

## Newman on the Degrees of Certitude

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It is no surprise that even devoted readers of Newman seldom take up *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*. It is, by any judgment, a difficult book.

I would like to discuss one small part of it today, as a way of paying a debt that I owe its author. Asked to devote one of the two conferences that I am to give here in Rome to some philosophical topic in Newman, I naturally found myself thinking about this book – clearly, one of his more philosophical writings. Thinking about it invariably brings me back to the time when I had just begun to write my doctoral dissertation in the fall of 1981. I had chosen to write on the relation between truth and freedom according to Karl Jaspers. But in trying to write up a crisp statement of the problem, I found myself stuck.

Independently of that project, I was (providentially!) reading a bit of Newman, and I learned that he had been trying for decades (oh no, I thought!) to write a book on the problem of certitude in regard to religious faith. But he too felt stuck.



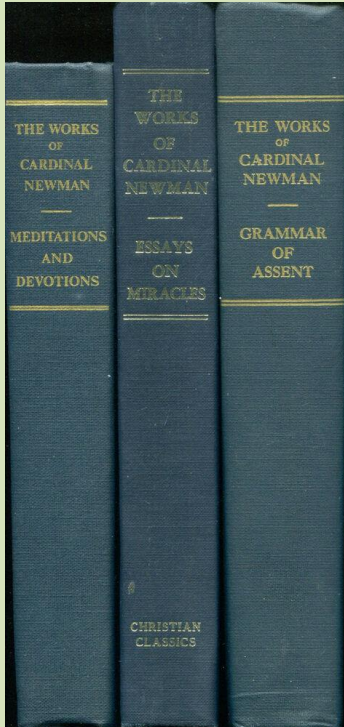
But while on vacation (ah, I thought – what a good idea – go on vacation – maybe to Rome!) in August 1866 near the Lake of Geneva with his dear friend Ambrose St. John, a new thought struck him. It occurred to him that he had been proposing the problem to himself in the wrong way. Instead of beginning with the topic of “certitude,” perhaps he should slowly work toward the topic of certitude but should begin by contrasting “assent” with “inference” (more on that as we go).

By reversing the order of the topics that he intended to cover, he allowed a stream of thought, long pent up in the reservoir of his mind, to find a release. The result was *An Essay* (in the sense of “an attempt”) *in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (that is, an attempt to offer some help with grasping how we come to hold the positions that we take, both on religious and non-religious questions).

What learning of his experience provoked in me was an insight about how I could get unstuck. Perhaps I had started my own investigations at the wrong end, too. Perhaps I had packed my shopping bag inside of my groceries, rather than the reverse. With that shift, I got unstuck and, providentially, I was able to finish my dissertation in nine months. That was in 1982, and I am very pleased, finally, to pay my debt of thanks for

inspiration by coming here to Rome on vacation and speaking to you about some of his insights!

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The part of his book on which I want to focus comes from near the end, and so I will begin by giving just a few preliminary observations, to provide a context. In presenting some of the philosophical distinctions in play, I will try to avoid getting overly technical. Instead, I will try to focus on the use that Newman made of these insights and to suggest some things that may be useful for all of us on questions outside of the specific problem he was investigating.

The central thesis of Newman’s book is that we often come to hold the positions that we do (that is, we come to give our *assent*) not only or primarily on the basis of logic or demonstration but also on the basis of other mental and emotional processes, including feelings, memories, associations, “the right state of heart,” and even a sense of “the convergence of innumerable probabilities.”

It is not at all that Newman disdained logic or demonstration – in fact, much of the early part of this book is given to a careful review of these specific topics. But the main project of this book is to counter a range of agnostic and atheistic propaganda that was gaining influence in his time, namely, the view that only what is scientifically demonstrated should be regarded as knowledge, that religious claims can never be considered genuine knowledge, and that religious belief is likely to be a menace to gaining any real knowledge.

