

NEWMAN AND QUASI-FIDEISM: A REPLY TO DUNCAN PRITCHARD

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Abstract: In recent years, Duncan Pritchard has developed a position in religious epistemology called quasi-fideism that he claims traces back to John Henry Newman's treatment of the rationality of religious belief. In this paper, we give three reasons to think that Pritchard's reading of Newman as a quasi-fideist is mistaken. First, Newman's parity argument does not claim that religious and non-religious beliefs are on a par because both are groundless; instead, for Newman, they are on a par because both often stem from implicit rather than explicit reasoning. Second, *pace* Pritchard, Newman's distinction between simple and complex assent does not map onto the Wittgensteinian distinction between groundless hinge commitments and beliefs that flow from these hinges. For Newman, simple and complex assent differ in terms of the believer's level of awareness of their grounds. Third, and finally, Newman does not reject Locke's evidentialism *in toto*. Instead, he argues that certitude is not restricted to beliefs stemming from intuition and demonstration but often rightly includes probabilistically supported (or fallibly evidenced) beliefs.

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Duncan Pritchard has developed a position in religious epistemology called quasi-fideism that he claims traces back to John Henry Newman's treatment of the rationality of religious belief.¹ In this paper, we argue that Pritchard's reading of Newman as a quasi-fideist is mistaken. We offer three reasons. First, Newman's parity argument is not, as Pritchard suggests, that religious and non-religious beliefs are both groundless but that both kinds of belief are often grounded in implicit reasoning processes. Second, Newman's distinction between simple and complex assent is not a distinction between groundless commitment and grounded belief; rather, it is between unreflective but grounded belief (simple assent) and reflective endorsement of our beliefs (complex assent). Third, Newman does not reject Lockean evidentialist epistemology wholesale but instead expands Locke's restricted understanding of knowledge and certitude to include beliefs with overwhelming probabilistic support. If we are correct, Newman should not be placed in the line of thinkers leading to Wittgensteinian hinge epistemology or Pritchard's quasi-fideism about religious belief.

¹Duncan Pritchard, 'Faith and Reason', *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 81 (2017): 103, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S135824611700025X>.

II. PRITCHARD ON NEWMAN AS A QUASI-FIDEIST

According to some recent historical and philosophical work, Wittgenstein—especially as seen in *On Certainty*—read and took inspiration from Newman’s epistemology.² Now, in several recent articles, Pritchard argues that Newman steered between rationalism and fideism by adopting a quasi-fideism about religious belief.³ For Pritchard, those on the rationalist end of the spectrum see religious belief as being rational through and through: individual beliefs can be traced back logically to solid foundations which are themselves reasonable (if not utterly self-evident).⁴ At the other end of the spectrum, the fideist claims that religious belief is not (and need not be) based upon good epistemic reasons at all. Between them, Pritchard thinks, is the quasi-fideist who holds that *all* belief—both religious and secular—is ultimately groundless. If we trace any of our reasons back far enough, they all bottom out in commitments that are not themselves grounded by further reasons or evidence; they are simply fundamental. Unlike fideism, quasi-fideism does not require special pleading for religious belief. Neither religious nor non-religious belief is rationally supported all the way down. Instead, all belief is a matter of faith in this sense.

Pritchard maintains that Newman employs a parity argument against rationalist critics of religious belief: in concrete rather than abstract matters (*e.g.*, mathematics), both religious and non-religious certitudes are in the same epistemic boat.⁵ According to Pritchard, as a quasi-fideist, Newman maintains that ‘*all* belief, even beliefs which we generally hold to be paradigmatically rational, also presuppose fundamental arational commitments.’⁶ In support of his claim, Pritchard points to Newman’s observation that very often the foundations of our noetic systems do not meet the Lockean standard of being either strictly demonstrated or known via rational intuition. As Newman writes,

None of us can think or act without the acceptance of truths, not intuitive, not demonstrated, yet sovereign. If our nature has any constitution, any laws, one of them is this absolute reception of propositions as true, which lie outside the narrow range of conclusions to which logic,

²See especially Wolfgang Kienzler, ‘Wittgenstein and John Henry Newman on Certainty’, *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 71, no. 1 (2006): 117–38, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18756735-07101007>. See also Cyril Barrett, ‘Newman and Wittgenstein on the Rationality of Religious Belief’, in *Newman and Conversion*, ed. Ian Ker (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1997), 89–99; Anthony Kenny, ‘Newman as Philosopher of Religion’, in *Newman: A Man for Our Time*, ed. David Brown (London: Morehouse Press, 1990), 98–122; and Anthony Kenny, *What is Faith? Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 89–109.

