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ARTICLE

Newman the Evidentialist

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Abstract

A number of recent philosophers have argued that John Henry Newman is an anti-evidentialist – and not without reason. This article begins by examining three reasons one might think Newman is an anti-evidentialist: his dismissal of formal logic, his emphasis on emotions, and his critique of John Locke. It then seeks to rebut these reasons for thinking that Newman is an anti-evidentialist as well as to give three positive reasons for thinking that Newman is an evidentialist. Newman's evidentialism, it is argued, is seen in his account of conscience, his account of certitude, and his apologetic for Christianity in chapter 10 of *A Grammar of Assent*. These are not minor features of Newman's epistemology that are easily detachable from his larger perspective. His accounts of conscience and certitude in particular are not only two of the most well-known passages in Newman's corpus, but they express his deeply held and long-considered views. Thus, this article concludes that Newman is an evidentialist.

Keywords: anti-evidentialism; certitude; conscience; evidentialism; John Henry Newman

1. Introduction

A number of recent philosophers have examined John Henry Newman's epistemology and concluded that he is an anti-evidentialist. When the history of religious epistemology is recounted, for instance, it is often said that figures such as Newman, James, and Kierkegaard rejected the demand to ground religious belief in evidence. For example, Martin Smith writes, 'In contrast to mainstream epistemology, evidentialism has long had a somewhat ambivalent status in the epistemology of religion – William James, for instance, is often interpreted as rejecting evidentialism in 'The will to believe' (1897) and John Henry Newman also appears to reject the idea in his *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870)'.[1] According to Avery Cardinal Dulles, Newman rejected 'the evidentialist school of apologetics' and maintained that 'The great majority of committed Christians…do not believe because the evidence has convinced them'.[2] Similarly,

[1]Martin Smith, 'The Epistemology of Religion', *Analysis*, 74 (2014), p. 136.
[2]Avery Dulles, *John Henry Newman* (London: Continuum, 2002), pp. 37–38.

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Duncan Pritchard and Modesto Gómez-Alonso have both recently compared Newman's supposed 'anti-evidentialism' with Ludwig Wittgenstein's in *On Certainty*.[3]

Yet, in what follows, we give three reasons to think that Newman is an evidentialist.[4] First, Newman's evidentialism is seen in his account of conscience. Second, his evidentialism is seen in his account of certitude. Third, and finally, Newman's evidentialism is further displayed in his apologetic for Christianity in chapter 10 of *A Grammar of Assent*. But we begin by examining several reasons why one might (mistakenly) think Newman is an anti-evidentialist in the first place.

2. Newman the anti-evidentialist?

Our interlocutors have not labeled Newman an anti-evidentialist without reason. We think that there are three very clear – although ultimately inadequate – motivations for reading Newman as an anti-evidentialist.

2.1. Deriding logic

First, Newman was a consistent critic of formal logic and argumentation or what he dismissively labeled 'paper logic'.[5] For Newman, it is 'not by invincible syllogisms' that we are led to certitude.[6] He maintains that the mind's activity is richer and more subtle than explicit or formal reasoning often allows. As he writes in the *University Sermons*,

> The mind ranges to and fro, and spreads out, and advances forward with a quickness which has become a proverb, and a subtlety and versatility which baffle investigation. It passes on from point to point, gaining one by some indication; another on a probability; then availing itself of an association; then falling back on some received law; next seizing on testimony; then committing itself to some popular impression, or some inward instinct, or some obscure memory; and thus it makes progress not unlike a clamberer on a steep cliff, who, by quick eye, prompt hand, and firm foot, ascends how he knows not himself, by personal endowments and by practice, rather than by rule, leaving no track behind him, and unable to teach another. It is not too much to say that the stepping by which great geniuses scale the mountains of truth is as unsafe and precarious to men in general, as the assent of a skillful mountaineer up a literal crag. It is a way which they alone can take; and its justification lies in their success. And such mainly is

[3]Duncan Pritchard, 'Quasi-Fideism and Virtuous Anti-Evidentialism: Wittgenstein and Newman on Knowledge and Certainty', in *John Henry Newman and Contemporary Philosophy,* ed. by Frederick D. Aquino and Joe Milburn (New York: Routledge, 2025), pp. 7–27; Modesto Gómez-Alonso, 'Newman and Wittgenstein on the Will to Believe: Quasi-Fideism and the Ground of Religious Certainty', *Religions,* 16:2 (2025), pp. 1–20.

[4]While we have previously claimed that Newman is an evidentialist, we have not given this topic the sustained attention it deserves. Frederick D. Aquino and Logan Paul Gage, 'Newman and Common Sense Epistemology', in *John Henry Newman and Contemporary Philosophy*, pp. 28-46.

