KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEF: CONTEXTS OF NEWMAN'S EPISTEMOLOGY

Floyd C. Medford

April 15, 1980
Abstract

The paper assumes the usefulness of juxtaposing the major philosophical, religious, and literary components of the milieu of Newman's notion of knowledge. Rooted in classical philosophies of mind, his view draws both upon the idealisms of Kant and others and upon the variety of romanticisms of Coleridge and of the Oxford Movement. His Apologia Pro Vita Sua holds in uneasy reconciliation his insistence at once upon the necessity of rational grounds for belief and upon the psyche's need for transcendence of rational processes. The resulting empiricism, most clearly stated in his Grammar of Assent, exhibits some of the theoretical problems common to that modern school of philosophy.
Knowledge and Belief: Contexts of Newman's Epistemology

While the world may be knowable only in so far as it consists of comprehensible forms, classic philosophical tradition has generally held reality to be characterized by a fundamental, irrational blur, an elemental, unknowable surd, to use a mathematical analogy. Confronted by the receptacle, matter, or substance, the mind has been conceived by Plato, Aristotle, and the Medieval Scholastics, respectively, to have for its end something other than "knowing the world:" the mind is turned back toward itself and seeks its own ideal morality, or it looks beyond the world for its salvation. The great seventeenth-century rationalists seeing the world as entirely form denied that the mind reaches reality except in its knowing function. In the criticism of Hume and Kant, the world once again assumed an unknowable and mysterious aspect: the mind legitimately approaches reality not only logically but also psychologically. For Kant, faith is possible only where knowledge is not, so he felt he had to "remove knowledge to make room for faith." This idealistic movement in thought is paralleled in literature by the tremendous surge of nineteenth-century romanticisms after a century of rationalism.

It is instructive to approach the epistemology of Newman in the light of these considerations. Newman, indeed, held the world in its deepest character to be unknowable: an abiding mystery attaches to its inner nature. "What do I know of substance or matter? Just as much as the greatest philosophers, and that is nothing at all." ¹

The Oxford Movement, with which he was so famously connected, was energized to some extent by romantic elements ² (although to the romantic, truth is mysterious and vague while it is mysterious and definite for the Oxford Movement).


We are not surprised, therefore, to discover in Newman a basic predisposition to concern himself with those mental processes which aspire to something other than the mere copying of existence: imagination and conscience, delight, compunction, and wonder. The implication of this for Newman's epistemology is apparent: since the world as it really is, is unknowable, we are justified in believing, as if we knew it, that the world is like what, in our hearts, we want it to be: it is beautiful because we are imaginative; it is holy because we are conscientious. If the rationalist reduces ontology to logic, Newman leaves himself open to the charge of reducing it to psychology: of substituting his own mental processes for the world of nature. His problem becomes, then, the reconciliation of Reason, which proves its amoral object, and Feeling, which is powerless to show its own value.

This conflict between intellect and emotion not only supplies the central issue and the substance of whatever may be said to be explicitly epistemological in Newman, but also characterizes to some extent his method and manner in many of his works. There is repeated shuttling from a demand that we be reasonable to a justification of emotional activity. And passages which shine with a logical defense of irrationality are as numerous as those which plead emotionally for bright reason. Newman felt that there was "an intellectual cowardice in not having a basis in reason for my belief." Further, he asserted that "few minds can remain at ease without some sort of rational grounds for their religious belief; to reconcile theory and fact is almost an instinct of the mind." He was led, he says, to preach "earnestly against the danger of being swayed by our sympathy rather than our reason in religious inquiry." On the other hand, he knows that "men go by their sympathies, not by arguments." The theme of his Grammar of Assent is that belief or knowledge is arrived at not primarily by rational processes, but by "the whole man"—his emotions, memories, etc., and in Oxford Sermon Number X Newman includes even "prejudices." Here is a sample of Newman's eloquent anti-intellectualism: "While we talk

3 Apologia, p. 81.
4 Apologia, p. 232.
5 Apologia, p. 160.
6 Apologia, p. 136.
logic, we are unanswerable; but then, on the other hand, this
universal living scene of things is after all as little a
logical world as it is a poetical; and, as it cannot without
violence be exalted into poetical perfection, neither can it
be attenuated into a logical formula. In defiance of its
own instructions, the ideas of the Grammar are unfolded,
apparently, in a carefully logical way. On closer study,
however, the fervent defence of faith is seen to justify
the comment of one writer: in the Grammar "there is a com­
plete absence of scientific formalism, of adequate defini­
tions and divisions, of clear-cut distinctions and a
strictly logical order."