³See Pritchard, ‘Faith and Reason’; Pritchard, ‘Wittgenstein on Faith and Reason: The Influence of Newman’, in *God, Truth, and other Enigmas*, ed. Mirosław Szatkowski (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 152–63; and Pritchard, ‘Quasi-Fideism and Religious Conviction’, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 10, no. 3 (2018): 51–66, <https://doi.org/10.24204/ejpr.v10i3.2605>.

⁴Pritchard calls this view ‘epistemic heroism’ and sees philosophers like Richard Swinburne as being in this camp. See Pritchard, ‘Faith and Reason’, 101.

⁵On such parity arguments, see William Alston, ‘Religious Experience and Religious Belief’, *Noûs* 16, no. 1 (1982): 3–12, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2215404>; William Alston, ‘Is Religious Belief Rational?’ in *The Life of Religion*, ed. Stanley M. Harrison and Richard C. Taylor (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986), 1–15; and William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

⁶Pritchard, ‘Faith and Reason’, 104.

formal or virtual, is tethered; nor has any philosophical theory the power to force on us a rule which will not work for a day.⁷

Similarly, Pritchard points to propositions that Newman takes to be as solid as anything we believe and yet are empirical certainties that are not even capable of full demonstration. Newman writes:

We are sure beyond all hazard of a mistake, that our own self is not the only being existing; that there is an external world; that it is a system with parts and a whole, a universe carried on by laws; and that the future is affected by the past. We accept and hold with an unqualified assent, that the earth, considered as a phenomenon, is a globe; that all its regions see the sun by turns; that there are vast tracts on it of land and water; that there are really existing cities on definite sites, which go by the names of London, Paris, Florence, and Madrid. We are sure that Paris or London, unless suddenly swallowed up by an earthquake or burned to the ground, is today just what it was yesterday, when we left it. We laugh to scorn the idea that we had no parents though we have no memory of our birth; that we shall never depart this life, though we can have no experience of the future...⁸

Furthermore, Pritchard might have pointed to Newman's emphasis on 'presumptive reasoning' from antecedent probabilities and expectations. Newman thinks that most of our epistemic lives consist of proceeding on various assumptions—at least until these assumptions fail us or are called into question.⁹

If Pritchard is correct and Newman is a quasi-fideist, then Newman is ultimately arguing that the fact that religious belief requires arational commitments presents no *special* problem for the religious believer. After all, *both* religious and non-religious reasoning bottom out in arational hinge commitments.¹⁰ Pritchard writes:

In essence, Newman's approach to the problem of scepticism about religious belief was to argue that local scepticism about religious belief is unfounded because one has equal grounds to be sceptical about all belief. It is thus irrelevant to make a specific charge against religious belief on the basis that it is posited upon certain pivotal ungrounded beliefs (such as in the existence of God), when there is nothing unique about religious belief

⁷John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, ed. Ian Ker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 118.

⁸Newman, *Grammar*, 117.

⁹This theme runs throughout his *University Sermons*, especially sermons 10–14, but is also seen in his more mature work like the *Grammar of Assent*. John Henry Newman, *Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford*, ed. James D. Earnest and Gerard Tracey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁰Such fundamental commitments are labelled 'hinge commitments', because they are like immobile hinges that allow a door to move. As Wittgenstein puts it, 'the questions that we raise and our doubts depend upon the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.' Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), §§ 341. At times in his work, Pritchard distinguishes between hinge commitments (like 'the Bible is a reliable epistemic source') and uber hinge commitments which are very big picture commitments (like 'I am not systematically deceived about reality'). The former are particular beliefs where we know people on each side of the issue, while the latter are common commitments of all epistemic systems. See Duncan Pritchard, 'Wittgensteinian Hinge Epistemology and Deep Disagreement', *Topoi* 40, no. 5 (2021): 1120, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-018-9612-y>.

in this respect. Rather, we should recognise that all belief is based upon ungrounded presuppositions...¹¹

While we agree that Newman offers a kind of parity argument (which we will explicate below), we think that Pritchard's reading of Newman as a quasi-fideist is mistaken for three reasons.¹² If we are correct, Newman should not be taken as the progenitor of Wittgensteinian hinge epistemology or quasi-fideism about religious belief.