[5]John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, ed. by M. Svaglic (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 155. Hereafter *Apo.*

[6]John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, ed. by Ian T. Ker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 208. Hereafter *GA.*

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> the way in which all men, gifted or not gifted, commonly reason, – not by rule, but by an inward faculty.[7]

That is, opposing the rationalism[8] of his day, Newman insists that actual reasoning 'operates naturally, rather than according to rule; it is 'a living spontaneous energy within us, not an art', whose validity is not dependent on its reduction to syllogistic form'.[9]

Yet Newman often ended up sounding like a critic of logic or the need to possess reasons to ground our beliefs. Still, while he is less than careful at times, attention to the broad sweep of his thought reveals that he does not mean that we have no need for grounds or evidence to help secure justified belief. While evidence must guide belief, our grounds are often difficult to articulate to others: 'all men have a reason, but not all men can give a reason'.[10] In particular, Newman wishes to highlight the importance of implicit or informal reasoning and the difference between having implicit grounds and being able to articulate those grounds to others (or even oneself). 'A person may reason well, without knowing the rules of reason, or being able to put into shape or into words the process through which he goes. Reason may be implicit, and yet be as truly reason as if it were drawn out into explicit form'.[11]

2.2. *Personal reasoning*

A second reason one might see Newman as an anti-evidentialist derives from his emphasis on the personal nature of reasoning – and even on the affective dimension of the person. If one begins with the presupposition that evidence and emotion are at odds, then one will see Newman as an anti-evidentialist when he maintains that there is often an epistemic role for emotions in belief formation. 'Faith is influenced by previous notices, prepossessions, and (in a good sense of the word) prejudices.... The mind that believes is acted upon by its own hopes, fears, and existing opinions'. And it is love, he says, that is the safeguard of faith – not reason.[12] Such comments from Newman have repeatedly led to the charge that, far from being committed to evidentially grounding our beliefs, he is a subjectivist, relativist, or fideist.[13]

[7] John Henry Newman, in *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford Between A.D. 1826 and 1843*, ed. by J. D. Earnest and G. Tracey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), pp. 176–77. Hereafter *US.*

[8] Newman's mentor, Richard Whately, one of the Oriel Noetics, maintained that reasoning, 'on whatever subject, is one and the same process, which may be clearly exhibited in the form of syllogisms'. Richard Whately, *Elements of Logic*, 8th London edn. rev. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1854), p. 249. Consequently, Whately and the Noetics reduced religious belief 'to little more than logical deduction from certain evidences for the divine character of Christianity'. Terrence Merrigan, 'Newman's Oriel Experience: Its Significance for His Life and Thought', *Bijdragen,* 47 (1986), p.193. The Noetics' approach left little room for considering the role of implicit reasoning or matters of the heart in the process of belief-formation.

[9] Geertjan Zuijdwegt, 'Richard Whately', in *The Oxford Handbook of John Henry Newman*, ed. by Frederick D. Aquino and Benjamin J. King (Oxford: Clarendon Press), p. 213.

[10] *US,* p. 178.

[11] *US,* p. 246 (appendix B).

[12] *US*, p. 134; see also pp. 155–72.

[13] See Owen Chadwick, *The Mind of the Oxford Movement* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1960), pp. 42–45; Anthony Kenny, 'Newman and Victorian Doubt', *New Blackfriars,* 92 (2011), pp. 157–69; Jay Newman, 'Newman on Love as the Safeguard of Faith', *Scottish Journal of Theology,* 32 (1979), pp. 143–44.

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We have no wish to downplay this dimension of Newman's thought.[14] Yet his genius lies in recognizing the harmony between evidentialism and the affective side of the human person. If emotions have a cognitive dimension, as a very large body of literature suggests,[15] then they may function as epistemic reasons. If emotions are 'intelligent, cultivated, conceptually rich engagements with the world, not mere reactions and instincts', then they might plausibly constitute a rational and evidential engagement with the world.[16] As Mark Wynn puts it, 'affections may themselves be intellectual'; our perception itself can be 'affectively toned'.[17] If this is right, then we need not see Newman as adding emotions to, or letting emotions distort, our evidence.[18]

As we've already seen, Newman holds that we often perceive far more than we can consciously process and formulate into explicit arguments – and this holds true for both perceptual and emotional experience. He maintains that our affective and emotional dispositions affect our perceptions; and this is fully rational since 'enlightened presumptions' aid us in perceiving what we might otherwise miss (or even dismiss).[19] We already know that we are primed, even in ordinary life, to see some things rather than others. A rightly ordered person, then, may gather evidence that is not available to everyone. Our desires and emotions do not function here so as to make up for a gap or lack of evidence. Rather, through a kind of connatural knowledge or likeness with the object of perception, we come to know it (see *Nicomachean Ethics* Bk. 10, ch. V).[20] The goal, for Newman, is not to excise emotions and affections in order to see the truth but instead to exercise them in the pursuit of epistemic goods. Such a person is more likely, he thinks, to find the truth.[21] One might think that Newman is wrong in treating emotions as having evidential value. But the fact that he does so reveals not an anti-evidentialism but a moderate form of evidentialism.[22]

2.3. *Critique of Locke*

A third and final reason why some have seen Newman as an anti-evidentialist stems from his criticisms of the arch-evidentialist John Locke. As a critic of Lockean

[14]See Frederick D. Aquino and Logan Paul Gage, *John Henry Newman's Humane Epistemology* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

[15]See, for instance, Peter Goldie, *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000); Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thoughts: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Robert C. Roberts, *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Ronald de Sousa, *Emotional Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[16]Robert C. Solomon, *The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1993), p. ix.

[17]Mark R. Wynn, 'The Relationship of Religion and Ethics: A Comparison of Newman and Contemporary Philosophy of Religion', *Heythrop Journal,* 46 (2005), p. 445.

