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## John Henry Newman and the Significance of Theistic Proof

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JOHN HENRY NEWMAN  
AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THEISTIC PROOF  
BY  
MARY SUSAN GLASSON

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
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## ABSTRACT

The central problem of this paper is to decide the significance of formal argument for God's existence, in light of John Henry Newman's distinction between notional and real assent. If God in fact exists, then only real assent to the proposition asserting his existence is adequate. Notional assent is inadequate because it is assent to a notion or abstraction, and not to a present reality. But on Newman's view it is notional assent which normally follows on a formal inference, therefore the significance of traditional formal arguments is thrown into question.

Newman has claimed that our attitude toward a proposition may be one of three; we may doubt it, infer it, or assent to it, and to assent to it is to hold it unconditionally. That unconditional assent may be of two kinds, notional or real. A notional assent is an assent to a proposition whose terms are apprehended as notions; a real assent is an assent to a proposition whose terms stand for things or for images, and Newman says alternately both. The former position, that in real assent the terms of a proposition stand for things, requires a strongly realistic theory of knowledge, which Newman seems to deny. Because

the distinction cannot be tied to that between notions and things, because of epistemological constraints, nor to singular and general terms, because the relationship is indirect, images assume great importance. But Newman is concerned with assents to many propositions containing terms we cannot imagine in the ordinary sense, consequently "image" is understood broadly.

One of those propositions is the proposition "God exists" and Newman offers an argument in its support, an argument from conscience, and he describes the characteristics of a real assent to God's existence. It involves an image especially of the predicate term, which is personal because it arises out of the individual's experience, and practical because images affect our feelings, and we act when our feelings direct us. The argument divides conscience into sanction, or "commandingness" and law, or what is commanded. It derives its force from the sanction of conscience; conscience could not have its authority over us, and we would not respond emotionally as we do, if God did not exist.

Newman has overlooked traditional metaphysical proofs as a source of the same kind of real, imaginative, assent. Existential interpreters of Thomas Aquinas, and existentialists in general have described quite well the real apprehension of existence which makes possible real assent to the proposition "God exists", and at the same time lends force to the traditional argument from contingent existence.

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in 1922 (published in English as A Newman Synthesis in 1931<sup>3</sup>) and Nedoncelle's La Philosophie Religieuse de John Henry Newman, published in 1946.<sup>4</sup> But while scathing philosophical analyses of Newman's work abounded before the second world war, and possibly because they were so numerous and inaccurate, they are now scarce. What has happened according to Weatherby, author of Cardinal Newman in His Age, is that Newman scholars represent him more accurately now, but because they are convinced of his religious orthodoxy and sympathetic to it (modernism is a heterodox position in the Roman Catholic Church) they have overlooked the difficulties that Newman's philosophy presents.<sup>5</sup>

Those difficulties are a consequence of the very things for which Newman is admired: his coming to terms with the subjectivism, individualism, and relativism which characterize later nineteenth and twentieth century thought. Newman was willing to grant to the subjectivists that we know best what is interior to us, to individualists that things or persons or images and not universal propositions are the most powerful sources of religious knowledge, and to relativists that the apprehension of religious truth is a personal product that varies greatly from one to another. And yet he clearly meant to preserve these positions from consequences incompatible with Roman Catholic doctrine, for

instance the doctrine that the existence of God can be proven by natural reason.

One of the areas in which Newman's thought runs counter to what he himself calls "the tradition of 1500 years" is the relationship between faith and reason. More specifically, he contradicts a traditional view of the role that philosophical argument is to play in deciding religious questions.

Newman claims first, that for most men who believe, say that God exists, their belief is not grounded in formal argument, but in a variety of indicators. He writes in the Development of Christian Doctrine

that as for the reasons of believing, they are for the most part implicit, and but slightly recognized by the mind that is under their influence, that they consist moreover rather of presumptions and guesses, ventures after the truth than of accurate proofs; and that probable arguments are sufficient for conclusions which we ever embrace as most certain and turn to the most important uses.<sup>6</sup>

What is radical in Newman is that he is willing to call the conclusion of that process a "certainty" and that the conviction which accompanies it "certitude".<sup>7</sup> Most philosophers have restricted certainty to the conclusion of formal demonstrative proof. Newman has attempted to admit a variety of means of coming to know propositions, while still securing their truth.

Second, Newman doubts that even with a formal demonstrative proof available, that men would come to what

he calls "real assent" or certitude. He writes in the Grammar of Assent

This is why science has so little of a religious tendency; deductions have no power of persuasion. The heart is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through imagination. . . to most men argument makes the point in hand only more doubtful, and considerably less impressive. After all man is not a reasoning animal; he is a seeing, feeling, contemplating, acting animal. . . Life is not long enough for a religion of inferences; we shall never have done beginning, if we determine to begin with proof.<sup>8</sup>

Formal argument then for Newman is not a process by which men ordinarily come to real assent, and it is the nature of the relationship between philosophical argument for and real assent to God's existence which poses the central problem of this paper. The paper has three parts:

I) a drawing-out of the distinction between notional and real with criticisms; II) a discussion of Newman's argument from conscience for God's existence; and III) a parallel discussion of Aquinas' argument from contingent existence.