III. OBJECTION 1: NEWMAN'S PARITY ARGUMENT

To become clear about Newman's parity argument, we must look at it not only in the *Grammar* but in *University Sermon* 11 also, where it first appears in sustained form. In this sermon, Newman defines reason as 'any process or act of the mind, by which, from knowing one thing it advances on to know another.'¹³ The senses give us direct knowledge or immediate awareness of the material world, whereas knowledge by reason is 'attained beyond the range of sense' and thus acquired 'indirectly'.¹⁴ Reason proceeds 'from things that are perceived to things which are not; the existence of which it certifies to us on the hypothesis of something else being known to exist, in other words, being assumed to be true'.¹⁵ If reason is understood in this way, faith may be construed as a process of reasoning in which we accept 'things as real, which the senses do not convey, upon certain previous grounds; it is an instrument of indirect knowledge concerning things external to us'.¹⁶ Faith, then, is not merely a 'moral act' that depends on a 'previous process of clear and cautious Reason'.¹⁷ Faith and reason are not radically distinct habits of mind in which reason secures the credentials and faith assents to reason's workings (*e.g.*, 'to show both that the apostolic testimony is trustworthy and that the purported revelation is duly warranted by evidence of a miraculous nature').¹⁸

¹¹Duncan Pritchard, 'Is "God exists" a "Hinge Proposition" of Religious Belief?', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 47, no. 3 (2000): 132, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1004046914561>.

¹²Our concern in what follows is to demonstrate that Pritchard misreads Newman. For a sustained critique of quasi-fideism itself, see Jeroen de Ridder, 'Against Quasi-Fideism', *Faith and Philosophy* 36, no. 2 (2019): 223–43, <https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil201951123>. And for an example of those arguing that Pritchard's broader hinge epistemology fails to escape epistemic relativism, see Oscar Piedrahita, 'Can Hinge Epistemology Close the Door on Epistemic Relativism?', *Synthese* 199 (2021): 4645–71, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-020-02995-4>, especially section 3.2. For Pritchard's latest defence of quasi-fideism against the charge of epistemic relativism, see Duncan Pritchard, 'Quasi-Fideism and Epistemic Relativism', *Inquiry* (forthcoming), <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2022.2135820>.

¹³Newman, *University Sermons*, 155.

¹⁴Newman, *University Sermons*, 145.

¹⁵Newman, *University Sermons*, 145–46.

¹⁶Newman, *University Sermons*, 146.

¹⁷Newman, *University Sermons*, 144; 130–31, preface 6. See also *University Sermons*, 143.

¹⁸Geertjan Zuijdwegt, 'Richard Whateley's Influence on John Henry Newman's Oxford University Sermons on Faith and Reason (1839-1840)', *Newman Studies Journal* 10, no. 1 (2013): 88.

The core of Newman's parity argument in *University Sermon* 11 is to show that faith is a kind of reasoning distinct from formal argumentation.¹⁹ Faith is not divorced from reason but, like most of our beliefs, involves a kind of implicit reasoning. Moreover, it is not incompatible with 'the state in which we find ourselves by nature with reference to the acquisition of knowledge generally,—a state in which we must assume something to prove anything, and can gain nothing without a venture'.²⁰ In seeking to challenge a narrow conception of reason, Newman highlights the ways in which presumptive or implicit reasoning factors into the formation of religious and non-religious beliefs. Reliance upon antecedent probabilities (*i.e.*, our expectations given all we've observed in the past) typically ensures a reliable process of belief-formation in everyday life.²¹ In Butlerian fashion, Newman highlights the ways in which this presumptive reasoning factors into the formation of religious and non-religious beliefs. The onus of the burden lies with those who demand greater 'assurances of truth in religion than they would demand in the realm of secular knowledge'.²² There is ample empirical evidence, Newman argues, that most people operate on the level of presumptive reasoning until 'antecedent probabilities fail'.²³ They follow the dictum that probability is the way of life in everyday affairs. So, faith is 'not the only exercise of Reason, which, when critically examined, would be called unreasonable, and *yet is not so*'.²⁴ This power of spontaneous reasoning and judgement operates in areas like morality, politics, literature, as well as religion.

To illustrate his point, Newman draws attention to our belief-forming faculties. We have a number of ways of forming beliefs (*e.g.*, sense perception, memory, and reason). We utilise these belief-forming faculties and processes until they are shown to be unreliable. That is, we have no choice but to cognise by means of our powers of cognising. There is no appeal

¹⁹See also Zuijdwegt, 'Richard Whately's Influence,' 88.

²⁰Newman, *University Sermons*, 151.

