

Newman on faith, reason (and universities)

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Newman realised that talk of faith, reason, and their relationship had, in his day, become so burdened with popular and strange meanings that the real objects of the discussion were lost from view. The most pervasive and confused tendency, Newman thought, was to drastically intensify our terms into a catchy rhetoric of opposites, where faith means unthinking 'superstition' and reason means unforgiving 'scepticism',¹ a rhetoric that endures today. For Newman this is just about the worst possible model we could have because, while being pleasingly graspable and thus happily repeated by all, it describes modes of thought that no one would ever admit to holding. Instead, in his later *University Sermons* (1839-43), Newman wants to purge our talk of faith and reason and realign it with reality, with the ways that faith and reason actually occur in daily life. One of his favourite ways of doing this is to begin with a simple Aristotelian definition of reason, variously stated as follows: 'a progress of thought from one idea to the other';² 'any process or act of the mind, by which, from knowing one thing it advances on to know another';³ an act of mind that 'passes on from point to point',⁴ that 'proceeds from truth to truth';⁵

¹ John Henry Newman, *Fifteen sermons preached Before the University of Oxford between A.D 1826 and 1843, in the definitive third edition of 1872*, intro. by Mary Katherine Tillman (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press), *Sermon X*, 20-24.

² *Sermon XI*, 8.

³ *Sermon XII*, 2.

⁴ *Sermon XIII*, 7.

⁵ *Sermon XIII*, 8.

'to reason is nothing more than to gain truth from former truth';⁶ 'Reason is the power of proceeding to new ideas by means of given ones.'⁷

From this simple and uncontroversial definition we can, with Newman, establish two characteristics of reasoning which will enable us to talk more fruitfully about the realities of faith and reason: first, the act of reason *abstracts* from experience;⁸ second, the act of reason *takes time*.

Newman does not think abstraction is a bad thing, and describes it not in order to bewail reason's dislocating our minds from reality, but rather to stress the opposite: that is, to locate reason precisely *within* the daily variety and history of our sensual experience of the world. Although in 'the popular view' mentioned above the act of abstraction (reason) is *deliberate*, only beholding the world at those rare moments when experienced reality crystalises into irrefragable evidence,⁹ 'the exercise of Reason' as it actually takes place 'is a living *spontaneous* energy'.¹⁰ It is 'habitual',¹¹ always and untraceably abstracting and forming judgements from the whole variety of evidences that lived existence has on offer. By pointing out that reason is simply an act of abstraction, I am suggesting, Newman shows just how ordinary and quotidian it is; reason is a habit, a skill, more like speaking a language than doing science, or, as Newman says, like 'the ascent of a skilful mountaineer':

⁶ *Sermon XIII*, 9.

⁷ *Sermon XIV*, 28.

⁸ *Sermon XI*, 7; *Sermon XIV*, 28-32.

⁹ *Sermon X*, 17; *Sermon XII*, 2-3, 10.

¹⁰ *Sermon XIII*, 8 (my italics).

¹¹ *Sermon XII*, 8.

Reason, according to the simplest view of it, is the faculty of... ascertaining one thing by means of another... It passes on from point to point, gaining one by some indication; another on a probability; ... 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 trace behind him, and unable to teach another.¹²

As Newman says in another sermon, the views and beliefs that someone holds as a result of this ongoing process are, at least, evidence that the individual is 'deeply-exercised', evidence not of a finished work of art but something more analogous to 'an intuitive knowledge of the beautiful in art', which, Newman points out, men commonly call '*genius*'.¹³

Moving from point to point, becoming 'deeply-exercised', takes time: moments, years, even centuries in the case of the Church's exercise of developing doctrines.¹⁴ Newman recognises that if reason takes time it belongs completely to a specific history, a specific practice ground. The temporal reality of reason, Newman says, thereby 'lead[s] us to be satisfied with the humblest and most obscure lot.'¹⁵ We should be 'contended... in our generation, whatever be the peculiar character or the power of the errors of our own times.'¹⁶

¹² *Sermon XIII*, 7.

¹³ *Sermon V*, 12.

¹⁴ *Sermon XV*, 11-18. In this, the last sermon Newman suggests that, just as in the mind of a person, there are 'impressions or implicit judgments, in the mind of the Church' (13) that over time surface in (clear or unclear) expression; in the Church's case this expression is the labour of doctrine. Two years later he would publish his *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* where he expands his ideas.

¹⁵ *Sermon V*, 37.

¹⁶ *Sermon V*, 36.