Newman offers in the Grammar of Assent his outstanding contribution to the philosophy of religion, and to the theory of knowledge as well, that is the distinction between real and notional assent. Briefly, real assent is an assent to a proposition whose terms stand for things. It is opposed to an assent to a proposition whose terms stand for notions or abstractions. What Newman attempts to give in the Grammar is an epistemological account of a familiar truth about our ordinary assents. "The



destruction of the world by nuclear weapons is imminent," is sometimes a notional proposition and sometimes a real proposition to a given individual, and his assent, if he assents, to it is correspondingly notional, or real. About the notional we say "I knew it, but I didn't really see it, or it didn't matter to me" and about the real assent "All of a sudden I realized it, or it struck me; it hit home." How this distinction can be drawn on an epistemological level is the topic of the first section of this paper. Although I think there are insurmountable difficulties in Newman's account of the distinction between notional and real assent, still real assent is the goal of any theistic proof.

In the second section I look critically at the kind of approach to God's existence Newman himself thinks is most persuasive. Newman outlines a formal argument from conscience to God's existence in the chapter "Proof of Theism" in his Philosophical Notebook. Why he does so, given his view of deductive argument, is discussed. There is an informal version of the same argument in the Grammar. An informal argument ordinarily does not supply the reader with enough information to ensure its conclusion, and Newman thinks no argument about concrete facts can. The conclusion of a formal argument must be true if its premises are true, so it seems a reader who was convinced of the truth of its premises, would be

equally sure of its conclusion. It is thoroughly characteristic Newman to prefer the first informal approach.

In the third section I compare Aquinas' Third Way (Summa theologiae) to knowledge of the existence of God, to Newman's argument. Newman argues from the experience of conscience, Aquinas from contingent existence. (Something exists contingently if it is possible for it to exist or not exist.) I find Aquinas' argument more effective. Although it is difficult to give a full explanation on an epistemological level of real assent, formal argument does not preclude it.

## I. NOTIONAL AND REAL APPREHENSION AND ASSENT

This section critically explores the distinction Newman draws in the Grammar of Assent between notional and real assent to a given proposition. As will become clear, the difference between notional and real assent is largely a function of how we apprehend the terms--the subject and the predicate--of the proposition to which we give our assent. Whether or not we can differentiate between the two kinds of apprehension from within a modern, as Newman's is, theory of knowledge, is the central difficulty. But before asking that question, it is necessary to understand what Newman means by assent and apprehension, and the notional and real varieties of each.

### A. ASSENT

Newman thinks of coming to know as a process beginning with a question--Does God exist?, progressing to a conclusion--My conscience is troubled; therefore God exists, and ending in an assertion--God exists. Each of those statements, the question, the conclusion, and the assertion, he calls propositions. Doubt, inference, and assent are the corresponding "modes of holding propositions," which Newman defines in this way: to doubt a proposition is to be unable to hold it; to

infer a proposition is to hold it on sufficient grounds, and to assent to a proposition is to hold it.<sup>9</sup>

Newman considers his categories exclusive. Propositions which are inferred, or held on sufficient grounds, are not a subset of propositions which are assented to, or simply held. To hold on sufficient grounds is for Newman a peculiar kind of holding; assent itself has a different character. In fact, establishing the "substantiveness" of assent is central to the Grammar. To support the intrinsic difference of assent from inference, Newman points out that even in cases where an argument disposes us to assent, assent can be withheld, or given and then withdrawn while the argument is unchanged, or endure after the argument is forgotten.<sup>10</sup>

By treating assent and inference as distinct, Newman divorces himself from the position that Locke takes: that our assent to a proposition should never exceed the strength of the arguments we have in its favor (and the correlative view that assents may vary in degree), and Newman does so in order to defend the religious assents of most men. His method has been called "phenomenological" in contrast to Locke's, who

consults his own ideal of how the mind ought to act instead of interrogating human nature, as an existing thing, as it is found in the world. Instead of going by the testimony of psychological facts. . . he would form men as he thinks they ought to be formed, into something better and higher.<sup>11</sup>

Since our legitimate assents do in fact exceed the strength of our arguments, Newman concludes that Locke's position must be incorrect. Many of the convictions Locke would call irrational or enthusiastic Newman claims are natural and legitimate.

But in allowing for the independence of assent from inference, Newman seems to simultaneously commit himself to the view that a proposition which is inferred must always be held conditionally, and cannot be assented to until it somehow breaks free from argument. For Newman, to infer is always to hold a proposition conditionally. Even the conclusion of a demonstration, that is a sound argument whose premises are held unconditionally, is, insofar as it is inferred, held conditionally. That Newman does mean to take this unusual position is evident in the following quote:

If assent is the acceptance of truth, and truth is the proper object of the intellect, and no one can hold conditionally what by the same act he holds to be true, here too is a reason for saying that assent is an adhesion without reserve or doubt to the proposition to which it is given. And again, it is to be presumed that the word has not two meanings: what it has at one time it has at another. Inference is always inference; even if demonstrative, it is still conditional; it establishes an incontrovertible conclusion on the condition of incontrovertible premisses.<sup>12</sup>

Now in most discussions of inference Newman excludes demonstration, "because in concrete matter, on which I am engaged, demonstration is impossible." He does not define "concrete matter," but clearly means

to include in the Grammar questions surrounding the  
existence of God.<sup>13</sup>

## B. APPREHENSION

The model for Newman's analysis of apprehension is the categorical proposition, a proposition of the kind "Some women are logical," where "women" is the subject term, and "logical" the predicate term. He does not address the difficulties presented by other kinds of statements in the Grammar. Newman maintains that assent, to a greater degree than inference, requires apprehension of the terms of its proposition, especially the predicate term, because the predicate term works to elucidate the subject. An inference, by way of contrast, can operate on symbols of unknown meaning.<sup>14</sup>

### Assent

is the absolute acceptance of a proposition without any condition, . . . it presupposes the condition, not only of some previous inference in favour of the proposition, but especially of some concomitant apprehension of its terms.<sup>15</sup>

When he emphasizes the part that apprehension of the predicate term plays in our assent to a proposition, Newman gives as examples propositions which are definitions of unknown terms:

"Trade is the interchange of goods,"  
and  
"Lucern is food for cattle."<sup>16</sup>

It is clear that many propositions, even if they fit the "subject is predicate" form, differ from these examples, and Newman's selectivity here is discussed in the critical remarks which follow. Apprehension itself Newman defines simply as "our imposition of a sense on the terms of which propositions are composed."<sup>17</sup> And to impose a sense is to make a term stand for a notion, or for a thing.

