A major concern of Pierre Nicole’s in his *Essais de morale* is the soul’s preference for the world and its objects, as opposed to God, a problem that he poses in terms of man’s insensitivity to the Creator:

Il est d’autant plus important, que l’âme s’applique à considérer les causes de son insensibilité pour Dieu. . . . Car c’est ce qui nous donne entrée dans l’âme, aux impressions des objets des sens, qui seraient peu capables de la toucher, si elle l’était autant qu’elle le devrait être des choses de l’autre vie. . . . [C’est cette insensibilité pour Dieu, qui la rend sensible pour les créatures, parce qu’elle ne saurait être sans quelque pente, et qu’il faut toujours qu’elle s’attache à quelque objet. Ainsi un de ses principaux devoirs, c’est de tâcher d’en reconnaître les causes, et d’y apporter tous les remèdes qui lui sont possibles.]

The indifference for God that Nicole talks about here and the soul’s vulnerability to sense impressions are constant reflexes of his thought. Man’s indifference to the Creator, however, does not necessarily explain the soul’s preference for the world and its objects, a preference that distinguishes fallen nature, according to Nicole. This “insensibilité,” as one might expect, is merely symptomatic of a more profound disorder, a disorder that is not limited to heathens. Indeed, the susceptibility of Christians to the objects of the world, “quelque innocents qu’ils puissent être” (“De la Vigilance chrétienne,” IV: 296; hereafter cited as “VC”), seems equally widespread; even the men “que Dieu a éclairés par de si pures lumières” remain subject to the “bagatelles du monde” (“De la Faiblesse de l’homme,” I: 62; hereafter cited as “FH”). Furthermore, we know that innocent Adam was subject to these same sense impressions without preferring the world to God. What is different about the soul of *post-peccatum* man?

In analyzing this problem the theologian or moralist inspired by St. Augustine reveals few hesitations. According to Augustine, the perfect rectitude of the soul of innocent Adam has been replaced in fallen man.
by a disorder in which a sick and evil will (and/or heart) dominates. Sin has become, as it were, instinctive in fallen man, and the natural inclination to sin reveals itself whenever a man chooses the world and its objects over God. This preference or, more precisely, this desire for the world is what Augustinians call concupiscence. From an Augustinian perspective, of course, God is the only proper object of man's desire—all other objects, if they are desired and loved for themselves, are necessarily evil. Augustine thus distinguishes, in the familiar passage from the City of God, two categories of objects and two types of love: "Two loves have thus built two cities: the love of self to the point of despising God has built the earthly City; the love of God to the point of despising oneself has built the heavenly City."  

Since men desire and love those objects that please them the most, the law of delectation, and since the man without grace necessarily finds temporal objects more pleasing than spiritual objects (because of the evil will/heart), it follows that in every instance and at every moment fallen man will reject God in favor of the world, unless the will is healed by grace.

Given the eclectic nature of his thought and the unsystematic arrangement of the Essais, it is not always clear to what extent Pierre Nicole subscribes to Augustine's analysis of the springs governing human choice, which is to say, the factors that determine the human appetite. While on the one hand endorsing the Augustinian law of delectation, which makes choice more or less synonymous with the pleasure that one finds in an object, Nicole on the other hand often appears to have been influenced by the Thomist model according to which the will follows, or at least should follow, the recommendations of the reason. Despite this hesitation or confusion, there is little doubt that Nicole's conception of the sensitive appetite is inspired by Augustinian and biblical psychology. He gives expression to the dynamic nature of this psychology in numerous passages in the Essais de morale:

... il ne s'y faut pas tromper. Il faut que Dieu, ou le diable, règne en nous. Il n'y a point de milieu. Quiconque ne travaille point à établir en soi le règne de Dieu, travaille à y établir le règne du diable. Dieu y règne quand son Esprit y règne, quand c'est par son Esprit que nous agissons. ... Le diable y règne quand nous nous laissons conduire à nos passions ... en un mot quand ce n'est que la cupidité qui agit en nous. ["Des Quatre Dernières Fins de l'homme," IV: 78; hereafter cited as "QDF"]
... il [l'homme] est obligé ... de reconnaître qu'il a dans le fond du cœur une pente contraire à cet amour [la charité], qui le porte à aimer les créatures, à s'y attacher, et à en jouir. Cette pente est un effet de la corruption originelle, qui domine dans ceux qui ne sont pas encore justifiés, et qui reste, quoiqu'elle ne domine pas dans ceux qui le sont. C'est cette pente qu'on appelle la concupiscence, qui sollicite au mal les plus justes, qui excite en eux de mauvais désirs, qu'ils sont continuellement obligés de réprimer. ["L'Emploi d'une maîtresse des novices," V: 217–218]