[18]Even Wainwright, who otherwise thinks of Newman as an evidentialist who is much closer to Locke than might at first appear, at times writes of Newman as though he thinks it legitimate to add emotions to our evidence. William J. Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart: A Prolegomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 55–83.

[19]*US*, p. 165; see also pp. 138, 140, and 143. On this point, see Frederick D. Aquino, 'Newman on the Grounds of Faith', *Quaestiones Disputatae,* 8 (2018), pp. 5–18.

[20]Maritain describes connatural knowledge as 'a kind of knowledge which is produced in the intellect but not by virtue of conceptual connections and by way of demonstration'. Jacques Maritain, 'On Knowledge through Connaturality', *The Review of Metaphysics,* 4 (1951), p. 473.

[21]*US*, p. 165.

[22]For more on Newman and the emotions, see Frederick D. Aquino and Logan Paul Gage, 'On the Epistemic Role of Our Passional Nature', *Newman Studies Journal,* 17 (2020), pp. 41–58.

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epistemology, it is understandable that many might take Newman to be an anti-evidentialist. But closer examination of their dispute reveals that Newman does not find fault with evidentialism *per se* but only with some of Locke's particular claims.

Newman makes two main attacks on Lockean epistemology. First, he rejects the idea that there are degrees of assent.[23] Instead, he insists that assent is a simple act of agreement of the will. Anything more hesitant, partial, or degreed he declares to be an inference (rather than an assent); or else he attributes the degreed-seeming phenomenon to the strength of the apprehension on which the assent is based, to the vivacity of the image thereby generated, or to the feelings attending an assent rather than the assent itself.[24]

Contrary to some, we do not find Newman's distinction between inference and assent very helpful (or very clear, for that matter). Regardless, Newman is speaking of assent 'itself' or 'in its nature' rather than claiming that we always assent with the highest possible confidence.[25] And in empiricist fashion, he acknowledges that the experiences on which our assents are founded come in various degrees of vividness or dullness.[26] In our view, his insistence on the simple pro-attitude nature of assent is meant to oppose those who maintain that we should never really commit ourselves to propositions but may only do so tentatively. For Newman, this is an unnatural standpoint; it does not fit with actual human practice. We need not always assent with an admixture of doubt or hesitancy in order to be rational.[27]

Most importantly, there is no threat to evidentialism here. As an evidentialist, one is free to adopt a variety of views about whether there are degrees of belief/assent (e.g., *S* weakly believes that *p*) or only binary beliefs with degrees or probabilities built into them (e.g., *S* fully believes that *p* with probability *c*). Evidentialists are free to choose a variety of views on belief and credence, because none of this would change whether it is evidence, at the end of the day, which justifies belief or makes belief rational (more on this below).[28] Evidentialists might hold a belief-first view or a credence-first view, or something in between.[29] Moreover, while Newman, in the *Grammar*, criticizes the view that there are degrees of assent, he speaks elsewhere of varying degrees/strengths of assent/belief.[30] And this makes sense, since nearly all parties think there is something degreed about belief as well as something binary. For this reason, we concur with Naulty in thinking that Newman's dispute with Locke about degrees of assent is merely verbal.[31]

[23] *GA*, p. 114ff.

[24] *GA*, pp. 30–32 and 54–64.

[25] *GA*, pp. 30 and 157.

[26] *GA*, pp. 30 and 122.

[27] Note that to hold a belief that *p* without doubt is not to hold that *p* is indubitable or incapable of rational doubt. It is merely to assert that while you assent you are not in active doubt. M. Jamie Ferreira, *Doubt and Religious Commitment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 88.

[28] If we are correct (below) in thinking that Newman's central reply to Locke is a fallibilist view of knowledge and certitude, then he does not need the additional claim that there are no degrees of assent in order to show that there can be legitimate religious certitude.

[29] For a helpful overview of positions, see Elizabeth G. Jackson, 'The Relationship between Belief and Credence', *Philosophy Compass*, 15 (2020), pp. 1–13. N.B., Newman's notion of credence (*GA* 41-4) differs from modern usage.

[30] See *Apo*, pp. 31 and 121; cf. *GA*, pp. 18, 19, 30, 32, 44, 55, 59, 122, 128, and 159.

[31] R. A. Naulty, 'Newman's Dispute with Locke', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 11 (1973), pp. 453–57.

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Newman's second attack on Lockean epistemology is more fundamental to Newman's view of the rationality of religious belief (and especially religious certitudes). The central issue raised in the *Grammar of Assent* is whether probability can lead to certitude. Newman has the deepest 'respect both for the character and the ability of Locke'[32] and expresses agreement with him in many things (including his attack on religious credulity and superstition). However, Newman utterly rejects Locke's 'pretentious axiom' that probability can never lead to certitude:

