

Newman on the Problem of the Partiality and Unity of the Sciences

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Abstract: This paper focuses on Newman's approach to what we might call "the problem of the partiality and unity of the sciences." The problem can be expressed in the form of a question: "If all human knowing is finite and partial, then on what grounds can one know of the unity and wholeness of all the sciences?" Newman's solution to the problem is openly theistic, since it appeals to one's knowledge of God. For Newman, even if I exclusively pursue my own partial science as a physicist, or psychologist, or historian, and even if I do not understand much about the content of the other sciences, nevertheless it is still possible for me to grasp the comprehensive ground of the unity of all the sciences, by virtue of my knowledge of God. The problem, however, is that this solution seems to rely on the sort of intellectual imperialism that Newman criticizes throughout much of his work. For this solution seems to assert the unity of the sciences only by placing one science—theology—above all the others as a supervening *Über-science*. The aim of this paper is to defend Newman against this charge of imperialism, and to show that his thought is not only more plausible, but also more nuanced, than might appear at first sight.

Introduction

John Henry Newman was an elusive and controversial person during his life, and he remains so for us today. His extensive and multi-faceted *corpus* offers perspectives that will resonate with readers of just about any persuasion: traditionalist, progressive, conservative, liberal, anti-modern, pro-modern, and even post-modern. One reason why Newman strikes us as such a multi-faceted figure is that he was indeed a very complex, subtle, and highly nuanced thinker. But another reason is that he was not a systematic thinker and had no aspirations about constructing a unified, comprehensive theory of metaphysics, epistemology, or ethics. Newman's philosophical insights are scattered unevenly throughout his *corpus*, since he availed himself of philosophy in a more-or-less piecemeal and *ad hoc*

fashion. In what follows, I shall not attempt to speculate about what a systematic representation of Newman's philosophy might look like—or whether such a representation is even possible. Instead, I shall focus on a particular philosophical issue that is present throughout Newman's *corpus*, what might be called “the problem of the partiality and unity of the sciences.”

My investigation shall unfold in three main sections:

In section one, I discuss Newman's understanding of the problem of the partiality and the unity of the sciences with special reference to his famous work, *The Idea of a University*. Even though *The Idea of a University* does not explicitly address the philosophical dimensions of the problem, it does raise the problem in general terms and begins to address the problem's social, cultural, and even intercultural dimensions. In section two, I introduce Newman's theistic solution to the problem, and demonstrate how this solution can be theistic without being theological. In the third and final section, I show that Newman's theistic solution is not only more plausible than may appear at first sight, but is also more interesting insofar as it is bound up with Newman's attempt to reverse various aspects of our ordinary way of understanding things.

1. Newman on the Problem of the Partiality and Unity of the Sciences

As we enter into Newman's thought on the problem of the partiality and unity of the sciences, it should be made clear at the outset that for Newman a “science” is not primarily a set of propositions or theories or doctrines. Rather, a science is an essentially human activity undertaken by finite, limited human minds for the purpose of making sense of the world and of the role of human beings within it. Contrary to modern “scientism,” Newman holds that what counts as the proper methodology or as valid evidence within any particular science cannot be determined by reference to any generalized or pre-established set of rules or guidelines. Each science has its own, immanently-generated set of standards and canons, and each science arrives at truths about the world and about human existence on the basis of its own delimiting assumptions, abstractions, and hypotheses. Because of this, each science is partial and abstractive, and delivers only partial, abstractive, and incomplete truths about the world as a whole.¹ Seen in this context, the problem of the partiality of the sciences is in fact a specification of the more general philosophical problem of the partiality or abstractive character of all finite, human understanding whatsoever.

Newman himself discusses the problem by speaking of the need for a kind of “justice” or “diplomacy” among the various sciences, or among the various theoretical approaches to our understanding of the world. Thus he warns against the usurpations, encroachments, or transgressions that might occur when one science—in spite of its partiality—fails to recognize its own partiality and begins to tread upon the territory that properly belongs to another science. Even though he does not put it in precisely these terms, the philosophical problem for Newman is this: how does one science recognize and make sense of its own partiality, when it is itself partial, and thus when it does not possess a broader perspective or a “view of the whole” on the basis of which it can recognize and account for its own partiality? Or to approach the

problem in slightly different terms: if each and every science provides only a partial, limited, and abstractive view of the world, then how can any finite, scientifically-informed mind really know that its own partial view really does fit harmoniously within an overarching whole, except by claiming to have a view of the whole and thus—implicitly and illicitly—by claiming to have escaped its own partiality? The philosophical issues broached by Newman’s questions are continuous with a host a problems in contemporary philosophy of mind and epistemology;² but within the context of the present paper, I will be able to address only a few dimensions of Newman’s approach to the problem.

