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THE PROBLEM OF CERTITUDE: REFLECTIONS ON THE *GRAMMAR OF ASSENT**

Thomas D. Sullivan

It is sometimes said by modern critics that John Henry Newman's *Grammar of Assent* does not argue a case, but merely depicts what it means to hold a belief, religious or non-religious. This idea of the *Grammar* arises in part from Newman's modest claims for a work filled with astute psychological observation. But contemporaries of Newman, such as W. G. Ward, well understood his fundamental purpose. "Newman," Ward wrote, "deserves the warm gratitude of his co-religionists, were it only as being the first to fix Catholic attention on what is certainly the one chief stronghold of philosophical objectors against the Church. . ." And, Ward continued, Newman "deserves still more gratitude for the singular power of argument and felicity of illustration he has brought to his task." (Ward, 244)

By the "chief stronghold" Ward meant the charge that Catholicism requires intellectual dishonesty. We are obliged to be intellectually responsible, proportioning belief to evidence. But whatever evidence exists for the claim that God has revealed his mind to us, the evidence cannot possibly be strong enough to warrant absolute confidence in those who claim to be messengers from God. Nonetheless, the Church requires faith, firm belief in the absence of irresistible proof, that God has spoken to

us through these messengers. This in itself shows Catholicism is false.

A similar objection, of course, could be brought against any religion that requires firm intellectual commitment to received doctrine. From John Locke, whose remarks on revelation in Book IV of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* occasioned much of what we find in the *Grammar*, to W. K. Clifford, Bertrand Russell, and Brand Blanshard, the demand to equate belief to the evidence has always represented a challenge to faith *as such*. In defending the belief of Catholics against the "chief stronghold of objectors," Newman was thus defending all who are disposed to accept with reverence the word of God through appointed messengers.¹

But what, precisely, was Newman's defense?

It is not easy to say. The *Grammar* suggests several distinct answers. My purpose in the following is to try to disengage from better known, but faulty arguments the only argument that seems to me correct.

I.

The first task, then, is to set out the objection more formally than Newman does himself. Since the argument proceeds on *a priori* grounds, without troubling to examine the evidence for religious belief, let us refer to it as the *A Priori* Objection. Following Newman, we will express the objection in terms of Catholicism, though, as just noted, a similar argument could be brought to bear on a number of faiths.

The A Priori Objection

¹It is immoral not to proportion belief in a proposition to the evidence for the proposition. [Call this the Proportionality Precept].

*2. Catholicism requires absolute adherence to some propositions for which there does not exist compelling evidence.

*3. If adherence to a proposition is absolute while the evidence for it unconvincing, the belief is disproportionate to the evidence.

4. Catholicism requires belief disproportionate to the evidence.
[From 2,3]

5. Catholicism requires its members to do something immoral.
[1,4]

*6. No religion that requires its members to do something immoral is true.

7. Catholicism is not true. [From 5,6]

The starred propositions are the basic assumptions from which the rest flows. Let us consider these assumptions.

II.

It will prove convenient to work backwards, starting with *6. Newman does not deny *6. If the morality of a religion is low, that by itself shows it is false. “. . . [N]o religion is from God which contradicts our sense of right and wrong. (*Grammar*, hereafter *G*, 318) He continues, “The precepts of a religion certainly may be absolutely immoral; a religion which simply commanded us to lie, or to have a community of wives, would *ipso facto* forfeit all claim to a divine origin.” (*G*, 319) We are drawn to Christianity in part by the very beauty of its moral doctrine; it must come from heaven.

So much, then, for *6.

III.

That brings us to proposition *3—If adherence to a proposition is absolute while the evidence for it is unconvincing, the belief is disproportionate to the evidence.

Newman variously speaks of devout belief as “unqualified,” “absolute,” and “unconditional.” The main attribute of such belief, whatever it is called, is that it is *undoubting*. We may be convinced beyond doubt that something is so, convinced beyond doubt that it is not so, or somewhere in between. Affirmative conviction lies at one extreme.

Similarly, evidence ranges from being overwhelmingly in favor of a proposition to being overwhelmingly against it. When evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of a proposition, it might be called “convincing”—we are *compelled* to believe. Commonly cited sources of convincing evidence include internal and external perception, axioms of thought, and the products of short demonstrations from the same. To these we must add with Newman the sort of evidence that leads us to infer with complete confidence that *England is an island* and *There are other minds*.

