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CARDINAL NEWMAN ON THE INDEFECTIBILITY OF CERTITUDE

Jay NEWMAN

There are many passages in Cardinal Newman's *Grammar of Assent* which provide fresh insights into subjects widely discussed by contemporary epistemologists, and some of the most interesting of these are to be found in the section of the treatise which deals with the "Indefectibility of Certitude" (Chapter 7, § 2). In the following pages we shall consider Newman's attack on epistemological scepticism and his analysis of certitude. We are going to see that there is a fundamental inconsistency in Newman's theory of certitude, but we shall also find that Newman has raised some disturbing epistemological problems.

Newman's philosophy falls very much within the British Empiricist tradition. Newman took his early philosophical training at Oxford, was a keen student of Locke's *Essay*, and was familiar with the idealistic and sceptical arguments of Berkeley and Hume. His discussion of the indefectibility of certitude begins with an attack on a kind of scepticism with which all contemporary epistemologists are familiar. He writes,

What looks like certitude always is exposed to the chance of turning out to be a mistake. If our intimate, deliberate conviction may be counterfeit in the case of one proposition, why not in the case of another? If in the case of one man, why not in the case of a hundred? Is certitude then ever possible without the attendant gift of infallibility?

And in the next paragraph, he asks,

And, as to the feeling of finality and security, ought it ever to be indulged? Is it not a mere weakness or extravagance; a deceit, to be eschewed by every clear and prudent mind? With the countless instances, on all sides of us, of human fallibility, with the constant exhibitions of antagonist certitudes, who can so sin against modesty and sobriety of mind, as not to be content with probability, as the true guide of life, renouncing ambitious thoughts, which are sure either to delude him, or to disappoint?

Newman begins his answer by distinguishing between infallibility and certitude. He argues that many people have been led to scepticism because of their failure to understand this distinction. "A certitude," Newman writes, "is directed to this or that particular proposition; it is not a faculty or gift, but a disposition of mind relatively to a definite case which is before me". Infallibility, on the other hand, "is a faculty or gift, and relates, not to some one truth in particular, but to all possible propositions in a given subject-matter". Only people, and not beliefs or

opinions, are fallible or infallible. A person can be fallible and still be certain of specific propositions:

Certitude is at most nothing more than infallibility *pro hac vice*, and promises nothing as to the truth of any proposition besides its own. That I am certain of this proposition to-day, is no ground for thinking that I shall have a right to be certain of that proposition to-morrow; and that I am wrong in my convictions about to-day's proposition, does not hinder my having a true conviction, a genuine certitude, about to-morrow's proposition. If indeed I claimed to be infallible, one failure would shiver my claim to pieces; but I may claim to be certain of the truth to which I have already attained, though I should arrive at no new truths in addition as long as I live.

After making this important distinction between a faculty and a propositional attitude, Newman admits that he has not as yet disposed of the problem of epistemological scepticism. Certitude, he observes, involves a sense of security and of repose, and it is still not clear how this security can be ours. We have all been "balked by false certitudes a hundred times," and so how is future certitude possible "when it thus manifestly ministers to error and to scepticism?" In answering this new question, Newman does not deny that the false certitudes of the past "are to the prejudice of subsequent ones." He admits that they constitute an "antecedent difficulty" in our allowing ourselves to be certain of something today or tomorrow. "[B]ut antecedent objections to an act are not sufficient of themselves to prohibit its exercise; they may demand of us an increased circumspection before committing ourselves to it, but may be met with reasons more than sufficient to overcome them." Newman is making an empirical claim here, and a true one. At the time when Newman was writing these lines, Peirce's study of "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities" had just appeared in an 1868 edition of the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*. There, criticizing the scepticism of Descartes' first *Meditation*, Peirce warns, "Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts." This theme is one of Newman's favorites, and can be traced back to his earliest philosophical writings. Still, that we are and can be certain does not entail that we have a right to be. Newman clearly believes that the reasons that overcome the antecedent objections are sound ones, reasons that *ought* to overcome them. Now, certitude is an assent "given expressly after reasoning," and if my certitude is unfounded, "it is the reasoning that is in fault, not my assent to it." Moreover,

It is the law of my mind to seal up the conclusions to which ratiocination has brought me, by that formal assent which I have called a certitude. I could indeed have withheld my assent, but I should have acted against my nature, had I done so when there was what I considered a proof; and I did only what was fitting, what was incumbent on me, upon those existing conditions, in giving it.

So much for Newman's attack on a basic kind of epistemological scepticism. Now let us contrast it with his analysis of certitude. In summarizing his views on the nature of certitude in the last paragraph of Chapter 7, Newman writes,

It seems then that on the whole there are three conditions of certitude: that it follows on investigation and proof, that it is accompanied by a specific sense

of intellectual satisfaction and repose, and that it is irreversible. If the assent is made without rational grounds, it is a rash judgment, a fancy, or a prejudice; if without the sense of finality, it is scarcely more than an inference; if without permanence, it is a mere conviction.

