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A Saint for Our Times

Newman on Faith, Fallibility, and Certitude

“HOW MANY of you know that you have hands?” I once asked my students. Everyone raised a hand. The clever students raised two. I then repeated the question: “I mean, how many of you really *know* that you have hands?” With just the inflection changed, hands dropped one-by-one. I was in shock. Yet I knew what had happened. Students thought of all the logically possible scenarios in which they, despite all appearances, might lack hands. They could be the classic brain in a vat, stuck in the Matrix, or subject to the wiles of Descartes’s evil demon.

As class discussion erupted, I vigorously attempted to convince the students that they really *do* know that they have hands. Their crucial assumption quickly emerged: they held the not unreasonable (yet unexamined) conviction that knowledge requires absolute certitude. Considering the remote yet possible skeptical scenarios, they inferred that their knowledge of their hands was not one hundred percent certain and therefore not knowledge at all.¹

This assumption, most philosophers think, is mistaken. That is, most philosophers are “fallibilists.”² They hold that one can know something without one’s evidence being absolutely conclusive.³ On

this view, I can know what I ate for breakfast this morning (even though my memory is fallible) and who my biological mother is (even though I've never done any DNA tests and could be, as my sister once tried to convince me, adopted).

Many people instinctively worry that if the things they know are not certain, then this leaves room for skepticism and crippling doubt. So they double-down on certitude. Yet if one examines both classical and contemporary arguments for skepticism, one finds that they typically hold infallibilism—the view that knowledge requires utter certitude or perfect evidence or the ruling out of all alternative possibilities—as a premise.⁴ That is to say, infallibilism about knowledge not only fails to solve the skeptical problem but, ironically, creates it. As Bernard Lonergan recognized, “To demand the absolute and to be content with absolutely nothing else results in a skepticism.”⁵ If every belief is guilty until *proven* innocent, it will be impossible to build our knowledge from the foundations up in the way Descartes envisioned. The lesson, according to most epistemologists, is that knowledge does not require certitude.

Why then does the Church repeatedly speak about certitude? Fallibilism sounds reasonable, but it isn't easy to see how it squares with the commitments of Scripture, the councils, and the “Catechism of the Catholic Church.” No Catholic thinker in modern times has been more concerned to overthrow the false Enlightenment standards of knowledge, evidence, and rationality than John Henry Newman. He held fast to the historic truths of the faith, yet he was also clearly a fallibilist. At one point he declared, “We are given absolute certainty in nothing.”⁶

Newman was canonized October 13, 2019, and some speculate that he may be declared a doctor of the Church. For this reason, it is worth considering whether this fallibilist runs afoul of the commitments of Catholic tradition vis-à-vis faith and certitude. While much of what Newman says about the fallibility of the human mind and the nature of faith stands in *prima facie* tension with Catholic teaching, I will argue this tension is only apparent. What emerges, I believe,

is that Newman's understanding of the certitude of faith is not only harmonious with the Catholic tradition but enlightening.

To see this, let me first look at the apparent problem. The Church teaches that faith is certain. The author of the letter to the Hebrews tells us, "Faith is being sure of what we hope for. It is being certain of what we do not see."⁷ The catechism declares, "Faith is certain. It is more certain than all human knowledge because it is founded on the very word of God who cannot lie."⁸ And in 1870, the First Vatican Council declared on the certitude of the knowledge of God (and not just faith, which is after all a supernatural gift): "Holy mother Church holds and teaches that God, the source and end of all things, can be known with certainty from the consideration of created things, by the natural power of human reason: ever since the creation of the world, his invisible nature has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made."⁹

So the Church has a lot to say about certitude. Yet perhaps you consider the matter and decide that your faith (or even your knowledge of God's existence) is not as certain as $2 + 2 = 4$. It at least makes sense to question whether, on our evidence, God exists or whether Jesus can be both God and man at the same time, while it does not make much sense to investigate whether $2 + 2$ really equals 4. Such considerations can even cause doubts about one's faith if it is not deemed indubitable.

For this reason, it is extremely important to be careful with our sources. First of all, the New International Reader's Version translation of Hebrews 11 (above) is cherry-picked. Most translations of Hebrews 11:1 do not speak of the "certitude" or "sureness" of faith but rather of our "confidence" or "assurance."

