

NEWMAN AND PEIRCE ON PRACTICAL RELIGIOUS CERTAINTY

4

Matthew Moore

University of St Thomas, Houston

Although nothing has ever been written to compare Charles Sanders Peirce and John Henry Cardinal Newman, there are many reasons to make the comparison. For instance, they write in approximately the same time period; they both write to oppose positivism; they both break away from modern philosophy and out of the critical problem; they both affirm philosophic realism; they both re-embodiment the intellect philosophically after its Cartesian philosophical disembodiment; they both were obviously influenced by the empiricist tradition; they both have theories of continuity/development that were articulated in response to evolution theories of the time; they both were influenced by the Scottish school of common sense; both wrote in response to David Hume's critique of miracles; both attack abstraction; both go beyond traditional logic by asserting some logical method of reasoning about singular facts and the concrete world; both develop theories of practical decision making by the personal, not subjective, interpretation of signs; both claim that the signs from which man reasons are in themselves only probable, not definitive, indicators, that require an *interpretant*; both argue rationally to justify belief in God by uneducated persons using informal reasoning, and both depart from the traditional proofs in doing so. The point of this paper is to compare John Henry Cardinal Newman and Charles Sanders Peirce on this last similarity, insofar as they both use philosophy to explore and support uneducated religious belief in God. Since, as mentioned before, nothing so far has ever been written to compare these two great thinkers, this comparison will be far from exhaustive. Rather than being a final word on the subject, this essay will be a first word. It will introduce the need for comparative studies of the two thinkers by revealing some broad philosophic lines that establish that need.

Newman and Peirce both write works to defend common sense, uneducated belief in God. Peirce marshals his "Neglected Argument for the Reality of God" (CA),¹ the key point of which is that reasoning to God by a kind of intellectual instinct common to all men is rational. Peirce claims that his argument

¹The "Neglected Argument" is made up of three parts: the Humble Argument (HA), the Neglected Argument (NA), and the Logical Methodetic (LM). Since both the whole argument and one of its parts are named the "neglected argument," I call the whole Neglected Argument the complete argument (CA) and the part of the argument the Neglected Argument (NA).

has a metaphysical tinge to it,² but it produces belief which is defined in his terms and in a pragmatic way: the CA is "an inquiry which produces, not merely scientific belief, which is always provisional, but also a living, practical belief, logically justified in crossing the Rubicon with all the freightage of eternity."³ Although, therefore, Peirce's argument is formally intellectual or speculative, it ends in belief in God thereby transferring out of the speculative and into the practical order.

When we turn to the HA itself, we find that it involves activities called "play" and "musing." According to Peirce, all people will eventually be led to engage in musing by a form of "rational instinct." "Play" occurs naturally when sense impressions lead to observation. After a particular observation—the observation of a commonality amongst the three universes—one transitions from pure play to a distinct kind of play called "musing." Musing is a kind of play that moves the mind towards a cause of at least one of the three universes. In Peirce's words, musing is about "homogeneities of connectedness" within and amongst the three universes.⁴ Peirce's doctrine of three universes of experience includes: the universe of mere ideas (or pure abstractions and imaginations), brute facts, and the universe of signs, which includes all acts of knowing. The last of the three, the universe of signs, acts an intermediary between the mind and brute facts and actualities. This third universe consists specifically of the relation established by the mind between the other two universes. Signs, which themselves are a universe, unite the other universes. The universe of signs, due to its relational existence, has within itself an "active power" to establish a connection between the universes. One example of homogeneity amongst the universes is from the observation of "growth and ordering."

The HA is different from typical theological arguments for many reasons. One particular reason is that its *logical structure* is only implicit and its intrinsic law is freedom – it starts almost anywhere and develops uniquely in most cases. Because its inner law is freedom, we might well call it humble "arguments" because, by Peirce's account, the HA could not be the same for everybody. General principles remain the same, but specifics always differ. Another reason why the HA is distinct from typical theological argumentation is that its *method* is not found within traditional Greek logic. Since God is not abstractable from the universes, the conclusion that God exists is not an induction, according to Peirce. Nor is it a deduction using syllogistic reasoning, explicit or implicit. Rather, it is an *abduction*, a mental action not found in traditional accounts of logic. Peirce states that theologians do not understand the HA because "logic is Greek to them."⁵

Peirce's theory of abduction (or retroduction or hypothesis) can be best understood in contrast to the traditional acts of reason: deduction and induc-

² Peirce 1908 (in Weiner 1966: p 376).