### C. THE NOTIONAL/REAL DISTINCTION

Whether, in our apprehension of a proposition, its terms stand for notions, or for things, determines whether our apprehension is notional or real. These are the alternatives:

Sometimes they [terms] stand for certain ideas existing inside our own minds, and for nothing outside of them; sometimes for things simply external to us, brought home to us by the experiences we have of them. . .

Now there are propositions, in which one or both of the terms are common nouns, as standing for what is abstract, general, and non-existing, . . . these I shall call notional propositions, and the apprehension with which we infer or assent to them, notional.

And there are propositions, which are composed of singular nouns, and of which the terms stand for things external to us, unit and individual, . . . and these I shall call real propositions, and their apprehension real.<sup>18</sup>

So at its simplest, the distinction between notional and real apprehension, and therefore assent, seems to be this: we have in notional apprehension a relationship between terms which are common nouns

and notions which exist only in our minds, and in real apprehension a relationship between terms which are singular nouns and things which exist externally to us. Notional assent to a proposition is correlative with notional apprehension of the proposition's terms, and real assent to a proposition requires real apprehension of the proposition's terms. And we have two parallel hierarchical arrangements, from the notion or thing, to the notional assent, or real assent

notion:	thing:
(spring-flowering bulbs)	(the lilac near the fence)
general term	singular term
notional apprehension	real apprehension
notional proposition:	real proposition:
("The first things up are spring-flowering bulbs.")	("The one that didn't bloom last year is the lilac near the fence.")
notional assent or inference	real assent

This diagram, which the passage quoted above seems to justify, suggests first, that the distinction between notions and things is to be drawn along the same lines as the distinction between general and singular terms. And second, that notions and things, which are what terms stand for, are easily distinguished. Note that it would not be meaningful to talk about notional and real assent to the same proposition, as we are in the question of assent to the proposition "God exists" if assent were simply a function of the proposition. So it must be possible to refer that



distinction back to something other than the proposition itself.

#### D. CRITICAL REMARKS

A preliminary difficulty referred to above is that when Newman assigns such importance to our apprehension of the predicate term in determining how we assent to a proposition, he has in mind propositions which are definitions, where the predicate does elucidate the subject. But many of our assents are not to definitions of unknown terms. Among the propositions we assent to are statements that a certain thing exists. In the proposition "My mother exists" we do not find a predicate elucidating its subject. (Many logicians would deny that the proposition has a logical predicate at all.) So a proposition that Newman means to include as a possible object of real assent, falls outside of the class suggested by his explanation of assent itself.

A second complication is the relation between notional and real apprehension, and general and singular terms. The notional/real distinction appears, in the simple diagram and in the quoted passage on which it is based, to be tied directly to the distinction within the spoken or written proposition between general and singular terms, general terms being involved in notional apprehension and assent, and singular terms in

real. The example which follows though allows real assent to propositions containing general nouns, and notional assent to propositions containing singular nouns. Newman uses the example of a child who tastes sugar for the first time. He understands his nurse's notional proposition "Sugar is sweet" to mean "This sugar is this sweet thing." Both "sugar" and "sweet" stand for things to him, or "images" in the peculiar sense that Newman uses the word, and he has a real apprehension of both terms.<sup>19</sup>

Incidentally, Newman does not suggest that the child misunderstands the proposition "Sugar is sweet." Apprehension is properly our own imposition of a sense on a term. The priority of an individual's subjective understanding of a term's meaning, over any more objective or shared understanding of its meaning, and the priority of a subjective impression left by an external object, over the object itself, is characteristic of what Edward Sillem has called Newman's "personalism" which makes him both attractive, and suspect.<sup>20</sup>

If we allow Newman's suggestion, and draw the notional/real distinction along the same lines as that between general and singular nouns, then again propositions which Newman maintains can be really assented to, fall outside of the class defined by his explanation.

The third and most important difficulty is this. The quality of our apprehension of a term cannot depend on whether or not the term is general or singular, but does depend on whether the term stands for a notion, or a thing, to the apprehender. That ability to discriminate what a term stands for, which Newman does not question, appears to presuppose this general epistemological position: we have direct sensory experience of things, in contrast to notions, which are produced by abstraction from our sensory experience, and there is an immediacy about our experience of things which makes them clearly recognizable as things. But there is evidence that this is not Newman's basic epistemological position, and it is certainly not the modern consensus. When he expressly addresses epistemological questions in his Notebook Newman writes

I am conscious that I see what I call a tree or a house; and that consciousness is infallible. I am not conscious of the objective reality, but of the subjective sensation or impression.

and again

My point is, not to deny that our knowledge comes from experience, not to advocate innate forms, but to say that our experience is not so much of external things, but of our own minds.<sup>21</sup>

The passages in the Notebook date from 1859-1860, as compared to the Grammar which was written between 1866 and 1870, and the Notebook is admittedly exploratory.

