function related to faith on the one hand and a psychological or even mystical function on the other. Perhaps this diversity of heart functions and the lack of clarity about its exact meaning in Pascal's view is the reason why scholars paid less attention to this issue and focused more on Pascal's wager and its place in discussions regarding the philosophy of religion and the rationality of religious belief.

In his book *Pensées*, Pascal raises discussion about the heart in different ways and this is due to the connection between the heart and other human and theological issues. In the following text, we will go through the three functions of the heart in Pascal's view, or in other words, explore the three images of the heart that he demonstrates in his book.

### **3. Three Different Functions for the Heart**

Pascal puts forth the topic of the heart in three different characterizations, or in another sense, in terms of three different functions. First, the heart is a means of natural intuition. Second, the heart is a power, like the will, that helps us to love and choose. Third, the heart is the power that receives divine grace, which is necessary for faith. In the following paragraphs, we will first demonstrate each of these three styles in Pascal's view and show that in each of them, the heart has a fundamental role. In addition, we will point out the critical connection between these three functions and human nature, and at the end, explain that for Pascal, the heart is the most essential and fundamental component that shapes man's nature.

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8 P. Blaise, *Pensées...*, 394.

9 *Ibid.*, 423

### 3.1 The Heart as a Means of Natural Intuition

The first function that Pascal considers for the heart is as a means of natural intuition:

We know the truth, not only by reason, but also by the heart, and it is from this last that we know first principles. We know that we do not dream, and however impossible it is for us to prove it by reason, this inability demonstrates only the weakness of our reason, but not, as they affirm, the uncertainty of all our knowledge. For the knowledge of first principles, such as space, time, motion, and number, is as sure as any of those which we get from reasoning. And reason must trust these intuitions of the heart, and must base them on every argument.<sup>10</sup>

In Pascal's words, the heart is capable of perceiving certain truths with direct and non-intermediary intuition. The heart is more a means of cognition than a place for feelings and instincts. The heart enables man to answer positively the question of the possibility of knowing and believing in the first principles and to say with certainty that we are fully aware of these principles and truth. What are meant by the first principles and truths are things such as the principle of identity, the law of non-contradiction, time, and motion. Awareness of these principles is a prerequisite for rational reasoning, and this awareness, according to Pascal, cannot be achieved unless through the heart and its natural intuition. Essentially, in his view, a man attempting to engage in rational and argumentative reasoning must start from the first principles; principles that he has already sensed through the heart.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, firstly, the mind cannot reason without the first principles and truths, and secondly, the mind is not accountable for knowing the first principles and truths, for in Pascal's opinion the mind presupposes their legitimacy and validity. In other words, although the logical mind and the heart have different epistemological functions, with the help of each other, they help man to gain a more comprehensive knowledge of the natural world around him. When we claim that man has the power of reason, it implies that he has the power of intuition; otherwise, the logical mind will have no place in the human existential system. Hence, for Pascal, the logical mind and rational reasoning implicitly include intuition.

What has been quoted from Pascal in the book *Pensées* about the heart is, in fact, a clear response to Cartesian rationality in *Meditations*. In opposition to Descartes, Pascal states that certainty can never be obtained by reason alone since certainty in rational reasoning is based on the first

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 751.

principles and truths of which we become aware by intuition.<sup>12</sup> In his idea, “we have an image of the truth that no skeptic can dominate and destroy it”.<sup>13</sup>

To make the intuitive cognition of the heart clearer, Pascal makes a comparison between the intuitive mind and the mathematical mind.<sup>14</sup> These are two ways of thinking; the former considers objects as a whole in their entirety and the latter begins with trivial principles.<sup>15</sup> The mathematical mind is thoroughly logical and makes use of methods and principles that are derived from everyday human experience. On the other hand, the intuitive mind perceives the first principles very simply and directly and enjoys a high degree of precision and flexibility, which the mathematical mind lacks. The mathematical mind is a way of thinking that employs reasoning, while the intuitive mind is a way of thinking that, like the heart, is based on intuition. This comparison between the intuitive and the mathematical mind is quite aligned with the comparison between the heart and the mind. According to Pascal, the activity of the mind progresses slowly since the principles required by rational reasoning are not always readily available to the mind, yet the activity of the heart goes the other way around because the first principles and truths are always present for the heart and intuition.