³ Peirce 1908 (in Weiner 1966: p 378).

⁴ Peirce 1908 (in Weiner 1966: p 364).

⁵ Peirce 1908 (in Weiner 1966: p 373).

tion. Abduction is similar to induction when contrasted to deduction: abduction and induction work off of the concrete, not universal, ideas and deal with practical matters. Although similar to induction in relation to deduction, however, abduction is still distinct from induction in that it is not simply an abstraction induced from data. Whereas induction is controlled by the data from which it is taken, abduction outruns the data at hand insofar as it includes a postulation about the future or a given situation based on a gut level insight one has into it due to an “affinity between the reasoner’s mind and nature.” Because it outruns the data, abduction is in a way “groundless.”

The HA comes to a close in reaching the Creator; musing ends in communion with God and possibly scientific study. Prior to scientific study, however, one begins with sensation, observation, enters musement and attains communion. The scientific study takes place on the second and third parts of the CA, the NA and LM. Although the HA is a complete in itself as a rational act of the mind and the one who reasons such need go no further, the argument itself *can* be bolstered by a more formal, philosophic argument. Peirce’s goal in NA and LM is to offer formal argumentation to support the HA. Although common man who proceeds no farther than the HA does not achieve the strength of conviction that the philosophers do, nonetheless, his belief is not superstition: it is rational insofar as it goes.

The NA, section two of the CA, involves the analysis of the conclusion from the first part, called the God-hypothesis. This stage seeks to offer explicit scientific and philosophic support for the HA and it is here that a believer naturally undergoes a process by which his belief both matures in meaning and in certainty.⁶ It proves nothing new, but rather aims to show that the line of thinking in the HA is rational. This step involves a second kind of inference: deduction. In this case, the process of deduction is unique since it involves drawing out the meaning of the idea of God from the belief in God. Since God is an infinitely incomprehensible object, the idea of God itself must be vague and will only admit a limited, qualified understanding, not a full one. As Peirce writes: one should not accept without qualifications the meaning or “implications of the hypothesis” for God, yet one should not reject them either—“they should be partly disavowed while admitting they are less false than their denial.”⁷ Since one spends his entire life reflecting on the meaning of the idea, Peirce states that the idea of God would always be subject to growth. To be sure, the growth is not in God Himself, but only in man’s understanding of the object of the hypothesis, in man’s understanding of the idea of God.

The constant growth in the understanding of the idea of God aligns itself with the constant growth in the understanding of the three universes, which themselves in “connectedness” exhibit constant “growth and ordering,” as

⁶ Even though Peirce teaches that certainty can never be achieved, a doctrine that undergirds his *probabilism*, he still claims that by the usage of the scientific method one grows in certainty or verges towards it hyperbolically.

⁷ Peirce 1908 (in Weiner 1966: p 365).

mentioned before. So the deduction of meaning from the God-hypothesis is confirmed by the induction from reality; and the scientific method, once it has run its course, confirms the initial abductive hypothesis. It does so because the universe itself is always growing, it is constantly assisted by divine providence directing its purposes. So the growth in the idea of God aligns itself with an induction from the created world indicating that it also is constantly growing. As the world itself grows, our understanding of the God who guides it grows. Within growth, one finds purpose, and from purpose one must posit God's reality. Positing God's reality again strengthens the initial abduction of His existence. And the deeper understanding of the meaning of the idea of God leads to a deeper understanding of the universe he created.

In *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, Newman's purpose is to prove that the religious assent of an Irish factory girl is reasonable, not mere superstition. For this purpose, Newman offers philosophic—logical, semantic, and epistemological—argumentation in support of the factory girl's belief. The Irish factory girl can make (assisted by grace) a "natural inference" to belief in God and to His revelation. By this natural inference, the uneducated woman can really apprehend God, and such a *real apprehension* naturally turns into a real assent to God.