²¹One reader worries that Newman may consider things like hopes, wishes, and fears as grounds (see Newman, *University Sermons*, sermons 10 and 11)—not just previous experience, observation, or evidence. In fact, William Wainwright maintains that Newman thinks it is legitimate to let these passions interpret or colour our evidence. William J. Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart: A Prolegomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), chapter 2. We, however, hold that if emotions are cognitive—and they plausibly are—then it would be a false dichotomy to distinguish evidence and emotions. Emotions, or emotional experience, can constitute evidence. We develop this proposal at length in Frederick D. Aquino and Logan P. Gage, 'On the Epistemic Role of Our Passional Nature', *Newman Studies Journal* 17, no. 2 (2020): 41–58, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nsj.2020.0019>. Our proposal helps make sense of Newman's insistence that our beliefs, and even our religious beliefs, rest on reason. 'Faith must rest on reason', Newman writes, 'nay even in the case of children and of the most ignorant and dull peasant.' John Henry Newman, *The Theological Papers of John Henry Newman on Faith and Certainty*, ed. Hugo M. de Achaval, SJ, and J. Derek Holmes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 86.

²²Terence Penelhum, *Butler: The Arguments of the Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 1985), 198.

²³Newman, *University Sermons*, 135; see also *University Sermons*, 150. 'In a letter to J. D. Dalgairns, Newman summarizes, in a way, the innovative intent of this second series of sermons on faith and reason: "These sermons take in the two principles which are so prominent in the Essay [on the Development of Christian Doctrine], that no real idea can be comprehended in all its bearings at once—that the main instrument of proof in matters of life is 'antecedent probability.'" (LD xii.5). In yet another document he prepared in advance of the French translation, Newman remarks of 'reasoning on antecedent probabilities,' which is the logic of faith, that 'this kind of reasoning is the highest, as being used by the highest minds, and in the highest discoveries.' (Earnest and Tracey, 'Editors' Introduction' in Newman, *University Sermons*, lxxviii.)

²⁴Newman, *University Sermons*, 147; emphasis added.

beyond cognitive faculties, nature, and practices to which we all find ourselves committed. Moreover, most people form beliefs ‘on *grounds* which they do not, or cannot produce, or if they could, yet could not prove to be true, on latent or antecedent grounds which they take for granted’.²⁵ ‘We consider that there is so strong an antecedent probability that they are faithful’.²⁶

We trust sense perception as a reliable belief-forming process, though it may deceive us at times. The same applies to memory and reason. Though they fail us occasionally, we still use them as reliable sources for acquiring knowledge. Consequently, in forming beliefs, most people acknowledge the strong antecedent probability that sense perception, memory, and reason are reliable processes of belief-formation. Faith, likewise, operates from a presumptive level of reasoning, but this level of reasoning is not unique to religious belief. Faith is thus a rational way of proceeding, Newman argues, unless we presume a higher bar of reason than we do in everyday affairs.

The important point vis-à-vis Pritchard is that Newman clearly thinks faith has grounds. As he points out in *University Sermon* 13, faith ‘cannot exist without grounds or without an object’.²⁷ He even thinks it is important to assess this implicit process of reasoning since not all grounds are necessarily adequate or truth-conducive. However, he rejects the conflation of having grounds with the capacity to state those grounds in argumentation. People should not be considered irrational simply because they are incapable of articulating or explicitly reconstructing an implicit process of reasoning. Reflexive analysis is not a prerequisite to being rational in either sacred or profane matters.

What Newman rejects out of hand is the claim that faith requires or is synonymous with the operation of an explicit or demonstrative kind of reasoning. Though reason plays an important role in belief formation and even, at times, in evaluating the process of belief formation, it does not follow that faith springs from a formal account or explicit reasoning. Being aware of how reason operates, then, is not a precondition to having rationally acceptable beliefs. Faith, as a tacit or implicit kind of reasoning, is typically ‘independent of and distinct from what are called philosophical inquiries, intellectual systems, courses of argument, and the like’.²⁸ However, faith is ‘independent not of objects or grounds ... but of perceptible, recognised, producible objects and grounds’. As a result, faith ‘admits, but does not require, the exercise’ of explicit reasoning.²⁹

In sum, contrary to Pritchard, Newman’s parity argument is not meant to show that faith, like reason, is ultimately groundless. Rather, careful examination shows that Newman seeks to broaden the scope of reasoning beyond formal and explicit reasoning, both in everyday matters as well as in matters of faith. If it is rational to believe with certitude that Great Britain is an island without demonstration or being able to marshal all of one’s reasons explicitly, then it can be rational to do likewise in matters of faith—provided that there are indeed good grounds. The trouble in both cases is not that there is a lack of reasons or grounds. Rather, Newman indicates, the trouble is that our grounds are often implicit and too numerous to assemble.