Second, notice that in the catechism passage, faith is contrasted to all human knowledge. And hence it seems that the passage refers to *the faith* itself rather than an individual's *personal faith*.¹⁰ A truth can be certain, or fixed and true, without me being certain of its truth. There are surely mathematical conjectures, for instance, that are necessarily true even though they have yet to be proved by anyone. Similarly,

Aquinas and Bonaventure both distinguish between metaphysical necessities and one's epistemological grasp on necessary truths. The catechism follows Aquinas in holding that faith is more certain than other things because it is grounded in divine testimony rather than frail human reason. Yet even as Aquinas says this, he maintains that, "certitude may be considered on the part of the subject, and thus the more a man's intellect lays hold of a thing, the more certain it is. In this way, faith is less certain."¹¹ There is all the difference in the world between certitude (or, better, necessity) on the side of the object and certitude on the side of the perceiving subject. The catechism appears to refer to the former.

Third, as regards Vatican 1, we have to be careful here too. Exegeting this passage is difficult. Many simply assume that the certitude of which the council speaks derives from Aquinas's five ways. While Aquinas never seemed far from the council fathers' thoughts, arguments are not mentioned at all either here or in the Romans 1 passage they paraphrase. Instead, St. Paul indicates that God's existence is plain to people throughout the ages because they can see his power and divine nature in creation. Thanks be to God he makes no mention of airtight logical demonstrations that rule out all alternative possibilities that only a few philosophers could follow anyway. Similarly, Newman insists that children and the uneducated can fully embrace both God's existence and the faith.¹² Even if absolute certitude is possible for a few via such arguments, it is not the path of the many.

While the Catholic tradition speaks of the certitude of faith, it also speaks of limitations on human cognitive abilities. For one thing, we are material human beings, not angels. Further, sin often clouds our judgment. Even with the eyes of faith, St. Paul writes, "*Now* we see through a glass, darkly; but *then* face to face: *now* I know in part; but *then* shall I know even as also I am known."¹³ Such anthropological and theological considerations aside, it is simply an empirical fact that we are often mistaken on a wide range of matters. Precisely because of the difficulty of proving God's existence, Aquinas claims that divine revelation was fitting.¹⁴

Newman maintains not only that we can be mistaken but that there is no sure test for distinguishing true from apparent certitude.¹⁵ He is not a knowledge-denying skeptic, however, because he rejects the view that knowledge requires absolute certitude. At the same time, Newman agrees with the Church that there is a certitude to faith. He writes: “Faith has two peculiarities; —it is most certain, decided, positive, immovable in its assent, and it gives this assent not because it sees with eye, or sees with the reason, but because it receives the tidings from the one who comes from God.”¹⁶ Why then is Newman a fallibilist? One reason has to do with the merit of faith. He writes:

It requires no act of faith to assent to the truth that two and two make four; we cannot help assenting to it; and hence there is no merit in assenting to it; but there is merit in believing that the Church is from God; for though there are abundant reasons to prove it to us, yet we can, without any absurdity, quarrel with the conclusion; we may complain that it is not clearer, we may suspend our assent, we may doubt about it, if we will.¹⁷

If faith is to be meritorious, as the Church maintains, there needs to be some freedom in it.¹⁸ The truths of the faith cannot just compel our assent like $2 + 2 = 4$. Newman would caution us against thinking of the certitude of faith as what philosophers call “epistemic certitude”—certitude of the highest kind, having absolutely perfect evidence with zero room for error. Descartes wrongly identified all certitude with epistemic certitude. As Benedict XVI comments, Descartes “models this intellectual certainty on mathematical certainty and elevates mathematics to the position of prototype of all rational thinking.”¹⁹

The Church talked about certainty long before Descartes. In the high Middle Ages, for instance, Christian thinkers recognized that there are degrees of certitude. In applied ethics, they noted, we have a great deal of knowledge; but it clearly is not an area of absolute mathematical certainty. As Aristotle noted long ago, different

subjects lend themselves to differing degrees of precision.²⁰ In *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, Newman shows that this is not some ad hoc claim about faith. We constantly render a kind of certain and unwavering assent to propositions that could turn out to be false. That Great Britain is an island, for instance, is a conviction most of us could not shake—and rightly so—even though we have never investigated the matter for ourselves.

The medievals often spoke of “moral certainty” (*certitudo moralis*).²¹ Moral certainty is fallible but well-supported or highly probable belief. You are certain in that you have solid reasons and no serious doubts about the matter at hand—even though you recognize that it is logically possible for you to be mistaken.²² It is simply untrue, then, that all certitude should be identified with infallible Cartesian certitude. Certitude, rather, admits of degrees.