Nicole poses in the starkest of terms here the choice confronting man—God or Satan, the Creator or the creation—and the expression is an unmistakable echo of Augustine's (and Port Royal's) “either/or” perspective on the human condition. The antithesis that Nicole expresses so powerfully in these passages is at the very center of the Augustinian dialectic. Indeed, one might argue convincingly that Augustine's thought, reduced to its essential components, is only about this choice confronting all men. From another point of view, however, it might be asserted that although Augustine's thought is about a choice—God or the world—words like “choice” and “choose” really have no place in his lexicon. Men of course do make choices and do perform free acts; but, for the Augustinian, all choices ultimately fall into one of two categories: those inspired by a love of God or those inspired by a love of the world. Because of a choice made by the first man, all men born into this world, unless aided by divine grace, infallibly—although freely⁷—choose objects that are temporal in nature and therefore inappropriate to their end. Given this unhappy situation, words like “orientation” and “inclination” seem to represent the Augustinian psychological framework more accurately than a word like “choice.” According to this view, which synthesizes Augustine's psychology and theology, men are oriented in one of two directions—toward the Creator or toward the creation—and inclined to love one or the other. For a moralist like Nicole, however, the apparent inevitability of the choice—and here we are close to the whole question of determinism in the thought of Augustine—does not release men from choosing and from striving to choose correctly: “La vie présente par laquelle on doit passer, ne lui [à l'homme] est donnée que pour choix de l'un ou de l'autre de ces deux états [l'Enfer ou le Paradis]; et ce choix doit être l'unique emploi et l'unique exercice de sa vie” ("QDF," IV: 180).

In the two passages quoted above, Nicole reproduces with absolute accuracy all the elements of the Augustinian view of nature: original sin,
concupiscence, the theory of the two loves—everything is present. This pessimistic view of things is of course explained by the doctrine of the Fall, a doctrine that informs and colors all Nicole’s thinking on the relation between nature and supernature. Central to this doctrine is the notion that all men share in Adam’s sin—even the most righteous (-appearing) among them. The somewhat puzzling phenomenon of the inclination to sin found in justified Christians, alluded to earlier, as well as their apparent nonchalance in the face of eternal damnation, surprizes less when we learn that such a tendency persists in all of Adam’s heirs and “stimulates evil desires” whenever it is not opposed by the contrary orientation of charity.

Although it might seem that one could easily identify the two orientations or “pentes” (Nicole’s preferred word) that “determine” our behavior, by analyzing and classifying the acts proceeding from them, such is not always the case. In theory, we would assume that those men whose acts are virtuous, as the world commonly understands that word, are turned in the direction of God, while the opposite would be true of men whose actions are vicious. For an Augustinian like Nicole, such an analysis is simply naive. While it is true that those acts that men recognize as vicious are performed by individuals estranged from the Creator, it is by no means certain that “good” acts are performed by men of virtue and are thus meritorious. The key to sorting this out lies in the distinction between exterior and interior acts, between what we “feel” in our heart and what we do; a man who gives alms in order to gain the admiration of his fellow men, with no thought to helping the poor, is, many of us would agree, performing a “good” work, but his intention is vicious, because his end is himself (“De l’Humilité dans les oeuvres de charité,” VI: 59). Thus, there is seldom, as Nicole recognizes, a direct correlation between a man’s exterior and interior actions, between what the world sees and what lies in a man’s heart:

Il y a cette différence entre les actions extérieures et les intérieures, que l’on connaît beaucoup mieux si les actions extérieures sont conformes ou contraires à loi [sic] de Dieu, que l’on ne le sait des intérieures, qui sont couvertes souvent par les nuages, que la concupiscence y répand; en sorte que nous ne saurons assurer si nous avons le fond du cœur dans l’état où Dieu veut que nous l’ayons. [“De la Soumission à la volonté de Dieu,” I: 89; hereafter cited as “SVD”]

... cette innocence extérieure, qui ne consiste que dans l’observation des devoirs extérieurs de la Religion Chrétienne est un signe fort équivoque
This discrepancy between what others see and what lies in our heart is often paralleled by the language that we use. We say one thing, but mean another, and thereby risk falling into that category of men about whom God says, "Ce peuple m'honore des lèvres, et son coeur est fort éloigné de moi" (Isa.xxix.13; quoted in "CD," I: 164). This is a serious and frightening charge, but a charge that is completely justified by the content of a man's heart. We give alms, but for the wrong reason. On the other hand, however, the desire to deceive God conceals itself with such finesse that men are often unaware of its existence; thus, the man who denies that there is a contradiction between what he says (or feels) and does is, paradoxically, both lying and telling the truth. Hearts have reasons of their own, as Pascal knew and as we shall see.