> First he [Locke] says, in his chapter 'On Probability', 'Most of the propositions we think, reason, discourse, nay, act upon, are such as we cannot have undoubted knowledge of their truth; yet some of them *border so near* upon certainty, that we *make no doubt at all* about them, but *assent* to them as *firmly*, and act according to that assent as resolutely, *as if they were infallibly demonstrated*, and that our knowledge of them was perfect and certain'. Here he allows that inferences, which are only 'near upon certainty', are so near, that we legitimately accept them with 'no doubt at all', and 'assent to them as firmly as if they were infallibly demonstrated'. That is, he affirms and sanctions the very paradox to which I am committed myself.
>
> Again; he says, in his chapter on 'The Degrees of Assent', that 'when any particular thing, consonant to the constant observation of ourselves and others in the like case, comes attested by the concurrent reports of all that mention it, we receive it as easily, and build as firmly upon it, as if it were certain knowledge, and we reason and act thereupon, with *as little doubt as if it were perfect demonstration*'. And he repeats, 'These *probabilities* rise so near to certainty, that they *govern our thoughts as absolutely*, and influence all our actions as fully, as *the most evident demonstration*; and in what concerns us, we make little or no difference between them and certain knowledge. *Our belief thus grounded, rises to assurance*'. Here again 'probabilities' may be so strong as to 'govern our thoughts as absolutely' as sheer demonstration, so strong that belief, grounded on them, 'rises to assurance', that is, to certitude.[33]

Newman attacks Locke's pretentious axiom for a few reasons. For one thing, Locke begins his epistemology by inventing his own idea of rationality *a priori*. According to Newman, Locke fails to attend adequately to actual practices stemming from human nature, and so he invents castles in the sky. For another, Locke's view is so unstable that he himself is forced to make exceptions to his own strict standards. That is, while he claims that knowledge and certitude only arise from rational intuition and strict demonstration, even he has to acknowledge that a great many of our beliefs do not meet this standard and yet seem to be held with the firmest certitude of which we are psychologically capable.

For our purposes, the important point is this: Newman does not attack Locke for insisting that our beliefs need rational justification by way of reasons or evidence.[34]

[32] *GA*, p. 107.

[33] *GA*, pp. 106–07.

[34] Reasons for belief and evidence are basically synonymous in the literature on evidence. Thomas Kelly, 'Evidence: Fundamental Concepts and the Phenomenal Conception', *Philosophy Compass,* 3 (2008), p. 953, fn 4.

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Newman agrees with the need to possess reasons, evidence, or grounds. What he insists upon, however, is that probabilistic grounds, when they come from numerous and disparate lines of evidence, can often build up to such a strong case for belief that we are well within our rights to assent with certitude. This idea that multiple lines of fallible evidence can add up in a cumulative way to more than sufficient grounds for certitude is one of Newman's deepest and most long-lasting viewpoints. As Fr Ker summarizes:

> Over the years he had slowly but steadily continued to develop the central insights of the *Oxford University Sermons*.... In the *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, he spoke of a 'collection of weak evidences' which 'makes up a strong evidence', and 'a converging evidence' amounting to 'proof'. He also referred to 'a prudent judgment' which decides when probability is sufficient for conviction.... But his encounters with theologians at Rome during 1846-7 made him [Newman] acutely aware of the Church's insistence on 'a rational faith...built upon right reason'. And he began to wonder if this might not 'be the result of converging probabilities, and a cumulative proof' from 'cumulating probabilities'. Non-logical truths, he argued, were reached 'not by one direct simple and sufficient proof" through a syllogism, 'but by a complex argument consisting of accumulating and converging probabilities'. The 'proof of Religion', he wrote in 1861, using a striking analogy, 'I liken...to the mechanism of some triumph of skill...where all display is carefully avoided, and the weight is ingeniously thrown in a variety of directions, upon supports which are distinct from, or independent of each other'. Or, as he explained by another analogy, 'The best illustration...is that of a *cable* which is made up of a number of separate threads, each feeble, yet together as sufficient as an iron rod', the latter of which 'represents mathematical or strict demonstration'. ...In the *Apologia*, Newman explained...that 'absolute certitude' in religion is 'the result of an *assemblage* of concurring and converging probabilities'.[35]

This is not a rejection of the need for evidence but an expansion of Locke's narrow construal of it. We should not, then, take Newman to be an anti-evidentialist simply for criticizing aspects of Lockean epistemology.

3. A word on evidentialism

Ultimately, Newman may appear as an anti-evidentialist to many because he has a very broad understanding of grounds or evidence. That is, he does not fit the classical evidentialist mold. For Newman, evidence is not limited to what is publicly available to all people. Many speak as if evidence only consists of results of scientific research in peer-reviewed academic journals. But as we saw above, Newman recognizes that our own experience and the personal testimony of others rightly evidences in favor of some propositions and not others.[36] Even in his early works, he shows a deep understanding of human reasoning by broadening the narrow notion of reasons, evidence, and

[35]Ian T. Ker, *John Henry Newman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 620–21.
[36]*GA*, p. 249.

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grounds received from prominent Enlightenment figures. As he writes in the *University Sermons*:

> when we come to what is called Evidence, or, in popular language, exercises of Reason, prejudices and mental peculiarities are excluded from the discussion; we descend to grounds common to all; certain scientific rules and fixed standards for weighing testimony, and examining facts, are received. Nothing can be urged, or made to tell, but what all feel, all comprehend, all can put into words; current language becomes the measure of thought; only such conclusions may be drawn as can produce their reasons; only such reasons are in point as can be exhibited in simple propositions; the multiform and intricate assemblage of considerations, which really lead to judgment and action, must be attenuated or mutilated into a major and a minor premiss.[37]

At times, critics of religious belief – and even some of its fideistic defenders – can be heard saying that 'there is no evidence' for such belief. Newman's reply reminds us of Monty Python's famous question: 'All right, but apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, a fresh water system, and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us'?[38] Sure, Newman seems to say, apart from all of your personal experience of love, prayer, nature's order, the goodness of new life, gratuitous beauty, purpose and meaning, and testimony from others, what evidence is there for religious belief?