Now, surely matters of faith are more like ethics than math vis-à-vis certitude. As Albert the Great, Aquinas’s legendary teacher, writes, “Faith is a complete persuasion of one side through many probabilities.”²³ So faith is highly certain and reasonable because of the many reasons in its favor. By grace our eyes are opened to see the faith as a coherent body of belief with the ring of truth. Just as the good person might understand the right thing to do, not by ratiocination but by a sort of instinct or kinship with the good, so too the intellect enlightened by faith sees it *as* divinely revealed even without complex arguments. Newman was fond of quoting St. Paul in his Oxford University sermons: “He that is spiritual judgeth all things.”²⁴ While faith has its reasons, it isn’t simple math, easily demonstrable to all regardless of their disposition.

Many might think that Aquinas above all would hold that the certitude of faith is epistemic certitude, given all he has to say about scientific demonstrations, proving God’s existence, and the like. But in fact, both Albert and Aquinas contrast faith with *scientia* (or demonstrative knowledge).²⁵ As Josef Pieper explains, for Aquinas the certitude of faith involves a firmness of conviction—a holding fast to the true and the good—in the midst of imperfect evidence.²⁶

There is middle ground, then, between those who say that faith

involves a blind leap and those who think that faith involves utter Cartesian certitude. That middle ground consists in having very good (but imperfect) reasons in favor of believing Christian theological claims. Newman avoids fideism by holding that there are good reasons or grounds for faith.²⁷ At the same time, he also avoids rationalism. In fact, we can see him as avoiding at least four mistaken positions stemming from Enlightenment rationalism:²⁸

- (1) Faith is certain because of formal arguments.
- (2) Because formal arguments are underwhelming or inconclusive, we must make a blind leap of faith.
- (3) Because the formal arguments are underwhelming or inconclusive, faith is irrational.
- (4) We must proportion our belief to the strength of the formal arguments.

Newman avoids (1), (2), and (3) because he thinks the arguments are good but do not provide Cartesian certitude.²⁹ To think otherwise misunderstands the role of formal argumentation in human life. Arguments rarely if ever provide such certainty. He writes, “Let it be considered how rare and immaterial (if I may use the words) is metaphysical proof: how difficult to embrace, even when presented to us by philosophers in whose clearness of mind and good sense we fully confide.”³⁰ Even if arguments did provide such certainty, most people are unaware of the arguments. He would also add that whether one finds an argument underwhelming or inconclusive depends on one’s disposition. It is not simply an impartial, analytical judgment but a judgment of the whole person.³¹ Lastly, he avoids (4) by broadening reason to include the accumulation of reasons from experience rather than merely logical syllogisms.³²

If Newman denies the rationalist assumption that the certitude of faith requires Descartes’s unrealistic level of certitude established upon metaphysical demonstrations and opts instead for firm moral certitude, how is such certitude established? Newman thinks that

after investigating an issue we can have “a specific sense of intellectual satisfaction,” “a sense of security and of repose.”³³ Perhaps his most novel epistemological claim is that he thinks we achieve this kind of certitude from imperfect evidence in everyday affairs.

Newman thinks that various lines of evidence—each of which is probable but not absolutely certain or self-evident—can converge. Each piece of evidence, considered separately, may not overwhelm. Yet when taken together the mind sees the pattern clearly. Newman writes in *Grammar*:

It is plain that formal logical sequence is not in fact the method by which we are enabled to become certain of what is concrete [as opposed to abstract matters like pure mathematics]; and it is equally plain . . . what the real and necessary method is. It is the culmination of probabilities, independent of each other, arising out of the nature and circumstances of the particular case which is under review; probabilities too fine to avail separately, too subtle and circuitous to be convertible into syllogisms, too numerous and various for such conversion, even were they convertible.³⁴

The key to certainty—what pushes us beyond a tentative acceptance to firm conviction—is the perception of independent reasons “converging towards a common conclusion.” If, when “taken together,” they “converge on a . . . conclusion, this conclusion can be certain.”³⁵

We do not behave like robots, of course, calculating exact numerical probabilities between zero and one for each piece of evidence before inserting them into a formal Bayesian apparatus.³⁶ In fact, if you take anything we are highly certain about—say, who is currently president—it would be immensely difficult just to recall all your various lines of evidence. But they have accumulated. While you lack an overall number stating your exact credence in some target proposition, Newman thinks that you are built so as to have a kind of insight into the weight of the evidence.