The attempt to learn more about the discrepancy between what men feel and do requires a descent to the level of the inner person. According to Nicole's topography of the soul, the heart is located in the most profound depths of the individual. Here, Nicole makes an unsettling discovery concerning the ancient philosophic rule that urges men to know themselves. While the moralist certainly agrees that this principle is the foundation of virtue—he quotes St. Bernard and St. Augustine to this effect ("CSM," III: 39)—he also reveals more than a little pessimism regarding the successful outcome of the endeavor: "Il ne faut pas . . . prétendre, quelque progrès qu'on fasse, de pouvoir jamais arriver à se connaître parfaitement; il y a toujours dans le cœur de l'homme, tant qu'il est en cette vie, des abîmes impénétrables à toutes ces recherches" ("CSM," III: 116-17). Even given these natural limitations (natural only since the Fall), men could know more about themselves than they normally do, asserts Nicole. If men do not know themselves better, it is often because they reject such knowledge: "... ce qui fait qu'on ne se connaît pas, c'est qu'on ne le désire pas pleinement; et qu'on nourrit dans le fond de son cœur un éloignement secret de la vérité" ("CSM," III: 54). Regarding this aversion for the truth, Nicole recalls Paul's appeal to the Colossians:

... il [Paul] nous apprend ... que lorsqu'on demande à Dieu de connaître sa volonté, il faut avoir un désir sincère de la connaître toute entière, et qu'il ne faut pas avoir dans le coeur des réserves volontaires, par lesquelles nous souhaitions de ne la pas connaître en quelque point, de peur de nous
croire obligés de l'accomplir. . . . Nous avons presque tous de certains défauts auxquels nous ne voulons pas toucher, et que nous cachons . . . à Dieu et à nous-mêmes. Et c'est pourquoi saint Paul ne souhaite pas seulement aux Colossiens, qu'ils connaissent la volonté de Dieu; mais il leur souhaite encore qu'ils soient remplis de cette connaissance . . . c'est-à-dire, qu'il n'y ait point de replis secrets dans leur esprit, et dans leur coeur, où cette divine lumière ne pénètre, et qu'ils n'aient point d'attaches volontaires qui empêchent que Dieu ne les remplisse de sa lumière et de sa grâce. [“SVD,” I: 82–83]

We see in this passage, with its depiction of wills in conflict (divine will vs. human will), what some of the heart's reasons might be. First Nicole tells us that self-knowledge depends on the extent to which the heart recognizes and renounces its "voluntary attachments"—something it is loathe to do—and welcomes the divine light that illumines its interior in such a way that hiding places for favorite vices become impossible. The metaphor of the heart as a vessel is not only traditional, but is also effective in showing how knowledge of God's will must fill the heart (we recall that either God or Satan must reign there). We also see here that self-knowledge (awareness of what lies in our heart) and knowledge of God's will (what God wants) are merely different aspects of the same endeavor, which is to know the truth. One implies the other; when we know God's will, we know ourselves, and, consequently, when we reject knowledge of the one, we reject the other. There are among Christians, Nicole believes, men who show some signs of desiring to know the truth, that is, who wish to abandon the world in order to know God more perfectly. However, because the resistance to truth inspired by concupiscence is too powerful, there coexists with the desire to know and love God an equal or greater desire to hold on to the world at all costs. Now, while this attachment for the world is certainly inappropriate, it is also, in Nicole's view, understandable. Men are weak, and this is true of Christians as well as of heathens. As Nicole often observes in the *Essais*, echoing Pascal, they are seeking an "assiette," 12 which will give them a feeling of stability in an unstable world. As I understand Nicole's use of this word, the assiette depends for its steadiness on the world of familiar objects that surrounds men.11 To abandon the attaches volontaires (in the passage quoted above), which confer a sense of security in an alien universe, requires a stronger desire to love God and a steadier faith than most men have. For—and this is essential—the commitment to God must be or become total; otherwise, the heart will remain "partagé" ("CSM," III: 55): "On
cherche Dieu et le monde ensemble; le coeur est bien-aise de plaire à l'un et à l'autre . . ." ("De la Charité et de l'amour-propre," III: 168–69; hereafter cited as "CAP"). Thus, while there are some men, observes Nicole, who are praying to God to receive the divine illumination that will penetrate the soul's deepest recesses, shining light into shadowy places and replacing blindness with sight and insight, all too often these prayers emanate from a divided heart, which resists abandoning those vices and objects that comfort:

 Ils exposent à Dieu tout le reste de leur coeur; mais pour ce repli où ils ont mis ces imperfections qu'ils chérissent, ils se donnent bien de garde de le découvrir . . . Ils récitent tous les jours ce Psaume qui ne contient que cette unique prière [de connaître la volonté de Dieu], et il leur semble qu'ils le font de tout leur coeur. Mais c'est qu'autre ce coeur qui prononce ces prières, ils en ont encore un autre qui les désavoue. Ils en ont un pour Dieu, et un pour eux-mêmes. Ils en ont un qui désire d'obéir à Dieu dans quelques actions qui ne leur sont pas fort pénibles; et ils en ont un autre, qui voulant demeurer attaché à certaines choses, ne veut pas connaître qu'elles soient mauvaises. ["SVD," I: 84]