In his *Idea of a University*, Newman discusses the problem of the partiality and unity of the sciences in terms of what he calls the “rivalry” between the various sciences. Each of the sciences represents only a partial view of things, and in spite of their partiality, the sciences are the “natural rivals” of each other. If left to their own devices and without proper guidance, each of the sciences will tend to totalize itself and tend to usurp the rightful authority of some other science or sciences. For Newman:

[I]f you drop any science out of the circle of knowledge, you cannot keep its place vacant for it; that science is forgotten; the other sciences close up, or, in other words, they exceed their proper bounds, and intrude where they have no right.³

A proper integration of the various sciences is crucial, Newman argues, because the particular sciences—whether they acknowledge it or not—need one another, depend on one another, and complete one another.⁴ Because of this thoroughgoing interdependence, “to encroach upon any science . . . is to do an injury to all.”⁵

One of the main goals of the university, then, is to ensure the proper integration of the various sciences, but—one must keep in mind—Newman does not regard such integration as a task to be achieved once and for all. The integration of the sciences is an ongoing task. This is so, not only because the sciences themselves are always expanding and developing; but also because the human tendency towards intellectual totalization and usurpation is itself not a passing affliction or a temporary condition. As long as human minds are finite and partial in their grasp, they will always tend to forget their own finitude and partiality. The tendency of finite human minds towards self-forgetfulness and intellectual usurpation or imperialism is not a tendency to be confronted, addressed, and overcome once and for all; it is a tendency that will be with us as long as we must pursue our intellectual endeavors with finite and partial human minds.

For Newman, indeed, the tendency towards totalization, or the forgetfulness of the partiality of one’s intellectual partiality, is part of a “natural dialectic” to which no finite human mind is immune. Accordingly, Newman’s *Idea of a University* might be understood as his *Critique of Totalizing Reason*. What Newman aims to provide us with is not so much a “magic pill” to be taken once and for all, but rather an exercise regimen to be followed on a regular basis. Newman’s university is never finally “achieved,” but is always in the process of being achieved. This is why

Newman entitles his famous work in idealistic terms: it is the *idea* of a university, rather than the description of the university as actually achieved, or the plan for a university as actually achievable.

Now, when we put the problem in these terms, it becomes clear that, for Newman, the university represents nothing more than the imperfect, incomplete, institutional embodiment of an ideal philosophical view. According to this view, the individual sciences not only are part of a comprehensive, unified whole, but can be recognized as being part of a comprehensive, unified whole—even though one’s recognition of such wholeness is possible only from within the partial perspective of some individual science. In other words, Newman’s university is the concrete, institutional embodiment of a philosophical ideal, namely the ideal of grasping the unity and wholeness of all possible knowledge, even from within the limited, finite, partial perspective of one’s own particular science or theoretical view.

The challenge of Newman’s ideal becomes all the more clear if we turn to his description of just what it is that the university is supposed to produce. For Newman, the university should produce what he calls “the gentleman,” or—to use less politically incorrect language—it is supposed to produce liberally-educated persons, or persons possessed of “universal knowledge,” or what we might call “holistically-minded persons.” The holistically-minded person is not so described because he or she adheres to any particular view or set of doctrines. Nor is he or she so described because of the quantity of information that he or she has at his or her disposal. Rather, Newman’s “gentleman” or the holistic-minded person is one who has a particular intellectual habit, the habit of *not* being narrowed by the partial perspective of his or her own intellectual grasp of things.⁶

Such intellectual capaciousness and holistic-mindedness is not only good in itself insofar as it constitutes a perfection of the human mind as such. It is also good because of its social, cultural, and even intercultural ramifications. For Newman, a holistic-minded person is one who is not enslaved by the narrowing tendency of his or her particular intellectual endeavors. Throughout *The Idea of a University*, Newman makes abundantly clear that he is anxious and concerned that academics and intellectuals will be possessed by—rather than in possession of—their increasingly narrowed and specialized intellectual knowledge. The problem is not just that the sciences suffer; the more significant problem is that human beings become increasingly narrowed and even degraded. Newman warns:

[Y]ou must be above your knowledge, not under it, or it will oppress you; and the more you have of it, the greater will be the load. The learning of a Salamasius or a Burman, unless you are its master, will be your tyrant.⁷

And in a passage that rivals even Nietzsche’s disdain for dead, useless, and dehumanizing knowledge, Newman observes:

[T]here are authors who are as pointless as they are inexhaustible in their literary resources. They measure knowledge by bulk, as it lies in the rude block, without symmetry, without design. . . . How many writers are there

of Ecclesiastical History . . . who, breaking up their subjects into details, destroy its life, and defraud us of the whole by their anxiety about the parts! . . . Recollect, the Memory can tyrannize, as well as the Imagination. Derangement, I believe, has been considered as a loss of control over a sequence of ideas. The mind, once set in motion, is henceforth deprived of the power of initiation, and becomes the victim of a train of associations.⁸