Newman does not ask the same questions in the Grammar (i.e. What are the objects of consciousness?) that he asks in his Notebook, but he does mention the "objectum internum" or "subject-object" that is present in real assent.<sup>22</sup> The inconsistency of these passages with the passage quoted above (p. 11) is obvious. It is the same inconsistency that is reflected when Newman says alternately that in real apprehension a term stands for a thing,<sup>23</sup> or for an image.<sup>24</sup> Of course he means to connect the image to the thing, but he seems to have severed that connection.

Newman had in his youth gone as far as to doubt the reality of external objects. He writes in the Apologia that the Calvinist view he held at age fifteen, of being predestined for eternal glory, tended to confirm in him the idea of "two and two only absolute and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator," and the reality of other beings paled in comparison.<sup>25</sup> The significance of Newman's earlier questioning of the reality of external objects, and later affirmation that we know what is internal better than what is external to our minds is this. First, the distinction between notional and real apprehension is difficult to draw while remaining within Newman's epistemology, and second, Newman was sufficiently skeptical not to base an argument for God's existence on any knowledge of external objects.

The introduction of a "subjective impression" into real apprehension works to blur the distinction between notional and real apprehension in this way: if our consciousness of things is actually consciousness of a subjective impression, then real apprehension is a relationship between a term and that subjective impression, and the existence of the objective reality is a presumption.<sup>26</sup> Notional apprehension has been explained as a relationship between a term and a notion, and there is (I think) a parallel presumption that nothing external corresponds to what is appropriately apprehended as a notion. But then real apprehension is more like notional apprehension than it originally seemed to be. Terms do not stand for notions, or things, but for different kinds of mental objects, and objective reality seems to be beyond us. Remembering that to apprehend a term in a real way is to make it stand for a thing, the thing it must stand for is a subjective impression, when the object is before us; or an image, when the object is remembered or created by imagination out of past impressions. Modern psychologists might use "percept" in the first case, "memory image" in the second, and "created image" in the third.<sup>27</sup> Newman seems to use "image" for all three. The important point, and the last of these critical points, is that

the distinction between these two kinds of mental objects, notions and images, is less clear than either the distinction between notions and things, or between general and singular terms, as the discussion on images below will show.

What an image is, is the subject of the final part of this section, and what an image of God could be is the subject of the second and third sections. Real assent is also imaginative assent, and the presence of an image is evidently its defining characteristic. We have excluded two possible explanations of the difference between notional and real assent above: 1) that the terms of a proposition, either general or singular, will tell us the kind of assent it may involve (whether it is understood as general or singular helps to tell us); and 2) that the difference can be explained wholly in terms of what is apprehended--notion, or thing. For "thing", "subjective impression" or "image" must be substituted, and the distinction between notion and image is a difficult one.

#### E. IMAGES

Newman emphasizes the role of images in real assent in this passage from the Grammar

In its notional assents as well as in its inferences, the mind contemplates its own creations instead of things; in real, it is directed towards things, represented by the impressions which they have left on the imagination. These images, when assented-to, have an influence both on the individual and on society, which mere notions cannot exert.<sup>28</sup>

He extends the meaning of the term "image" in several important directions. First, as has been mentioned, he uses it by implication for the percept associated with a present object of perception, or for what he called in his Notebook a subjective impression. Second, he uses "image" for the impress of senses other than sight (say the memory of a smell), although "image" in ordinary language is more likely to mean something visual.<sup>29</sup> Third, he uses "image" even for past mental acts: "hope, inquiry, effort, triumph, disappointment, suspicion, hatred."<sup>30</sup> And last, Newman speaks of "images" of facts.<sup>31</sup> So beside there being images associated with the real apprehension of terms, there are also images associated with the real proposition which is assented to. The images of God involved in real assent to his existence certainly go far beyond mental pictures.

It is difficult to find any properties these images share, and I think there is only one which is critical, that is their "impressiveness". There may be a clue to what Newman means by "image" or "imaginative assent" in cases where there can be no

question of an object or sight (like "God exists"), in the meaning of "image" when something is actually seen.

When an object is perceived, the eye's lens focuses an image on the retina. That image is an impress left by the experience of seeing. The image is there during perception; it can be recalled at a later time, and it can be combined with other images to create composite images of never-experienced things. And I think it is traces or impresses of experiences, that need not be in any sense visual images, that Newman thinks are required for real assent. A dictionary definition of "impress" is

A mark, character, figure, or image produced by or as by pressure; as, the impress of a seal in wax,

and of "impressive"

Relating to that which has an internal effect or carries a meaning for the subject himself.<sup>32</sup>

Take an example of Newman's that fits the broader sense of "image".

Able men. . . who are exercised in physical investigations. . . cannot bring themselves to entertain as a hypothesis. . . a thought contrary to that vivid impression of which they are the victims, that the uniformity of nature, which they witness hour by hour, is equivalent to a necessary, inviolable law.<sup>33</sup>

In short, I think that although Newman does not use "image" literally, he does use it meaningfully; the term suggests qualities that real assent needs.



In a real assent to a proposition concerning God's existence, we can expect to find some inference which leads to our asserting the proposition, and real apprehension of the proposition's terms, especially its predicate term.