Absolute, undoubting adherence to a proposition can be produced by convincing evidence. The summit of belief is equal to the summit of evidence. But absolute assent can exist in the absence of convincing evidence. The summit of belief exceeds the evidence. So, there is a disproportion. Proposition *3 is truism.

IV.

Proposition *2 is the claim that Catholicism requires absolute adherence, i.e., undoubting belief, in some propositions for which there does not exist convincing evidence. There are three points here: (A) That Catholicism requires belief in propositions, (B) the quality of the belief is that of absolute adherence, (C) that the evidence is not convincing.

(A) *Propositions as Objects of Belief*

(A) is obvious on the face of it. Catholicism has definite creeds and defined propositions.

Of course there are religiously minded persons who think that genuine religion has nothing to do with fixed propositions and unqualified assent. Faith is not a matter of accepting propositions, but an affair of the heart, a relationship to a Person. Granted, when talking about faith we are talking about something more than mere acceptance of propositions. Propositions are only vehicles for thinking about God in certain ways. But it is hard to imagine how one could fully commit oneself to God without believing *that* there is such a being as God, any more than one could resolve to go to Boston without believing that there is a Boston.

In any event, Newman did not try to escape from the *A Priori* Objection by claiming that Catholicism does not offer distinct propositions as objects of belief. Quite the opposite. Newman claimed the marvelous growth of doctrine was a sign of the divine origin of the Church. (G, 327-28)

(B) *The Requirement of Unreserved Assent*

Some Christians see faith as a risk. Doubt is a necessary element of true faith. Newman allows that a measure of devotion is possible without conviction. But "[s]acrifice of wealth, name, or position, faith and hope, self-conquest, communion with the spiritual world, presuppose a real hold and habitual intuition of the objects of Revelation, which is certitude under another name." (G, 180) We recite creeds that begin not with "I believe the existence of God has some probability," but "I believe in God." Our prayer is not, "Oh God, if there is a God, save my soul, if I have a soul," but, "Help me, Yaweh my God, save me since you love me."

Of course this does not mean that faith is without difficulties. Faith, after all, is faith—not knowledge. But as Newman observed, ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt, any more than a hundred ponies make a horse. Nor does it mean that the faithful cannot investigate these difficulties, as we are now, or acknowledge their force. It is rather that we are to remain confident in the word of God, to pray for light, and remain within it, responding to the movements of grace.

Whatever one thinks of the wisdom of this requirement of Catholicism, Catholicism does indeed require of those with the gift of faith unconditional assent to its creeds.²

(C) *Compelling Evidence*

That brings us to the third point (C): the evidence for the propositions is disproportionate to the belief.

Here faithful Catholics sometimes balk. Raised in an anti-fideist tradition that lays great stress on evidence and natural theology, Catholics often tend to transmute faith into knowledge. From Aquinas' five ways, based on such features of the world as its contingency and order, we arrive at God's existence and divine attributes, including his unfailing truthfulness. Then, since God has revealed the mysteries of Christianity to us, and the truth of that revelation is secured by God's veracity, the revelation is certainly true. Q.E.D.

A moment of serious reflection, however, should dispel that illusion. First, we certainly don't want to say that only philosophers and theologians can properly have faith. As Aquinas himself observes, only the tiniest minority of believers with the desire, talent, and opportunity to solve all the knotty philosophical problems can come to know the existence and attributes of

God through natural theology. Faith seldom originates from philosophical reflection.

But even when it does, philosophy can only carry us so far. It cannot make revealed truths evident. Suppose you demonstrate that God exists and cannot deceive. It follows that if God has revealed that he is triune, then God is triune—if God has revealed this. But while evidence exists for the credibility of the revelation, it is not compelling evidence—evidence that *compels* assent. The claims of apostle, gospel, or church to speak as the oracle of God are not backed by irresistible evidence.