The antithetical tendency of Nicole's way of looking at human nature is nowhere more evident than in this analysis of the ways in which man's heart deceives him and tries to deceive God. Just as there are two opposing cities and two contrary loves, we now learn that there are also two hearts, one for the world and one for God. There is, however, another antithesis at work here, this one within the larger context of Nicole's morale. Although the author of the Essais condemns the coeur double described above (he quotes Ecclesiastes ii.14 at the end of the cited passage: "'Malheur à ceux qui ont le coeur double.'"), confirming once again his Augustinianism, it does seem that his account of two loves and two hearts coexisting within the soul—this coexistence is, granted, problematic—indicates an important shift in perspective. The law of the two loves, with its implicit notion of their mutual incompatibility, has been somewhat moderated. Man loves God or the world becomes man loves (or is trying to love) God and the world. However, while this transcendence of the Augustinian law is an important movement in Nicole's dialectic, it is only temporary. For Nicole recognizes that a heart divided between a love of the world and a love of God is not going to carry a man very far on the road to the Creator; indeed—and on this point Nicole is not in the least equivocal—the tendency of our love for God must be in the direction of exclusiveness: "Dieu ne demande proprement des
hommes que leur amour: mais aussi il le demande tout entier, et il n’y veut point de partage . . .” (“De la Comédie,” III: 229). Nicole must be firm about this because, as he goes on to say, man’s end is God and God alone. It does seem, however, that the divided heart could be a necessary point of departure for the rehabilitation that must take place. In any case, Nicole’s analysis of what is happening on the level of the inner man seems inspired by acquaintance with real men living in a dangerous world of difficult moral choices. And when they examine their heart, these men find, Nicole suggests, an uneasy balance where the desire to know and love the world is accompanied by a desire to know and love God.

At the beginning of this discussion we saw that concupiscence is that love of the world and its objects that competes in the soul of fallen man with the love of God. The man who undertakes the self-examination urged by Nicole soon discovers, however, that concupiscence is more than a simple love of the world. It is first of all a love of self whose tendencies are so singular and whose hold on fallen man is so tyrannical that Nicole has no doubt that this unfortunate legacy of the first man is the principle of all human crimes “depuis les plus légers jusqu’aux plus détestables,” (“CAP,” III: 124). “Adam,” Nicole reminds us, “ne s’est perdu dans son innocence qu’en oubliant Dieu, et en s’attachant dans cet oubli à la contemplation de la beauté des créatures et de soi-même. Combien l’homme pécheur est-il plus capable de se corrompre par la même voie?” (“Dangers des entretiens des hommes,” II: 56; hereafter cited as “DEH”). Thus, sin after the Fall continues to be an imitation of the sin of the first man. Although one might be tempted to compare amour-propre to the principle of self-preservation,15 thereby demonstrating that love of self is a completely natural and necessary law of the human condition, there is, however, at least one radical difference here. If it is true that amour-propre is a law of nature, it is also true that it is a law of a fallen and corrupt nature whose desires and love became focused on the self only when Adam turned away from God. It is the loss of original happiness, and the resulting void, that explains man’s attraction to the world and love of self.16

Given the horror that the concept of self-love exercises on the Augustinian imagination, we should not be too surprised by the violence of the images chosen by Nicole to convey concupiscence’s despotic nature:

Voilà le monstre que nous renfermons dans notre sein, il vit et règne absolument en nous, à moins que Dieu n’ait détruit son empire, en versant
un autre amour dans notre coeur; il est le principe de toutes les actions qui n'en ont point d'autre que la nature corrompue; et bien loin qu'il nous fasse de l'horreur, nous n'aimons et ne haïssons toutes les choses qui sont hors de nous, que selon qu'elles sont conformes ou contraires à ses inclinations. ["CAP," III: 124]

Despite the familiarity of the theme here, Nicole's expression is stirring and fresh, with the power of his description deriving from the aptness of the metaphor. The comparison to a monster is apt because concupiscence, like a monster, is an all-powerful, even overpowering, force and, more importantly, is a force for evil. The energy of the image is reinforced by the words, "empire," "vit," and "règne." The two verbs are especially disturbing. For Nicole, amour-propre is a living and, we assume, growing thing; it reigns "absolutely" in the heart in such a way that a man is, for the most part, impotent to control its movements.