## II. NEWMAN'S ARGUMENT FROM CONSCIENCE

The images of real assent "have an influence both on the individual, and on society, which mere notions cannot exert."<sup>34</sup> Now if it is true, then the proposition "God exists" ought to matter. So the ultimate importance of any formal argument for God's existence lies in the extent of its association with real assent. Assent has two prerequisites: more importantly, the apprehension of the predicate term of the proposition which is assented to, and less importantly, some previous inference, in the broadest sense, supporting the proposition.<sup>35</sup>

The role of inference in real assent is for Newman clearly secondary to the role that images play, because he thinks sophisticated inference first, to be closed to most men who should believe, and second, even to be unsuited to real assent. He writes in the University Sermons on the first point "If children, if the poor, if the busy, can have true faith, yet cannot weigh evidence, evidence is not the simple foundation on which faith is built."<sup>36</sup> And on the second, in the Grammar

the paradox is true, that, when Inference is clearest, Assent may be least forcible, and, when Assent is most intense, Inference may be least distinct; for though acts of assent require previous acts of inference, they require them, not as adequate causes, but as sine qua non conditions, and while the apprehension strengthens Assent, Inference often weakens the apprehension.<sup>37</sup>

First the inference--in the passage from the Development of Christian Doctrine quoted in the introduction, Newman describes the reasons for believing as "presumptions and guesses, ventures after the truth. . . rather than accurate proofs." And the whole second part of the Grammar is devoted to the informal method of inference, which proceeds by the illative sense.<sup>38</sup> Newman holds both that most believers do not possess formal arguments for God's existence, and that they are justified in believing (that is, their belief is reasonable). As a Christian apologist, Newman held that "deductions have no power of persuasion"<sup>39</sup> and so he had little impetus to develop a formal proof, and in fact did not publish one. The difficulty for Newman as a Roman Catholic (the writing of the Development of Christian Doctrine precipitated his conversion in 1845) is that the Roman Catholic Church teaches that the existence of God can be demonstrated by reason. When Newman outlined his "Proof of Theism" in his Notebook he noted

As to the Being of God, I suppose that conscience teaches some attributes in which all are implicit--& afterwards deduced by the reason. And I should think (& hope) that this would satisfy the requisite of the S. Congr. [Sacred Congregation] of the Index which... pronounced the Being of a God demonstrable by reason.<sup>40</sup>

Here in outline is Newman's "proof of theism." He wrote it in 1859 because he had been misunderstood to hold that God's existence implies moral obligation. His thought, as shown below, was that moral obligation implies God's existence.<sup>41</sup> The passage is paraphrased.

1) An individual is conscious of his own existence.

2) In the fact of his existence is included his memory, sensation, reasoning, and conscience.

3) "Conscience" means the discrimination of acts as praise-worthy or blame-worthy, and has two senses: one, the act of moral judgement; and two, the particular judgement formed.

4) All individuals know the feeling of a good or bad conscience, although they may differ over what conscience requires of them. "Conscience" here means sanction or command (the first sense above).

5) Conscience implies a relation between the soul and something both exterior and superior to itself. That something has an excellence it does not possess, and an authority it cannot challenge.<sup>42</sup>

Newman begins with his consciousness of his own existence, and takes the fact of his existence to include the fact of conscience. Newman thinks it improper to speak of his mental faculties (and he includes conscience among them) as things separable from himself, as things for instance in which he could "have faith."<sup>43</sup>

He will not dispute his existence with conscience contained in it, but holds it as a first principle which must be granted. Concerning first principles "which are called self-evident by their respective advocates because they are evident in no other way," and he thinks less of formal inference because it does not produce first principles, but only takes us easily away from, and back to, them. He believes that they arise from the personal characteristics of the knower.<sup>44</sup>

Newman claims that one's consciousness of his existence and his conscience (they're an odd pair but Newman means to keep them together) is an "internal fact." It is internal, as opposed to, say, the external fact that a table is under this paper. Because it is internal, it overcomes the skepticism Newman sometimes leans to, and it is a desirable starting point for an argument for God's existence.

He writes that

what is internal to the mind is an object of consciousness, which external things are not. Thus the line is broad & deep between the reliance on reason or conscience and upon the trustworthiness of the impressions of the senses or the reality (existence) of matter. Hence the being of a God, arising out of what is internal, is an external fact different in evidence (proof) from every other external fact.<sup>45</sup>

Conscience itself has two aspects: one is its "commandingness"--Newman calls it a sanction--and the other is what it commands. Newman based his argument on the first, and not the second. To begin with the second aspect

of conscience could involve him in a petitio principii; to assume something commanded seems clearly to assume the existence of someone who commands, in a way that the authoritative aspect of conscience does not.<sup>46</sup>

A curious consequence of this division of conscience into what it commands and the manner in which it commands it, is that what conscience commands, and Newman admits that varies widely, is irrelevant to the argument. Whether I become acquainted with conscience's sanction in connection with the commandment to "Shrink all your enemies' heads" or in connection with the commandment to "Love your enemies," it is my confrontation with its sanction which leads me to the existence of God.<sup>47</sup>

Conscience as a sanction is responsible for the unique set of feelings which arise when it is transgressed, or obeyed: "self-reproach, poignant shame, haunting remorse, chill dismay at the prospect of the future--and their contraries when the conscience is good, as real though less forcible." Newman believes simply, and it is on this that the proof depends, that these feelings require a person "to whom we are responsible, before whom we are ashamed, whose claims upon us we fear," and that person is God.<sup>48</sup>

Let me turn to my own criticisms of Newman's argument for the existence of God. First, when Newman begins his argument he means by "conscience" "sanction or command" but it seems to be the feelings that conscience as sanction or command engenders that are denoted by

"conscience" in the conclusion. In other words, there is an additional distinction between meanings of "conscience" that is not clearly made. Second, Newman writes that the feelings of a good or bad conscience would not arise if there were not a person toward whom they were directed; he writes that "inanimate things cannot stir our affections, these are correlative with persons. . . . These feelings in us are such as require for their exciting cause an intelligent being."<sup>49</sup> But we know of many cases in which our feelings are inappropriately directed towards inanimate things--If the bread box falls open and knocks the coffee pot off the counter I may in my anger stomp on the pot--and Newman has not established that the feelings of conscience are not inappropriately directed in a similar way.