Newman reasons to such a *real apprehension* in chapter 5 of Part 1 of the *Grammar*. He begins by questioning whether one's natural assent or belief in God can be more than notional. Given that any form of irrational superstition is inadmissible, he questions whether belief in God for the common man can be rational and still something that affects action and changes his life? Or is such belief deeply theoretical and impractical, like a metaphysical demonstration? He answers these questions by analyzing man's experience of other persons. One's personhood is not an object of empirical experience, but an intellectual or moral object "brought home to us through the senses."⁸ Newman claims that by a kind of mental instinct we go beyond the merely empirically given experiences of a person to apprehend and assent to the existence of other minds endowed with reflective self-consciousness that are basically similar to one's own. He gives as an example the knowledge that we gain of "Cicero or Dr. Johnson, of St. Jerome or St. John Chrysostom."⁹ In offering this example, Newman sets up an analogy to sensation: as one forms a picture in one's mind that is a unified mental construction from the disparate data and input from five different sources, the five external senses, and forms within what is classically called the common sense a synthesized reconstruction of the object of sense experience, so in a similar way, *mutatis mutandis*, the multiple experiences of a person through immediate and empirically given sense experience leads one to determine a person behind the multiple empirical exposures that he has of that person physically through sensation. He then extends the analogy to man's real apprehension of God:

⁸ Newman 1889 (in Ker 1985: p. 72).

⁹ Newman 1889 (in Ker 1985: p. 72).

It is one peculiarity of animal natures to be susceptible of phenomena through the channels of sense; it is another to have in those sensible phenomena a perception of the individuals to which this or that group of them belongs. This perception of individual things, amid the maze of shapes and colours which meets their sight, is given to brutes in large measures, and that, apparently from the moment of their birth. It is by no mere physical instinct, such as that which leads him to his mother for milk, that the new-dropped lamb recognizes each of his fellow lambkins as a whole, consisting of many parts bound up in one, and, before he is an hour old, makes experience of his and their rival individualities. And much more distinctly do the horse and dog recognize even the personality of their master. How are we to explain this apprehension of things, which are one and individual, in the midst of a world of pluralities and transmutations, whether in the instance of brutes or again of children? But until we account for the knowledge which an infant has of his mother or his nurse, what reason have we to take exception at the doctrine, as strange and difficult, that in the dictate of conscience, without previous experiences or analogical reasoning, he is able gradually to perceive the voice, or the echoes of the voice, of a Master, living, personal, and sovereign?¹⁰

As a man accumulates sensibly given experience of another person in order to get to know him, i.e. determine his character, culture, and habits, so also men generally accumulate multiple real experiences of God in and through their multiple perceptions of moral obligation and the need to make moral judgments.

Given that all feel a sense of moral obligation, why must the basis of moral obligation and moral judgment be God? Why does common sense perceive God through moral obligation? Is such a perception rational? Why can the source of moral obligation not be located somewhere else, like within oneself? Newman answers, first, by arguing that the basis for moral obligation cannot be in an inanimate object since man always seeks approbation or censure from a person. If its source is to be located within a person, secondly, it cannot be in oneself because oftentimes conscience tells one not simply his own will and preference but, rather, what one *should* want to do, against what one in fact desires to do. Simply put, whereas one's own personal decisions are within his power, conscience issues moral obligations from outside and above oneself. Thirdly, Newman shows that the source of moral obligation could not be in society because human law does not invoke the same sense of obligation as the conscience. Moral obligation has an absoluteness that civil law and one's personal desires do not.