While the notion of concupiscence as a dynamic and uncontrollable force—pulling man away from God in the direction of the world—is in itself unsettling, amour-propre frightens Nicole and should frighten his reader for another, more basic reason. We know of course that this fundamental orientation, which inclines men to find delight in themselves and in the world, is changed only by the unmeritable gift of divine grace. The Augustinian moralist, never forgetting the seriousness of Adam's sin, has an additional reason for his pessimism. Not only is man corrupt from head to toe ("CSM," III: 63), but this corruption, this insensibilité for God, is, quite simply, an irremediable defect of fallen nature:

On a déjà fait voir que cette malheureuse inclination était devenue naturelle à l'homme depuis le péché; et il faut ajouter ici, que la grâce ne la détruit jamais entièrement; et que quelque désir qu'elle nous inspire de ne nous pas aveugler nous-mêmes, il reste toujours . . . dans le fond du vieil homme une pente vers cet aveuglement volontaire. . . . ["CSM," III: 54]

We see in this passage, and elsewhere in the Essais, one of the fundamental principles of Nicole's view of man after the Fall; Adam's sin caused a profound mutation in human nature. Consequently, the roots of corruption plunge themselves to such depths within the heart and resist efforts to destroy them so successfully that they are always producing, Nicole maintains, "quelque goût pour les biens de la terre, et quelque dégoût pour les biens du Ciel" ("QDF," IV: 185). In reading these passages, which faithfully echo Augustine, we begin to understand that for every movement of concupiscence (the passions) that a man may succeed in
repressing, a new one is born to take its place. Nicole finds this reality utterly demoralizing; to know that the fundamental principle of sin in man can never be completely vanquished in this life is perhaps the most tragic aspect of the Augustinian vision:

Quelle misère de n’être maître ni de son esprit ni de son coeur, et de voir l’un occupé de mille pensées ridicules et dérégées, et l’autre agité d’une infinité de mauvais désirs et de sentiments corrompus, sans pouvoir arrêter cette malheureuse fécondité! d’être obligé de vivre avec cette foule d’ennemis intérieurs, d’être toujours aux mains avec eux, sans pouvoir jamais les exterminer! ["QDF," IV: 210–11]

Nicole’s tour of the heart’s secret places makes it clear that Adam’s heirs have been burdened with a legacy whose implications are tragic for the pilgrim concerned to stay on the road to the Creator: “Nous naîsons tous dans l’ignorance de Dieu et de nous-mêmes, des vrais biens et des vrais maux. Nous apportons de plus en naissant une volonté toute plongée dans l’amour de nous-mêmes, et incapable de rien aimer que par rapport à nous” (“DEH,” II: 45). This “natural” corruption which we bring with us into the world makes the pursuit of virtue a difficult and unlikely enterprise, impelling man as it does to find pleasure in himself and directing him away from his true end.

Despite this bleak picture of the consequences of the Fall, however, Nicole’s analysis does not stop at mere description of the corruption that fills the heart of man. The author of the Essais, in a powerfully drawn image, refuses to conclude that nothing can be done to resist the gravity-like pull of concupiscence:

Il est difficile d’arrêter un poids qui se précipite par un lieu penchant, lorsqu’il est dans le milieu ou dans la fin de son mouvement, et qu’il a déjà acquis beaucoup d’impétuosité et de violence. Mais souvent il n’y avait rien de si aisé que de l’arrêter au commencement, et la moindre force qui l’eût poussé de l’autre côté, aurait été capable de le retirer. Il en est de même des passions qui produisent les plus grands renversements dans les âmes. Elles sont d’ordinaire assez faibles dans leur naissance. Ce sont des étincelles qu’il aurait été aisé d’éteindre avec un peu d’eau. . . . [M]ais quand on laisse enflammer ces étincelles, elles causent ensuite de terribles embrasements que Dieu impute souvent à la négligence de ceux qui n’y ont pas remédié quand ils le pouvaient. [“Des Supérieures,” V: 166–67]

The comparison here between the operations of the passions and the law of gravity is striking. It is especially interesting to note that the same
vocabulary describes both phenomena; we have, in fact, seen the words (or their synonyms) here depicting the motion of an object in space applied to the activities of concupiscence: “mouvement,” “impétuosité,” “violence.” While the first comparison (to a weight responding to gravity’s pull) may be a more natural one for an Augustinian (we recall Augustine’s dictum: “Amor meus pondus meum.”), the second analogy (fire), though trite, may be more apt in representing the implications of uncontrolled passions.

It is clear, I think, that we are touching on a fundamental aspect of Nicole’s morale here. In contrast to the pessimistic view detailed earlier, we now learn, in another example of Nicole’s habit of envisaging the human soul as existing in a state of tension between conflicting forces, that control of the passions, in theory at least, can be a relatively simple affair. Just as the motion of a falling weight can be arrested at the beginning of its descent by the slightest push in the opposite direction and sparks of fire can be extinguished by the tiniest amount of water, the movements inspired by concupiscence can be controlled with minimal effort, if such control is begun soon enough.

While Nicole’s remedy is by no means original, the Senecan echo, coming from so loyal an Augustinian, is somewhat unexpected. The author of the Essais is suggesting that the orientation that we can call concupiscence, the seemingly irresistible inclination in man to act according to what pleases him, may be no more than just that: a “tendency” to act in ways that are certainly predictable, but not necessarily inevitable. And while Nicole does not deny that it is much easier to act in accordance with a natural bent, than to resist, he seems to be telling us that resistance is possible. It is true that as Adam’s heirs we come into this world instinctively finding pleasure in its objects and in ourselves. But the impulses of fallen nature can be controlled.