Furthermore, for Newman, partial and fragmented knowledge may not only narrow and deaden the individual's intellect and imagination; it can also separate and alienate the individual from his or her fellow human beings. Such alienation not only causes fragmentation and disintegration on a social level, but also leads to the dehumanization of the individual. In order to illustrate some of the dangers attendant upon an intellectual division of labor, Newman quotes from Dr. Edward Copleston, who had warned about the dangers of an economic division of labor. With the economic or intellectual division of labor, the human being:

becomes himself more and more degraded as a human being. In proportion as his sphere of action is narrowed his mental powers and his habits become contracted; and he resembles a subordinate part of some powerful machinery.⁹

In addition to warning against the personal and social consequences of intellectual partiality and fragmentation, Newman also makes clear that there are worrisome intercultural ramifications as well. For just as an individual can be narrowed by his or her own intellectual pursuits, and can become alienated from others within the same culture, so too he or she can become intellectually enslaved by the commitments that he or she happens to share with those in his or her own culture. By contrast, the liberally-educated, holistic-minded person will have an intellectual openness that makes possible greater intercultural understanding. In a statement that nicely anticipates the ideal of intercultural understanding announced in our own conference theme, Newman explains that a liberal education prepares a person:

to fill any post with credit, and to master any subject with facility. It shows him how to accommodate himself to others, how to throw himself into their state of mind, how to bring before them his own, how to influence them, how to come to an understanding with them, how to bear with them. He is at home in any society, he has common ground with every class.¹⁰

But now how—according to Newman—does the university student come to this habit of mind, when those who teach the different branches of knowledge within a university do so by focusing explicitly on one particular thing or another, and never on all of them together in their wholeness? The problem here is that there simply is no additional academic specialization or field of study that explicitly addresses the

interconnectedness of all things and shows the student how one discipline—in all of its determinacy and detail—is related to all of its fellow disciplines. That is to say, there is no partial view that uniquely escapes the partiality of all partial views. And even though Newman valorizes “philosophy” or “the philosophical habit of mind,” he does not mean to say that the unity of the different branches of knowledge is to be achieved through some particular philosophical view or set of doctrines that supervenes on the other sciences and holds them all together. Even for Newman, philosophy—insofar as it is itself a particular discipline—cannot explicitly play an over-riding, supervenient role within the university. And—as we can all imagine from our own professional experience—even if philosophers were given the task of overseeing the integration and unification of all branches of knowledge, it would not be long before they themselves would become divided over whether the integration should be Aristotelian, or Thomistic, or Cartesian, Leibnizian, Spinozistic, Hegelian, and so forth.

Newman is clear about the matter: the student arrives at a sense of the interconnectedness of all things, not from any additional university course and not from any *Über-discipline* that would supervene on the others and draw them all together from some external, privileged point of view. Instead, Newman argues, the student arrives at a holistic point of view because of the *way* in which *each* of the individual disciplines is taught. Newman’s point is nicely illustrated in his discussion of professional training within a university context:

In saying that Law or Medicine is not the end of a University course, I do not mean to imply that the University does not teach Law or Medicine. What indeed can it teach at all, if it does not teach something *particular*? It teaches *all* knowledge by teaching all *branches* of knowledge, and in no other way. I do but say that there will be *this* distinction as regards a Professor of Law, or of Medicine, or of Geology, or of Political Economy, *in* a University and *out* of it, that *out* of a University he is in danger of being absorbed and narrowed by his pursuit, and of giving lectures which are the lectures of nothing more than a lawyer, physician, geologist, or political economist; whereas *in* a University he will just know where he and his science stand, he has come to it, as it were, from a height, he has taken survey of all knowledge, he is kept from extravagance by the very rivalry of other studies, he has gained from them a special illumination and largeness of mind and freedom and self-possession.¹¹

For Newman, then, what distinguishes a university education from a non-university education—even with respect to the training one gets in the professional fields—does not depend on the *content* of what is taught, but rather on the *way* in which it is taught. In a university, the specialized and potentially confining content of medicine, or law, or geology, or political science, or even history, or philosophy, or literature, is taught in a way that does not confine or contract, but rather in a way that *positively* expands the student’s openness to a pluralism of specializations

and interdisciplinarity. What is distinctive about the university is that it addresses the problem of the partiality of the sciences, and does so through a kind of *activity* that permeates the manner in which any particular discipline is taught: this is the activity of ongoing dialogue or discussion (or good-spirited “rivalry”), which succeeds in systematically reminding all the participants that the different branches of knowledge are but abstractions and partial views, and *outright falsifications* if taken to represent the whole.

