

The Role of Reason in the Assent of Faith – Pascal, Shestov and the Late Medieval Background

by

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The aim of this paper is to take some steps towards determining what makes an assent an assent of faith. The opening steps will bring into view a set of three kinds of assent, namely opinative assent or opinion, evident assent, and assent of faith, this with the purpose of directing our attention more precisely to the kind of assent that is at issue. The approach will benefit from guidance provided by some late-medieval logicians and theologians, including John Mair, George Lokert, Gervaise Waim, and Nicolas Francus of Vimeu.¹ This part of the discussion will emphasise an assent of faith that is inseparable from, and indeed arises out of, an exercise of reason. I shall then argue that this concept of ‘assent of faith’ is vulnerable to attack by Pascal and Shestov on the basis of their teaching on the apparent mutual exclusivity of faith and reason with respect to some acts of faith.

1 John Mair (c.1467-1550), *In primum Sententiarum*, (Paris 1519); George Lokert (c.1485-1547), *Scriptum in materia noticiarum* (Paris 1514); Gervaise Waim (c.1491- 1554), *Tractatus noticiarum*, (Paris 1528); Nicolas Francus (fl. 1500s), *Tres hecatonomie Nicolai Franci Vimacui de conceptibus* (Paris c.1509). The first three were students at and also taught at the University of Paris (and elsewhere also) during the first half of the sixteenth century. I do not have details of the professional career of Nicolas Francus; however, he attended the University of Paris, and was an associate of Philippe Prévost, regent in Arts at the Collège du Cardinal Lemoine. For discussion of Mair and Lokert on the assent of faith see A. Broadie, ‘Assentiment et volonté: la pré-Réforme écossaise’, in *Croit-on comme on veut*, éd. Laurent Jaffro, Paris: Vrin, 2014, pp.103-15; and for discussion of all four late-medieval philosophers on the assent of faith see A. Broadie, *Notion and Object: Aspects of Late-Medieval Epistemology*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1989, 125-78.

To start with assent broadly understood: it is possible to grasp or apprehend the sense of a proposition without also judging that things are as the proposition signifies them to be. There are at least two elements in this analysis, first apprehension, and secondly a judgment, where the apprehension is expressible in the form of a proposition signifying a given state of affairs, and the judgment is an acknowledgement that things are indeed as the proposition signifies them to be. The kind of judgment here described is what, in accordance with modern and also late-medieval practice, I shall term ‘assent’ (Latin *assensus*).

What motivates the move from apprehension to assent? There are three answers that correspond to the aforementioned three kinds of assent, namely opinion, evident assent and assent of faith. I shall deal with these in turn. First, ‘opinion’ is a technical term commonly used by late-medieval logicians to signify a judgment drawn as a conclusion from premisses that are sufficient to yield a probable conclusion. The concept of opinion here envisaged may not precisely match the modern use of the term ‘opinion’, and it is the concept as defined here by late-medieval thinkers that is relevant. It has therefore to be noted that probable arguments are rational acts. Typical of them are arguments whose premisses include a witness statement, say, or an *auctoritas*, an authoritative text such as an assertion by Aristotle or St Augustine. The concluding assent is reasonable, in this sense, that not only is there a reason for the assenter to say yes, but further, the reasoner has made that reason his own, so that the reason has become *his* reason for saying yes. His reason is set out in the premisses. But the assenter recognises that the conclusion, though probable, is not certain, since evidence, such as a witness’s testimony, is defeasible, even if it is strong enough to make it appear more likely than not that the testimony is true. So the concluding assent is hesitant, there is a holding-back or a self-restraint by the assenter. The Latin term routinely used in this context for ‘hesitant’ is *formidolosus*, which can also, and more literally, be translated as ‘fearful’ or ‘timid’ – no doubt because the kind of assent at issue is given by

people who fear that they may be wrong. To the aforementioned two characteristics of opinion, (1) the basis in reason and (2) the hesitancy of the assent, a third characteristic was regularly added, namely the fact that the assent has a natural cause, a movement of the intellect unaided by a free cause, a movement of the will. I shall say more about this distinction later when I turn to the assent of faith.