²⁵Newman, *University Sermons*, 149; emphasis added.

²⁶Newman, *University Sermons*, 150.

²⁷Newman, *University Sermons*, 174–75.

²⁸Newman, *University Sermons*, 149. See also *University Sermons*, 146, 155.

²⁹Newman, *University Sermons*, 175.

IV. OBJECTION 2: ASSENT VS. COMMITMENT

In addition to the parity argument, Pritchard misses the mark when it comes to Newman's understanding of assent. Pritchard maintains that Newman's distinction between simple and complex assent maps onto a Wittgensteinian division between groundless fundamental commitments and more reflective beliefs that trace back to these arational hinge commitments.³⁰ He holds that the former (*i.e.*, unreflective, groundless beliefs) are where certitude is located.³¹ Disagreements about the external world or religious matters are so intractable because we hold these foundational commitments with certitude, and yet they are not even subject to rational evaluation. Quasi-fideism therefore has the advantage of explaining intractable disagreement. Yet we believe this reading of Newman is mistaken.

Pritchard is correct that simple assent, for Newman, is often unconscious and even automatic. That is, propositions, in Newman's words, 'pass before us and receive our assent without our consciousness' or without a 'recognition' of an assent or of its 'grounds'.³² However, the distinction between simple and complex assent is not that the former is groundless and the latter grounded; rather, it is that simple assent does not require reflexive endorsement of the grounds while complex assent does. 'All this I am accustomed to take for granted without a thought; but, were the need to arise, I should not find much difficulty in drawing out from my own mental resources reasons sufficient to justify me in these beliefs'.³³ Newman recognises that not all simple assents are necessarily truth-conducive.³⁴ Some may be 'merely expressions of our personal likings, tastes, principles, motives, and opinions'.³⁵ In this sense, the process of reflection might correct a simple assent.

Simple assent is not, then, arational or groundless. The fact that many of our fundamental beliefs are non-demonstrable by Lockean standards does not entail that they are groundless. For instance, take the examples of belief in the external world and belief in God. Newman is explicit that both of these beliefs are grounded in large-scale inductions from sense experience and the experience of conscience, respectively. He writes:

³⁰See Pritchard, 'Faith and Reason', 116–17. We call these arational 'commitments' rather than 'beliefs' because, for Pritchard, they are not the result of a rational process or subject to rational evaluation like paradigmatic beliefs. Commitments, for him, are positive propositional attitudes and 'belief-like' mental states but not beliefs strictly speaking. See Duncan Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst: Radical Skepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 90–91. While some religious beliefs lend themselves to rational evaluation, all belief (for Pritchard) seems to bottom out in optimally certain commitment grounded in passion rather than reason. Duncan Pritchard, 'Quasi-Fideism and Skeptical Fideism', *Manuscripta* 44, no. 4 (2021): 3–30, <https://doi.org/10.1590/0100-6045.2021.v44n4.dp>.

³¹Pritchard, 'Faith and Reason', 116.

³²Newman, *Grammar*, 124.

³³Newman, *Grammar*, 139. See also *Grammar*, 127.

³⁴On Newman and the grounds of faith, see Frederick D. Aquino, 'Newman on the Grounds of Faith', *Quaestiones Disputatae* 8, no. 2 (2018): 5–18, <https://doi.org/10.5840/qd2018822>. Newman also thinks it is important to assess the implicit process of reasoning. In both the *University Sermons* and *Grammar of Assent*, Newman makes it clear that not all grounds are necessarily adequate or truth-conducive. For a contemporary account of adequate grounds, see William P. Alston, *Beyond 'Justification': Dimensions of Epistemic Evaluation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), esp. chapter 5.

³⁵Newman, *Grammar*, 124. See also *Grammar*, 138.

as to the proposition, that there are things existing external to ourselves, this I do consider a first principle, and one of universal reception. It is founded on an instinct; I so call it, because the brute creation possesses it. This instinct is directed towards individual phenomena, one by one, and has nothing of the character of generalization; and, since it exists in brutes, the gift of reason is not a condition of its existence, and it may justly be considered an instinct in man also.³⁶

This may sound at first as if Newman thinks our belief in the external world is merely grounded in animal instinct and is thus an arational commitment. However, Newman continues:

What the human mind does is what brutes cannot do, viz. to draw from our ever-recurring experiences of its testimony in particulars a general proposition, and, because this instinct or intuition acts whenever the phenomena of sense present themselves, to lay down in broad terms, *by an inductive process*, the great aphorism, that there is an external world, and that all the phenomena of sense proceed from it.³⁷