From these cursory conclusions it becomes clear that Newman's realist definition of reason – an act of mind that 'passes on from point to point' – collapses any lofty picture of reason as a mental act leading us into objective or infallible observation of truth, and demonstrates instead that reason belongs to, and manoeuvres us through, our experience of the world and history. So, elsewhere Newman describes rationality as 'locomotion', an exercise in place (*locus*) moving through time (*motio*).¹⁷ Importantly, on this model of rationality, it becomes obvious that *faith* is nothing other than a kind of reasoning, a habit of mind shaped from a multitude of abstractions from evidences encountered in an individual history.¹⁸

Newman calls these evidences 'antecedent probabilities', including memory, testimony, received laws and notions, personal influence and trust, habits of thought, all of which form in us a sense of what is *probable* or likely to be true. Faith of all kinds, religious or not,¹⁹ rests on such grounds, and Newman points out that, like the mountaineer who cannot nor needs to trace his steps, people 'do not, or cannot produce [the grounds of their faith], or if they could, yet could not prove [them] to be true.'²⁰ One of Newman's favourite expressions of this is the biblical language of the good shepherd and his sheep: 'I am the Good Shepherd,

¹⁷ John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University: defined and illustrated, I. in nine discourses delivered to the Catholics of Dublin, II. in occasional lectures and essays addressed to the members of the Catholic University*, ed. by I. T. Ker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), VI, 134.

¹⁸ *Sermon XI*, 3, 9.

¹⁹ Newman says that deliberate 'unbelief', especially, is a kind of faith: it 'considers itself especially rational, or critical of evidence; but it criticizes the evidence of Religion, only because it does not like it, and really goes on presumptions and prejudices as much as Faith does' (*Sermon XII*, 11).

²⁰ *Sermon XI*, 17.

and know My sheep, and am known of Mine' (John 10:14); 'Ye believe not, because ye are not of My sheep... My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow me' (John 10: 26-27).²¹ 'The sheep could not tell *how* they knew the Good Shepherd', Newman says; 'they had not analyzed their own impressions or cleared the grounds of their knowledge, yet doubtless grounds there were: they, however, acted spontaneously on a loving Faith.'²² Like sheep, following the shepherd because they trust his familiar voice, so in faith a person becomes 'deeply-exercised', so well practiced and familiar with various antecedent probabilities that their assent is 'spontaneous', and they cannot reconstruct the grounds of evidence on which their faith was formed.

Since faith forms out of antecedent 'εἰκότα' ('probabilities') untraceably gathered from a person's experience and history, and not out of argument or 'σημεία' ('proofs'),²³ Newman says that 'it is [as] absurd to *argue* men... into believing', as it is to induct a blind man into sight with scientific explanations of light and colour.²⁴ Newman tells us, therefore, 'that exercises of Reason [in the popular sense] are either external, or at least only ministrative, to religious inquiry and knowledge: accidental to them, not of their essence; useful in their place, but not necessary.'²⁵

Before continuing, it is interesting to notice how Newman translated this model of reason (and faith) into his *Idea of a University*, a work that comprised, along with other discourses, a revised compilation of the

²¹ *Sermon XII*, 18. See also *Sermon X*, 43 and *Sermon IV*, 1.

²² *Sermon XIV*, 5.

²³ *Sermon X*, 27.

²⁴ *Sermon IV*, 10 (my italics). See also 8-9.

²⁵ *Sermon IV*, 14.

lectures originally given in Dublin 1852 in anticipation of a new Catholic University of Ireland of which Newman had been asked to be Rector.²⁶ Newman begins his argument, in the Preface, by defining the university as 'a place of *teaching universal knowledge*.'²⁷ By this Newman means that a university must make available every kind of knowledge, every kind of approach to truth; the university must offer a universal *range* of knowledge. Just as a colour appears different or more pleasing in the company of certain other colours, so does truth look different through the lens of different kinds of study, whether it be classics, biology, or French. The best *context* of our perception of truth includes as many kinds of study as possible.²⁸ Newman prefigures this axiom in his *University Sermons*, where he claims (counterintuitively) that the best possible view of truth is the *most contextualised view*: a well exercised reason knows things through a multitude of evidences, weak and strong; it takes *everything* it experiences into account, letting different evidences contextualise the others, so that our minds are never dominated by any *one* evidence, any *one* grasp on truth.²⁹ Faith, too, as a kind of reasoning, has this universal scope. Although faith may not be so consciously systematic, in principle '[t]here is no subject which Faith working by Love may not include in its province'.³⁰

Continuing our discussion, Newman's account of faith and reason certainly seems remarkably perceptive and accurate, but a troublesome question

²⁶ I. T. Ker, 'Editor's Introduction', xii-xv, in *Idea*.

²⁷ *Idea*, Preface, ix.

²⁸ *Idea*, V, 100.

²⁹ *Sermon XIV*, 21, 29.

³⁰ *Sermon XIV*, 40.

looms, of which Newman himself is very aware. Does his model licence any and all varieties of faith (including unbelief³¹), regardless of their content? As Newman puts it, '[a]ntecedent probabilities may be equally available for what is true, and what pretends to be true, for a Revelation and its counterfeit, for Paganism, or Mahometanism [Islam], or Christianity.' In other words, and most fundamentally, antecedent probabilities by themselves supply no principle to judge what *should* be believed, what is a *true* belief.³² The question is, then, what is the 'safeguard' of faith?