But is this view still evidentialism? Yes, it is. Too often, even contemporary epistemologists treat classical evidentialism as the whole of evidentialism. Classical evidentialism, as seen in figures such as Descartes and Locke, held not only the core commitment of evidentialism (namely, that a subject *S*'s rational/justified belief in proposition *p* requires that *S* possess adequate evidence for *p*) but the additional assumption that adequate evidence can only consist of absolutely certain or indubitable propositions or deductions from them.[39] Numerous prominent evidentialists today reject this additional assumption. They think, instead, that *S*'s evidence for *p* can consist of experiences that present *p* as true to *S*.[40] Hence, it is

[37] *US,* pp. 159–60. N.B., when Newman speaks of 'the Evidences' with a capital E, he appears to have in mind works of apologetics such as William Paley's *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* (1794) and Richard Whately's *Introductory Lessons on Christian Evidences* (1837). Hence, when he speaks of 'Evidence' with a capital E, he usually has in mind the exercise of explicit reason and formal argumentation.

[38] *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, scene 10.

[39] Whether this textbook story is ultimately fair to Descartes and Locke (and other major figures like Plato and Aristotle) is a question for specialists. However, we would note that it is a good question as to whether we should see Descartes and Locke as elucidating the concept of 'knowledge' or, instead, the concept of 'certain knowledge'. See Ernest Sosa, 'How to Resolve the Pyrrhonian Dialectic: A Lesson from Descartes', *Philosophical Studies,* 85 (1997), pp. 229–49; Robert Pasnau, 'Epistemology Idealized', *Mind,* 122 (2014), pp. 987–1021. Many languages express this distinction between knowing and knowing for certain. Bob Beddor, 'New Work for Certainty', *Philosophers' Imprint,* 20 (2020), p. 3.

[40] See, for instance, Michael Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001); Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, 'Evidence', in *Epistemology: New Essays*, ed. by Quentin Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Kevin McCain, *Evidentialism and Epistemic Justification* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

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inadequate to label Newman an anti-evidentialist simply because he opposes classical evidentialism.[41]

4. Three positive arguments

One might think that the debate over whether Newman is an evidentialist could easily be solved by citing his numerous evidentialist-sounding passages. As we noted earlier, he says that 'all men have a reason, but not all men can give a reason'.[42] Even faith 'must rest on reason, nay even in the case of children and of the most ignorant and dull peasant'.[43] While faith admits of explicit argumentation and grounds, it does not require them the way rationalist Christian apologists (such as Whately) demand. Faith is 'independent not of objects or grounds (for that is impossible,) but of perceptible, recognized, producible objects and grounds'.[44] While the truths of the faith are not mathematically demonstrable, the grounds of faith 'tend towards it, and may come very near it'.[45]

Yet these sorts of individual passages fail to convince some scholars that Newman thinks rational belief is grounded in reasons or evidence. Because of this, we will attempt a more circumspect argument. We will not rest on such individual passages; rather, we rest our case on three large sections of Newman's *Grammar of Assent* and the fundamental ideas they contain. In particular, we will argue that Newman's view of conscience as a path to God (in chapter 5 of the *Grammar*), his considered view of rational certitude (in chapters 6-9 of the *Grammar*), and his cumulative case for Christianity (in chapter 10 of the *Grammar*) all display a commitment to rationally grounding our beliefs in evidence rather than in externalist mechanisms of proper function, reliabilism, and the like.

4.1. Newman on conscience

When he considers how we arrive at belief in God and what forms its foundation, how does Newman construe it? Does he think of this as an externalist causal story, or is it based upon internal evidence? All interpreters agree that Newman thinks that theistic belief arises from the internal workings of conscience. But few seem to notice that he does not construe conscience's workings in causal, proper functionalist, or reliabilist terms; rather, the experience of conscience constitutes a sort of inner evidence.[46] As seen in his early writings, his private papers, and the *Grammar*, Newman held that theistic belief arises from conscience through a kind of implicit reasoning.[47]

[41] For more on Newman's moderate approach to knowledge and evidence, see Logan Paul Gage and Frederick D. Aquino, 'Newman the Fallibilist', *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 97 (2023), pp. 29–47.

[42] *US*, p. 178.

[43] John Henry Newman, *The Theological Papers of John Henry Newman on Faith and Certainty*, ed. by H. M. de Achaval and J. D. Holmes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 29.

[44] *US*, p. 175.

[45] *US*, p. 156.

[46] While Newman does not ground the rationality of theistic belief in proper function, he does argue that conscience is every bit as much of a natural faculty as that of sense perception, memory, etc. Its naturalness is a further reason to trust its outputs just as we trust the outputs of our other faculties. *GA*, pp. 73–74.