We make large-scale probabilistic judgments easily and naturally.

We effortlessly weave disparate lines of evidence into an overall impression of the truth. Newman calls this power of ours “the illative sense.” He compares it to Aristotle’s *phronesis* in practical reasoning. There are ethical rules, to be sure, but in concrete situations one needs practical wisdom honed by previous training and experience to know how to apply ethical rules. Similarly, Newman holds that in speculative reasoning about concrete, particular matters, we need to hone good judgment. The illative sense is the power of the mind to form convictions on the basis of numerous and disparate lines of probabilistic evidence—an ability that can be honed in particular domains.³⁷

The illative sense can sound fantastical, but, Newman avers, it is but “a grand word for a common thing.”³⁸ In a letter, Newman helpfully describes it as the “inductive sense.” This faculty can produce certitude, yet it won’t be Cartesian certitude—or immunity from all possibility of error—but rather the certitude that we are familiar with every day: the certitude that Earth is spherical, that kangaroos live in Australia, that one day I will die. This is certitude in the sense that some things are just beyond rational doubt on our part because the reasons have mounted to the point where doubt would be unreasonable.

If this is the way we normally and reliably achieve certitude, then why would God’s existence be an exception, Newman asks? If the intellect, in ordinary matters, gives the firmest assent to truth in this way, then faith (though it involves an enlightened intellect) is not automatically irrational in doing likewise.³⁹ Religious belief is reasonable, and attains a kind of certitude—not by abandoning reason but by utilizing informal reasoning rather than formal.⁴⁰

Newman is particularly insightful here. If a news crew suddenly thrust a camera in any of our faces and asked why we believe in God, why we think there are moral truths, or how we know our mothers love us, we would likely stumble or, at best, give simplistic answers. It would sound to the skeptic as though we lack good reasons or evidence. Yet our inability to marshal reasons in a skeptic-satisfying

syllogism does not mean that we lack good reasons. As Newman says, “All men have a reason, but not all men can give a reason.”⁴¹

In truth, the difficulty is that our reasons are too numerous to mention. Each piece of evidence is part of what philosophers call a “cumulative case.”⁴² Take the religious skeptic. When asking for a justification of religious belief, skeptics often presume that such beliefs—if supported at all—must be supported by a simple deduction from a single killer piece of evidence. The attempt to give such a reason, of course, almost inevitably sounds lame. It sounds lame because the actual ground of belief is not some one thing: it is rather ten thousand strands all wound together into a cord that seems (from the believer’s point of view) unbreakable. Again, it is not just religious belief but almost anything important and highly certain that is like this.

In *Orthodoxy*, G. K. Chesterton wrestled with this very phenomenon in trying to explain his conversion to Christianity:

But this involved accuracy of the thing makes it very difficult to do what I now have to do, to describe this accumulation of truth. It is very hard for a man to defend anything of which he is entirely convinced. It is comparatively easy when he is only partially convinced. He is partially convinced because he has found this or that proof of the thing, and he can expound it. But a man is not really convinced of a philosophic theory when he finds that something proves it. He is only really convinced when he finds that everything proves it. And the more converging reasons he finds pointing to this conviction, the more bewildered he is if asked suddenly to sum them up. Thus, if one asked an ordinary intelligent man, on the spur of the moment, “Why do you prefer civilization to savagery?” he would look wildly round at object after object, and would only be able to answer vaguely, “Why, there is that bookcase . . . and the coals in the coal-scuttle . . . and pianos . . . and policemen.” The whole case for civilization is that the case for it is complex. It has done so many things. But that very

multiplicity of proof which ought to make reply overwhelming makes reply impossible.

There is, therefore, about all complete conviction a kind of huge helplessness.⁴³

Newman recognized what Descartes and many others—leading Catholic philosophers among them—overlook: namely, that inductive, cumulative cases can easily lead to as much or more certitude than deductive arguments. Newman thinks their view of human reason too small. Reason is not identical to deductive inference. In fact, formal reasoning is derivative; it is an abstract, simplified representation of real human reasoning that can be seen as following logical rules but *implicitly* rather than through formal syllogisms. People reasoned well long before Aristotle developed a system of formal deductive logic.⁴⁴

Not only do we lack demonstrative syllogisms for many highly certain things, but, even if we possessed them, resting our belief on a single deductive inference can be precarious. If one premise is incorrect, then the argument crumbles and takes one's confidence in the conclusion with it. The beauty of cumulative case arguments is that they do not rest with their whole weight on any single piece of evidence.