Newman’s book aims to show that much of daily life is based not on the sort of rigorous *inferences* (chains of reasoning) that are typical of science, but on faith (in a general rather than a specifically religious sense), that is, trust in the credibility of someone’s word or testimony. We rely all the time on concrete acts of assent (i.e., holding a belief, saying yes to a proposition) that in turn rest on countless probabilities (likelihoods).

To put the matter another way, the mind does no violence to itself in making such innumerable acts of assent in daily life. The judgments by which we hold this or that to be the case are normally not arbitrary or whimsical. Quite the contrary, they are based on experience, and further experience can confirm or disconfirm what we had been inclined to think. These many acts of assent that we make actually follow various laws

and patterns, and the more that we notice and confirm the laws and patterns involved, the greater confidence we can have. They bring us certitude (that is, the confidence that what we are holding is right) in many fields and spheres, not merely in that of religion.

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To work through the details of *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* would be a lengthy but valuable project. The part on which I would like to concentrate here comes from a section in the final chapter where Newman is discussing the distinction between natural religion and revealed religion. The term “natural religion” refers to what we can know about God and about our duties to him by the use of our minds in reflection on our experience of the world. He discusses natural religion at some length there. Then, after discussing what he calls “our great internal teacher of religion” – that is, our conscience, he turns to the topic of revealed religion.

To begin his reflections on what believers do when they accept divine revelation as true, he makes use of a passage from an ancient pagan philosopher – Aristotle – that offers very prudent advice about giving our assent in various fields of inquiry and about what constitutes genuine knowledge. The lengthy quotation that Newman makes from Aristotle here focuses our attention on the need to remember the limits of the certitude that we can expect within a particular sphere:

Aristotle says, “A well-educated man will expect exactness in every class of subject, according as the nature of the thing admits; for it is much the same mistake to put up with a mathematician using probabilities and to require demonstration of an orator. Each man judges skillfully in those things about which he is well-informed; it is of these that he is a good judge, viz., he in each subject-matter, is a judge, who is well-educated in that subject-matter, and he is in an absolute sense a judge, who is in all of them well-educated.” Again, “Young men come to be mathematicians and the like, but they cannot possess practical judgment; for this talent is employed upon individual facts, and these are learned only by experience; and a youth has not experience, for experience is only gained by a course of years. And so, again, it would appear that a boy may be a mathematician, but not a philosopher, or learned in physics, and for this reason – because the one study deals with abstractions, while the other studies gain their principles from experience, and in the latter subjects do not give assent, but make assertions, but in the former they know what it



is that they are handling” (John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, ed. Ian T. Ker, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985 [1870], pp. 276-77).

The text that Newman quotes here is from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, ch. 3. Before considering the application that Newman draws for the question about whether revelation can be said to give us real knowledge, let us first consider the meaning of Aristotle’s text.

In this passage Aristotle is insisting that we should not expect more certitude than the subject-matter can deliver, but we are entitled to expect certain levels of rigor in some fields. It would be an error, he says, to allow mathematicians to rest their case on probabilities; from professional mathematicians one expects tight patterns of reasoning that lay out all the possibilities and then exclude all but the correct line of thinking. From an orator, however, one should not expect that kind of argument. An orator will use appropriate generalizations, appeals to emotion, and the like. A well-educated person will look for precision in a given class of things insofar as the subject-matter admits of such precision. In a field where the best one can hope for is a convergence of probabilities, that will be taken as good grounds for giving that type of assent.

Using examples like these, Aristotle describes the sort of criteria that well-educated people can use for judging what they hear. One can be a good judge in a particular field when one is well-informed in that field. To be a good judge in general, one would need to have received a well-rounded education, and often one will need considerable experience.

In the second part of the text that Newman quotes, Aristotle offers some examples. A young person can be a good judge in mathematics, for instance, for it is not experience of the world that matters as much as knowing various rules and then applying those rules to a highly restricted set of objects. In other fields, Aristotle argues, one needs more experience of the world. The example mentioned in the quoted passage is about physics, where one needs to have experiential knowledge of how things operate in the material world. By these examples, Aristotle is leading the reader of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to make appropriate judgments about questions of morality.