[47] See *US*, p. 56, fn 13 and 'Proof of Theism', in *The Argument from Conscience to the Existence of God According to J. H. Newman*, ed. by Adrian J. Boekraad and Henry Tristram (Louvain: Editions Nauwelaerts, 1961).

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Newman believes that the experience of conscience implies another to whom we are morally obligated, the very source of the moral law itself. The moral obligation that we sense in conscience – what he refers to as 'a sense of duty' or 'a magisterial dictate'[48] – gives us an awareness not only that particular acts are right or wrong but an awareness of a law to be obeyed. That is, we are all aware, though perhaps not under this description, of a sanction or command behind the 'feelings' which indicate rightness and wrongness. If we attend to the experience of conscience, we perceive one exterior to ourselves, a Lawgiver. Conscience:

> involves the recognition of a living object, towards which it is directed. Inanimate things cannot stir our affections; these are correlative with persons. If, as is the case, we feel responsibility, are ashamed, are frightened, at transgressing the voice of conscience, this implies that there is One to whom we are responsible, before whom we are ashamed, whose claims upon us we fear. 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 pleadings, in whose anger we are 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.[49]

If we pay attention, we are easily made aware of an external lawgiver speaking to us in conscience. The moral obligation here must ultimately be personal, and yet, 'It is more than a man's own self. The man himself has not power over it, or only with extreme difficulty; he did not make it, he cannot destroy it…'.[50]

In this path to God *via* conscience, Newman attempts 'to show that in this special feeling, which follows on the commission of what we call right or wrong, lie the

[48] *GA*, p. 73.

[49] *GA*, pp. 75–76.

[50] John Henry Newman, *Sermons Preached on Various Occasions*, 6th ed. (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1891), pp. 64–5 (Sermon 5).

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materials for the real apprehension of a Divine Sovereign and Judge'.[51] In the context of the *Grammar*, Newman's account of conscience is not merely trying to argue us into belief in God from the outside. Rather, it attempts to show how the experience of conscience can, and often does, awaken in us a sense of the divine that leads to a real assent to God's existence (i.e., a lively assent capable of moving us to religious commitment). Newman's reasoning is clearly evidentially based, even if based in our experience. We might lay out the logic as follows:

1. If I have experiences of conscience in which it seems that I have transgressed a law and displeased someone, then there is a superior being with God-like attributes.
2. I have experiences of conscience in which it seems that I have transgressed a law and displeased someone.
3. Therefore, there is a superior being with God-like attributes.[52]

Newman is certainly not claiming that we consciously walk through such a syllogism in our minds before believing in God. However, one of Newman's life-long intellectual commitments was to the importance of implicit and informal reasoning. He thinks that most human reasoning is quick and implicit. But it is evidence-based reasoning nonetheless.[53]

One might critique Newman's case. Still, it surely attempts to give an evidential case from features of our own experience for the existence of God – one that he thinks even children intuitively follow.[54] And if Newman rests such an important belief as this upon evidential considerations, it stands to reason that he does so with other beliefs as well. Newman is actually quite explicit that belief in God is arrived at 'by means of...induction' and that belief in the external world, for instance, rests on 'an inductive process'.[55]

4.2. Newmanian certitude

Newman's project in the second half of *A Grammar of Assent* is to resolve a 'paradox' about certitude. The paradox is, 'how it is that a proposition which is not, and cannot be, demonstrated, which at the highest can only be proved to be truth-like, not true, such as 'I shall die', nevertheless claims and receives our unqualified adhesion'; how it is that, 'an unconditional acceptance of a proposition can be the result of its conditional verification'.[56] That is, he wonders how in the world our limited, fallible

[51]While the use of the word 'feeling' is unfortunate here, Newman is clear that he has something cognitive in mind. Elsewhere (*US* p. 51) he recognizes the deficiency of speaking of 'feelings' and instead speaks of 'moral perception'.

[52]Cf. Logan Paul Gage, 'Newman's Argument from Conscience: Why He Needs Paley and Natural Theology After All', *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 94 (2020), p. 146.

[53]For more on how this implicit reasoning operates, see Logan Paul Gage and Frederick D. Aquino, 'Newman's Illative Sense Re-Examined', in *John Henry Newman's an Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Frederick D. Aquino & Matthew Levering (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2025), pp. 183–202.

[54]*GA*, p. 77.

[55]*GA*, p. 47.

[56]*GA*, p. 105.

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evidence can ground our deepest certitudes. If we examine his answer, we see further evidence of his evidentialism.

While Locke and others restricted legitimate certitude to the rare cases in which we form beliefs through rational intuition (e.g., a simple mathematical truth like $2 + 2 = 4$) or strict demonstration (e.g., as in a logical proof from necessary truths), Newman thought that certitude was a natural and frequent state of the human mind.[57] Certitude, for Newman, is a complex or reflex act in which we are reflectively aware that we have solid reasons for belief.[58] In other words, the notion of certitude – so central to his larger epistemological framework – not only presupposes that we have evidence but that it is (at least very often) internally or reflectively accessible.