And it is still a further step to identify the person required by the feelings of conscience of God, and not with someone only God-like. Psychodynamic theorists<sup>50</sup> might object that we feel guilty and ashamed and afraid because we have internalized and subsequently transgressed our parent's or our society's rules for moral behavior, and that it is in fact toward our parents that our feelings are directed. And in a child who has been less effectively socialized, those feelings of guilt, fear and shame might not occur at all. The only difficulty Newman offers to this interpretation is that he sees in the feelings of conscience even the implication of a final judgement, which presumably our parents could not bring about.

Learning theorists or behaviorists<sup>51</sup> explain emotion as a correlative of a personal history of punishment or reinforcement; if one were punished as a child for failing to love his enemies, the emotional correlative of punishment could endure beyond the punishment, and if he were reinforced for failing to love his enemies, then a very different kind of emotional correlative might endure into his adulthood. And it is not necessary that a person be the deliverer of punishment, or reinforcement. Newman assumes that conscience as sanction, and its correlative emotions, develop in a way that is relatively uninfluenced by social forces, or by an idiosyncratic history of reinforcement.<sup>52</sup> He cannot of course be faulted for failing to anticipate Freud, or Skinner.

To return to Newman himself, we can look at his proof from the inside, or from the outside. From without, his existence includes his conscience which in turn implies God's existence. This seems to be nothing other than a traditional moral argument. But when we examine the proof from within, it is our "consciousness" of our own existence, our "feelings" of conscience's commands transgressed or obeyed, and the "image" of God we form which assume importance over (metaphysical) facts and logic. It is the image, apart from the reasoning, which characterizes real assent.



Newman describes in the Grammar the God an especially good child might imagine:

First, it involves the impression on his mind of an unseen Being with whom he is in immediate relation, . . . Next, of One whose goodwill towards him he is assured of, and can take for granted-- . . . Further, of One who can hear him, wherever he happens to be, and who can read his thoughts, . . . Lastly, of One who can effect a critical change in the state of feeling of others towards him.<sup>53</sup>

Now this would seem to be an image of God with the ordinary attributes-- He is invisible, personal, benevolent, omniscient and omnipotent, but the child is aware of them as attributes of a person who is active in his life. Again, "image" seems to relate more to the impressiveness which describes our contact with things (presumably) external to us, than it does to a visual or analogous representation. This image is clearly not the product of direct sensory experience of God, but of the emotions aroused by obeying or disobeying the commands of conscience (remember those emotions are relative to conscience's sanction, and not to the content of its commands). It is not possible to exclude entirely the aspect of representation from Newman's use of "image." If we do so we cannot distinguish notional from real apprehension, and the distinction is certainly more obscure in the case of the apprehension of God's attributes, than it is in the apprehension of "sugar" and "sweet." It is not particularly helpful to have recourse to real apprehension's "impressiveness" alone.

The image in real assent is also defined by Newman as personal, and indirectly practical. The belief in God

may be a real and personal belief, being produced in different individual minds by various experiences and disposing causes, variously combined; such as warm or strong imagination, great sensibility, compunction and horror at sin . . . parental example and instruction, religious friends, strange providences, powerful preaching. In each case the image in the mind, with the experiences out of which it is formed, would be a personal result . . . .<sup>54</sup>

In contrast, the notional apprehension of a term, and notional assent to the proposition in which it occurs, implies that each person who apprehends it (notionally) has imposed the same sense on it, and the notion which the term stands for is a common product of abstraction.

The image is indirectly practical because on Newman's view of it, images arouse emotions, and emotions (not pure intellect) lead to action. If there is something that we ought to do in consequence of our assent (and God's existence is a proposition with consequences for action) then the assent will need to affect our emotions, and our emotions are affected by images, not notions.<sup>55</sup>

### III. THE ARGUMENT FROM CONTINGENT EXISTENCE

The preceding section discussed what Newman considered to be the best formal argument for God's existence, and the characteristics of the real assent which might accompany it. I have made the assumption that the formal argument in the Notebook could persuade at least a philosopher as effectively as the informal argument from conscience in Grammar. If he were persuaded, then he would give his real assent. It is still worth noting that for Newman the role of inference in real assent is minor, and assent is a substantive something else, involving more importantly the imaginative apprehension of a proposition's terms. I am attempting to show in this section that one of Aquinas' arguments in support of God's existence--his Third Way--can be stated to accomplish the same ends. If successful, it shows that Newman's suspicions of the traditional arguments in support of God's existence are unfounded. The interpretation of Aquinas draws upon ideas developed by existential Thomism.

Newman comes closest to the cosmological arguments of Aquinas when he discusses the "Evidences," or arguments, like William Paley's, from design or order. He says in the Grammar

If I am asked to use Paley's argument for my conversion, I say plainly I do not want to be converted by a smart syllogism; if I am asked to convert others by it, I say plainly I do not care to overcome their reason without touching their hearts.<sup>56</sup>

Newman does not treat the metaphysical arguments as if there were an image of God to be gained by them.