However, what appears simple in theory, control and repression of the passions, seems less so when viewed in terms of men engaged in the distracting and tempting activities of the world. Nicole’s analysis has shown us that the heart, as the seat of concupiscence, is a region of tremendous energy manifesting itself as spontaneous movements which tend to pull us away from our true end with all the force of gravity:

Les effets extraordinaires des passions . . . dépendent de mouvements qui ne sont pas entièrement volontaires. Nous ne pouvons pas exciter en nous
quand nous voulons ces émotions violentes; elles dépendent des objets, et même de certaines dispositions du corps qui ne sont pas en notre pouvoir. [“Réflexions sur la traité de Sénèque: De la Brieveté de la vie,” II: 332–33]

While it may be true that the coming into being of the emotions is a spontaneous phenomenon, these movements within the soul are not exempt from all control. If such were the case, the possibility of moral behavior would vanish. Although a man may be unable on the one hand to will anger, for example, thus demonstrating that emotions are not voluntary, he can at least choose to avoid those objects and situations that provoke this emotion. Even when this is not possible, a man can condemn and contain within himself the movements of these disruptive forces:

Mais si nous ne pouvons pas nous empêcher de les [mauvais désirs, mauvaises pensées] sentir, nous pouvons au moins les condamner et les déavouer sitôt que nous les sentons, et retenir ce tumulte au-dedans de nous, sans qu’il en éclate rien au-dehors. [“VC,” IV: 343]

Nicole’s censorship of the passions derives not, I think, from their inherent evil, but from what they indicate about the status of a man’s soul—love of self and desire for the objects of the world—and from the interference that they pose for the soul’s uninterrupted movement toward the Creator. This latter consideration has special importance for the moralist. Although the operations of divine grace remain inscrutable, Nicole, like Pascal, never doubts that when God speaks to us, it is through the heart: “... veiller selon l’esprit, c’est aussi avoir les oreilles du coeur attentives à la voix de Dieu” (“VC,” IV: 293); thus, a soul and a heart whose emotions are constantly aroused will be deaf to His voice. The goal that Nicole has in mind for men is a “solid and unshakable peace” (“Des Moyens de Conserver la paix,” I: 297) where the soul, no longer distracted by the objects of the world (it may still prefer them—this is an important point), can give its full attention to its only proper object. Nicole reminds us of God’s command to avoid “human movements like anger” in order to enter a state of calm and tranquility (“De la Préparation à la mort,” V: 308). The means to this end is the acquisition of moral dispositions, which is to say, habits of right doing. The role of these habits is to function as regulators, repressing unruly passions. As
Nicole tells us repeatedly, it is only in a state of calm that a man can make the difficult choices the virtuous life requires.

We must not be deceived, however, by the apparent simplicity of Nicole's remedy. The good life remains a fragile enterprise. We are, after all, fallen creatures, a reality that Nicole never allows us to forget. Thus, even when the desire to know God is present and even when the emotions have been quieted for the moment, the movements of concupiscence are always latent. Repressed and quieted passions are always capable of being awakened. While they sometimes appear to be "healed" (Nicole compares them to "wounds"), their cure is no more than an illusion:

Mais il ne faut pas s'y [à la guérison] fier absolument: car jamais elles [les plaies] ne se referment si bien qu'elles ne puissent s'envenimer de nouveau. Quelque éloignement que nous ayons de certains vices, il reste pourtant toujours en nous assez de penchant pour nous y faire tomber. . . .

["CSM," III: 65]

The cruelest epithet that Nicole can find to label human behavior that fails to conform to the divine will is "animal-like"/"manière toute animale" ("VC," IV: 361). By this, as we have seen, the moralist means the natural inclination of fallen man to act without reflection, in accordance with the movements and impulses of his lower appetite.

Although the Nicolean morale is predicated to an important degree on the view that men do those things that give them greatest pleasure, a careful reading of the Essais de morale reveals that man is (or can be) more than an appetite seeking the satisfaction of its desires. We may say, then, that if the point of departure of this morale is the Augustinian law of delectation, with its profoundly pessimistic view of nature, its point of arrival is a certain optimism in the intellect's capacity to monitor the movements of the sensitive appetite (the moral dispositions discussed above depend on this vigilance). For, despite the similarity in their behavior, men and animals are different. Alone of all creatures, man has been endowed with a reason that allows him to act with consideration. Although it is obvious that men can and do sin with premeditation, Nicole believes that sin is often merely a question of inattention to what God wants:

. . . ceux qui ont un véritable désir d'être à Dieu parfaitement, ne sont d'ordinaire détournés de la pratique des vertus, que parce qu'ils n'y pensent pas. . . . ["VC," IV: 385]
Of course—and here we return to the point where we began this discussion— the burden of original sin acts as a powerful deterrent to the reflective way of conducting one's life recommended by Nicole. Men prefer to act without thinking: "On ne peut nier que . . . le penchant de l'âme fut d'agir sans tant de réflexions, en se donnant entièrement à ce qui lui plaît . . ." ("VC," IV: 362-63). So the tension remains and will continue to remain. Given the disproportion between God and His creatures, between the eternal and temporal orders, man's desire to know the Creator and to conform his behavior to the divine will is never sufficient in this life to overcome in an absolute way (there are few absolutes in Nicole's moral universe) the pull of concupiscence. Restoring reason's ante peccatum hegemony over the passions is a process and the work of a lifetime, for, as Nicole asserts in another gravity image, we are always on the brink:

Dieu ne l'emporte souvent que de bien peu sur les objets de concupiscence. Nous ne laissons pas d'estimer encore les avantages du monde infiniment plus qu'ils ne méritent d'être estimés. Nous sommes encore près de l'équilibre, et en changeant un peu la balance, c'est-à-dire en augmentant un peu l'impression des choses du monde sur notre esprit, elles reprendraient facilement leur empire, et l'emporteraient sur Dieu. ["DEH," II: 54]

Notes

1. All references to the Essais de morale are to the 1730 edition published in Paris by Deprez. The first four volumes of this work appeared between 1671 and 1678; volumes V and VI appeared posthumously, in 1700 and 1714-15, respectively. References to the text will be given as follows: treatise or discourse title, volume in the 1730 edition, and page number; here, for example: "De la Crainte de Dieu," I: 142-43; hereafter cited as "CD." I have modernized Nicole's spelling in quoting from his works. All further references to the Essais will appear in the text.

2. Quotations from Augustine's works are from the Bibliotheque augustiniennne: Oeuvres de saint Augustin, 85 vols. (projected), (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1945–). This edition gives the Latin text and a French translation; I shall give my own English translation. References will be given as follows: treatise title in Latin, book or chapter, subchapter, volume in the BA, page. Here, for example: De Civitate Dei, XIV: 28, BA XXXV: 464.

3. "Quod enim amplius nos delectat secundum id operemur, necesse est." This fundamental law of human behavior, cited repeatedly in the literature on Augustine, appears in the Expositio Epistolae ad Galatas. The key word is, of
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According to the Augustinian analysis, the will is moved to act because of the delight it takes in a thing. As J. Carreyre observes in his summary of the *Augustinus* in the *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, "Qu'on demande à quelqu'un pourquoi il a fait et voulu tel acte; à travers des détours, il arrivera à répondre: parce que cela m'a plu, me faisait plaisir." "Jansenisme," *DTC* (1930–50), VIII, 1ère partie, col. 419.

4. "Les hommes ne seraient pas hommes, s'ils ne suivaient quelque sorte de lumière, fausse ou véritable. Leur nature est tellement formée, que la volonté n'embrasse rien qui ne lui soit présenté par l'esprit sous l'apparence de quelque bien. Ils sont donc obligés en quelque sorte de suivre la conduite de la raison." "Discours sur la nécessité de ne pas se conduire au hasard, et par des règles de fantaisie," II: 6. Cf. St. Thomas: "Since the object of the will is the good, or at least the apparent good, the will is never attracted by evil unless it appears to have an aspect of good about it, so that the will never chooses evil except by reason of ignorance or error." *Summa Theologiae* (New York and London: Blackfriars, 1969), 1a, 2ae, 77, 2, XXV, 165. Here, at least, Nicole seems firmly anchored in Thomist/Scholastic philosophical psychology.


6. Although I agree with those who hold the view that French Jansenism was not "monolithic" (there were many Jansenisms and many Jansenists), I shall use the terms "Jansenist" and "Port-Royal" to refer, nevertheless, to a view of the relation between nature and supernature common to many of the figures associated with Port-Royal.

7. Although fallen man retains use of the *libre arbitre*, it is effective only in choosing evil, for he no longer finds delight (*delectatio*) in good as he did when the will was healthy. In other words, man after the Fall is free, but less so than Adam, since his freedom exists only for evil. For penetrating discussions of the complex problem of freedom vs. determinism in the thought of St. Augustine, see F.-J Thonnard, "La Vraie Liberté selon saint Augustin," *BA*, XXIII: 753–762; and John Rist, "Augustine on Free Will and Predestination," in *Augustine: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. R. A. Markus (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972).

8. II [le Chretien] jouit tranquillement des plaisirs qu'il sait être la cause de son malheur. Ces connaissances que la foi lui donne malgré lui, demeurent sans action et sans effet. Elles ne le troublent point. Il agit, il parle comme un homme qui n'a rien à faire qu'à se divertir en cette vie, et qui n'aurait rien à craindre en l'autre." “CD,” I: 149–50.