This passage from Aristotle is a classic source-text for what the tradition has come to call the three degrees of certitude. To use the standard terminology, there are three types of certitude: metaphysical certitude, physical certitude, and moral certitude. The point of distinguishing these three levels of certitude from one another is to avoid expecting more certitude than the subject-matter can deliver. As we noted earlier, one of the main

purposes of Newman in writing this book is to combat the false expectation that only scientific reasoning counts as genuine knowledge.

The level of metaphysical certitude is rare. This term refers to those situations in which one can exhaustively enumerate all the possibilities (for example, X, Y, and Z) and then exclude all but one of them. If the possible answers to a question are X, Y, and Z, and if I can exclude X and Y, then the answer must be Z. To have metaphysical certitude, one must have identified all the logical options and then ruled out all but one, so that there are no other logical alternatives remaining, and this can be difficult to establish.

Gaining physical certitude is not quite so rare. To attain this level of certitude requires us to understand something's nature and typical operations. It is a level of certitude that we can expect when we understand something sufficiently according to its kind. Note the use here of a degree word – namely, *sufficiently*. In this context, this term means “to an adequate extent.” For example, we can say that water always or for the most part freezes if the temperature goes below zero degrees Celsius (below 32 degrees Fahrenheit). Why would we say “for the most part”? We are right to assent to this general claim, but we need to make certain qualifications, for there could, for instance, be impurities in a given water sample that might change the temperature at which it will freeze. What we are assuming when we assent to the generalization are certain conditions about the purity of the sample, not to mention factors such as normal air pressure, the type and volume of the container, being at or near sea-level, and so on, for changes in the circumstances can bring about slight changes in the temperature when freezing begins. Much the same could be said when judging claims about the way certain types of animals hunt and the way certain types of trees bear fruit. The level called physical certitude allows us to say that something will take place “always or for the most part,” and it depends on knowledge of what Aristotle calls the thing's “nature” (in Greek, *physis*).

Finally, there is “moral certitude.” This term refers to the level of certainty that we can attain when we are making judgments about human conduct. Statement in this regard do not come simply from what we manage to discover about human nature (as in physical certitude), but from whatever we can discover about an individual's character, about the circumstances, and so on. That there is some genuine certitude possible in this domain (but certitude to a lesser degree than in the previous two levels) is the result of an additional factor that needs to be taken into account. It is not just a question of “impurities in the sample” or “altitude” or the “nature” of a thing. There is also the question of an individual's exercise of the power of free choice to be considered, not to mention the difficulties of our ever knowing the internal state of mind of other people. And yet, even given these factors, we can still attain some sort of certainty. To offer just one example, this is the brand of certitude that is expected in a court of law when the



judge instructs the jurors in a criminal case that they may only vote “guilty” if they find themselves certain of an individual’s culpability “beyond a reasonable doubt.”

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Newman has chosen to quote the very passage from Aristotle that has been a classic source-text for distinguishing various types and levels of certitude. It seems to me that this distinction is well worth our reflection for many questions in life, and so I have tried to examine it at least briefly above. Let me offer one further point from the philosophical tradition in which Newman was operating before I turn to his use of this material on the question about knowledge and revealed religion.



Much of Newman’s book relies on a view of knowledge that has a long and respectable place in the history of thought, namely, the notion of knowledge as “justified true belief.” This is a notion that Plato articulated in his dialogue *Theaetetus*. Understanding this definition is crucial for appreciating Newman’s view. According to this definition, anything that we can claim as genuine knowledge involves, first of all, a kind of belief – that is, giving our assent or affirmation (making an assertion that something is the case). Otherwise all we have is *opinion* rather than making a claim to have *knowledge*. We have already noted above Newman’s focus on *assent*.

Secondly, for whatever it is that we believe to be true and give our assent, what we believe actually has to be the case in reality, or else we do not have knowledge. No matter how much we want to believe that a given claim is true, that claim cannot be judged to be a genuine case of knowledge unless what we assert really is the case. And yet even these two conditions (that we believe X to be the case and that X is the case) are not enough, for we could just be guessing and we might have just gotten lucky! The third condition is that we have a justification, a reason, a warrant, a suitable ground for believing X to be the case.