What is implicit here is Newman’s belief that individual university teachers must themselves be the kind of holistic-minded persons that the university aims to produce. More specifically, university education is not just about the production of holistically-minded persons, as if from out of a vacuum; more accurately, it is about the *self-reproduction* of holistically-minded persons. Furthermore, one simply cannot count on a teacher who is not a gentleman (in Newman’s sense) to produce another gentleman. If the teacher himself or herself is not also a holistically-minded person, then the students will not become holistically-minded—except perhaps *per accidens*: through a mistake or accident or luck. But accidents and luck are clearly not enough for Newman. The business of the university is the deliberate, reflective, and non-accidental self-reproduction of what he calls “gentlemen” or what we have called holistic-minded persons. And if this self-reproduction is to be deliberate and systematic, then one evidently needs some principle for asserting the unity and wholeness of all the partial sciences, in spite of their inescapable partiality.

2. Newman’s Theistic Solution to the Problem

We have now presented Newman’s view of the problem of the partiality and unity of sciences, but this presentation has only given rise to further questions. For example, how is it that the university can genuinely engage in the systematic and non-accidental production of “gentlemen,” when those who do the teaching are themselves partisan practitioners of different fields of study and thus naturally fall prey to the tendency to understand things according to the limited and limiting methods and hypotheses of their own disciplines? For Newman, we (as philosophers and educators) cannot simply ignore the problem, or hope that the integration of the different branches of knowledge will take place of its own accord. For as Newman emphasizes, the human mind—in spite of its partial and limited grasp of things—naturally systematizes and naturally seeks completeness and unity in what it knows. The mind simply “cannot keep from speculating and systematizing.”¹² And in the absence of a carefully-articulated and critical principle of the unity of all the sciences, some false principle or some impostor will naturally arise to fill the vacuum. This is precisely what happens when some physicists propose to unify the sciences on the basis of a reductionistic causal determinism, or when some economists propose to unify them on the basis of an uncritical religion of efficiency, or utilitarianism. In either case, a partial science has forgotten its own partiality and has taken itself to represent the essential truth of all the sciences. For Newman, one cannot simply propose a policy of benign non-interference among the different

disciplines. The human mind naturally aims to systematize, and so—if left without proper guidance—it will naturally tend towards intellectual imperialism and interdisciplinary usurpation.

The university's mission calls for active integration, and not just passive non-interference, among the sciences. Furthermore, every university educator—regardless of his or her particular discipline—should in principle be committed to this goal of active integration. But how can any practitioner of a particular discipline go about trying to understand the unity and wholeness of the sciences, except on the basis of methodologies and premises that are specific to his or her own discipline? And if the unity of all the sciences is thus understood by each educator only on the basis of the terms set by his or her discipline, then isn't any proposed "unity of the sciences" always going to be a false and partisan unity, understood only through the partial perspective of each discipline? In what follows, I will not be able to offer a comprehensive philosophical account of Newman's solution to the problem of the partiality and unity of the sciences; however, I will be able to *introduce* Newman's solution, and discuss some of the interesting philosophical ideas bound up with it.

On the face of it, Newman's solution to the problem is rather straightforward and simple. Newman's solution is what we might label a "theistic" solution, since it is a solution that appeals to one's knowledge of God. For Newman, even if I exclusively pursue my own partial science as a physicist, or psychologist, or historian, and even if I do not understand much about the content of the other sciences, nevertheless it is still possible for me to grasp the comprehensive ground of the unity of all the sciences, by virtue of my knowledge of God. For Newman, in other words, those who engage in very different intellectual pursuits can appreciate the interconnectedness of all the sciences, not because they directly know this interconnectedness by knowing all the sciences, but rather because they know of the unitary *source* of all things that are investigated by the sciences, namely God. According to Newman's theistic solution, "all branches of knowledge are connected together, because the subject matter of knowledge is intimately united in itself, as being the acts and the world of the Creator."¹³ For Newman, it is our knowledge of God that allows us access to the ground of the non-partial unity of all the sciences and ultimately saves us from the intellectual narrowness or provincialism to which we are naturally prone.

Now, in addition to being initially plausible, Newman's theistic solution also lends indirect support to his claims concerning the importance of theology and the Catholic faith in an ideal university. But on the other hand, Newman's theistic solution also gives rise to a host of new and important questions. First of all, doesn't this solution—contrary to some of Newman's other statements in the *Idea of a University*—effectively elevate theology to the status of a totalizing *Über-science* that would supervene externally on the other sciences in order to ensure their unity and interconnectedness? And doesn't this elevation of theology to the status of a super-science effectively contravene Newman's own warnings about one science usurping the domains of others? Furthermore, doesn't this also fly in the face of Newman's understanding that the student is to become holistically-educated, not

on the basis of any *content* that is taught by any particular science, but on account of the holistic *manner* in which each and every one of the sciences is taught? And does this mean that Newman, in the final analysis, gives up on the ideal of “justice” and “diplomacy” among the sciences, and opts instead for a theological imperialism according to which one science must oversee and unify the others?