Similarly, when it comes to theistic belief, Newman likewise thinks this belief grounded in a kind of instinct combined with an induction from numerous experiences:

As then we have our initial knowledge of the universe through sense, so do we in the first instance begin to learn about its Lord and God from conscience; and, as from particular acts of that instinct, which makes experiences, mere images (as they ultimately are) upon the retina, the means of our perceiving something real beyond them, we go on to draw the general conclusion that there is a vast external world, so from the recurring instances in which conscience acts, forcing upon us importunately the mandate of a Superior, we have fresh and fresh evidence of the existence of a Sovereign Ruler, from whom those particular dictates which we experience proceed; so that... we may, *by means of that induction* from particular experiences of conscience, have as good a warrant for concluding the Ubiquitous Presence of One Supreme Master, as we have, from parallel experience of sense, for assenting to the fact of a multiform and vast world, material and mental.³⁸

Newman certainly thinks we have an instinct toward believing in things like the existence of the external world. But it is also clear that he thinks this belief is reasonable in that it is built upon a large-scale induction from experience. Belief in the external world and belief in God are not fundamental arational commitments but rational beliefs from outer sense experience and the inner experience of conscience. While neither basis irrefutably demonstrates the existence of its object, such inductions are not groundless. They are, in fact, empirically grounded. We see no reason to suppose that such beliefs cannot be the subject of rational evaluation.

What is more, whereas in Wittgensteinian hinge epistemology and quasi-fideism, certitude belongs to the foundations, for Newman certitude (including religious certitude) arises at the summit of one's noetic structure. Certitude is a difficult concept in Newman. However, he holds that paradigmatic certitude is not found in simple assents by themselves. Rather, certitude is a kind of complex (or reflective) assent to one's simple assents, which as we have just seen are based upon broad inductions.³⁹ Certitude is not merely a simple, unreflective commitment at

³⁶Newman, *Grammar*, 46.

³⁷Newman, *Grammar*, 47; emphasis added.

³⁸Newman, *Grammar*, 47; emphasis added.

³⁹Newman, *Grammar*, 142.

the bottom of one's beliefs. As Newman writes, 'certitude, as I have said, is the perception of a truth with the perception that it is a truth, or the consciousness of knowing, as expressed in the phrase, "I know that I know"'.⁴⁰

In the *Grammar*, Newman asks how it is that we can be so certain of ordinary facts such as our own mortality and that Great Britain is an island even though we cannot demonstrate such truths decisively. How is it that we assent to such propositions with the highest possible certitude? Newman's answer, as we began to see above, involves an informal cumulative case from a great many sources of information. Newman argues that we have a natural 'illative' or inductive sense.⁴¹ This is the name Newman gives to our ability to form beliefs based on broad-scale inductions from numerous and disparate lines of evidence. Without doing exact calculations, our minds are capable of summing up a great deal of evidence and believing in its direction. In other words, our everyday certitudes arise from a process of reasoning—even if it is not a formal process, let alone a demonstration.⁴² With respect to quasi-fideism in particular, notice that (as we saw above) faith is a kind of implicit reasoning rather than an arational commitment from which reason begins.⁴³ These are assents of reason, not unquestionable commitments of the sentiments. In other words, it is a conclusion based upon evidence, even if it is not a demonstrative conclusion.⁴⁴

Hence, Newmanian religious epistemology does not begin from arational hinge commitments such as belief in God but rather from experience and a broad base of evidence. Out of this comes rational assent on often implicit grounds, not mere dogmatic commitment. If this is so, then we have another reason to doubt that Newman can properly be considered a proto-quasi-fideist.

V. OBJECTION 3: NEWMAN ON LOCKE

We are now in a better position to understand Newman's disagreement with Locke and the problem it poses for Pritchard's reading of Newman. As we have seen, Pritchard claims that 'Newman opposes a Lockean conception of our basis for religious belief'.⁴⁵ However, Newman is not rejecting Locke's evidentialist epistemology *per se* but rather challenging him on the nature and scope of knowledge and certitude. Newman's engagement with Locke in the *Grammar* is both appreciative and critical. On the one hand, Newman deeply admires Locke's commitment to the pursuit of truth. He concurs with many of Locke's 'remarks upon reasoning and proof' and with his critical evaluation of enthusiasm.⁴⁶ On the other hand, Newman insists that we should let the empirical facts guide our epistemological categories. Locke, according to Newman, proceeds more from an *a priori* view of human cognition than from the world of

⁴⁰Newman, *Grammar*, 129.