A second sort of assent is ‘evident assent’, where the term ‘evident’ is to be understood in a way highly consistent with its etymological root, *videre* (to see). We give evident assent to a proposition if we see the proposition to be true. Among the characteristics of such assent are, first, that it is firm or is unhesitant (*sine formidine*), a term that is used, John Mair informs us, to exclude suspicion and conjecture’.² Secondly ‘it is caused by causes that necessitate the cognitive power (sc. the intellect)’.³ A third criterion, implicit in the second, is that the causality of these necessitating causes is natural, a qualification that is intended to exclude the will as a possible cause of evident assent. In a sense the etymology of ‘evident’ itself indicates the exclusion of the role of the will. We open our eyes, immediately see some object, and immediately judge the object to be present.

I turn now to the third of the three sorts of assent, the assent of faith, which is an assent (1) which is given to a proposition that is the conclusion of a probable argument and given because of the agent’s apprehension of the argument, and (2) which is given firmly or without hesitation. Faith is therefore, in a sense, intermediate between opinion and evident assent in so far as it shares its first characteristic with opinion and shares its second with evident assent. This position, shared by many late-medievals, is backed by an authoritative text of Aquinas’s: ‘Faith is intermediate. For it exceeds opinion in that it is held firmly, and it falls short of knowledge in that it is of the invisible (*non habet visionem*).’⁴

2 Dicitur ... sine formidine ad excludendam suspensionem (et) coniecturam. Mair, 1 *Sent.*, 6 *verso*, col.1.

3 Assensus evidens est ... natus causari a causis necessitantibus ipsam potentiam cognitivam...’ Lokert, *Noticiarum*, sig.e, 8 *verso*.

4 *Summa Theologiae* 1a2ae, 67, 3 c.

But this set of criteria of assent of faith seems in tension with itself and is perhaps even self-contradictory. The tension at issue will pursue us through this paper. Let me make a start on it by asking the obvious question: how it is possible for an assent of faith to be firm or unhesitant if its foundation is only a probable argument, and not, say, a logical demonstration or an unmediated insight? Alternatively we might put the question the other way round and ask how the assent of faith can be based on nothing more than a probable argument if the concluding assent itself is firm or unhesitant. The answer to both questions is that we need to revisit the easily-made claim that the assent of faith is intermediate between opinion and evident assent, and challenge it on the grounds that whereas the latter two kinds of assent are produced by a natural cause in that they are caused by a movement of the intellect, the assent of faith is freely caused, for it is produced by a movement of the will. From which it follows that the assent of faith is not on the same logical plane as opinative assent and evident assent.

This seems to me a well-founded challenge, to which I shall now begin to respond by enquiring what it is that the will wills when the outcome of its willing is an assent of faith. The will cannot transform a probable argument into a demonstrative argument, for the outcome of that transformation would be evident assent. In giving evident assent the assenter lays claim to knowledge, but there is a long tradition of regarding knowledge and faith as mutually exclusive. It is precisely where knowledge is not achievable that there is space available for faith. Or, to use the language of the bible, faith is in things that cannot be seen. To return to my question, therefore: What does will have to will to produce faith? The answer is that the will wills that firm or assured assent should be given to the conclusion of a probable argument, not indirectly by means of the transformation of the argument into a demonstration, but instead directly by the will's reinforcing or confirming or strengthening of the uncertain, hesitant or timid assent that is the appropriate outcome of a probable argument. To use an architectural metaphor, the will is a kind of flying buttress

supporting the opinative conclusion of a probably argument and giving concluding assent a degree of firmness it could not receive from the premisses alone, while at the same time the act of will could not be classed as an additional premiss.

