

Beast of burden: Pascal’s “abêtira” and the yoke of heaven

Benjamin Miller

Once Pascal finishes his famous wager argument and his textual interlocutor is convinced, the interlocutor comes to a new problem. Although he wants to believe in God, he does not know how (Pascal, 1972: 119). Pascal advises him to follow in the footsteps of those who have been in his situation before by following the Catholic rituals as if he believed. If he does so, Pascal (1972) tells the interlocutor, “... Cela vous fera croire et vous *abêtira*...” (119). After the wager, this (sometimes translated as) “stupefaction” is the next step in Pascal’s “therapy” and some have said the key to the whole therapy (Hunter, 2013: 139), it is therefore important to understand exactly what this “stupefaction”, as I will tentatively call it, entails.

Below, I canvass the current interpretations of this word and their drawbacks. I conclude by suggesting an alternative that shares their strengths while avoiding most of their pitfalls. Due to space constraints, I do not situate the debate over this word in broader debates about how to read Pascal or the wager argument. Doing so would unquestionably nuance the arguments herein, yet I offer this still as a viable starting point in. I appreciate that taking the wager at face value suffers from a more fundamental issue concerning assumptions about Pascal’s dialectical methods and end goals, nevertheless, within the context of this more straight-forward approach, I think interesting lessons can still be drawn.

Part 1: Current Interpretations

1. The Cartesian Interpretation

Etienne Gilson argues that “abêtir” means to make us a beast, which, following Descartes’s understanding, means to make us an automaton (1955: 270). This Cartesian interpretation is

supported by the fact that: Pascal’s method of “abêtissement” is the practice of rote machine-like repetition of Catholic customs; elsewhere Pascal shows he is sympathetic to Descartes’ understanding of animals; and Pascal claims many times that man has both the nature of an angel and a beast so it would make sense that Pascal is instructing us regarding our animal nature (Gilson, 1955: 270-273).

But if the above is true, the order of the words is wrong “... vous fera croire... vous abêtira...”. If Gilson’s interpretation holds, the automatism should precede the belief, not vice versa (Foster, 1963: 2; Hunter, 2013: 141). Elizabeth Moles (1965) replies that the sentence does not necessarily imply any order for the faith and the automation, just that they’re both accomplished by Pascal’s recommendation (379). While Moles’ reading is plausible, especially given that Pascal’s text was compiled based on unfinished notes, if the text’s order can be interpreted with precision, this seems preferable.

Secondly, Pascal’s book is addressed to laymen, so it is peculiar that he would rely on the technical philosophical meaning of the term that they may not understand to convey such an important message (Foster, 1963: 2; Howells, 1984: 58). Thirdly, Howells argues Pascal’s understanding of the automaton is not nearly as close to Descartes as Gilson would have us believe (Howells, 1984: 58).

Fourthly, one does not need to suppose the Cartesian picture to understand Pascal’s message of subduing the animals in ourselves through habit. It would be apparent to any farmer that it is through habit that one trains and domesticates a beast. We may therefore ask what bringing in Descartes adds (Hunter, 2013: 141).

2. The Humility Interpretation

According to Elizabeth Moles (1965), some commentators have ascribed Pascal’s use of “abêtir” to Pascal’s reading of Montaigne’s *L’apologie de Raymond Sebond* (379). Accordingly, Pascal uses “abêtir” to appeal to one of the few advantages beasts have over humans, their lack of excessive human pride. Seen this way, “abêtir” is a development of a theme found throughout the wager argument, namely, the limits of human reason. This interpretation has the advantage of explaining what *bête* could mean in a positive context, when practically everywhere else Pascal seems to use it negatively (Pascal, 1972: 75, 77-78 Art. 1 sec. 5, 7; Art. 6 sec. 33; Art. 8 sec. 1, etc.).

But why would Pascal introduce it so abruptly and without explanation, and why would “abêtissement” have this special worthwhile status, when Pascal uses “bête” negatively almost everywhere else (Moles, 1965: 379)? Additionally, as with the Cartesian interpretation, why would Pascal allude to an author that would probably not occur to his general audience?

3. The Child Interpretation

Others have interpreted “abêtir” as meaning returning to the state of a child (Gilson, 1955:

267). On this interpretation, Pascal is advising his interlocutor to forsake the worldly prejudices that he has built up. Gilson, among others, rejects this interpretation because this is not a particularly obvious meaning of the word “abêtir” and because it is not clear how this fits with the interlocutor’s response “But that is what I fear” (Gilson, 1955: 267).

4. The Irony Interpretation

Others have simply suggested Pascal meant it ironically in order to draw the interlocutor into admitting his fears (Howells, 1984: 59). This interpretation simply pushes off the question of what “abêtir” actually means, since it is not immediately clear what exactly the interlocutor fears.