### 3.2 The Heart as the Will

The second style or function of the heart, mentioned in *Pensées*, is different from the first style, because, in this one, the heart has a function similar to that of the will and is regarded as a means of desiring and loving. Pascal writes: “I say that the heart naturally loves the Universal Being, and also itself naturally, according as it gives itself to them; and it hardens itself against one or the other at its will”.<sup>16</sup> However, the question arises of how exactly the heart loves something because to love something, it must create motivation and movement in the heart. In his interpretation of Pascal, Guardini believes that this stimulus and motivation is value: “The heart reacts to value. Value is one’s inner movement for meaning. Value is the self-justification of what exists, that is, what is worthy of being. This dynamism motivates and evokes the movement of the heart, which is

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12 *Ibid.*, 298.

13 *Ibid.*, 406.

14 *Ibid.*, 512.

15 Hans Urs von Balthasar, “The Glory of the Lord”, in: John Riches (ed.), *Studies in Theological Style: Lay Styles*, vol. 3, San Francisco (CA): Ignatius Press 1986, 179, 152-204.

16 P. Blaise, *Pensées...*, 426.

love”.<sup>17</sup> In fact, this dynamism is the continuous creation of value that leads the heart to love and be loved. The heart can instinctively and naturally understand the value of things.

Obviously, Pascal considers the heart to have the ability to love and choose. However, does he understand will and the heart to be the same? And if not, what is the connection between the two? Does the will have the ability to love and value? This ambiguity stems from Pascal saying that, “it is natural for the mind to believe and for the will to love”.<sup>18</sup> Both the will and the heart tend to love naturally, but it still remains unclear whether for Pascal the two are synonymous. It is also noteworthy that where Pascal speaks of the will in *Pensées*, there is also the concept of temporality, yet this is not the case with the heart. As an instance, he says, “the will shall never satisfy itself, even if it has the power to take every action at times”.<sup>19</sup> In another section of *Pensées*, Pascal describes the will as a power that dominates the body.<sup>20</sup> But when he speaks of the heart with a function similar to that of the will, he often mentions “searching with the depths of the heart”, and this search always refers to God or “true good”.<sup>21</sup> In his book, Pascal mentions only once that the will tends to love; however, it seems that Pascal means merely an emotional desire by love therein, and nothing more.

At any rate, there are many instances in *Pensées* that indicate a difference between the will and the heart. When Pascal speaks of the tendency of the heart to love, he considers this love to be more stable and lasting, incorporating complete satisfaction and acceptance of what the heart has loved. For Pascal, the love of the heart for something, like the love of the will, is not just a fleeting emotional desire accompanied by a preference for one thing over another, rather, when the heart has a love for something, it accepts it completely and thoroughly and distances itself from all other things. From his point of view, “the heart devotes all its efforts to gain knowledge of the true good and to seek it”.<sup>22</sup> This true good is God, and God is the most worthy and competent for whom the heart can have love, whether it chooses to love or not.<sup>23</sup> In Pascal’s view, man should have a love for things that lead him to approach the true good that is God, the God who is within us but neither is He us, nor a part of us.<sup>24</sup> The point to note

17 G. Romano, *Pascal for Our Time...*, 131.

18 P. Blaise, *Pensées...*, 661.

19 *Ibid.*, 362.

20 *Ibid.*, 737.

21 *Ibid.*, 427-429.

22 *Ibid.*, 429.

23 *Ibid.*, 148.

24 *Ibid.*, 546.

here is that for Pascal, true love is the love for the mighty good or God, not merely a love of something in particular; this second type of love is about the will, not the heart.

Centered on Pascal's idea, all human beings seek prosperity, and since the heart goes only after what is the utmost good, the heart, therefore, seeks the utmost prosperity. The will also seeks prosperity, yet it pursues the prosperity that has already been considered and chosen by the heart, and this utmost prosperity is nothing but God. Henceforth, a man who has an image of prosperity based on which he seeks prosperity within himself, he, in fact, has not chosen God as true prosperity even if he prays to God.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the heart is the basis and foundation of will and its function, because if the will seeks true prosperity, it must find the one that has already been presupposed by the heart and its desire for prosperity. It should also be noted that although the heart chooses the utmost prosperity and in a way, basically makes the best possible choice, the opposite may come true, meaning that the heart may similarly make the worst possible choice and mistake. Nevertheless, according to Pascal, all human beings ultimately pay attention to the best and most valuable choice because they simply cannot live without it,<sup>26</sup> and of course, it is in the wake of this best choice that man can truly realize the value of many other things in his life. The heart of a man, who has chosen *himself* as the most valuable being, cannot see the world and what is in it as other valuable creatures that have been both created and valued by God. Therefore, the most valuable thing for a man is based on the most valuable choice that his heart makes.