But if, as a result of this act of the will, the assent given to the conclusion of the probable argument has the assurance befitting an assent to the conclusion of a demonstration, we are entitled to ask what constitutes the foundation of that assurance or firmness. After all, the rational foundation of the conclusion remains merely a probable argument. The only new element is the movement of the will, and that movement is neither a new premiss nor is it derived from new premisses. To be clear, if there were new premisses and if these sufficiently strengthened or confirmed the assent, the assenter would have not faith but knowledge. It appears therefore that it is the bare willing of the confirmation, and not any new premiss that the assenter brings to the conclusion, that constitutes the difference between the hesitancy of an opinion and the assurance of an assent of faith.

On this analysis an assent of faith is both reasonable and unreasonable. It is reasonable to the extent that the conclusion to which assent is given is supported by a probable argument, and it is unreasonable to the extent that the firmness or assurance of the assent of faith is not supported by any argument, for the only argument that the assenter has is the probable argument which, by its nature, does not support a firm conclusion. If we are being unreasonable in so far as we are doing something which we cannot justify by any argument, then unreasonableness is not an obstacle to faith; on the contrary, it is necessary for it. In short, on this analysis, one disturbing feature of faith is its resolute resistance to the colonising activities of reason. For even granted that an assent of faith has a foundation in a probable argument, the last and defining step in the act towards the assent of faith, namely the movement of the will, cannot be colonised by reason without the concluding assent being an assent not of faith but of knowledge. However, I should like to suggest a weakness in this line of argument. As a first move I shall say what I take to be the relation between intellect and will. My account is influenced

by that of Duns Scotus. I shall not however raise questions concerning Scotus's explicit qualification of will as a rational faculty.

The intellect, faced with the practical question: 'What shall I do?', conceives a plan or a line of action which it takes to be the best answer to the question, and duly presents the plan to the will. How does the will respond? We can't be certain in advance since the will is free, by which I mean that it is open to opposites, in that, whatever it does in response to the intellect's proposal, it is possible for it to do something else instead, or even to do nothing (if that is not included in 'doing something else instead'). This openness is in contrast to causal relations between objects lacking a will. The sun heats a stone, and at that moment and in that circumstance it cannot not. Of course the sun can do many things, bleach and blacken things, harden and melt things, and so on, but at any given moment it is not open to doing anything other than it does. The contrast is covered by the medieval tag: 'Natura ad unum, voluntas ad opposita – Nature is towards a single thing, the will is towards opposites.' This position implies a rejection of determinism, including intellectual determinism. Hence the relation of the movement of the intellect to the movement of the will is not the relation of a natural cause to a natural effect. The effect is free, in which case the intellect's proposal has the status of advice or a suggestion or a recommendation, or even of a command (for one can disobey, as well as obey commands) and not the status of an efficient cause. But if, throughout this process, the will remains open to opposites, then the 'yes' (if 'yes' is its response), is not wholly the voice of reason or the intellect. Instead something that is non-reason directly moves the agent to act.

This, however, does not imply that the resultant act is not reasonable – far from it. For if the intellect recommends an intellectually defensible plan as the practical answer to the practical question, and the agent accomplishes what the intellect recommends, then the agent's act is thereby informed by the concept worked out by the intellect, and to that extent the act is reasonable; the agent has done what you would expect a

reasonable person to do. Of course, there may be a very different outcome. Even though the proposal presented to the will by the intellect is reasonable, the will may reject the proposal and instead will something utterly crazy. This can happen to all of us – we can do the craziest things even while knowing them to be crazy. That’s the price you pay for being human. Of course, most often we don’t do crazy things, we do reasonable ones because we are reasonable. Furthermore, as I have just argued, the fact that the will is free and therefore always goes beyond the intellect, does not mean that every free act is unreasonable or irrational. In saying this I am relying on the doctrine with which I started, namely that an assent of faith is produced by an act of will that wills the reinforcement or confirmation of the prior assent to the conclusion of a probable argument; from which it follows that the proposition to which the assent of faith is given has the support of an piece of probable reasoning.

