



Newman's Argument from Conscience: Why He Needs Paley and Natural Theology After All

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Abstract. Recent authors, emphasizing Newman's distaste for natural theology—especially William Paley's design argument—have urged us to follow Newman's lead and reject design arguments. But I argue that Newman's own argument for God's existence (his argument from conscience) fails without a supplementary design argument or similar reason to think our faculties are truth-oriented. In other words, Newman appears to need the kind of argument he explicitly rejects. Finding Newman's rejection of natural theology to stem primarily from factors other than worries about cogency, however, I further argue that there is little reason not to pursue design arguments in order to save the argument from conscience.

*I see Thee not in the material world except dimly,
but I recognise Thy voice in my own intimate consciousness.*

—John Henry Newman¹

I. Introduction

St. John Henry Newman's distaste for natural theology—especially the design argument of William Paley—is well known. Rather than arguments from design, Newman preferred a theistic argument from conscience. In this essay, I wish to evaluate the soundness of Newman's argument. I begin with an exposition of the argument and its advantages. I then consider the most pressing defeater for the argument: Darwinian explanations of conscience. What emerges is a conflict between Newman's dismissal of design and his own argument from conscience. If the argument is to succeed, we need a reason to think that conscience is truth-oriented—a reason traditionally provided in the West by an appeal to the obvious design of creation. Hence, I conclude by re-examining Newman's objections to Paley and design. I argue that Newman's objections are not primarily *in principle* objections but stem largely from personal and historically situated concerns. Given the *current* state

of Western culture, if we are to echo Newman's sensitivity to his own times and clear obstacles to faith we must recover a sense of nature's design.

II. Newman's "Proof of Theism"

While woven throughout his entire corpus, Newman's argument from conscience is best seen in chapter five of *Grammar of Assent* and his unpublished manuscript "Proof of Theism."² Newman thinks of "consciousness, reasoning, memory, sensation," and perhaps others as our basic, internal faculties.³ Like Augustine, Descartes, and Classical Foundationalism generally, Newman believes that internal, mental reality is immediate and certain for us but external reality must be known from appearances. However, Newman thinks that God, while being external to us, is known through a wholly internal act and hence with more certainty than the external world. The way in which he is known to us is akin to the Cartesian *cogito*. Just as my existence is implicit in every act of thinking, God's existence is evident in every act of conscience.⁴

"By conscience," Newman says,

I mean the discrimination of acts as worthy of praise or blame. . . . Here then are two senses of the word conscience. It either stands for the act of moral judgment, or for the particular judgment formed. In the former case it is the foundation of religion, in the latter of ethics.

If I practice deceit, or I am grossly intemperate, or commit some very selfish act, I have a double feeling—first that I am transgressing a law, secondly that the law says this or that. This latter conviction may

²It can be argued Newman's *Grammar* doesn't so much advance *an argument* for theism as attempt to awaken a real assent to God's existence in those with only a notional assent. Still, Newman explicitly claims that his examination furnishes the raw material for an argument. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 94, 97. See also *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 182, where he claims that his way to God from conscience, even if it has not been expressed with precision, "will stand examination." Moreover, elsewhere he is clear: "Such is the argument for the being of a God which I should wish, if it were possible, to maintain. It has been my own chosen proof of the fundamental doctrine for thirty years past." Newman, "Proof of Theism," in *The Argument from Conscience to the Existence of God According to J. H. Newman*, ed. Adrian J. Boekraad and Henry Tristram (Louvain: Editions Nauwelaerts, 1961), 121.

³Newman, "Proof of Theism," 107. Cf. Newman, *Grammar*, 98. In this essay I call conscience a "faculty." I do not intend anything more substantive than the power of the intellect to act in various ways. Newman seems to speak of conscience in both substantive and deflationary ways. S. A. Grave, *Conscience in Newman's Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 30–2. Fortunately, for our purposes nothing significant hangs on this distinction.