What, though, of the “Illative Sense?” Does not Newman show how we may attain certitude in these matters through a mode of knowing more personal, more concrete than what could be captured by paper logic? Why not say with Newman that the mind, operating on antecedent and converging probabilities, can reach certitude about the divinity of Christ in the same way it can about the existence of India? (G, 262) Though we cannot set out our arguments in the style of Euclid, that’s also true of propositions such as “England is an island” and “I was born of a woman.” A mountain of implicit evidence backs these propositions with a cogency on a par or nearly on a par with a proof in Euclid. As Charles Frederick Harrold expresses it in the introduction of his edition of the *Grammar*,

[I]t was Newman’s doctrine of the “illative sense,” which seemed to many readers an admirable solution to the old problem of reason, faith and certitude.

The “illative sense” may be defined as the spontaneous divination by the mind in concrete matters that a conclusion is inevitable, if it is felt to be “as good as proved,” even though not determined by a process of reasoning logically complete. (G, xvii)

Harrold could point to much in Newman to support this view. (See especially *G*, 262) And there are times when the reader of the *Grammar*, swept along by the great beauty and power of Newman's argument for Christianity, may well feel that revelation is as good as proved. But for all that Newman offers us in the *Grammar*, it cannot be fairly said it is shown there that implicit and personal evidence confers on a belief such as "The Church is infallible," certitude comparable to that enjoyed by propositions such as "I am a mortal being" or "There is an India." With respect to many everyday judgments, the evidence is so compelling that we feel, as Wittgenstein puts it, "If I don't trust *this* evidence why should I trust any evidence." (*On Certainty*, n. 672, 89) Everything speaks for the fact, nothing against it. But this is not the way it is with religious belief. There are genuine difficulties. I am not saying that one cannot be legitimately as certain of the one as of the other. I am saying rather that the certitude in the case of religious belief does not entirely rest on evidence.

Faith is not knowledge. Evidence there is, but what steals religious belief is not evidence alone.³

Despite, then, what some commentators say, Newman cannot solve the problem of certitude in religious matters merely by appealing to the illative sense as a personal mode of proof in practical matters. The evidence is disproportionate to the assent. Newman's contributions to the psychology of assent are very considerable, but they cannot serve the function of showing how to transmute faith into knowledge.

V.

And so we are driven back to *1, the Proportionality Precept: It is immoral not to proportion belief to the evidence for the belief.

A. *Various Attacks on the Proportionality Precept*

Philosophers and theologians have attacked the Proportionality Precept in a number of ways.

It is sometimes argued that this precept, promoted by the scientifically minded of the Enlightenment, undercuts science itself. The history of science is replete with success stories of theorists sticking with their beliefs against a mountain of evidence to the contrary. Other responses include the dismissal of the need for any evidence to justify the rationality of religious belief and the claim that believing isn't under our control, so it is not under the jurisdiction of a moral rule.

None of these, it seems to me, is adequate. Unfortunately, a number of Newman's suggestions are not any better.

Newman complains that the Proportionality Precept is meaningless. Locke tells us there is to be no "surplusage of *assurance beyond* the degree of that evidence." But assent, Newman insists, does not admit of degrees. (*G*, 123 ff.) "We might as well talk of degrees of truth as of degrees of assent." (*G*, 131) Assent by definition is unconditional acceptance of a truth. (*G*, 130) Assent is an all or nothing affair. One can no more partially assent to a proposition than partially touch something.

But as H. H. Price shows in his Gifford Lectures, by this maneuver Newman at best gains a small verbal victory over Locke. (*Belief*, 130-157) The substantive problem remains untouched, even if we give up Locke's wording of his point in terms of "degrees of assent." One might very well say, "Fine, let us stipulate that 'assent' means complete adhesion to a proposition; so one cannot assent by degrees. But certainly there are well recognized psychological states between being dead certain that something is the case and dead certain that it is not. Most of the time we are somewhere in between, *leaning* toward one view and away from another. The Proportionality

Precept, then, may be rephrased, using expressions such as “lean towards,” or “incline towards,” or “confident to the extent that.” Locke is not talking nonsense.