This doctrine of the nature of faith, considered as the joint product of the faculties of intellect and will, that was common currency among the late-medieval logicians is clear, elegant and deeply rooted in the western theological tradition; but it is also, it seems to me, threatened by Pascal, and no less threatened by Shestov. The late-medievals do not say that some assents of faith satisfy the criteria that they set out; what they say is that these are the criteria that any assent has to satisfy if it is to be an assent of faith. Pascal, supported by Shestov, produces examples of assents of faith that surely could serve as archetypal assents of faith, and yet that appear not to satisfy the criteria of my late-medievals. I shall mention three examples; they concern the agony of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, the binding of Isaac, and original sin, and I shall close by consider the underlying fact that drives this Pascalian narrative. (I should add that since in this paper I am focusing on religious faith the Shestovian examples I use are religious, but it has to be remembered that Shestov was not concerned only with religious propositions, since his target was the role of reason and unreason in our lives, and not only reason and unreason in their

interface with religion. It is therefore to be recalled that Shestov dedicated two hundred pages of *Athènes et Jérusalem* to a meditation on the hideous torture instrument known as the Bull of Phalaris and the extraordinary claim, made by some stoics, that a true stoic could be happy even while being roasted inside the Bull.

The first Pascalian example concerns the event narrated in the various Gospel accounts of the agony of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.⁵ Pascal understands the accounts in terms of their practical implication: ‘Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world. One must not sleep during that time.’⁶ Shestov ponders Pascal’s words for the whole length of a book.⁷ He is as alive as anyone could be to the absurdity of what seems to be Pascal’s assumption, namely that human beings are capable of staying awake to the end of the world, and Shestov suggests, as a possible interpretation of Pascal’s position, a narrative that deploys St Augustine’s doctrine of *fides implicita*. This doctrine states that the faithful do not themselves need to be in direct communion with heavenly truth; it is instead sufficient if they observe the principles declared true by the church. Shestov, translating this into what he terms ‘the language of good sense’ (*le langage du bon sens*), declares Pascal’s doctrine to mean that humans must of course sleep, even while Jesus is in agony; reason, after all, says as much. We are only human and we must obey the biological imperative to sleep when exhausted; this is not just our right, it is a natural necessity, from which therefore no-one, not even Pascal, is exempt.⁸ Nevertheless, while we are awake we are no doubt bound in some measure to suffer agony in sympathy with the agony of Jesus, bound in that, in contemplating the agony of Jesus, our contemplation cannot be

5 Accounts are to be found in the four Gospels. See *Matthew* 26, vv.36-56; *Mark* 14, vv. 32-52; *Luke* 22, vv.40-53; *John* 18, vv.1-18.

6 Pascal, *Pensées*, présentation et notes par Gérard Ferreyrolles, texte établi par Philippe Sellier, Le Livre de Poche: Paris, 2000, pp.573-6.

7 Léon Chestov, *La Nuit de Gethsémani: Essai sur la philosophie de Pascal*. Paris; Éditions de l’éclat, 2012. Published also in Léon Chestov, *Sur la balance de Job*, tr. B. de Schloezer, ed. Isabelle de Montmollin, Paris; Le Bruit du temps, 2016, pp.433-501.

8 *Sur la balance de Job*, pp. 440-1.

sustained but is instead transformed into endurance, as we naturally feel the pain that he must endure, and bound also in that, in contemplating his agony, we recognise that we must not avert our gaze just in order to live a more comfortable or more tranquil life; we are instead bound both religiously and morally to be in communion with Jesus in his agony. I think that Pascal's words imply as much.