In *Pensées*, when Pascal writes about choosing from the heart, he sometimes associates this choice with love and sometimes with desire. At first glance, it seems that he considers two different but similar choices for the heart as if the heart sometimes loves something and sometimes desires something, like when it desires to eat. However, it is important to note that when he introduces the heart, when it is in pursuit of the utmost prosperity and most valuable good, whether accompanied by the act of loving or by the act of desire, he, in fact, has one thing in mind and sees no difference between loving and desiring the utmost good.

### 3.3 The Heart, Receiving Faith

In the third style that Pascal considers for the heart, the heart takes on a completely different function from the previous two. In this style, he stresses that the heart is a part of the human that is connected through faith

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25 H. U. von Balthasar, "The Glory of the Lord...", 184.

26 P. Blaise, *Pensées...*, 146.



to the ultimate truth, which is God: “It is the heart, rather than reason, that has the main role in our knowledge of God. The process and truth of faith take place through the perception of God by the heart, not through the soul.”<sup>27</sup> The heart cannot only love and gain knowledge through natural intuition but it can also believe in God and know Him properly. Therefore, the heart can be taken as the link between man and the sacred. Pascal’s assertion that it is only the heart that can bring man faith in God, not reason, is so strong that he sees no need for any argument or proof for this.

Nevertheless, he addresses the question of how faith relates to man’s nature. In his idea, faith is God’s gift and man receives it solely from God. In another sense, it is God who drives man’s heart to faith, not his various actions and thoughts: “We can never find belief and faith in our heart unless God directs our hearts towards Himself.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore, if it is only God who can direct a man’s heart to faith, then without a doubt, only God can provide the conditions for man to know about Him through faith. According to Pascal, “those, to whom God has given faith by an instinctive feeling, are very blessed, and justly convinced. But to those who have it not, we can give it only by reasoning, waiting for the time when God shall impress it on their hearts, without which faith is human only, and useless for salvation.”<sup>29</sup>

Henceforth, faith can be a gift from God, and only a man’s heart can receive it. But if this is the case, is faith part of human nature? In *Pensées*, Pascal holds the view that man is inherently and naturally in search of the utmost prosperity; however as we have said, this paramount prosperity, which is nothing but faith in God and gaining His knowledge, can only be obtained through God’s grace to humans and the direction of man’s heart by God. Consequently, there seems to be a mystical paradox in human nature; on the one hand, inherently and naturally, he cannot prosper alone and only with his actions and thoughts, yet, on the other hand, inherently and naturally, he has a desire and inclination toward true prosperity and faith in God. This is a point to consider because Pascal points to the connection between the finite and the infinite in man and acknowledges that a man’s heart is the place where these two, the finite and the infinite, meet each other. This is why Pascal writes: “Man infinitely transcends man.”<sup>30</sup> Consequently, it cannot easily be said that faith is a part of human nature, nor can faith be considered entirely far beyond human nature.

Bearing in mind the third function of the heart that Pascal mentions, it can be said that the heart can only comprehend and gain knowledge of the

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27 *Ibid.*, 464.

28 *Ibid.*, 380.

29 *Ibid.*, 110.

30 *Ibid.*, 131.

infinite in this style. In *Pensées*, he considers true knowledge of God possible only for the heart, when it is adorned with the light of faith.<sup>31</sup> It is in this style that the heart is blessed with God's grace and is filled with faith in Him. As a result, the knowledge that man finds in this style, i.e. a human's intuitive knowledge, which is derived from the light of faith, is different from rational knowledge. This third style provides the heart with a supernatural function, distinguishing it completely from the previous two styles, as if the heart, which is connected to faith, moves beyond time and space and acquires a thorough dominance over individuality and details.<sup>32</sup>

#### 4. Man's Heart and Nature

Given what has been discussed regarding the three different styles for the heart, we can now have a better understanding of the heart and its functions in Pascal's view. From his standpoint, the heart is the determining factor not only in rational reasoning but also in the operation of the will and more importantly in receiving faith. These explanations can to a certain extent lead to the partial dismissal of criticisms of Pascal, criticisms that may have been most clearly expressed in Leszek Kołakowski's words:

Knowing God through feeling him in the heart seems to be faith in the strict sense of the word, which is to receive the grace of God. However, on the other hand, the heart is the intuition through which the obvious and non-religious principles of mathematics are also perceived, that is, the principles to receive and understand, for which, there is no longer any need for divine and godly grace. Consequently, it can be said that the heart has to be defined differently considering its diverse and rather inconsistent functions: the heart is the intuition through which one can know things that cannot be proved by mathematical reasoning or the testimony of the senses.<sup>33</sup>

As we observe in the quotation above, Kołakowski is of the belief that Pascal sees the heart as merely a place for receiving faith or inner deeds such as will and choice, and that the heart can not only be used for infinite and sacred issues like faith in God but must also be employed in order to know about finite and even infinite non-sacred topics, such as mathematics. However, it is clear from Pascal's words that he does not consider the heart as solely as a container or place for the various deeds and intentions of man, but speaks of it as if man wills with the heart, believes with the heart, receives the grace of God with the heart, and even reasons with the heart.