So the Proportionality Precept is meaningful. Can it be followed? W. G. Ward thought that Newman’s solution consisted in showing that it cannot. As Newman showed in fine detail, too much of the evidence for what we believe is implicit, and so we cannot get all the evidence before the mind in order to assent to the proper degree. (Ward, 250) Again, the solution won’t do. True, most of my evidence for, say, my friend’s honesty is implicit. If I tried to make a list of times when he has proved himself honest, it would be embarrassingly short. But I know that there have been thousands of times when he has proved honest. I know I have, though I cannot give, mountains of evidence for the proposition. On the other hand, I can’t say the same about the first person I meet on the street. Similarly, I am sure for more reasons than I can possibly articulate that India exists, while I know that I have little or no implicit evidence for the existence of the latest hypothetical entity concocted by physicists trying to explain the superconductivity of certain ceramics. So I can, and I do—at least roughly—proportion my belief to the evidence I know I have. An objector to the Proportionality Precept might as well say, “The rule to proportion your spending to your wealth is impossible to follow, because nobody knows precisely how much he or she is worth. Much of one’s holdings can’t be precisely fixed. And who knows at a given moment exactly how much change is rattling around in the pocket?”

B. *Newman on the Duty to Believe*

So none of these solutions seem to work. But Newman has a better argument against the Proportionality Precept. His point of departure is an extension of Aristotle’s doctrine of *phronesis* to cover believing. (G, 268)

The idea, I take it, is this. To believe is to act; therefore the choice to believe is properly subject to guidance by an acquired habit, formed and matured by practice and experience. (G, 268) The wise—Newman quotes the *Nicomachean Ethics*—“expect exactness in every class of subject, according as the nature of the thing admits.” (G, 314) In religious matters, we cannot intelligently expect argument on a par with what is found in mathematics.

As in mathematics we are justified by the dictate of nature in withholding our assent from an undemonstrated conclusion, so by a like dictate we are not justified, in practical matters, especially of religious inquiry, in waiting till such logical demonstration is ours, but are bound in conscience to seek truth and to look for certainty by modes of proof, which when reduced to the shape of formal propositions, fail to satisfy the severe requisitions of science. (G, 313)

So the personal act of believing may well express the excellent practical judgment of a mind that sees enough of the evidence to realize it would be wrong to refuse to honor a divine truth.

The trouble with the Proportionality Precept, then, is just that it exempts one activity—believing—from the governance of prudence. No abstract rule can determine just under what circumstances something is to be believed or believed without reservation.

The authoritative oracle, which is to decide our path, is something more searching and manifold than such jejune generalizations as treatises can give, which are most distinct and clear when we least need them. It is seated in the mind of the individual, who

is thus his own law, his own teacher, and his own judge in those special cases of duty which are personal to him. (G, 269)

This is not to say there is nothing to the Proportionality Precept. Practical wisdom should not disdain evidence. But the Precept is simplistically stated, and it is not at all clear that it can be amended in such a way as to prove unexceptional in all circumstances. Practical wisdom often must judge concrete matters in the absence of proximate universal norms. If believing is acting, it must be regulated in the same way, by practical wisdom taking into account circumstances.

Newman's complaint against the Proportionality Precept seems entirely justified. Imagine you are a juror in a civil trial between Smith and Jones. Before you hear any evidence, Smith and Jones have an equal chance of being right. Now Smith tells the tale—his way of course. And so as Smith concludes his testimony, the evidence favors Smith. What should you do? Immediately side with Smith before Jones gets to tell her side of the story? Of course not. In these matters we do not *immediately* proportion our belief to the weight of the evidence.

This exception to the Proportionality Precept rule is neither small nor insignificant. It draws attention to the fact that punctilious adherence to the Proportionality Precept would operate contrary to the ends of human existence, including the very adjudication of the truth.

The example of the case of law may suggest that wisdom always dictates deferring a decision until all the evidence is in. But no such rule is practical or wise. Waiting until "all the evidence is in" means postponing marriage, benevolent acts, choosing a career—just about anything of worth—until it is too late. And are we to wait until all the evidence is in before deciding whether the rule to wait is measured by "all the evidence?"

The proper response to evidence is a matter of practical wisdom. Timing is but one circumstance of the act. The object is another. What does the belief bear on? The fidelity of one's mate? Othello's belief in the faithfulness of Desdemona? The integrity of one's parents or friends?

With respect to religious belief, what we should ask ourselves is not whether the evidence establishes beyond possible doubt whether God has revealed a truth to us, but rather whether the evidence is sufficient for us to judge *that we have an obligation to believe what is taught us*. In a letter written to Mrs. Katherine Ward fourteen years after the first appearance of the *Grammar of Assent*, Newman puts it this way.