To take a pedestrian case, if one finds out tomorrow that a single news source that contributed to his knowledge that Ronald Reagan was once president is actually a purveyor of “fake news,” should it lessen his belief, *even a tiny bit*, that Reagan was president? It would not, and rightly so. If it affects his confidence at all, the change would be too small to notice.

More personally, as a Christian philosopher this is the way I feel about arguments for God's existence. I think I can weigh them pretty fairly, precisely because no single argument constitutes my *reason* for theistic belief. I have thousands of reasons, from arguments, to conversations I've had, to feeling God's presence very strongly at times, to observing the lives of the theists and non-theists I know, and more.

There isn't a single reason; there are thousands. That's why the belief is so strong.⁴⁵

Such "informal inferences," as Newman calls them, are not illogical. These informal reasons are what ground beliefs that are highly certain for us in ordinary matters—not just belief in God's existence but things like the fact that the world wasn't just created five minutes ago. Newman thinks these beliefs can be about as certain for you as any human belief can be, even without achieving the Aristotelian ideal of logical demonstrations with necessary or self-evident premises.

However—and here's the part where soft rationalists perspire and hardcore rationalists faint—the fact that something seems certain to you is not an *absolute* guarantee: "What looks like certitude," Newman writes, "always is exposed to the chance of turning out to be a mistake."⁴⁶ But the mere *possibility* of being wrong doesn't mean you *are* wrong or that your knowledge is somehow *uncertain* or up in the air. It is logically possible for us to be mistaken in our belief that Great Britain is an island. But Newman's point is that it would be erroneous to infer that we therefore don't know this with great certitude. Such is the power of cumulative case reasoning.

This way of thinking also helps us see why a particular horrendous evil does not make theists suddenly uncertain about God's existence. If you have good reasons for God's existence from observing nature, experiences of God's presence, and some reasonable explanations for why God sometimes allows evil, then this will not strike you as overwhelming evidence against theism. The atheist will never convince the theist with a single "defeater" of this sort. He would have to offer a positive vision of his own, showing how atheism accounts coherently and systematically for the totality of the theist's experience. In other words, this broader view of evidence helps make sense of the rationality of our religious disagreements.⁴⁷

Newman's genius lies in offering a plausible middle way between *fideism* on the one hand and *rationalism* on the other. He avoids fideism by maintaining that reasons or grounds are necessary for faith. "Faith must rest on reason," Newman writes, "nay even in the case

of children and of the most ignorant and dull peasant.”⁴⁸ Faith is anything but an irrational leap in the dark. Yet—and this I think is the more important lesson for most of us—he avoids rationalism by advancing a broader and more humane understanding of human reason (where we can have evidence without disinterested deductive arguments and certitude without Cartesian apodictic certitude).

The Enlightenment reduced the scope of reason too much, and Newman rightly broadens it. If scientific beliefs based on broad induction or inference to the best explanation are rational, why aren't theistic claims rational on the same basis? Catholic tradition holds that God can be known with certainty; but it does not hold that God can *only* be known with certainty by trained philosophers with strict demonstrations. In fact, the catechism wisely quotes Newman (though without attribution) regarding arguments for theism. According to the catechism, the ways to know God's existence are “proofs,” but proofs “in the sense of ‘converging and convincing arguments,’ which allow us to attain certainty about the truth.”⁴⁹

In a world filled with both positivist rationalism and postmodern irrationalism, Newman is the saint we need.