Yet, having offered his interpretation in terms of *fides implicita*, which seeks to edge Pascal into the common world shared by 'tous les hommes qui pensent raisonnablement et correctement',⁹ Shestov appears to acknowledge that his interpretation does not measure up to what Pascal surely has in mind, even if he cannot readily articulate what it is that Pascal does have in mind. The starting point, as already indicated, is that Shestov finds that he cannot subscribe to the crazy idea, understood literally, of 'our staying awake to the end of time'. What on earth does or could Pascal mean by this phrase that acknowledges its bizarreness while at the same time bestowing on it at least an aura of plausibility? Shestov's interesting response is this: 'It is Aristotle who thought up the theory of the "middle [or intermediate]"¹⁰ and taught us the great truth that, if we aim to keep reason intact we must not exhaust it with questions which exceed its powers. Furthermore, Aristotle taught us that one should not ask any question whatever in such a way as to attack reason's sovereign rights. For it is he who invented the fiction (viz. of eternal truth) that unanswerable questions are senseless and therefore unacceptable.'¹¹ Elsewhere Shestov adds a detail: 'Beyond certain limits, man's curiosity becomes inopportune. Aristotle has formulated the position in the celebrated words : "To accept nothing without proof is a sign of the lack of a philosophical education".'¹² In a word, one

9 *Sur la balance de Job*, p. 458.

10 The concept of the middle or intermediate term is central to Aristotle's theory of the syllogism, and therefore to the whole of his logic. It is also central to his moral philosophy in so far as he argues on behalf of the 'doctrine of the mean', viz. that each of the moral virtues occupies a position intermediate between two extremes, each extreme a vice.

11 *Sur la balance de Job*, p. 465.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 441.

can't go on forever seeking further light on what Pascal meant. It cannot become clear to us *in hoc statu* because his teaching that we must stay awake to the end of time is crazy.

I wish here to introduce the term 'absurd' to make the point I have in mind. In general, we use the term 'absurd' to signify something that is not just false or invalid but also crazy. But 'absurd' is a term with an interesting history and its history deserves to be respected. Etymologically speaking, the fact that something is absurd does not imply that it is meaningless or false or invalid. It implies that it is *inaudible*. Something absurd may in fact make sense and may indeed be true. But to those who are deaf the message makes no sense. In response to Pascal's message that we should stay awake till the end of the world, Shestov first offers a rather banal interpretation, namely his words concerning the concept of *fides implicita*. But Shestov, like Pascal himself, is quite clear that the fact that a theological doctrine, when taken *au pied de la lettre*, is shocking, outrageous or crazy, does not mean that theologians are justified in taming, domesticating or disarming the doctrine. For in some cases domestication is falsification. It is, I think, with this in mind, that Shestov declares openly that his *fides implicita* interpretation of Pascal's account of the agony of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane is hopelessly inadequate.

There are things that we cannot understand in this life unless blessed with an *auxilium speciale*. Perhaps Pascal had indeed been blessed in this way, and thereafter was reaching into language to convey a message that we mortals do not have ears to hear. I shall return to this point shortly, but meantime, in light of the teaching of the late-medievals, I shall note that since reason tells us that it is impossible for human beings to stay awake till the end of the world, one cannot give an assent of faith, as 'assent of faith' is understood by the late-medievals, to the claim that humans can stay awake till the end of the world. Pascal is therefore giving his assent of faith to a proposition that cannot be supported by a probable argument.

I turn now from the agony of Jesus in the Garden to the biblical narrative concerning the binding of Isaac, but do not

thereby move to totally new ground, for in the latter case also the biblical event invites us to reject the dictates of reason, whose laws are confirmed by countless observations, but whose laws seem however to be groundless if the premiss of the biblical narrative is to be believed. Abraham, then more than a hundred years old, was commanded to kill his only begotten son whom he loved, the son through whom Abraham's seed would inherit the earth. A loving father sacrificing his only begotten child is an absurdity, and it is also an absurdity that the prophecy concerning the inheritance of the earth could be fulfilled if Isaac were sacrificed. Once again probable arguments do not seem to play a role in the way that the late-medievals envisaged, because in so far as reason tells us anything it is that the Abrahamic narrative is false, and not that it is probably true.