All of these critical questions might be well-placed if Newman’s claims concerning our knowledge of God were “theological” in nature, rather than what I have called “theistic.” Newman is indeed claiming that we can know of the ground of the unity of all the sciences on the basis of our knowledge of God; but—significantly—he is not claiming that our knowledge of God is primarily an intellectual or theoretical or scientific type of knowledge. Rather, Newman holds that we can know of God’s existence, and thus we can know of the comprehensive ground of the unity of all the sciences, on grounds that altogether transcend the limits of any particular science, including even the science of theology.

For Newman, our knowledge of the ground of the unity of all the sciences is itself not an achievement or a result of any particular science at all, and thus does not have to be partial in the way that all the sciences are. This is because, for Newman, we know of God most immediately and most adequately and most significantly on grounds that are wholly pre-scientific and pre-theoretical. Such knowledge of God is available to us on a *moral* basis, through the voice of “conscience.” In his *Grammar of Assent*, Newman explains:

If, as is the case, we feel responsibility, are ashamed, are frightened, at transgressing the voice of conscience, this implies that there is One to whom we are responsible, before whom we are ashamed, whose claims upon us we fear.¹⁴

And in an unpublished paper on the same topic, Newman makes the same point, quoting from one of his own sermons:

Man has within his breast a certain commanding dictate, not a mere sentiment, not a mere opinion or impression or view of things, but a law, an authoritative voice, bidding him do certain things and avoid others. I do not say that its particular injunctions are always clear, or that they are always consistent with each other; but what I am insisting on here is this, that it *commands*; that it praises, blames, it threatens, it implies a future, and it witnesses of the unseen. It is more than a man’s own self. The man himself has no power over it, or only with extreme difficulty; he did not make it, he cannot destroy it. . . . This is Conscience, and, from the nature of the case, its very existence carries on our minds to a Being exterior to ourselves; for else, whence did it come?¹⁵

For Newman, my awareness of the moral obligatoriness implied by the voice of conscience is as immediate, intimate, personal, and indubitable to me as my awareness of my very own self. Newman explains that there is an intimate connection

between my awareness of my own existence and my awareness of God's existence through the voice of conscience:

[I]t is as improper to say I have faith in consciousness, sensation, memory, thought, reason as to say I have faith in my existence, . . . for reasoning is the very breath of my existence, for by it I know that I exist. . . .

[Furthermore] when I say that the external fact of the existence of God is an object of faith, and a primary object, I do not mean that it is necessarily so in the order of history, but in the order of nature. I mean that it is more intimately connected with the nature of the human mind than anything else, and while it is to be received on faith, hardly it is so in fact. . . .

Though it is not easy to give a list of those primary conditions of the mind which are involved in the fact of existence, yet it is obvious to name some of them. I include among them, not only memory, sensation, reasoning, but also conscience.¹⁶

For Newman, just as I cannot coherently doubt my own mental acts or my own existence, so too I cannot coherently doubt the presence of the voice of conscience within me. The voice of conscience is just as indubitable as the presence of sensations or the presence of cogitations within me; and it is the presence of the voice of conscience within me (unlike the presence of mere sensations within me) that points immediately to the existence of God outside of me. Of course, Newman is not claiming that the voice of conscience is "indubitable" in the sense that it is always "correct" about what my moral obligations are. He is saying only that the voice of conscience is immediately certain and indubitable in the sense that my awareness of the being that I am—and I am inescapably a moral being—is immediately bound up with an awareness of moral obligatoriness, which is the voice of conscience.¹⁷ And for Newman, this sense of moral obligatoriness implies the existence of God as moral obligator.

It is not possible here to give a full account or defense of Newman's attempt to prove the existence of God on the basis of the voice of conscience. But Newman's point concerning the indubitability of the voice of conscience can at least be illustrated through a brief thought experiment: given the kind of being I am, I cannot begin to doubt unless I am also committed to the view that I ought to doubt. However, I cannot be committed to the view that I ought to doubt without having some sense—no matter how inchoate or ill-formed—of moral obligatoriness. And if I have any sense of moral obligatoriness at all, then I must hear the voice of conscience. I might very well conclude that I *ought* to doubt the existence of a voice of conscience within me—or I might conclude that I *ought not* to doubt it. But regardless of how I happen to resolve this or any other particular ought-question, the crucial point is that I am able to entertain an ought-question in the first place. And if I can entertain any ought-question at all, then—for Newman—I understand what it means to be morally obligated, in which case I hear the voice of conscience.

Now it is crucial to note here that, for Newman, the voice of conscience which forms the basis of our knowledge of God's existence is entirely pre-linguistic, pre-theoretical, and pre-scientific. As a result, the voice of conscience in us is quite different from any theoretical or scientific expression of the voice of conscience; and our immediate knowledge of God (which is bound up with the voice of conscience) is quite different from any theoretical or theological articulation of our knowledge of God. It is precisely for this reason that Newman can claim that this—our most intimate and direct knowledge of God—can *legitimately* ground our knowledge of the unity and wholeness of all the sciences. For our knowledge of God through conscience is not based on a partial theoretical view, and indeed is not based on any theoretical view at all. As a result, this knowledge of God uniquely escapes the partiality and one-sidedness that characterizes all theoretical views and all the sciences.