It is this third dimension that is the precise area of Newman’s special concern throughout this book. Now, in the entire history of thought, only four types of justification have ever been identified: (1) evidence that is present to the senses (presuming, of course, that our sense-powers are healthy); (2) analysis of the meaning of a proposition, for instance, by showing that all that the wording of a given proposition involves is really an assertion that A is A (for example, that a bachelor is an unmarried man, or that the whole is equal to the sum of its parts); (3) a demonstration (whether deductive or

inductive) in the ways that are appropriate to a given discipline (for instance, by showing that Y is the cause of X); (4) the testimony of a credible witness – that is, that one who is telling us something is one whom we have reason to trust and one who has access to (1), (2), or (3).

It is this fourth source of certitude that most of us use most of the time, whether we are claiming knowledge of an historical sort, claiming knowledge about a physical process that we have not ourselves investigated (such as having a science teacher explain to us that what we see as a “sunrise” is not really the sun moving upwards but a change in the way the sun appears to us that is really the result of the revolution of the earth on its axis), or claiming knowledge about what our friends report to us in casual conversation about their activities the day before.

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To begin a section of his book on knowledge through revelation, Newman uses this understanding of the four possible justifications for any knowledge claim that we might make as well as the distinction among the degrees of certitude that we can reasonably expect in different fields. He writes the following:

These words of a heathen philosopher, laying down broad principles about all knowledge, express a general rule, which in Scripture is applied authoritatively to the case of revealed knowledge in particular – and that not once or twice only, but continually, as is notorious. For instance, “I have understood,” says the Psalmist, “more than all my teachers, because Thy testimonies are my meditation.” And so our Lord: “He that hath ears, let him hear.” “If any man will do His will, He shall know the doctrine.” And “He that is of God, heareth the words of God.” Thus too the Angels at the Nativity announce “Peace to men of good will.” And we read in the Acts of the Apostles of “Lydia, whose heart the Lord opened to attend to those things which were said by Paul.” And we are told on another occasion, that “as many as were ordained” (or disposed by God) “to life everlasting, believed.” And St. John tells us, “He that knoweth God, heareth us; he that is not of God, heareth us not; by this we know the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error” (*Essay*, p. 277).

I find this to be a remarkable passage. Each of the scriptural quotations in this paragraph is an instance of the fourth kind of justification: the testimony of a credible witness, whether it be the reference to God’s own testimony in the quotation from Ps 119:99, or to the words of Jesus (Mt 11:15, Mk 4:9), or to various scripture passages about the words of the Angels or one of the Apostles.

The remainder of the chapter takes up various questions about what Newman calls “the evidences for Christianity” as well as a review of various authors from his day who advance arguments for or against the truth of the scriptures. Without pursuing the details of his apologetics here, we can simply note that he feels free to undertake that work by virtue of having defended the legitimacy of knowledge that comes from the testimony of reliable witnesses.

Deeply versed in the scriptures as Newman was, it is interesting to reflect on how rooted this approach is in the writing of a figure like St. Paul. Realizing that the truth of all the rest of the faith depends in great measure on whether Jesus really did rise from the dead, Paul devotes chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians not only to listing the witnesses to the resurrection (15:3-11) but to the construction of an argument for their credibility (15:12-19). If those who claimed to have seen Christ risen from the death knew that they were not telling the truth, there should have been something that they could have expected to gain by their lie. But men who do not receive any temporal gain (money, power, pleasure, or the like) and only suffering (imprisonment, shipwreck, suffering, death) have no good reason to lie when making claims about what they saw. For Paul, “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins... If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied” (15: 17-19).

It is in this Pauline spirit that Newman provides his defense for the credibility of revealed religion. His deft use of certain philosophical insights from Aristotle provide the context for assessing the credibility of the witnesses and for describing the kind of certitude that one can reasonably claim.

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