It is important to recognise, however, that even if we acknowledge the absurdity of the idea of the sacrifice of one's beloved child, and the absurdity of the idea of the inheritance of the world by your seed despite the fact that you have no seed, we are not thereby committed to the view that they must therefore be false or invalid. An alternative position, accepted, I think, by both Pascal and Shestov, is that we lack the mental apparatus required to grasp the message. Which leaves open the possibility that the message, now inaudible to us, is in fact true. Pascal indeed had faith that it is true; it is probable that Shestov, with regret, withheld belief that it is true, but certain that he rejected arguments supporting the claim that the narrative must be false.¹³

A comment with much the same form can be made regarding the third case I want to examine concerning an assent of faith whose object seems crazy, namely the doctrine of original sin, at least on Pascal's understanding of it. In this case the absurd object of faith is the culpability imputable to all the descendants of Adam for the sin of disobedience that Adam committed, a culpability that seemingly makes no sense given that agents not born nor even conceived till after the commission

13 Léon Chestov, *Athènes et Jérusalem*, tr. B. de Schloezer, ed. Ramona Fotiade. Paris; Le Bruit du temps, 2011, pp. 272-84.

of Adam's sin could not be culpable of anything prior to their conception nor therefore culpable of that first act of disobedience. One has to be alive if one is to be culpable. To deny this is surely to infringe the law of non-contradiction. Pascal, on Shestov's reasonable interpretation, holds that nothing could more rouse our reason and conscience to indignation than the mystery of the Fall and of original sin, and he also holds that original sin is absurd and impossible. But, as with the previous two archetypal cases of assent of faith, so also with this third, we need to bear in mind the fact that something's being absurd, impossible or contradictory does not mean, in the mind of Pascal or of Shestov, that the message is therefore false. Perhaps we cannot conceive how a contradictory proposition can be true, but even though God did not in fact bestow on us such a power of conception, perhaps he could have done. Shestov sums this up: 'Original sin appears to us as the incarnation of all that we consider immoral, shameful, absurd and impossible. But Pascal tells us that the greatest truth is there.'¹⁴ Sufficient to note that this heroic stance by Pascal, and indeed by Shestov also, is contrary to the doctrine of the relation between faith and reason with which I began. Shestov aligns this insight with the phrase on the famous sheet of paper that Pascal sewed into his clothing. There Pascal displayed his detachment from hellenistic philosophy with the affirmation: 'God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob – not of the philosophers and the sages'.¹⁵ For the doctrine of original sin, an article of faith that informs Christianity as deeply as any of Christianity's articles of faith, is so far from being a probable truth that it is here described as absurd and impossible, and it can therefore in no way serve as the conclusion of a probable argument. To which it has to be added, for the last time in this paper, to emphasise the anti-hellenistic stance of Pascal and of Shestov, that neither of these philosophers thinks that the absurdity and impossibility of the aforementioned article of faith imply that the article is not true.

14 *Sur la balance de Job*, p. 492.

15 *Sur la balance de Job*, p. 492.

Regarding the analysis of the assent of faith, there is at least one significant similarity between Pascal's position on the one hand and that of my late-medieval theologians on the other. For the latter group wrote as if the assent of faith arrives via logic, through the will working on the conclusion of a probable argument; and Pascal, who is of course famous as a founding father of probability theory, promoted the idea of a wager consisting of a movement that starts with a probable argument concerning the advantages of assenting to the proposition that God exists as against the disadvantages of not assenting, and that then proceeds to the conclusion that the person making the wager has nothing to lose and everything to gain by giving his assent to the proposition that God exists, so that there is no obstacle, and every incentive, to him or her judging, as an act of faith, that God exists.¹⁶ If that is a fair statement of Pascal's wager, then the wager does indeed seem significantly similar to the position of my late-medievales.