It follows, for Newman, that this conscience-based appeal to God as the ground of the unity and wholeness of all the sciences does not contravene his call for “justice” and “diplomacy” among the sciences, and does not involve any illicit, imperialistic stance whereby theology would supervene on the other, “lesser” sciences. For Newman, we are saved from intellectual imperialism and usurpation, but not on account of any *theoretical* view of things. Rather, we are saved from such partiality and provincialism because of our morally, and not theoretically, grounded knowledge of God on the basis of conscience. For Newman, I can know that the various sciences, in spite of their partiality, are unified and whole. And I know this, not because I have access to any superior scientific or theoretical perspective that transcends the partiality of all the other sciences; rather, I know this because of my inescapable moral vision of the world, which gives me access to God on an altogether different and non-theoretical basis. My *moral* vision affords me a non-partial, non-abstractive knowledge of God that no theory or science could claim for itself without running the risk of usurping other types and branches of knowledge. In short, we are saved from the usurpations of partial, abstractive, *theoretical* reason because of our knowledge of God which is available to us through immediate, concrete, and non-abstractive *practical* reason.

Given the limited scope of this paper, it will not be possible to discuss Newman's nuanced thinking about the relation between theoretical and practical reason. Nor will it be possible to show in any detail how our morally-grounded knowledge of God's existence can be appropriated by particular scientists and theorists so that they truly learn to regard their own sciences as but parts of a divinely-created whole. But at least a beginning has been made to show that Newman's *theistic* solution to the problem of the partiality and unity of the sciences is not a *theological* solution; and as such, Newman's solution does not itself contravene his own warnings against allowing any one science to become an imperialistic, usurping force over the others.

3. Newman's Three Reversals

In this third and final section, I would like to point out—however briefly—some of the ways in which Newman's “theistic solution” is bound up with his attempt

to reverse some of our ordinary ways of understanding things. In what follows, I shall discuss three of what I call Newman's attempted reversals:

- 1) Newman reverses our ordinary understanding of the relation between our belief in God and our sense of moral obligation;
- 2) Newman reverses our ordinary understanding of the relation between our belief in God and our perception of the world; and
- 3) Newman reverses our ordinary understanding of the relation between the partiality of our knowledge and our situatedness in the physical world.

First of all, Newman reverses our ordinary understanding of the relation between our belief in God and our sense of moral obligation. As he puts it in response to a critic:

Ward thinks that I hold that moral obligation is, because there is a God. But I hold just the reverse, viz. there is a God, because there is moral obligation. I have a certain feeling in my mind, which I call *conscience*. When I analyze this, I feel it involves the idea of a Father and a Judge,—of one who sees my heart, etc.¹⁸

Newman's reversal here makes his thinking on the matter quite similar to Immanuel Kant's thinking. Indeed, Newman's proof of the existence of God in many ways resembles the "moral proof" that Kant had offered.¹⁹ It is highly unlikely, however, that Newman was influenced by Kant's more famous "moral proof," since Newman read very little—if any—of Kant's work.²⁰ Furthermore, there is a crucial difference between Kant's moral proof and Newman's. While both proofs are based on our awareness of the moral law or moral obligation, Newman takes his proof to demonstrate the *actual* existence of God, whereas Kant takes his proof to demonstrate only that we are *justified* in believing that God exists, even if no proof of God's actual existence, or non-existence, is ever available to us.

Newman's second reversal pertains to our understanding of the relation between our belief in God and how we perceive the world. According to some understandings of the relation, we come to believe in God's existence on the basis of what we perceive in the world (e.g., goodness, purposiveness, orderliness, causality, etc.). But Newman seeks to reverse this ordering, holding that I perceive the world as I do, because I believe in God, and not *vice versa*.

This partly explains why Newman was reluctant to rely on any empirically-based arguments for the existence of God.²¹ For to make belief in God's existence depend on empirical claims is to make too much depend on merely partial, theoretical beliefs. Such empirically-grounded proofs of God's existence do not make belief in God any more secure, but tend only to make people more narrow and dogmatic in their adherence to partial, empirical beliefs. Newman thus argues against the "design-proof" in a letter to W. R. Brownlow:

I have not insisted on the argument from *design*, because I am writing for the 19th century, by which, as represented by its philosophers, design is

not admitted as proved. And to tell the truth, though I should not wish to preach on the subject, for 40 years I have been unable to see the logical force of the argument myself. I believe in design because I believe in God; not in a God because I see design.²²