Notes

1. Philosophers known as contextualists would contest this interpretation of my students. They maintain that “knowledge” differs in meaning in different contexts. They would likely claim that I have changed contexts on my students between questions. See David Lewis, “Elusive Knowledge,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74, no. 4 (1996): 549–67, and Keith DeRose, *The Case for Contextualism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). I do not, however, find contextualist explanations convincing, for reasons I explain elsewhere. See Logan Paul Gage, “Against Contextualism: Belief, Evidence, & the Bank Cases,” *Principia: An International Journal of Epistemology* Vol. 17, No. 1 (2013): 57–70.
2. Following the publication of Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), infallibilism has again earned wide discussion. But Williamson's “knowledge first” epistemology, I think it is fair to say, has not earned many actual adherents.
3. At times, fallibilism has been defined more radically: “Fallibilism is the thesis that we cannot be certain of anything,” Trent Dougherty, “Fallibilism,” *The Routledge*

Companion to Epistemology, ed. Sven Bernecker and Duncan Pritchard (New York: Routledge, 2011), 141. But the more standard sense of fallibilism I am assuming here is, in Jason Stanley's classic formulation, the view that "someone can know that *p*, even though their evidence for *p* is *logically consistent* with the truth of not-*p*," Stanley, "Fallibilism and Concessive Knowledge Attributions," *Analysis* 65, no. 2 (2005), 127.

4. See, for instance, Richard Feldman, *Epistemology* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 114–19.
5. Bernard Lonergan, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan: Phenomenology and Logic*, ed. Philip J. McShane (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 9.2.
6. Newman writes:

We are so constituted, that if we insist upon being as sure as is conceivable, in every step of our course, we must be content to creep along the ground, and can never soar. If we are intended for great ends, we are called to great hazards; and, whereas we are given absolute certainty in nothing, we must in all things choose between doubt and inactivity, and the conviction that we are under the eye of One who, for whatever reason, exercises us with the less evidence when He might give us the greater. *Oxford University Sermons*, 11.23.

Basil Mitchell comments:

Newman later glossed this passage with a note which abated the force of "absolute certainty in nothing," but he also later admitted that "left to myself, I should be very much tempted to adopt Butler's view and understand credibility as probability upon which it is safe to act." Whether or not he actually at any time embraced this view, he clearly acknowledged it as an arguable position. Basil Mitchell, "Newman as Philosopher," in Ian Ker and Alan G. Hill, ed., *Newman after a Hundred Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 229.

7. Hebrews 11:1 (NIRV).
8. "Catechism of the Catholic Church," para. 157.
9. *Dei Filius*, dogmatic constitution of the First Vatican Council, 1870, chap. 2.
10. Aquinas makes this distinction, for instance, in *Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 4 a. 6 (hereafter *ST*).
11. *ST* II-II (Fathers of the English Dominican Province translation). See also, St. Bonaventure, *Disputed Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity*, Q.1, A. 1.
12. Newman writes, "Will any one say that a child or uneducated person may not savingly act on Faith, without being able to produce reasons why he so acts? What sufficient view has he of the Evidences of Christianity? What logical proof of its divinity? If he has none, Faith, viewed as an internal habit or act, does not depend upon inquiry and examination." *Oxford University Sermons*, 10.16.
13. 1 Corinthians 13:12 (KJV).
14. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* I.4.4.
15. John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 145.

16. John Henry Newman, *Discourses Addressed to Mixed Congregations* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 195–96.
17. *Ibid.*, 225.
18. In *ST III*, q. 7, a. 3, Aquinas maintains that Jesus did not have faith. Faith implies a kind of “defect,” he says, as we lack sight of the object. Similarly, Pope Benedict XII’s constitution, “On the Beatific Vision of God,” makes clear that faith is supplanted by sight (the beatific vision) in Heaven. Another reason Newman thinks faith can be meritorious is because our antecedent probabilities as to what is reasonable to believe are determined not by our background evidence alone but by the whole person—including one’s moral temperament, how they view the universe, their deepest commitments to good and evil. See Joe Milburn, “Faith and Reason in Newman’s Oxford University Sermons,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 92, no. 3 (2018): 490–92.
19. Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 33.
20. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.3.
21. On notions of certitude in the ancient and medieval world, see James Franklin, *The Science of Conjecture: Evidence and Probability before Pascal* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).
22. Newman writes: “Antecedent probability is the great instrument of conviction in religious (nay in all) matters. Here persons at first misunderstood me, and because I talked of ‘probable arguments,’ they thought I meant that we could not get beyond a probable conclusion in opposition to moral certainty . . . but I hope they understood me better now. I use probable as opposed to demonstrative, not to certainty.” *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1961), 11:293. Newman further writes: “Moral evidence and moral certitude are all that we can attain, not only in the case of ethical and spiritual subjects, such as religion, but of terrestrial and cosmical questions also.” *Grammar*, 206.
23. Franklin, *The Science of Conjecture*, 68.
24. See especially sermon 14.
25. See *ST II-II*, q. 1, a. 5.
26. Josef Pieper, *Belief and Faith* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963), 43–50.
27. See *Oxford University Sermons*, 13.9. See also Frederick D. Aquino, “Newman on the Grounds of Faith,” *Quaestiones Disputatae* 8, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 5–18.
28. This is my formulation, but for an important discussion of Locke and liberalism/rationalism, see H. Francis Davis, “Newman on Faith and Personal Certitude,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 12, no. 2 (Oct. 1961): 250–53.
29. However, Newman finds some reasons and arguments more persuasive than others. On his preferred theistic argument from conscience, see Logan Paul Gage, “Newman’s Argument from Conscience: Why He Needs Paley and Natural Theology After All,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* (forthcoming, 2020).
30. *Oxford University Sermons*, 11.24.
31. See especially *Oxford University Sermons*, 12. For a discussion of this sermon and a