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 382, 418.

<sup>32</sup> Ann T. Delehanty, *Literary Knowing in Neoclassical France: From Poetics to Aesthetics*, Lewisburg (WV): Bucknell University Press 2012, 41.

<sup>33</sup> Leszek Kołakowski, *God Owes Us Nothing: A Brief Remark on Pascal's Religion and on the Spirit of Jansenism*, Chicago (IL): University of Chicago Press 1995, 146.

The threefold functions, or so-called styles, that we have pointed out for man, well illustrate, according to Pascal's view, that the heart and its functions have an interwoven connection with human nature. Also, these three functions and three styles of the heart, namely, will, reason, and faith, are relevant to other aspects of human beings, which set human beings apart in comparison with other creatures as unique beings. According to Pascal,

[t]he human being is only a reed, the weakest in nature; but this is a thinking reed... It isn't necessary for the entire universe to arm itself in order to crush him; a whiff of vapor, a taste of water, suffices to kill him. But when the universe crushes him, the human being becomes still nobler than that which kills him; because he knows that he is dying and the advantage that the universe has over him... All our dignity consists, then, in thought.

In another quotation, Pascal states that "I cannot imagine a man without thought; he would be a stone or an animal".<sup>34</sup> By emphasizing the power of man to reason and think, Pascal firstly distinguishes himself from other creatures in nature, and secondly, points out that rationality and reasoning, which are nothing but taking advantage of first principles and truths, are not possible without the heart. Therefore, to distinguish man from other creatures because of the power of reason is, actually, to distinguish him from other creatures because of his heart.

For Pascal, nevertheless, the heart is what makes human nature more valuable than other capabilities and functions of the heart. It has already been argued that in his opinion, faith can somehow be part of human nature, yet now the question arises as to how faith tells human nature apart from other creatures, "Man, by grace, has become like God and shares divinity with God. But without grace, man is like other animals".<sup>35</sup> In addition, since man observes different and paradoxical states and characteristics within himself, he cannot know his true nature without divine grace. Man's true nature, his true good, true virtue, and true religion, are things from which knowledge (divine grace) is inseparable. As a result, the knowledge of man's true nature goes hand in hand with the knowledge of God, and, consequently, man's true nature will be attainable only through divine grace and the presence of faith in a man's heart.

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34 P. Blaise, *Pensées...*, 111.

35 *Ibid.*, 131.



## 5. Conclusion

Considering the threefold functions of the heart, as Pascal characterizes them in *Pensées*, we can conclude that he emphasizes the role of the heart and its fundamentality for man's nature as well as for his will, reason, and faith. This is why for Pascal, the heart is the most significant and fundamental part of man and his identity. Once a man makes the most fundamental decision in his life with his heart, he follows all the different aspects of his life taking this decision into account and it seems as if he is taking a big risk in his life. The will, centered on this fundamental decision that the heart makes, urges man to make choices and decisions. The reason also makes arguments based on this fundamental decision of the heart. Pascal holds the heart as the basis of man's nature to contribute a deeper and broader capacity to man's nature as opposed to rationalists, who see man's nature only in his rational reasoning, and in the face of empiricists, who believe man's nature is limited to his empirical feelings. Nevertheless, according to Pascal, man is still in search of his true nature. He likens man to a king whose belongings and property have been confiscated. He knows that once he was the supreme king of his country but doesn't have a clue how to regain his lost throne. In his idea, the only way to reach and know the true nature of man is to believe in Christ and know God.



## SUMMARY

**Threefold Functions of the Heart in Pascal's View and Their Relations to the Nature of Human**

One of the key concepts in Pascal's thought is the heart. Pascal sees it as important as the knowledge of human beings and the knowledge of God. He considers the heart from three viewpoints: rational, volitional, and faithful. He shows that although some philosophers considered different faculties for the human being, the basis of them all is the heart. In this article, we try to depict that show the diffuse structure of *Pensées*, we can see three-fold functions for the heart and that the heart is the basis of the nature of human beings.

**Keywords:** heart; reason; will; faith; Blaise Pascal

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