5. The Stupidity Interpretation

One last interpretation stipulates that “abêtir” does not mean to make you a beast, but rather to make you stupid (Hunter, 2013: 139). Hunter’s explanation for this is that the interlocutor, unable to act according to demonstrative reason, wagers anyway and so acts as a stupid person does who ignores reason in favour of looking exclusively at rewards (Hunter, 2013: 143). Of course, the interlocutor is not genuinely stupid, since reason cannot help in this wager and the interlocutor has no choice but to wager. This interpretation has the advantage of being more closely connected to the word’s ordinary meaning and to the structure of the wager itself (Hunter, 2013: 144). Yet it is unclear given this interpretation why “stupid” appears where it does. If this interpretation holds true, then the interlocutor will not be made stupid by engaging in Catholic practices. Rather, the interlocutor must be thought to have already been stupid to wager as he did in the first place. That is, he is not made stupid, but revealed to be stupid. What’s more, this interpretation interprets Pascal only as saying that his interlocutor will *seem* stupid not actually *be* stupid. Yet there is no language to suggest seeming or appearances with regards to “abêtir”.

Part 2: The Yoke of Heaven Interpretation

I would like to suggest that “abêtir” means that the interlocutor will be made a beast, in that, like a beast of burden, he will be made to accept the yoke of heaven unquestioningly and with resolve. Stephen Hultgren (2003) explains this scriptural concept by saying, “The ‘yoke’ of the Jewish-Christian ‘believers’ is the law and righteousness through the law,” (43). This is closely tied to the notion of “throwing off the yoke” which essentially means to leave religious practice behind in favour of “the yoke of flesh and blood”, precisely the characteristic of his interlocutor according to some (Hultgren, 2003: 43). Pascal (1913) was obviously aware of this concept given that he uses the expression “throwing off the yoke” (*secoué le joug*) twice, both times to describe men who reject religion (Art 9 sec. 1). What’s more, when he uses the

expression throwing off the yoke, he says “c’est ce qu’ils appellent...” (It’s what they call...) which seems to suggest it’s a popular phrase. Immediately, we can establish two things: one, this concept is one Pascal was aware of and associated with lapsed Christians; and two, this was probably a well-known concept unlike the technical and literary meanings of Descartes and Montaigne.

This explains the order of “...cela vous fera croire et vous abêtira...” (Pascal, 1972; 119). Faith is a precondition but not the only goal of the devout. The yoke of heaven is that specific facet of righteousness having to do with subjugation to God *through the law*. What this means is that for Pascal Catholic practices accomplish two things: it makes one believe, but it also embodies that faith in action through observance of the law (i.e. accepting the yoke). These are two distinct accomplishments and both are necessary for the wager to be fully won. This is made clearer by how Pascal ends this section, “Vous serez fidèle, honnête, humble, reconnaissant...” (Pascal 1972: 120). That is, there is more to what Pascal is discussing than just faith. The other interpretations each explain how “Abêtissement” entails some of the above listed qualities, but none explains them all. Only the yoke interpretation offers a powerful enough concept to be able to account for all of these personal improvements.

No single interpretation of “abêtir” may be entirely satisfactory, but the yoke of heaven interpretation includes a number of the messages of the other interpretations while avoiding the drawback of having to rely on texts unfamiliar to laymen. It offers a coherent account of the text, without accusing Pascal of ambiguity. It may always be a mystery what “abêtir” actually means, but I think it is fair to say we can still aspire to interpretations that reveal interesting lessons that may or may not have been intended, just so long as those lessons are genuinely Pascalian and don’t displace anything that can be found in the text.

References

- Asher, M. (2007) The Yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven. http://www.gatherthepeople.org/Downloads/KINGDOMS_YOKE.pdf (accessed on May 1, 2014)
- Foster, B (1963) Pascal’s Use of Abêtir . *French Studies* 17.1: 1-13
- Gilson, E (1955) “Le sens du terme “abêtir” chez Blaise Pascal” in *Les idées et les lettres*. 2e edition. Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin.
- Howells, B (1984) The Interpretation of Pascal’s “Pari”. *The Modern Language Review* 79.1: 45-63
- Hultgren, S J (2003) 2 Cor 6.14–7.1 and Rev 21.3–8: Evidence for the Ephesian Redaction

of 2 Corinthians. *New Testament Studies* 49.1: 39-56.

Hunter, G (2013) *Pascal the Philosopher: An Introduction*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Moles, E (1965) Pascal's Use of Abêtir. *French Studies* 19.4: 379-384

Natan, S (2008) Le pari de Pascal et ses ambiguïtés. *Symposium* 62.3 : 159-174.

Pascal, B (1913) *Les Pensées*. London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd. <https://archive.org/details/lespenses00pasc>

Pascal, B (1972) *Les Pensées*. Paris: Librairie Hatier.