And what sort of evidence do we have for our certitudes, according to Newman? 'This certitude and this evidence are often called moral; ...moral evidence and moral certitude are all that we can attain, not only in the case of ethical and spiritual subjects, such as religion, but of terrestrial and cosmical questions also'.[59] Certitude, then, arises from good but fallible evidence. Now, because Newman thinks certitude is a normal act of the human mind and that it does not always arise from intuition or demonstration in Cartesian or Lockean fashion, Newman holds to a lesser standard of proof and evidence; yet he still thinks it can form the basis of legitimate certitude. Newman consistently appeals to a standard of proof beyond a reasonable doubt that we are all familiar with from legal cases.

> It may be added, that, whereas the logical form of this argument, is, as I have already observed, indirect, viz. that 'the conclusion cannot be otherwise', and Butler says that an event is proved, if its antecedents 'could not in reason be supposed to have happened *unless* it were true', and law-books tell us that the principle of circumstantial evidence is the *reductio ad absurdum*....[60]

He goes on to note that this was also the favored method of such a great reasoner as Newton.

Because Newman thinks that we can attain legitimate certitude on less-than-conclusive evidence, some scholars have thought that Newman is following Hume in carving out a third category of 'proof' between demonstration and probability.[61] It is too weak, Hume insisted, to say that 'the Sun will rise tomorrow' is a mere probability, and yet it is fallibly known and incapable of demonstration.[62] For Newman too, the accumulation of various lines of evidence all converging on a proposition constitutes a proof:

[57]John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 4.2.14, 4.3.6–8, 14, and 4.15.1–3. See also *GA*, p. 152.

[58]*GA*, pp. 140–42.

[59]*GA*, p. 206.

[60]*GA*, p. 208.

[61]See for instance, Ferreira, *Doubt and Religious Commitment*, 37, fn 7 and Ferreira, 'Newman on Belief-Confidence, Proportionality and Probability', *Heythrop Journal*, 26 (1985), pp. 171–2.

[62]David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Tom L. Beauchamp (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 6, fn 10.

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> the conclusion in a real or concrete question is foreseen and predicted rather than actually attained; foreseen in the number and direction of accumulated premisses, which all converge to it, and as the result of their combination, approach it more nearly than any assignable difference, yet do not touch it logically (though only not touching it,) on account of the nature of its subject-matter, and the delicate and implicit character of at least part of the reasonings on which it depends. It is by the strength, variety, or multiplicity of premisses, which are only probable, not by invincible syllogisms,—by objections overcome, by adverse theories neutralized, by difficulties gradually clearing up, by exceptions proving the rule, by un-looked-for correlations found with received truths, by suspense and delay in the process issuing in triumphant reactions,—by all these ways, and many others, it is that the practised and experienced mind is able to make a sure divination that a conclusion is inevitable, of which his lines of reasoning do not actually put him in possession. This is what is meant by a proposition being 'as good as proved', a conclusion as undeniable 'as if it were proved', and by the reasons for it 'amounting to a proof', for a proof is the limit of converging probabilities.[63]

The everyday certitudes that Newman has in mind are beliefs such as 'that there are really existing cities on definite sites, which go by the names of London, Paris, Florence, and Madrid'; 'that Great Britain is an island'; and that one day 'I...shall die'.[64] Such truths cannot be demonstrated even in principle, and yet we are as certain of them as of anything.

The important point for our purposes is simply to note that when it comes to certitude, perhaps the centerpiece of his epistemology, Newman thinks that it is arrived at by way of multiple lines of evidence. There is no appeal to mere proper function, reliable mechanisms, or other externalist or non-evidentialist notions. Nor is there any appeal, as one might expect, to divine action to bridge the gap between our limited evidence and our religious certitude. Instead, he insists that,

> the exhibition of credentials, that is, of evidence, that it is what it professes to be, is essential to Christianity.... It is a religion in addition to the religion of nature; and as nature has an intrinsic claim upon us to be obeyed and used, so what is over and above nature, or supernatural, must also bring with it valid testimonials of its right to demand our homage.[65]

[63] *GA*, p. 208.

[64] *GA*, pp. 117, 191, and 194.

[65] *GA*, p. 250. This view is not a later development in Newman's thought. In his Oxford University sermons, he writes: 'Almighty God influences us and works in us, through our minds, not without them or in spite of them; as at the fall we did not become other beings than we had been, but forfeited gifts which had been added to us on our creation, so under the Gospel we do not lose any part of the nature in which we are born, but regain what we have lost. We are what we were, and something more. And what is true of God's dealings with our minds generally, is true in particular as regards our reasoning powers. His grace does not supersede, but uses them, and renews them by using. We gain Truth by reasoning, whether implicit or explicit, in a state of nature: we gain it in the same way in a state of grace'. (*US*, p. 192; cf. *US*, p. 130).

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Even religious claims are not exempt from the demand for adequate evidential grounding. Hence, in his defense of certitude, Newman is seen to be an evidentialist, even if an evidentialist of a moderate rather than classical sort.

4.3. Chapter 10 of the Grammar

Lastly, when he makes a case for Christianity in the sprawling final chapter of the *Grammar*, it's certainly true that Newman's argument is unconventional. It is not the rationalist apologetic of a Whately or Paley. Still, it is a cumulative case argument, and it is inevitably an evidential one.[66] As Newman opens the chapter, 'so now I ought to speak of its [Christianity's] Evidences'.[67] His case stems from the evidence of the beauty, grandeur, coherence, and moral brilliance of the faith, rather than an attempt to establish the reliability of the gospels or to vindicate the resurrection probabilistically. Here we will simply recount Newman's central case in order to establish that when it comes to thinking about 'the Truths of Religion', he appeals to evidence to move others from notional to real assent. He is not, then, only an evidentialist in theory but also in practice.