A homiletic style stirs and edifies: but enlightenment
needs a method more exact than Newman's purposes require.
Consequently, the problem of arriving at his systematic
thought on epistemology is complicated by his mixing to­
gether elements that to the logician's mind will not mix,
then blandly damning logic with faint praise, and topping
all by charming with a style that even the logician admits
is persuasive. Hence, our approach to Newman's theory of
knowledge must be by way of an examination into assumptions
and implications: his explicit statements are too watery.
In the meantime, however, it seems that Newman must be aware
of this ability which is at once his genius and his weakness.
One of his major theoretic concerns throughout his career is
with what he calls "the logical cogency of faith." It is
only the reason in fallen human wills that he speaks against;
genuine, scholastic reason, reason "when correctly exercised,"
is basic, as he says, to Christian and Catholic philosophy.

Newman espoused, as we should expect a Christian priest
and scholar to do, the classical realism of Aristotle and
Aquinas, the main tenets of which are the attainability of
truth, the value of the ordinary sources of knowledge,
above all, the ultimacy of reason. His
bent for the practical and the concrete was fed by Aristotle's
stress on the actual as against the abstract.

8 S. P. Juergens, Newman on the Psychology of Faith in the
9 See Apologia, p. 219.
10 Newman often expressed his respect for Aristotle. For
Newman proceeds frequently in a scholastic vein: "When I speak of knowledge, I mean something intellectual, something which grasps what it perceives through the senses; . . . which sees more than the senses convey, which reasons upon what it sees, and while it sees; which invests it with an idea."11

Coexistent with this rationalistic strain in Newman's nature is a strongly empirical one. He was a great admirer of Locke. Of course, he must deny that philosopher's notion that assent should be exactly proportioned to inference, yet he found much in the English empiricist with which he could agree: e.g., the value of logic for Newman is expressed in Locke's assertion that "syllogism, at its best, is but the art of fencing with the little knowledge we have, without making any addition to it;" the syllogism, he continues, is "not the only nor the best way of reasoning;" "man knows first, and then only is able to prove syllogistically." Together with Butler, it was Locke who suggested to Newman his notion that probabilities could so converge and concatenate as to lead to practical certainty. The nominalism of both men is striking: Locke's empirical theory led him to consider abstract ideas as mere names; Newman's temperamental affinity for the concrete finds repeated expression: "In this world of sense we have to do with things far more than notions."12

No one has felt the force of nominalism in its implications for religious belief more strongly than Pascal. Underlying his famous aphorism, "the heart hath reasons of its own, which the reason cannot know," is the same distrust that Newman held for the capacity of mere ratiocination ever to pass from tautology over to any living reality. Something other than the mind's power to connect identities must be touched in order to produce belief. Thus, against the scientist's blessing upon "the duty to doubt," the nominalist, who is also religious, will stress the "will to believe."

example: "While we are men, we cannot help, to a great extent, being Aristotelians, for the great Master does but analyse the thoughts, feelings, views, and opinions of human kind." John Henry Newman, On the Scope and Nature of University Education (London: Longmans, 1943), p. 101.

11 On the Scope and Nature of University Education, p. 104; see also p. 126. However, most of the discussion of knowledge in this work is not pertinent to epistemology but to practical types of knowledge.

12 Grammar of Assent, p. 277.
That "Life is for action, and action is impossible without belief," is one of Newman's major principles. It is easy to see here how his connection with pragmatism might develop. As a matter of fact, the eminent pragmatist F.C.S. Schiller declared in a letter to Wilfrid Ward that "Newman was one of the forerunners and anticipators of pragmatism, and he discovered in a quite original and independent manner the great discrepancy there is between the actual course of human reasoning and the description of it in the logical text-books."13 Newman, with the pragmatists, wants to keep his theories in touch with the needs of practical experience. Both insist on the personal and subjective elements in the make-up of truth. Newman would agree with William James' assertion that "it seems as if all our passional and volitional nature lay at the root of all our convictions."14 And with Dewey when he states that "judgment is not logical at all, but personal and psychological."15 It is remarkable that Newman, with the heavy baggage of theological assumption, was able, literally, to feel his way through to the insight of this modern philosophical school: it is a tribute to his genius that in a church which has always valued its Aquinases above its Augustines, he preached with success the value of human experience above human reason.