defense of Newman's claim that it is the whole person who reasons, see Frederick D. Aquino and Logan Paul Gage, "In Defense of Passional Reason" (unpublished manuscript).

32. For a recent defense of the claim that experience can act as evidence, see Logan Paul Gage, "Can Experience Fulfill the Many Roles of Evidence?" *Quaestiones Disputatae* 8, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 87–111.
33. See Newman, *Grammar*, 168, 149.
34. *Ibid.*, 187.
35. Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (New York: Image Books, 1994), 8:522.
36. No one is a bigger fan of Richard Swinburne's probabilistic natural theology in *The Existence of God* than I am. But Newman would likely worry that the formal probability structure is still an abstraction from what we actually do. It might obscure the fact that, as Newman says,

In concrete reasonings we are in great measure thrown back into that condition, from which logic proposed to rescue us. We judge for ourselves, by our own lights, and on our own principles; and our criterion of truth is not so much the manipulation of propositions, as the intellectual and moral character of the person maintaining them, and the ultimate silent effect of his arguments or conclusions upon our minds. *Grammar*, 196.
37. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 8, 523, defines the illative sense as "a 'faculty' of the mind . . . which is . . . capable of discerning the point at which the convergence of probabilities amounts to conclusive proof." But, it seems to me, the illative sense isn't fundamentally about certitude but about the weight of reasons/evidence. Plus, as Newman makes clear, the illative sense isn't so much a passive thermometer measuring when the threshold of certitude has been passed but something active that involves the whole of one's character and judgment.
38. John Henry Newman, *Letters and Diaries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 24:275.
39. This sort of parity argument has been advanced in our own time, although with no apparent historical connection, by Alvin Plantinga. See Plantinga, *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).
40. Newman, *Oxford University Sermons*, 13; *Grammar*, chap. 8.
41. *Oxford University Sermons*, 13:9.
42. William Abraham traces today's cumulative case arguments back to Newman and Butler. Abraham, "Cumulative Case Arguments for Christian Theism," in William J. Abraham and Steven W. Holtzer, ed., *The Rationality of Religious Belief: Essays in Honor of Basil Mitchell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 17.
43. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* in *G. K. Chesterton: Collected Works* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 1:287. Martin D'Arcy, *The Nature of Belief* (St. Louis: Herder, 1958), 174, 192, similarly speaks of "a certitude for which we cannot set down the evidence, for the reason that the evidence is too vast, too infinite to be itemized . . . a conspiracy of evidence saying the same thing"

44. Newman writes: "The multiform and intricate assemblage of considerations, which really lead to judgment and action, must be attenuated or mutilated into a major and a minor premiss." *Oxford University Sermons*, 12.10. He further writes of the way in which logic "is brought in to arrange and inculcate what no science was employed in gaining." Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 6th ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 190.
45. For my own account of the rationality of religious belief, which is Newmanian in spirit, see Logan Paul Gage and Blake McAllister, "The Phenomenal Conservative Approach to Religious Epistemology," in John DePoe and Tyler Dalton McNabb, eds., *Debating Christian Religious Epistemology: An Introduction to Five Views on the Knowledge of God* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, forthcoming, 2020).
46. Newman, *Grammar*, 145.
47. For more on how a broad view of evidence helps solve the problem of peer-disagreement, see Logan Paul Gage, "Evidence and What We Make of It," *Southwest Philosophy Review* 30, no. 2 (2014): 89–99.
48. Newman, quoted in Ian Ker, *John Henry Newman: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 622.
49. "Catechism of the Catholic Church," para. 31.