Certitude is probably not the only indefectible assent: "prejudice may be such," but the two assents cannot be confused, for the latter is an assent "previous to rational grounds." Indefectibility is at least a "negative test of certitude, or *sine qua non* condition, so that whoever loses his conviction on a given point is thereby proved not to have been certain of it." Some contemporary epistemologists (e.g., certain Austinians) would criticize Newman on this point, but Newman is certainly trying hard to give an account of expressions like "I am certain that . . ." which is faithful to ordinary-language usage. In fact, throughout the *Grammar*, Newman is constantly appealing to ordinary language as a sounder criterion than the technical terminology of philosophers and intellectuals, whom Newman does not trust as much as the average man.

In pointing to rationality, the sense of finality, and permanence, Newman has set down three very demanding conditions of certitude. He has shown that he is willing to dismiss much that appears to be certitude as "false certitude," a counterfeit article which is quite different from the genuine one. But he has also attacked epistemological scepticism and argued that certitude has a "definite and fixed place among our mental acts." But now he begins to run into trouble. How do we know when we are certain? At subsection 6 of Chapter 7, § 2, Newman writes,

Certitude does not admit of an interior, immediate test, sufficient to discriminate it from false certitude. Such a test is rendered impossible from the circumstance that, when we make the mental act expressed by "I know," we sum up the whole series of reflex judgments which might, each in turn, successively exercise a critical function towards those of the series which precede it.

A few pages earlier, at subsection 4, he has written,

[C]ertitude follows upon examination and proof, as the bell sounds the hour, when the hands reach it,—so that no act or state of the intellect is certitude, however it may resemble it, which does not observe this appointed law. This proviso greatly diminishes the catalogue of genuine certitudes.

At subsection 3, he has described the sense of certitude as "the bell of the intellect," and warned, "that it strikes when it should not is a proof that the clock is out of order, no proof that the bell will be untrustworthy and useless, when it comes to us adjusted and regulated from the hands of the clock-maker." Is Newman being consistent here?

That he is not becomes quite clear when we consider his talk about the "illative sense" in Chapter 9. "It is the mind that reasons, not any technical apparatus of words and propositions," and we may call its power of "judging and concluding" the "Illative Sense" (§ 2). At the end of Chapter 8, Newman writes that, "Judgment then in all concrete matter is the architectonic faculty; and what may be called the Illative Sense, or right judgment in ratiocination, is one branch

of it." Now, in Chapter 9, he asks if there is any *criterion* of the accuracy of an inference, "such as may be our warrant that certitude is rightly elicited in favour of the proposition inferred." He answers that there is—"the sole and final judgment on the validity of an inference in concrete matter is committed to the personal action of the ratiocinative faculty, the perfection or virtue of which I have called the Illative Sense. . . ." The illative sense plays an important role in Newman's project. Newman is a Christian apologist, and his aim in the *Grammar* is to show that a simple, unlearned man can, without any knowledge of complex philosophical arguments, be—and have a right to be—certain of the truth of religious propositions. At Chapter 8, § 2, which bridges his discussions of the indefectibility of certitude and the role of the illative sense, he suggests that formal inference does not enable us to become certain of what is concrete. Certitude in concrete matter depends on our recognition of the "cumulation" and "converging" of subtle "probabilities." So if the average man does not possess something like the illative sense, and cannot detect when "probabilities" have "converged" to justify certitude, then, being wholly ignorant of the scientific demonstrations of Aquinas and others, he cannot and should not feel certain that God exists, that the Church's teachings are true, etc. Whenever an empiricist philosopher has trouble explaining something that has to be explained and cannot be explained in any other way, he either turns to scepticism or calls upon a special sense or faculty. Newman, eschewing scepticism, gives us an illative sense, one which can be understood when it is compared to parallel faculties like *phronesis*.

Now we are in the position to see the fundamental inconsistency in Newman's theory of certitude. Newman has introduced a special *faculty* in order to show how certitude in concrete matter is possible and warrantable (i.e., recognizable as "rightly elicited"). Newman has clearly committed himself to the position that the warrantability of certitude depends on the reliability of the illative sense, which is the "sole and final" judge of inferences in concrete matter. But (the sense of) certitude would not even be possible—in concrete matter, at least—if we lacked a faculty which enables us to recognize the convergence of probabilities. So the illative sense saves us from scepticism, from uncertainty. Or does it? In *attacking* scepticism, Newman has argued that the reliability of our judgment is only one of several factors that we consider prior to allowing ourselves to be certain of a particular proposition. The "antecedent difficulty" of false certitudes of the past being "to the prejudice of subsequent ones" can be *overcome* by sound *reasons* which are in some sense *independent* of the faculty of judgment. But can reasons—even very good ones—justify or ground certitude when the "sole and final" judge is defective, unreliable, untrustworthy? Newman wants to have his cake and eat it. He says that certitude is possible and warrantable because we possess a special faculty, the illative sense. But he also says that certitude is possible and warrantable because our confidence in our faculty of judgment is not a necessary condition of it.