The Cardinal's "Alexandrian Mysticism" has been the subject of much comment by critics. When he began to study the early fathers for his history of Arianism, he was fascinated by "the broad philosophy of Clement and Origen." He seems to have been particularly impressed by their disdain for the sensuous and inferential approaches to truth. In setting forth their doctrine for his book, he refers approvingly to the Alexandrian teaching that the external world "beguiles the imagination of most men with a harmless but unfounded belief in matter as distinct from the senses." Newman notices further the Alexandrian notion that the argument from final causes is meant only for the multitude, as teaching the existence of God, who "after all dwells intelligibly, prior to argument, in their heart and

conscience." Such passages as these anticipate the theme of Newman's later Grammar of Assent, in which he attempts to put in an ordered fashion the theoretic basis of his views on belief and knowledge.

The struggle to establish the "logical cogency of faith"—to reconcile in a single view the demands of philosophy for rationality and the claims of action for belief—culminated for Newman in the publication of what may be considered his most original work. The Grammar of Assent attempts to show that we do not discredit ourselves in certain acts of assent, but are simply following psychological laws which bring certitude in all fields.

The first Part of the Grammar treats of assent and apprehension; the second Part contrasts assent and inference and singles out for special treatment the faculty of "implicit reasoning," which is defined as the "illative sense." The doctrine of implicit reasoning had been foreshadowed in certain of Newman's University sermons: the believer, untrained in logic, possesses, nevertheless, the grounds that logic would give him because his faith reasons subconsciously for him; and even after this reasoning is set forth in logical fullness as "explicit reasoning," it is never adequate to account for all that was believed.

The most important part of the Grammar is its presentation of the doctrine of the illative sense. Newman's problem is to get from inference to assent, from probability to certitude: ordinary logic cannot bridge the gap; ordinary reason declares that any number of probabilities is insufficient for certitude. Hence, he developed the notion of a moral and psychological "illative sense."

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17 Oxford University Sermons (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1843), Sermon XIII. Compare William James' aphorism, "Every man has insides of his own." Freud, however, has by now invaded even this inner citadel of the religionist's peace and assurance: even subconscious processes follow describable laws.
Certitude is not a passive impression made upon the mind from without, by argumentative compulsion, but in all concrete questions it is the active recognition of propositions as true . . . and reason never bids us be certain except on absolute proof; and such proof can never be furnished to us by the logic of words, for as certitude is of the mind, so is the act of inference which leads to it. . . . Everyone who reasons, is his own centre . . . but then the question follows, is there any criterion of the accuracy of an act of inference, such as may be our warrant that certitude is rightly elicited in favour of the proposition inferred, since our warrant cannot as I have said be scientific? I have already said that the sole and final judgment on the validity of an inference in concrete matter is committed to the personal action of the ratiocinative faculty, the perfection or virtue of which I have called the Illative Sense.18

The field of religious experience stood in need of psychological treatment, and Newman indeed arrived at his definitions and determined his aims by looking into himself. The doctrine of the illative sense is an expression of the determination of the mind to secure its goods against its own scientific scruples: it may turn out that the purpose of mind is not to repeat but rather to celebrate the world.

18 Grammar of Assent, pp. 331, 332. Such passages as "Everyone who reasons, is his own centre" have led one commentator to remark that "the doctrine of the illative sense could only by the most delicate adjustment be adopted to the Catholic dogma. Its spirit was Protestant, pragmatic, uncongenial to the scholastic method of the Roman Church, and indeed to belief in any sort of infallibility. It [the illative sense] might account for the respect one man pays to the judgment of another man. But it left the individual, in proportion to his possession of it, superior to the institution." E. A. Burgum, "Cardinal Newman and the Complexity of Truth," Sewanee Review, XXXVIII (1930), 324.

Floyd C. Medford
Southwest Texas State University
San Marcos, Texas 78666