Aquinas writes in the Summa theologiae that there are five ways to the existence of God; what follows in outline is his Third Way. Modern Thomists favor it, although Aquinas did not.<sup>57</sup>

We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, . . . it is impossible for these always to exist, for that which is possible not to be at some time is not. Therefore, if everything is possible not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence, because that which does not exist only begins to exist by something already existing. Therefore, if at one time nothing was in existence, it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist; and thus even now nothing would be in existence--which is absurd. Therefore, not all beings are merely possible, but there must exist something the existence of which is necessary. But every necessary thing either has its necessity caused by another, or not. Now it is impossible to go on to infinity in necessary things which have their necessity caused by another, . . . Therefore we cannot but postulate the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity.<sup>58</sup>

Aquinas believes the proposition asserting God's existence to be self-evident in itself, although not to us. The function of demonstration must be to make explicit information which is already contained in the premises, since the conclusion of a deductive argument cannot go beyond its premises. Therefore one of the strongest criticisms of the cosmological argument (and it applies to Newman's argument

from conscience too) bears on the nature of argument itself. That criticism is that the argument has assumed what it seeks to prove, that the premise on which it depends is something like "If there are any beings which come into being and pass away, there is an absolutely necessary being," and if we admit that, we have admitted the existence of God.<sup>59</sup>

But the argument in fact begins with an existential proposition--"We find things in nature that are possible to be and not to be," and we know that many people who admit that do not admit God's existence (although there are relatively fewer who admit conscience but not God's existence). We are concerned with the argument in relation to real assent, which Newman says is an assent to an image that arises out of our personal experience, and that image creates feelings in us which lead us to act.

Aquinas begins with the observation that there are some things whose existence is contingent--things which could be, or could not be. The observation may not be as "internal" as Newman's beginning with his own existence, but Aquinas has less need to avoid talking about external things, because his epistemology is more realistic.<sup>60</sup> The flow of the argument is from contingent existence to necessary existence, and if we apprehend "contingent existence" in a real way, then we are, just as much as if we experience our conscience, on the path towards real assent to God's existence.

What does it mean to really apprehend existence? The real apprehension of existence has been frequently described by Jacques Maritain, a Thomist, in his philosophical works, and it is this emphasis which makes the term "existentialist" appropriate to his (and he would say also to Aquinas') metaphysics. Maritain does not use Newman's vocabulary, but speaks instead of the "intuition of being as such" or the "primordial intuition of existence".<sup>61</sup> The characteristics which lead Maritain to call it "intuitive" are the same that Newman finds in imaginative or real apprehension.

It is not necessary to be a philosopher of religion in order to experience the intuition of being as such; Jean-Paul Sartre describes in detail the real apprehension (to use Newman's term) of the existence of objects in Nausea.

All these objects. . . how can I explain? They inconvenienced me; I would have liked them to exist less strongly, more dryly, in a more abstract way, with more reserve. The chestnut tree pressed itself against my eyes. Green rust covered it half-way up; the back, black and swollen, looked like boiled leather. The sound of water in the Masqueret fountain sounded in my ears, made a nest there, filled them with signs' my nostrils overflowed with a green putrid odour.<sup>62</sup>

Now it is not primarily the qualities of objects which Sartre apprehends--their colors or sounds or smells. Sartre explains that "The sea is green" no longer means to him "sea" and "green" while "is" means nothing, nor does it mean that sea belongs to the class of green objects. Instead "is" has acquired a meaning: existence has unveiled

itself, has penetrated his eyes, nose, mouth; existence nauseates him. It is clear that to Sartre "existence" does not stand for a notion, but the thought he has of it "is as of something individual and from without," and it is precisely that characteristic of it which makes it appropriate to speak of an image of existence, and to call its apprehension real. Wrapped up in the apprehension of the existence of objects is an apprehension of their contingency, and of ones own contingent existence.<sup>63</sup> And for Sartre the real apprehension of contingent existence leads nowhere.

Maritain confirms Sartre's experience:

the primordial intuition of being is the intuition of the solidity and inexorability of existence; and, second, of the death and nothingness to which ones own existence is liable.

But Maritain discovers in the same intuition

that this solid and inexorable existence, perceived in anything whatsoever, implies--I do not know in what form, perhaps in the things themselves, perhaps separately from them--some absolute irrefragable existence, completely free from nothingness and death.<sup>64</sup>

This intuition of being as such is the starting point of an informal argument for God's existence which is very much like Newman's own from conscience. Where Newman takes his own existence with conscience included with it, Maritain takes the existence of things and his own existence (thrown into relief by the existence of other things) with contingency contained in it. In the feelings of conscience when it is transgressed or followed, Newman sees that God's existence

is required. And in his (often emotional) awareness of contingent existence, Maritain sees that some existence must be necessary. "God exists" is in both cases a real proposition, to which the believer may give his real assent.

The image involved in Maritain's real assent is also personal, not shared, because it must come from one's own experience. Maritain quotes another's autobiographical account of the intuition of being: "suddenly there came to me from heaven like a lightning flash the thought: I am a self," and he holds that the personal experience is a prerequisite for metaphysics.<sup>65</sup> The drawing out of this intuition of existence into a formal proof produces Aquinas' Third Way, and Newman's "Proof of Theism" is related to the child's feelings of conscience in much the same way.



## CONCLUSION

It seems that a traditional cosmological argument serves Newman's purposes well. Aquinas' Third Way directs us toward the contingent existence of things and the existentialists have described what it is to apprehend existence in a real way. The real apprehension of contingent existence leads to the real apprehension of necessary existence, and there need not be anything merely notional about formal argument for God's existence, and to assent to the proposition which asserts that God exists.