⁴¹Wainwright says that the illative sense 'is principally employed in three ways: (1) in conducting an argument, (2) in assessing prior probabilities, and (3) in evaluating an argument's overall force.' Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart*, 58. See also Newman, *Grammar*, 232–33.

⁴²Cf. Newman, *Grammar*, 233.

⁴³See Newman, *University Sermons*, sermon 11.

⁴⁴For more on certitude and non-demonstrative reasoning in Newman, see Logan Paul Gage and Frederick D. Aquino, 'Newman the Fallibilist', *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 97, no. 1 (2023): 29–47, <https://doi.org/10.5840/acpq2023328262>.

⁴⁵Pritchard, 'Faith and Reason', 113.

⁴⁶Newman, *Grammar*, 107.

'facts'—a stinging critique of the father of British empiricism. More precisely, Newman's appeal is to the natural 'constitution of the human mind as we find it', and not to how we think it ought to work.⁴⁷

A key issue (and perhaps *the* key issue) in the second part of the *Grammar* is whether probable reasoning can lead to certitude. Locke holds that beliefs based on probabilities cannot achieve certitude, and so do not constitute knowledge. In other words, 'absolute assent has no legitimate exercise, except as ratifying acts of intuition or demonstration'.⁴⁸ Anything that falls short of these acts is 'but Faith, or Opinion, but not knowledge'.⁴⁹ On this point, Newman disagrees and thus rejects Locke's 'pretentious axiom that probable reasoning can never lead to certitude'.⁵⁰ Newman not only seeks to show that there can be appropriate certitude in matters of religion but also in other aspects of life. There are many propositions to which we unconditionally assent, though they do not arise from demonstration or intuition.⁵¹ So, Newman's criticism is not that Locke fails to recognise the groundlessness of our fundamental commitments but that he excludes probabilistically grounded beliefs from the realm of certitude.

Certainty, for Locke, is an epistemic state. It is built 'upon the clear Perception of the Agreement, or Disagreement of our *Ideas* attained either by immediate intuition' or in 'demonstration'.⁵² Beliefs based on probabilities fall short of certainty. Newman likewise thinks that certitude is an epistemic state. He defines it as the

perception of a truth with the perception that it is a truth, or the consciousness of knowing, as expressed in the phrase, 'I know that I know,' or 'I know that I know that I know,'—or simply 'I know'; for one reflex assertion of the mind about self sums up the series of self-consciousnesses without the need of any actual evolution of them.⁵³

The disagreement, then, is over the scope of certitude (which they both take to be a necessary condition of knowledge). Locke writes, 'Probability, then, being to supply the defect of our Knowledge, and to guide us where that fails, is always conversant about Propositions, whereof we have no certainty, but only some inducement to receive them for true'.⁵⁴ Newman, by con-

⁴⁷Newman, *Grammar*, 106, 142. In a letter to R. H. Hutton in 1870, Newman clarifies his criticism of Locke's notion of the *a priori*: 'I accuse Locke and others of judging of human nature, not from facts, but from a self-created vision of optimism by the rule of "what they think it ought to be."' In fact, Locke's account 'is not from experience, but from pure imagination.' John Henry Newman, *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, ed. Charles Stephen Dessain and Thomas Gornall, vol. 25 (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1973), 115.

⁴⁸Newman, *Grammar*, 106. See also John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 4.3.6-8, 4.3.14, 4.15.1-3.

⁴⁹Locke, *Essay*, 4.2.14.

⁵⁰Newman, *Grammar*, 106.

⁵¹M. Jamie Ferreira, *Scepticism and Reasonable Doubt: The British Naturalist Tradition in Wilkins, Hume, Reid and Newman* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 230, argues that Newman and Reid 'share a criticism of Locke's methodological refusal to consider as philosophically relevant' what all people 'call knowledge or certainty'.

⁵²Locke, *Essay*, 4.18.5.

⁵³Newman, *Grammar*, 129. See also Newman, *Grammar*, 134.

⁵⁴Locke, *Essay*, 4.15.3.

trast, holds that certitude can arise via probabilistic evidence rather than intuition and demonstration alone.

In this respect, Newman targets Locke's chapter in the *Essay concerning Human Understanding* that contrasts knowledge and certitude with probability.⁵⁵ Locke acknowledges that

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.⁵⁶

In effect, Locke, according to Newman, 'affirms and sanctions the very paradox' to which Newman himself is 'committed'—namely, the paradox of absolute assent arising from non-conclusive grounds.⁵⁷ And so it would be easy to see why Newman draws attention to the exceptions that Locke makes in his treatment of knowledge (those things that are so close to certain that we can treat them as certain and therefore as knowledge).