I shall give an answer, which may seem at once common-place and paradoxical, yet I believe is the true one. The safeguard of faith is a right state of heart. This it is that gives it birth; it also disciplines it. This is what protects it from bigotry, credulity, and fanaticism... [This] is the quickening and illuminating principle of true faith, giving it eyes, hands, and feet.³³

A particular 'state of heart' keeps faith on the right track. Newman brings us back to this theme again and again: faith is not only shaped by reasoning abstraction from antecedent probabilities, but by the reasoner's moral disposition, their virtue, their habit of desiring, which always spontaneously *interprets* the information given to the mind.³⁴ Our dispositions determine the very beliefs and truths available to us. Newman puts it starkly: moral disposition is the '*sine qua non* condition' of a person's judgements,³⁵ most basically because 'persons believe what

³¹ See footnote 19.

³² *Sermon XII*, 13.

³³ *Sermon XII*, 16,

³⁴ *Sermon V*, 7; *Sermon X*, 44; *Sermon XI*, 25.

³⁵ *Sermon X*, 6, footnote 4.

they wish to be true',³⁶ so that '[a] good and a bad man will think very different things probable.'³⁷ As an example, Newman observes how a carefree or disengaged moral disposition leads inevitably to vague and pallid notions of truth: we should not be at all surprised, Newman says, that those who 'enter upon the most sacred points of Faith... in a careless frame of mind, in their hours of recreation, over the wine cup[,]... so frequently end in becoming indifferentists, and conclude that Religious Truth is but a name, that all men are right and wrong'.³⁸ Incidentally, Newman incorporates this notion too into his *Idea of a University*. As one commentator summarises, for Newman, '[t]he object of the university.. is to take students and turn them into "something or other", to mould their characters, form their habits, educate their hearts through educating their minds', hence Newman's emphasis on the university as a place for *teaching* and not *research*.³⁹

Moral dispositions are (exactly) as various as individual faiths, so what *kind* of disposition can safeguard a *true* faith? Newman has a simple answer: love: '*fides formata charitate*, or in St. Paul's words, *πίστις δι' ἀγάπης ἐνεργουμένη* [Galatians 5:6]'.⁴⁰ A right faith is one whose habits, whose antecedent probabilities, all take shape within a context of love: the person's love of God and, moreover, God's love of the person. Here we begin to see how, for Newman, faith is shaped not only by the history and

³⁶ *Sermon X*, 29.

³⁷ *Sermon X*, 35,

³⁸ *Sermon X*, 43.

³⁹ Gerard Loughlin, 'Theology in the University', *The Cambridge Companion to John Henry Newman*, ed. by Ian Ker and Terrence Merrigan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 226, referring to *Idea*, Preface, xiv.

⁴⁰ *Sermon X*, 37. See also *Sermon XII*, 16.

character of the knower but by the character of the *object* of knowledge.

Newman again uses the language of John 10 to express this:

[T]hose who believe in Christ, believe because they know Him to be the Good Shepherd; and they know Him by his voice; and they know His voice, because they are His sheep; ... moreover, they know and follow Christ, *upon his loving them... The divinely-enlightened mind sees in Christ the very Object whom it desires to love and worship, - the Object correlative of its own affections; and it trusts Him, or believes, from loving Him.*⁴¹

Our love for God forms out of God's love for us, the two loves 'correlate'. This means, in other words, that the safeguard of faith (love) consists in nothing other than the believer *becoming like* the object of faith (Love, which is God), doing what the object of faith does. And, as is obvious from the shepherd and sheep language, Newman knows this love to flow from the new life that God gives us in his ultimate expression of love in Jesus Christ.⁴² In this way, God, faith's object, is ultimately the one who shapes faith, and so Newman can call faith and the love that moulds it a 'supernatural grace'⁴³, a gift of the Holy Spirit,⁴⁴ God's own life of love expressed in ours.

Finishing here, if we draw all of these considerations together, we arrive at something like this: faith is (1) an act of reasoning, an ongoing accumulating act of time-bound abstractions, whose formation resembles less a scientific endeavour and more the practice of a language or skill, (2) a skill, moreover, that bears the marks of its practitioner's desires and

⁴¹ *Sermon XII*, 21 (my italics).

⁴² *Sermon XII*, 20 makes this very clear.

⁴³ *Sermon X*, 33; *Sermon XI*, 25; *Sermon XII*, 22.

⁴⁴ *Sermon XII*, 23; *Sermon XIV*, 3, 6.

character; (3) and, most importantly, *right* faith is a skill that bears the marks of its *object's* desires and character, that bears the marks of God's love. Put more simply, for Newman, a right faith occurs when the believer's rational navigation of their little vista of time, space, experience, and relationships, comes to trace the very shape of the life of God. So, as I have been trying all along to suggest, Newman has not only purged and reworked our often unthinking and distorting conceptions of faith and reason into a remarkably convincing and realistic account, by precisely locating faith and reason within temporal life, but has also and at once opened up faith to its divine source.