Newman's resistance to empirical or theoretical arguments for God's existence is bound up with his almost-Berkeleyan position on the status of the physical world. According to Newman, it may turn out that the physical world is nothing but a series of insubstantial shadows; however, for us humans, there is ultimately no need to distinguish between appearances and reality, provided only that we regard such appearances as given to us by God for ultimately moral purposes:

And should any one fear lest thoughts such as these should tend to a dreary and hopeless skepticism, let him take into account the Being and Providence of God, the Merciful and True; and he will at once be relieved of his anxiety. . . . What is it to us whether the knowledge He gives us be greater or less, if it be He who gives it? What is it to us whether it be exact or vague, if He bids us trust it? What have we to care whether we are or are not given to divide substance from shadow, if He is training us heavenwards by means of either? . . . If our senses supply the media by which we are put on trial, by which we are all brought together and hold intercourse with each other, and are disciplined and are taught, and enabled to benefit others, it is enough. . . . [W]e may leave the question of their substantial truth for another world.²³

Indeed, Newman is even prepared to hold that space, time, and even matter are altogether unreal:

I must candidly confess that there are things, some of which [Ward] at least takes for granted as to be accepted on the report of the senses which I do not believe to exist, except the Church tells me, and then I believe them on her word, and believe the cogency of the argument on her word. Ward says: "How do we know that men are here whom our senses bring before us and not in some other planet?" I answer, how *do* we know? I don't know, perhaps they are. Nay, I believe they are. Again I don't believe in the existence of space as a reality. It think it a *sine qua non* to our conceiving of matter—unless the Church determines otherwise—and then I hold it by faith in her word. I don't believe in time. There is just one primary belief I have—not knowledge but belief—it is not in matter, or space, or time, or any of this sort of outward thing—yet it is an external and outward being, or I should not talk of *faith*—it is belief in the existence of *God*.²⁴

This brings us to the topic of Newman's third reversal, his reversal of the relation between the partiality of our scientific or theoretical knowledge (on the one

hand), and our situatedness in the physical world (on the other). For Newman, the partiality of my scientific or theoretical knowledge is not fundamentally grounded on the fact that I happen to be situated in the physical world in a particular spatial and/or temporal location that prevents me from viewing the whole; nor is it fundamentally grounded on the fact that my scientific or theoretical knowledge depends on the givenness of matter or a material world outside of me. On Newman's account, the partiality of my scientific or theoretical knowledge cannot be fundamentally a function of space, time, or even materiality, since Newman is clearly prepared to dispense with belief in space, time, and matter. For Newman, even if space, time, and matter might be unreal, it is nevertheless the case that my knowledge is partial and limited, and I know this because I know of my dependence on God through the voice of conscience.

For Newman, the partiality of my knowledge is bound up with the fact that my knowing is never fully transparent to itself, or—stated differently—the fact that the knowing of what I know (no matter how well I know that) is never fully identical with self-knowing. As Newman makes clear, it is one thing to know, and quite another thing to know one's own knowing. There are

two processes, distinct from each other—the original process of reasoning, and next, the process of investigating our reasonings. All men reason, for to reason is nothing more than to gain truth from former truth, without the intervention of sense, to which brutes are limited; but all men do not reflect upon their own reasonings, much less reflect truly and accurately, so as to do justice to their own meaning. . . . In other words, all men have a reason, but not all men can give a reason.²⁵

Furthermore, Newman holds, because the knowing of what one knows is never fully identical with self-knowing, it follows that there are “unconscious ideas” in us which make possible our conscious knowledge of things, but which remain essentially hidden from us and operative only “behind our backs,” so to speak:

[T]he impression made upon the mind [by an idea] need not even be recognized by the parties possessing it. It is no proof that persons are not possessed, because they are not conscious, of an idea. Nothing is of more frequent occurrence, whether in things sensible or intellectual, than the existence of such unperceived impressions. What do we mean when we say that certain persons do not know themselves, but that they are ruled by views, feelings, prejudices, objects which they do not recognize?²⁶

For Newman, we fall into error, but not primarily because our limited spatial or temporal location prevents us from glimpsing a broader truth; rather, for Newman, the primary cause of error is our tendency to understand ourselves in terms of conscious ideas only, all the while forgetting the unconscious ideas that make our conscious knowledge possible. We err, in other words, not so much because our acts of knowing do not accurately depict their own objects, but rather because

we tend to understand our own *partial* acts of knowing as if they were *not* partial. And furthermore, the ground of this partiality has nothing to do with space, time, or matter, but rather with our reliance on unconscious ideas which we do not fully acknowledge. In other words, the fundamental problem is not just in understanding, but in *self*-understanding. And this is the essence of Newman's third reversal: it is not the case that my knowledge is partial because I am fundamentally situated within a spatial, temporal, and material world; rather, I wrongly believe that space, time, and matter cause my knowledge to be partial, only because my knowledge is partial and lacks self-transparency in a much more primordial, self-forgetful way.