Locke's admission that humans naturally treat propositions as certain even though they are not the product of intuition or demonstration only shows that his standard for knowledge and certitude is too restrictive. He circumscribes the realm of knowledge and certitude in a way that does not fit the 'common voice' of humanity; for we are often certain on less than conclusive evidence.⁵⁸ The non-demonstrative conclusions to which we assent with certitude are 'numberless' rather than few.⁵⁹ For, 'It is *a law of nature* then, that we are certain on premises which do not touch <reach> demonstration.'⁶⁰ Newman adds, 'If our nature has any constitution, any laws, one of them is this absolute reception of propositions as true, which lie outside the narrow range of conclusions to which logic, formal or virtual, is tethered'.⁶¹ For Newman, the real contrast is between demonstrative and non-demonstrative (probabilistic) ways of acquiring certitude, not, as Locke stipulates, between certitude and probability.⁶²

As a result, Newman's engagement with Locke is over whether there can be religious *knowledge*. Knowledge (and certitude), as Newman seeks to show, has a 'natural', 'normal', and 'legitimate place in our mental constitution'.⁶³ Newman agrees with Locke that a 'lover of truth' should not hold any proposition with greater assurance than the proofs it is built upon will warrant'.⁶⁴ Yet, there are assents that people give on 'evidence short of intuition

⁵⁵See Locke, *Essay*, 4.15.

⁵⁶Locke, *Essay*, 4.15.2; emphasis added.

⁵⁷Newman, *Grammar*, 107.

⁵⁸Newman, *Grammar*, 106.

⁵⁹Newman, *Grammar*, 116.

⁶⁰Newman, *Letters and Diaries*, xxiv.104. See also R. A. Naulty, 'Newman's Dispute with Locke', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 11, no. 4 (1973): 455, <https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.2008.0447>.

⁶¹Newman, *Grammar*, 118.

⁶²Newman, *Letters and Diaries*, xi.289, 293.

⁶³Newman, *Grammar*, 137, 149.

⁶⁴Newman, *Grammar*, 108. See also Locke, *Essay*, 4.19.1.

and demonstration, yet which are as unconditional as if they had that highest evidence'.⁶⁵ Newman broadens Locke's category of knowledge by allowing in beliefs with nearly conclusive probabilistic grounds. After all, Newman argues, we know (on probabilistic grounds)—and are even certain—that we will die, that there is an external world, and that Great Britain is an island. Such beliefs receive unqualified acceptance, though they cannot be demonstrated. On 'all these truths we have an immediate and an unhesitating hold, nor do we think ourselves guilty of not loving truth for truth's sake, because we cannot reach them through a series of intuitive propositions'.⁶⁶ People render unconditional assents to propositions that fall short of demonstrative proof and admit of nothing higher than probable reasoning.

In short, if Newman's disagreement with Locke is not a wholesale rejection of evidentialist epistemology but rather a disagreement about whether probabilistic reasoning can lead to certitude and knowledge, then we have yet another reason to think that Pritchard's reading of Newman as a quasi-fideist is incorrect. Newman does not reject the need for reasons to ground our certitudes; rather, he argues that these reasons can probabilistically rather than demonstratively ground our certitudes. Newman rejects Locke's demanding grounds, not the having of grounds altogether.

VI. CONCLUSION

In summary, we have advanced three points. First, Newman's parity argument does not claim that religious and non-religious beliefs are on a par because both are groundless; instead, they are on a par because both often stem from implicit rather than explicit reasoning. Second, Newman's distinction between simple and complex assent does not map onto the Wittgensteinian distinction between groundless, arational hinge commitments and beliefs that flow from these hinges. For Newman, simple and complex assent differ in terms of the believer's level of awareness of their grounds. Third, and finally, Newman does not reject Locke's evidentialism *in toto*. Instead, he argues that certitude is not restricted to intuition and demonstration but often rightly includes probabilistically supported (or fallibly evidenced) beliefs.

It may be that Pritchard's quasi-fideism is defensible on its own terms. As Pritchard says, 'the defensibility of such a proposal is obviously independent of whoever proposed it.'⁶⁷ However, if our objections are sound, John Henry Newman's religious epistemology bears little resemblance to Wittgensteinian quasi-fideism.

⁶⁵Newman, *Grammar*, 116–17.

⁶⁶Newman, *Grammar*, 118.

⁶⁷Pritchard, 'Faith and Reason', 103.