Reason does not prove that Catholicism is true, as it proves that mathematical conclusions are true . . . but it proves that there is a *case* for it so strong that we see we ought to accept it. There may be many difficulties which we cannot answer, but still we see on the whole that grounds are sufficient for conviction. This is not the same thing as conviction. If conviction were unavoidable, we might be said to be forced to believe as we are forced to mathematical conclusions; but while there is enough evidence for conviction, whether we *will* be convinced or not rests with ourselves

You can believe what you will; the only question is whether your reason tells you that you ought to believe . . . (12 October 1884. Letters, 289)

In sum, Newman rejects the Proportionality Precept, and with it the *A Priori* Objection, because believing is acting, and acting becomes obligatory on less than certain evidence. The way is thus open to another way of considering the claims of a revealed religion.

With his abhorrence of “paper logic,” Newman would never dream of expressing the argument in this way. But it seems to me that this is what the argument comes to.

N1 If it seems (highly) probable both that an end is obligatory and an action is indispensable to the end, then the action is itself obligatory. [If it seems probable to a firefighter that it is obligatory to rescue a person from a burning building and this can only be done by raising a ladder, then it is obligatory for the firefighter to raise a ladder.]

N2 If God has revealed something as true, then it is true.

N3 It may seem (highly) probable to someone (properly disposed to hear the evidence) that God has revealed that a certain end is an obligatory end (union with himself) and an action indispensable (absolute adherence to his teachings.)

N4 It may seem probable to someone that union with God is an obligatory end and absolute adherence to teaching indispensable. [From 2,3]

N5 Absolute adherence is obligatory (for anyone who sees the relevant evidence.) [From 1,4]

Expressing Newman’s argument this way permits us to see how the Illative Sense may contribute to faith, without claiming for it a power to transmute faith into knowledge. The proper role of the Illative sense is to furnish the judgment that in all likelihood God has revealed the received message—N3.

The reasoning is practical, as it should be. But it is not pragmatic. This is not an argument in the mode of Pascal’s Wager.⁴ Reflection on the evidence must *favor* religious belief. Truth, after all, is the very purpose for which the world was

made, and it must not be sacrificed to any pragmatic end. But we should not wait until we *see* the whole truth of Christ's doctrine. For we cannot arrive at the whole truth without first attaching ourselves to the Light. As Newman said, more than thirty years before writing his *Grammar*, "Wisdom is the last gift of the Spirit, and Faith the first." (*Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford*, 294).

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NOTES

I wish to thank Greg Coulter, Mary Hayden, and Thomas Russman for helpful comments on a version of this paper presented as the Aquinas Lecture at the University of St. Thomas, Houston, in January of 1989.

This article extends the treatment of Newman's views adopted in "Adequate Evidence for Religious Belief," in *Thomistic Papers IV*.

1. It should go without saying that this remark does not suggest religious indifferentism. Newman firmly believed, as do I, that the "*organum investigandi* given us for gaining religious truth...lead[s]...to Catholicity." [G, 389].

2. First Vatican Council, Session 3, April 24, 1870, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith*, ch. 3. Cited by Lawler, Wuerl, and Lawler, *The Teachings of Christ*, 296 for claim that "[T]hose who have received the faith under the teaching authority of the Church can never have a just reason to change the same faith or to call it into doubt."

3. It is the will moved by grace. Some Catholics reject this, arguing that the role of grace is to confer illumination sufficient to render the fact of revelation evident. The role of the will, on this account, is only to dispose the person for illumination. Aquinas, it is noted, calls faith *knowledge*. He does, but he also says, "Faith is said to be less than scientific knowledge because faith, unlike science, lacks vision of the fact, though it has the same firmness." (Fides) "dicitur tamen esse infra scientiam quia non habet visionem sicut scientia quamvis habeat ita firmam adhaesionem...." (*Disputed Questions on Truth*, q. 14, a. 2) The point deserves more attention than we can give it here. Those who think that illumination does render the fact of revelation evident may pursue what follows as an alternative account of the justification of religious belief.

4. Pascal's Wager Argument is an instance of the now standard process of probabilistic decision calculated on the basis of expected-value. The Wager is intended to work even if the probability of Christianity's being true may be low. See, Rescher, especially 15-16.

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