If, on doing wrong, we feel the same tearful, broken-hearted sorrow which overwhelms us on hurting a mother; if, on doing right, we enjoy the same sunny serenity of mind, the same soothing, satisfactory delight which follows on our receiving praise from a father, we certainly have within us the image of some person, to whom our love and veneration look, in whose smile we find our happiness, for whom we yearn, towards whom we direct our pleainings, in whose anger we are

¹⁰ Newman 1889 (in Ker 1985: p 77).

troubled and waste away. These feelings in us are such as require for their exciting cause an intelligent being: we are not affectionate towards a stone, nor do we feel shame before a horse or a dog; we have no remorse or compunction on breaking mere human law: yet, so it is, conscience excites all these painful emotions, confusion, foreboding, self-condemnation; and on the other hand it sheds upon us a deep peace, a sense of security, a resignation, and a hope, which there is no sensible, no earthly object to elicit. "The wicked flees, when no one pursueth;" then why does he flee? whence his terror? Who is it that he sees in solitude, in darkness, in the hidden chambers of his heart? If the cause of these emotions does not belong to this visible world, the Object to which his perception is directed must be Supernatural and Divine; and thus the phenomena of Conscience, as a dictate, avail to impress the imagination with the picture of a Supreme Governor, a Judge, holy, just, powerful, all-seeing, retributive, and is the creative principle of religion, as the Moral Sense is the principle of ethics.¹¹

He concludes that the source of moral obligation must be above both an individual and his society and that its absoluteness can only be accounted for by positing an absolute God, who is really experienced in and through moral obligation. God is really experienced by mankind through conscientious reception of moral obligation. One can really experience and apprehend God through moral obligation in a way similar to his getting to know a person by spending time with him.

After one really apprehends God, his understanding of God develops precisely due to the interplay of the real and notional in one's understanding of God. The notional order has a clarity and exactness, a technical precision that the real does not. For Newman, it is precisely by reflecting upon one's belief in God that he can achieve certitude in that belief and a greater degree of clarity of the significance of the belief. One starts with a more vague belief in God and reflects theologically on the significance of that belief both to bolster the assent with certainty and to enhance the formal understanding of the nature of the belief. One really and religiously apprehends God by a kind of natural inference in conscience, a kind of common sense reasoning about moral obligation. Without trying to establish anything new, Newman and other theologians go farther to support the common belief by examining it notionally. The notional examination supports the real apprehension and assent by analyzing it and revealing the rationale implicit in it. Finally, like Peirce, Newman's real apprehension is a speculative act which quickly produces real assent, and real assent immediately translates into action.

Part 2 of Newman's *Grammar* investigates the distinction between assent (belief) and inference. The essential difference between the two is that assent is unconditional and inference is conditional. As conditional, an inferred conclusion is preceded by the proverbial "ergo" and is unable to stand by itself apart from certain premises. In the course of distinguishing the two Newman makes clear that not only are assent and inference distinct, but they do not

¹¹ Newman 1889 (in Ker 1985: p 76).

strictly parallel with one another. People do not limit assent merely to whatever they can prove. His disagreement with Locke in the beginning of that section is rooted in Locke's failure to distinguish properly between assent and inference. For Locke, assent parallels proof, so that there are degrees of assent corresponding to the weight of evidence.¹²

In the course of the distinction, Newman must deal with the problem of certitude. Newman claims that virtually all of man's practical reasonings and reasonings about the concrete take place amongst probabilities, or signs which indicate things to a certain extent but not definitively. Although notional assents take place in notional reasonings, nobody dies for a conclusion. Practical reasonings take place amongst probable signs, not deductions: man is not certain that he will die *because of a syllogism*. But men *are certain* they will die. If this is so, then there must be a way of achieving certitude apart from formal inferences. Practical certainty requires the convergence of probabilities. In concrete matters, the convergence of probable signs obtains certainty. His example: how do I know that England is an island? Not from a formal inference of it. The two premises that would be required for such a deduction are: 1) England is surrounded on four sides by water. 2) Islands are surrounded on four sides by water. Ergo, the inferential conclusion: England is an island. Nobody can make this inference because nobody, or hardly anybody can know premise #1 for sure. Yet everybody is sure that England is an island. How? The convergence of probable signs, says Newman. Man has certitudes that he was born, he will die, and England is an island, etc., yet he comes to these certitudes by informal inference where concretes are involved and natural inference where practical reasoning is involved. Natural inference is like informal inference in that they both work by the convergence of probabilities. They are different in that informal inference deals with certitude about concrete matters; natural inference in practical planning.