Now consider Newman's clock analogy. Newman admits that the sense of certitude, the bell of the intellect, often strikes when it should not. Still, according to Newman, that does not mean that the "clock" (the faculty of judgment) will be

untrustworthy and useless when it comes back to us "adjusted and regulated from the hands of the clock-maker." This analogy is far from satisfactory. For one thing, Newman's original claim was, "that I am wrong in my convictions about to-day's proposition, does not hinder my having a true conviction, a genuine certitude, about to-morrow's proposition." But in the case of a clock, when we know that it has misled us once, we will not trust it again *until it has been repaired*. So, if the analogy is to hold, if I am wrong in my convictions about today's proposition, I should not trust my illative sense until it has been "adjusted and regulated." But to whom does one go to have his illative sense adjusted and regulated? We can agree with Newman that the faculty of judgment does "require and admit of discipline." But how is it disciplined and adjusted and regulated? If inference in concrete matter is really as personal and informal as Newman thinks it is, then studying logic is not going to help us to adjust our illative senses. Besides, if the simple, unlearned man has to go to someone to have his faculty of judgment adjusted, then has not Newman's whole apologetical project been undermined? For his main aim was to show how the simple, unlearned man can, without much difficulty, come to be certain of the truth of religious propositions. Newman could, perhaps, as he is often inclined to do, give a sort of Augustinian reply to this challenge, and argue that faith brings with it the appropriate adjustment of our faculty of judgment. But Newman himself admits that the logical order is reason first and faith second, and in any case, not many contemporary epistemologists are impressed by this particular kind of Augustinian move. Newman could also argue for the relevance here of his famous (and unsatisfactory) distinction between "inferences" and "assents," but even if this distinction were a satisfactory one, the fact is that in § 2 of Chapter 7, Newman himself has blurred the distinction.

It is clear that Cardinal Newman's approach to certitude is inconsistent and thus unsatisfactory; but we are still left with the epistemological problems that he has raised in his discussion. As an apologist, Newman recognizes the need for certitude:

Without certitude in religious faith there may be much decency of profession and of observance, but there can be not habit of prayer, no directness of devotion, no intercourse with the unseen, no generosity of self-sacrifice. Certitude then is essential to the Christian. . . . (Chapter 7, §1.)

As far as Newman is concerned, this fact alone forces us to reject epistemological scepticism. Epistemological scepticism breeds theological scepticism. Newman is no ordinary epistemologist, but a committed Christian. He even goes so far as to say that the fact of certitude is a proof that it is not a weakness to be certain—"How it comes about that we can be certain is not my business to determine; for me it is sufficient that certitude is left" (Chapter 9, Introduction). Still, Newman knows that he is not much of an apologist if he does not confront the problems that he has raised. And so he tries to show certitude is possible even though we are all well aware that we have felt certain of some things which have turned out to be false. One answer that he gives is that much that passes for (the sense of) certitude is not the real thing. But we have been interested in his two other answers, the two

which conflict. The first is, in effect, that certitude is based on reasons; the past unreliability of our faculty of judgment is a consideration to be taken into account, but only one of many, and it can be outweighed or “overcome” by others. This answer does dispose of the problem of epistemological scepticism. But even Newman is unhappy with it, for we are clearly left with a basic question—“How do we *know* that reasons *x*, *y*, and *z* overcome the ‘antecedent difficulty’ of the past unreliability of our faculty of judgment?” *That faculty* is being called upon to evaluate conditions upon which it is itself overruled! So Newman is forced to concede that we cannot throw out the “clock”; we have to have it adjusted. But we are not clear as to how the clock can be adjusted; and by admitting that the clock *has* to be adjusted, we are admitting that the problem of epistemological scepticism still stands. Yet, recognizing that our faculty of judgment has misled us itself involves a judgment, a judgment on the faculty. There cannot be an infinite regression of such faculties of judgment ; perhaps the “illative sense” is self-critical, and in that sense, truly the “sole and final” judge. If so, Newman’s final answer is the most attractive. But have we really disposed of the problem of epistemological scepticism when we have followed Newman in acknowledging the existence of a judge or sense which is so reliable that it even recognizes its own unreliability?