Newman's own argument may be flawed in its starting point; it is unclear that a socially unconditioned conscience, which Newman's argument requires is included in the fact of an individual's existence, and many contemporary thinkers will have trouble with it. It is even more unclear that it especially implies the existence of God. The argument allows for the possibility that the feelings of conscience disobeyed or transgressed are simply inappropriate; and it is their appropriateness, and not their simple existence, that suggests God's existence. Newman's argument is not a clearer nor a surer path toward imaginative apprehension and assent.

The distinction itself between notional and real assent is not explained by Newman's examples. The

difference cannot correspond to the distinction in the spoken or written proposition between general and singular nouns, because that distinction cuts across the distinction between notional and real assent. And if the distinction comes down to the apprehension of notions as notions, or things as things, then a more realistic epistemology than Newman supplies is needed. What remains important in Newman's explanation is the role of images in real apprehension and assent.

"Image" though is understood in a sense so much broader than "mental picture" that its secondary characteristics are more informative on the nature of real assent. First, it is a unique personal product, and second, it has consequences for action. It may be that the distinction ought to be drawn in the affective and volitional domains also, rather than restricted to the cognitive. To do so would be to claim that the distinction between notional and real assent to "God exists" requires, in addition to information about what the terms stand for, information about how one feels, or what he does, in consequence of his assent. In his phenomenological accounts of particular real assents, Newman does describe feelings, and the implications they might have for action. But Newman has restricted the grounds of the distinction between notional and real to the cognitive domain.<sup>66</sup>

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>A standard biography is Wilfrid Ward, The Life of John Henry Cardinal Newman (2 vols; New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1912).

<sup>2</sup>Modernism is a complex of beliefs, including the belief that God cannot be known through natural or supernatural revelation, and that faith therefore is wholly an emotional response. Pius X denounced modernism in 1907.

<sup>3</sup>Erich Przywara, republished as The Heart of Newman (Springfield, Ill.: Templegate, 1963).

<sup>4</sup>On the history of Newman studies see Charles Stephen Dessain, "Newman's Philosophy and Theology," Victorian Prose, ed. David J. DeLaura (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1973), pp. 166-175.

<sup>5</sup>Harold L. Weatherby, Cardinal Newman in His Age: His Place in English Theology and Literature (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1973), p. 8.

<sup>6</sup>An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine, edited with an introduction by James Munro Cameron (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 343.

<sup>7</sup>An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent, with an introduction by Nicholas Lash (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), p. 162.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., pp. 89-90.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., pp. 28-29.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>20</sup>The Philosophical Notebook of John Henry Newman, ed. Edward Sillem, rev. Adrian J. Boekraad, vol. 1: Introduction, vol. 2: Text; 2 vols. (Louvain: Nauwelaerts Publishing House, 1969-1970), 1.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 2:79-81 and 22.

<sup>22</sup>Grammar, p. 80.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., pp. 80-81.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>26</sup>Newman has been compared to Berkeley. His reply in the Apologia is "the very idea of an analogy between the separate works of God Joseph Butler leads to the conclusion that the system which is of less importance is economically or sacramentally connected with the more momentous system, and of this conclusion the theory. . . of the unreality of material phenomena is an ultimate resolution. At this time before 1833 I did not make the distinction between matter itself and its phenomena, which is so necessary and so obvious . . . I know little of Berkeley at this time except by name, nor have I ever studied him."

<sup>27</sup>David Krech and Richard S. Crutchfield, Elements of Psychology (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), pp. 351-362.

<sup>28</sup>Grammar, p. 76.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>32</sup>Webster's Third New International Dictionary, ed. Philip Babcock Cove (Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1976).

<sup>33</sup>Grammar, pp. 80-81.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 320. See also "The Usurpations of Reason" in Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1896), p. 231.

<sup>37</sup>Grammar, p. 52.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 271, "The sole and final judgement 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 is called the Illative Sense." "Illative" is derived from the Latin illatus, past participle of inferre, meaning "to bring in."

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>40</sup>Notebook, 2:58.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 2:31.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., "Proof of Theism," 2:31-77.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 2:47.

<sup>44</sup>Grammar, p. 216.

<sup>45</sup>Notebook, 2:41.

<sup>46</sup>Adrian J. Boekraad and Henry Tristram, The Argument from Conscience to the Existence of God (Louvain: Editions Nauwelaerts, 1961), p. 76.

<sup>47</sup>To one who holds that there is an inherent commandingness about all true values, and only an apparent commandingness about things mistakenly believed to be values, the distinction may be unrecognizable.

<sup>48</sup>Grammar, "Belief in One God," pp. 95-109.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>50</sup>Reuben Fine, A History of Psychoanalysis (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), pp. 436-463.

<sup>51</sup>For instance, B.F. Skinner, Science and Human Behavior (New York: The Free Press, 1953), pp. 160-170.

<sup>52</sup>He probably would not say that what conscience commands is similarly uncorrupted.

<sup>53</sup>Grammar, p. 103.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., pp. 86-92.

<sup>56</sup>Sermons, p. 70.

<sup>57</sup>F.C. Copleston, Aquinas (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1955), p. 127.

<sup>58</sup>Pt. 1, q. 2, art. 3.

<sup>59</sup>Copleston, p. 129.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., pp. 49-54. Also, the chapter "Critical Realism" in Jacques Maritain, The Degrees of Knowledge, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), pp. 71-135.

<sup>61</sup>Jacques Maritain, Approaches to God, trans. Peter O'Reilly (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1954), p. 4.

<sup>62</sup>Trans. Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation 1964), pp. 127-128.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>64</sup>Maritain, Approaches, pp. 4-5.

<sup>65</sup>Jacques Maritain, A Preface to Metaphysics (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1948), pp. 47-61.

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