The first principle of natural and informal inference is the illative sense.¹³ It is extremely personal and departmental. Newman calls it a "living *organon*," "personal gift," and "no mere method or calculus."¹⁴ Napoleon's native genius on the battlefield operates without rules or laws because it is not a generality in the department of war. Rather, it is unique and unrepeatable, inexpressible, incommunicable. It is a perception or insight into the relations amongst real things. The fact that the illative sense has no rules means that it cannot be gained by study. The genius of the illative sense is so particular to the individual that it cannot be acquired in education. Like Peirce's abduction, it is in a

¹² In this matter Peirce sides with Locke. See note on *probabilism* above.

¹³ Newman 1889 (in Ker 1985: p 223): "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, a use of the word "sense" parallel to our use of it in "good sense," "common sense," a "sense of beauty," &c."

¹⁴ Newman 1889 (in Ker 1985: p 205).

way groundless since it is rooted in a subjective genius that is particular to the person possessing it and unquantifiable. Its genius enables the one possessing it to discover the rules to each particular case.

One similarity between Peirce and Newman established in this study is that Peirce's belief from musing is roughly equivalent to Newman's real apprehension in that they both are formally speculative but productive of practical life changing consequences. A second point is that both Newman's *Grammar* and Peirce's "Neglected Argument" offer explicit rational justification for the common man's belief in God. More specifically, the supportive argumentation in the CA stands to the HA for Peirce in a way that is comparable to the way that the formal inference of God's existence stands to the natural inference of it for Newman. Thirdly, by offering rational justification for such uneducated religious belief, both Newman and Peirce differ from many of the traditional proofs for God's existence. Because they argue in defense of a common sense belief in God, there is a fifth point of similarity. They cannot rely on traditional demonstrations which usually utilize classical, Aristotelian logic instead of common sense. Simply put, due to the aristocratic nature of philosophy, the general run of mankind does not make demonstrations. Take this and add to it the specific challenge placed at their feet by their rationalistic, skeptic, or positivistic intellectual culture: namely, that one should never assent to what he cannot prove or formally infer. These two facts—the positivistic identification of assent with inference and the inability of the common man to infer God's reality forced a specific problematic upon Newman and Peirce: *either* 1) profess that the general mass of mankind who believe in God but cannot demonstrate His existence are irrational and superstitious precisely because of their theism *or* 2) argue to defend the general mass' common sense belief in God using philosophic reasoning. Whereas David Hume chose the former in his *Enquiry*, Newman and Peirce both choose the latter. In choosing the latter, Newman and Peirce make philosophic claims that the belief in God held by uneducated people is reasonable, even if it is not overtly philosophical. Instead of using technical reasoning to prove God's existence, rather, Newman and Peirce must identify a new method of reasoning that would allow man to make assertions that are neither induced nor deduced from the given data but based a kind of irreducible moral hunch. In abduction and illative sense, Newman and Peirce go beyond the limits of traditional logic to achieve a way of knowing practical and concrete matters. Such profound similarities between two such monumental thinkers requires academic attention.¹⁵

¹⁵ I want to thank John Deely for his direction in my understanding of both Peirce and Semiotics. For correspondence, please email me at matthewmoorecc@yahoo.com. For snail mail: Matthew Moore, Philosophy Department, College of Our Lady of Corpus Christi, 1200 Lantana, Corpus Christi, TX, 78407.

References

KER, Ian, Editor.

1985. Introduction, notes, and critical apparatus of the 8th 1889 edition of John Henry Newman 1870, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

NEWMAN, John Henry.

1870. 8th Edition by Newman 1889. *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

PEIRCE, Charles Sanders.

1908. “A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God” as reprinted including additament from *Hibbert Journal: A Quarterly Review of Religion, Theology, and Philosophy* in *Charles Sanders Peirce: Selected Writings (Values in a Universe of Chance)* (New York, NY: Dover, 1966), p. 358-380.

WEINER, Phillip P., Editor.

1958. Introduction and notes for *Charles Sanders Peirce: Selected Writings (Values in a Universe of Chance)* (New York, NY: Dover, 1966).