In an approach not often seen today, Newman first seeks to establish the continuity of natural and revealed religion. That is, he attempts to show that what we know from revelation is harmonious with and builds upon humankind's natural knowledge of the divine:

> Christianity is simply an addition to it; it does not supersede or contradict it; it recognizes and depends on it, and that of necessity: for how possibly can it prove its claims except by an appeal to what men have already? be it ever so miraculous, it cannot dispense with nature; this would be to cut the ground from under it; for what would be the worth of evidences in favour of a revelation which denied the authority of that system of thought, and those courses of reasoning, out of which those evidences necessarily grew.[68]

For instance, Newman uses basic morality as a criterion of truth: 'no religion is from God which contradicts our sense of right and wrong'.[69] Now, one might accuse Newman of naively underestimating the impact of Christian morality upon our moral intuitions when he takes 'our natural perception of right and wrong as the standard for determining the characteristics of Natural Religion'.[70] But he clearly argues for the truth of Christianity from its fit with what we naturally know of the moral law; he argues that it fits with our background knowledge. Just as Newman believes that an antecedent preparation of heart and mind is necessary for individuals to come to faith, so too he

[66] On Newman and cumulative cases, see William J. Abraham, 'Cumulative Case Arguments for Christian Theism', in *The Rationality of Religious Belief: Essays in Honor of Basil Mitchell*, ed. by William J. Abraham and Steven W. Holtzer, eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 17–37.

[67] *GA*, p. 248.

[68] *GA*, p. 250.

[69] *GA*, p. 270.

[70] *GA*, p. 269.

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believes that historically humanity itself underwent just such a preparation before the advent of the gospel.[71]

With the initial probability for Christianity increased by its demonstrated fit with our moral knowledge and that gained from natural religion, Newman's second step is to show that truth in religion is best obtained by a sort of personal reasoning. That is, he seeks to establish the evidential standards which must be met. While not outright dismissing attempts to fully demonstrate the truth of Christianity, he writes:

> it is more congenial to my own judgment to attempt to prove Christianity in the same informal way in which I can prove for certain that I have been born into this world, and that I shall die out of it.... I prefer to rely on that of an *accumulation* of various probabilities... [from which] we may construct legitimate proof, sufficient for certitude.[72]

Newman thinks that if our minds are rightly prepared and our illative sense is properly employed upon all the data we have from history, the development of world morality, the moral radiance of the saints, and so on, we will sense an accumulation of probabilities in the direction of Christianity's truth. But the evidential standard to be met – something evidentialists are deeply concerned with – is not strict demonstration but convincing and converging lines of evidence.

Having argued (i) for Christianity's fit with our natural knowledge, and (ii) for a moderate evidential standard, Newman proceeds to recount numerous vignettes from throughout history that he thinks reveal a pattern of evidence. To many, this chapter may read like a strange litany of disconnected ideas: the grand drama of the history of the Jewish people's walk with God; the fulfillment of prophecy for a religion for all people through a Jewish messiah; the plausible occurrence of miracles; the eye witness of the apostles; the rapid conversion of the pagan, Western world; the courageous witness of persecuted Christians overcoming the power of Rome; and the enduring witness of two millennia of Christian saints. Yet to Newman, those who are prepared by a natural longing for and expectation of divine revelation will perceive in this vast assemblage of facts the divine origin of Christianity and the authenticity of its revelation. In particular, they will see that 'Christianity is the completion and supplement of Natural Religion, and of previous revelations'.[73] This exercise is, as he says, more of an inquiry than a logical disputation.[74] Still, he aims to marshal evidence to allow the reader to see the truth for themselves. While it is good evidence – and has been sensed as such 'by hundreds and thousands besides me [i.e., besides Newman]' – it is nonetheless resistible evidence, unable to move the reader without effort on their part.[75]

[71] A 'special preparation of mind', Newman would note, is necessary to all intellectual endeavours rather than some sort of special pleading for religion. *GA*, p. 266.

[72] *GA*, pp. 264–65.

[73] *GA*, p. 250.

[74] *GA*, p. 275.

[75] *GA*, pp. 263, 274, and 264. N.B. how the language of evidence suffuses this part of the *Grammar.*

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5. Conclusion

In this article, we have sought to both rebut some reasons for thinking that Newman is an anti-evidentialist as well as to give reasons for thinking that he is an evidentialist. We began by arguing that Newman's dismissal of formal logic, his emphasis on emotions, and his critique of John Locke do not ultimately support the idea that he is an anti-evidentialist. But, beyond this negative rebuttal, we gave three positive arguments for thinking that Newman is an evidentialist. Newman's evidentialism is seen in his argument from conscience, his account of certitude, and his apologetic for Christianity. These are not minor features of Newman's epistemology that are easily detachable from his larger perspective. His accounts of conscience and certitude in particular are not only two of the most well-known passages in Newman's corpus but were deeply held and long-considered views. We thus conclude that Newman is an evidentialist.

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