However, the foregoing statement of Pascal's wager is incorrect and it is instructive to see why. In a word, the freethinker who, on the basis of Pascal's argument, wagers that God exists is not described by Pascal as thereby giving his (the freethinker's) assent, in the proper sense of 'assent', to the proposition that God exists. If, in the proper sense, to assent to the proposition p , is to hold p to be true, then neither does the freethinker promptly assent to 'God exists', nor does Pascal think that the freethinker will promptly assent to it - quite the contrary. The freethinker's response to the argument in support of the wager is: 'I am being forced to wager and I am not free: I am not being released and I am so made that I cannot believe. So what do you want me to do?' The reply given by Pascal is that the freethinker should work to reduce his passions and not work to convince himself by increasing the number of proofs of God, and the way to do this is to imitate people who 'behaved as if they did believe, taking the holy water, having masses said, and so on. By natural means, that will make you believe and

16 *Pensées*, ed. G. Ferreyrolles, (fragment 680).

will habituate you¹⁷.’ This is quite unlike the late-medieval case where the argument has produced assent, even if it is of the hesitant kind. For in the Pascalian case we are to suppose that the freethinker remains a freethinker despite the fact that the argument has made a difference to him, to the extent that he has decided, as an immediate result of the argument, to behave *as if* he assents. However, to decide to behave as if one does assent to articles of faith cannot be construed as an assent of faith, even if the outcome of the behaviour is the acquisition of faith, and even if the agent undertook the new pattern of behaviour with a view to his eventually giving an assent of faith.

The role of the wager in Pascal’s argument is therefore quite different from the role of the probable argument in the late-medieval narrative about the genesis of the assent of faith. To this there should be added a further difference, that the late-medievals were setting out the criteria that have to be satisfied by any act of assent that is an assent of faith, whereas Pascal is not doing any such thing in his discussion of the wager. In particular he does not suggest that every assent of faith must be underpinned by a wager. Indeed he is not even thinking of the premisses that lead directly to an assent of faith, but is thinking instead of premisses leading to an adoption of the idea of working towards the assent of faith by means of an imitation of the behaviour of real believers, an imitation of the real believers’ participation in the Mass and in receiving the holy water, and so on.

The whole emphasis of Pascal’s account of the assent of faith lies elsewhere than with probable arguments. The spiritual journey of the Shestovian Pascal whom I have been discussing contains not a wager but an existential moment, a shock of cosmic proportions that transformed him intellectually, morally and spiritually, and was bound to transform his theology also. The Shestovian Pascal became as if a new person, persuaded

17 ‘Vous abêtira’: What does Pascal signify by *s’abêtir*? I follow Gérard Ferreyrolles’s interpretation, that it means using what is common to humans and animals, viz. the ‘machine’ of the body, to incline or dispose oneself to belief, by repetitious behaviour that becomes customary. *Pensées*, ed. Ferreyrolles, (fragment 680), p.465, fn.1.

that the truth lies not in Aristotelian logic but in absurdities or impossibilities, and certainly not in the conclusions of probable arguments. This is what I referred to as the underlying fact that drives the narrative of the *Pensées*. His doctrine of the assent of faith, a faith not acquired by an engagement of the will, but instead blasted into being by a spiritual shock cosmic in its implications, is worlds away from the position taught at the University of Paris by John Mair and his colleagues. I do not suggest that one should never use the term ‘assent of faith’ in accordance with the account of it provided by many late-medieval writers. But I do believe that Pascal’s account of the assent of faith, developed by him in the course of trying to make sense not only of the deeply mysterious Biblical narratives concerning original sin, the binding of Isaac and the agony of Jesus in the Garden, but also of his own experience of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is no less compelling than, and in many ways reaches deeper down into human nature, than does the doctrine of the late-medievals.¹⁸

18 My thanks to Gérard Ferreyrolles and Laurent Jaffro for their helpful comments.