Because of the operation of unconscious ideas in us, Newman holds that it is sometimes possible for us to understand authors and writers better than they understood themselves. In fact, Newman goes so far as to say that the living truth of an author's idea is often not apparent in the author's own expression of it, but becomes evident only later on, when the idea is discussed, applied, and even modified in the context of later issues and reflections. Newman writes:

[A]n idea not only modifies, but is modified, or at least influenced, by the state of things in which it is carried out, and is dependent in various ways on the circumstances which surround it. . . . It is indeed sometimes said that a stream is clearest near the spring. Whatever use may fairly be made of this image, it does not apply to the history of a philosophy or belief, which on the contrary is more equable, and stronger when its bed has become deep, and broad, and full. . . . Its beginnings are no measure of its capabilities or its scope. At first no one knows what it is, or what it is worth. It changes with [circumstances] in order to remain the same.²⁷

With this paper, I hope that I have made a contribution towards illustrating some of the originality and relevance of Newman's ideas, not only to help enhance our understanding of Newman on his own terms, but also to facilitate our own self-understanding, too. As Newman himself suggests, the truth of his ideas can only be made manifest through the fruit that they might eventually bear in new contexts such as our own.

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Notes

1. See, for example, John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1947), 282: "Sciences are only so many distinct aspects of nature, sometimes suggested by nature itself, sometimes created by the mind."

2. I am thinking, for example, of contemporary philosophers such as John McDowell, who asks in *Mind and World* (though not exactly in these terms): "How does the mind know that its own conceptual, interpretive activity is 'bounded on the outside' by what is other

than it, yet without transgressing the limits set by its own conceptual, interpretive activity?" See John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

3. John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, edited by Frank M. Turner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 59.

4. *Ibid.*, 148.

5. *Ibid.*, 157.

6. As Newman puts it, the "gentleman" is capable of viewing all things "at once as one whole, of referring them severally to their true place in the universal system, of understanding their respective values, and determining their mutual interdependence." See *The Idea of a University*, 99.

7. *The Idea of a University*, 101–102.

8. *Ibid.*, 102.

9. *Ibid.*, 119.

10. *Ibid.*, 126. See also page 146 for a similar description of the qualities of the holistically-minded person.

11. *Ibid.*, 118 (emphasis added).

12. *Ibid.*, 74.

13. *Ibid.*, 76.

14. *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 83.

15. *The Argument From Conscience to the Existence of God According to J. H. Newman*, edited by Adrian J. Boekraad and Henry Tristram (Louvain: Editions Nauwelaerts, 1961), 114–116. In this particular passage, Newman is quoting from his own *Occasional Sermons*, V, 73.

16. *Ibid.*, 106–109.

17. Newman makes the point in these terms: conscience here does not refer to any "rule of right conduct," but only to the "sanction of right conduct." One cannot doubt the "sanction" or the general sense of obligatoriness, even if one has doubts about particular rules of conduct. See *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 81.

18. *The Argument From Conscience to the Existence of God According to J.H. Newman*, 103.

19. For example, Kant writes: "So far as practical reason has the right to lead us [and it does], we will not hold actions to be obligatory because they are God's commands, but will rather regard them as divine commands because we are internally obligated to them." (CPR, A819/B847). For my own account of Kant's so-called moral proof of the existence of God, see Michael Baur, "Kant's 'Moral Proof': Defense and Implications," in *Philosophical Theology: Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, edited by Michael Baur (New York: American Catholic Philosophical Association, 2001), 141–161.

20. In fact, Newman's copy of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (the Meiklejohn translation of the First Critique) was left in his room with half of its pages uncut at the time of his death. See Edward Sillem, *The Philosophical Notebook of John Henry Newman Edited at the Birmingham Oratory*, vol. 1 (Louvain: Nauwelaerts Publishing House, 1969), 229.

21. Thus Newman writes: “the thought of God, as Theists entertain it, is not gained by an instinctive association of His presence with any sensible phenomena.” See *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 79.

22. Letter of April 13, 1870, to W.R. Brownlow, in Wilfrid Ward, *The Life of John Henry Cardinal Newman* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1912), vol. II, 269.

23. From John Henry Newman, “The Theory of Development in Religious Doctrine,” *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford*; reprinted in *The Essential Newman*, edited by Vincent Ferrer Blehl (New York: The New American Library, 1963), 154.

24. *The Argument From Conscience to the Existence of God According to J.H. Newman*, 108.

25. From “Implicit and Explicit Reason,” *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford*; reprinted in *The Essential Newman*, edited by Vincent Ferrer Blehl (New York: The New American Library, 1963), 321.

26. This passage is taken from “The Theory of Developments in Religious Doctrine,” *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford*, reprinted in *The Essential Newman*, edited by Vincent Ferrer Blehl (New York: The New American Library, 1963), 139.

27. John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1906), Chapter One, section one, 39–40.