10. "Le précepte le plus common de la philosophie, tant païenne que Chrétienne, est celui de se connaître soi-même...." "De la Connaissance de soi-
mêmes, "III, I; hereafter cited as "CSM." In his treatment of this fundamental theme in the *Essais*, E. D. James emphasizes Nicole's notion that "it is through the observation of others that we can best come to know ourselves" p. 130. Bernard Chédozeau also devotes careful attention to "les limites de cette connaissance de soi" (p. 437) and shows that Nicole, in his discussion of the soul's "replis intérieurs," was pointing to modern theories of the unconscious: "Les 'replis intérieurs,' le rappel permanent de l'impossibilité d'une parfaite connaissance de soi, sont autant de formulations de l'inconscient psychologique" p. 437.


13. Although Nicole normally condemned any manifestation of amour-propre, he was not, however, insensitive to its utility for those who are extremely vulnerable to the attractions of the world. In a Pascalian-like reversal, Nicole recognizes that the human condition is such that some men cannot do without the "satisfaction of self-love" and recommends a "nourishing" of this love which will maintain a certain state of equilibrium in the soul. "Pensées diverses," 7, VI: 178-79. Cf. James's examination of this same passage, pp. 108-9 and p. 113.

14. B. Chédozeau, in a similar discussion, talks about Nicole's "correctif" to the Augustinian law. See pp. 401-3.

15. According to James, Voltaire, as well as other eighteenth-century thinkers, gave in to this temptation, thereby confusing self-love with self-preservation, p. 169.

16. "L'amour de nous-mêmes ... nous donne une inclination violente pour les plaisirs ... afin de remplir par là le vide effroyable que la perte de notre bonheur véritable a causé dans notre coeur." *Essais*, "CSM," III: 64.

17. "... concupiscence of the flesh is forgiven at baptism, not in such a way that it does not exist anymore, but in such a way that it is no longer imputed as sin. But, although its guilt is removed, this concupiscence remains nevertheless, until our sickness is completely cured. This will take place when, the rehabilitation of the inner man progressing from day to day, the external man has put on incorruptibility. For, concupiscence does not remain in the manner of a substance, like a body or spirit, but is a kind of evil disposition which affects us like a languor." *De Nuptiis et Concupiscentia*, XXV: 28; BA XXIII: 116-19.

18. Although the passage quoted above is addressed to those responsible for the moral behavior of inferiors, it seems possible and appropriate to extend the rule described here to personal self-control as well.

19. B. Chédozeau suggests that we should not be too surprised by the affinities between the thought of thinkers like Nicole and certain elements of Stoicism: "Tout le XVIIe siècle a été fasciné par le regard de vigilance que le sage stoïcien
porte sur lui-même, et saint François de Sales, Nicole et Malebranche, par exemple, ont fondé leur morale sur cette exigence première,” p. 416.

20. My analysis depends on the distinction between moral and infused virtues. This Scholastic distinction, though never explicitly articulated by Nicole, is, I think, a fundamental principle of his moral theology.


22. A knowledge of which objects and situations provoke our emotions is one of the most important fruits of the self-examination recommended by Nicole.


24. Cf. Aristotle: “Moral goodness . . . is the result of habit. . . . This fact makes it obvious that none of the moral virtues is engendered in us by nature, since nothing that is what it is by nature can be made to behave differently by habituation. For instance, a stone, which has a natural tendency downwards, cannot be habituated to rise, however often you try to train it by throwing it into the air. . . . The moral virtues, then, are engendered in us neither by nor contrary to nature; we are constituted by nature to receive them, but their full development in us is due to habit.

[ . . . ]

Men will become good builders as a result of building well, and bad ones as a result of building badly. Otherwise there would be no need of anyone to teach them: they would all be born either good or bad. Now this holds good also of the virtues. . . . In a word . . . like activities produce like dispositions. Hence we must give our activities a certain quality, because it is their characteristics that determine the resulting dispositions. So it is a matter of no little importance what sort of habits we form from the earliest age—it makes a vast difference, or rather all the difference in the world.” The Nicomachean Ethics, trans. J. A. K. Thomson, ed. Hugh Tredennick (New York: Penguin Classics, 1976), pp. 91—92. Although there is no evidence that Aristotle shaped Nicole’s thinking on the role of habit in moral behavior, Nicole’s comments in the Essais, especially in the treatise “De l’Education d’un prince,” are certainly reminiscent of the Aristotelian (and Thomist) notion of moral dispositions. In the “De l’Education d’un prince,” (analyzed by James and Chédozeau), Nicole shows how the body has the capacity to acquire through repetition certain postures which allow men to act in a consistent manner.

25. The “renversement du pour au contre. . . .” is as characteristic of Nicole’s analysis as it is of Pascal’s.