⁴Terrence Merrigan remarks, "in the order of certitudes, the belief in an external world occupies the third place after the certitude of one's own existence, and of the existence of God." Merrigan, *Clear Heads and Holy Hearts* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1991), 41.

change, and yet the former notion will remain. If in any particular my conscience is false, and I come to see it, then I review my judgment in the *particular* case about what is right or wrong, but I do not thereby at all weaken my sense of a law and consequent obligation—but I feel it as strongly for my new idea of right in the particular case as in my old idea. That is, the feeling of conscience is of right and wrong *under a special sanction*.⁵

Even in our particular, fallible moral judgments (e.g., “taking this candy bar without paying is wrong”) we recognize implicitly—and can come to do so explicitly—that we are under a binding law, that we must follow the dictates of our conscience (e.g., “it would be blameworthy to do something wrong”). In the *Grammar*, Newman refers to our felt moral obligation as “a sense of duty,” or “a magisterial dictate.”⁶ In conscience we find not just a judgment as to the rightness or wrongness of particular actions but a *law* to be obeyed.⁷

As Newman puts it in the *Grammar*, “conscience has both a critical and a judicial office.” Even when misguided in some particular moral judgment, conscience still testifies, firstly, “that there is a right and a wrong” and, secondly, that there is a sanction or command enjoining us to do good and avoid evil “conveyed in the feelings which attend on right or wrong conduct.” And it is this latter sense of moral obligation from which the argument proceeds.⁸

From this inescapable sense that we are under law, sanction, or command Newman believes it follows that we bear a relation to something external:

Now I say that, as consciousness of thought is a reflex act implying existence, (I think, therefore I am), so this sensation of conscience is the recognition of an obligation involving the notion of an external being obliging. I say this, not from any abstract argument from the force of the terms, (e.g. “A Law implies a Lawgiver”) but from the peculiarity of that feeling to which I give the name of Conscience.⁹

⁵Newman, “Proof,” 111. Newman’s repeated language of “feeling” is unfortunate, for it might give the mistaken impression of something wholly non-cognitive. Newman himself seems aware of this ambiguity in our language. In Oxford University Sermon 4, para. 6, Newman uses the better phrase “moral perception.”

⁶Newman, *Grammar*, 98.

⁷This is not unlike Aquinas’s notion of *synderesis*. *De Veritate* q. 16, a 1. Newman himself, in his “Letter to the Duke of Norfolk” (1875), draws a connection to Aquinas.

⁸Newman, *Grammar*, 98. This is why critiques from variations in particular moral judgments do not undermine the argument. E.g., Jay Newman, “Cardinal Newman’s Phenomenology of Religious Belief,” *Religious Studies* 10, no. 2 (1974): 136.

⁹Newman, “Proof,” 117.

Newman isn't just claiming that it is analytic that law requires a law-giver. Rather, he is claiming that if we give a phenomenological analysis of the experience of conscience we will perceive something exterior to ourselves. He notices that while we make various judgments only our moral judgments in conscience carry this sense that we are under sanction or command.

As we have a notion of wrong and right, so we have of beautiful and ugly; but the latter set of notions is attended by no *sanction*. No hope or fear, no misgiving of the future, no feeling of being hurt, no tender sorrow, no sunny self-satisfaction, no lightness of heart attends on the acting with beauty or deformity. It is these feelings which *carry the mind out of itself and beyond itself, which* imply a tribunal in future, and reward and punishment which are so special. The notion of a future judgment is thus involved in the feeling of Conscience. And more than that—the feeling is one analogous or similar to that which we feel in human matters towards a *person* whom we have offended; there is a tenderness almost tearful on going wrong, and a grateful cheerfulness when we go right which is just what we feel in pleasing or displeasing a father or revered superior. So that contemplating and revolving on this feeling the mind will reasonably conclude that it is an unseen father who is the object of the feeling. And this father has necessarily some of those special attributes which belong to the notion of God. He is invisible—He is the searcher of hearts—He is omniscient as far as man is concerned—He is (to our notions) omnipotent, if He can after so many ages at length hold the judgment, when all sin shall be punished and virtue rewarded.¹⁰

Two things especially seem to give us awareness of an external being: (i) a deeply felt obligation which implies another to whom we are obliged, and (ii) the presence of feelings similar to those we have upon offending another person, especially a superior. Regarding (i), note that obligation seems to be social in nature; obligation just seems to be obligation to another person. Think of how obligations attend social relations: I have an obligation to feed Clarke because I am his father; I have an obligation to show up to class on-time because I am an employee of Franciscan University, etc. Newman signals an awareness of the social nature of obligation but never fully develops it. Fortunately, others have.¹¹

Regarding (ii), think of the personal sensitivity we display in conscience. Shame and disappointment are characteristic of how we feel towards *persons* we've wronged. "Inanimate things cannot stir our affections" in this way, New-

¹⁰Ibid., 117–9.

¹¹See Robert M. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 231–48 and C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 25–52.

man thinks, only persons.¹² Just as shame is always in our experience shame *before another*, so does our emotional experience of obligation indicate a dyadic relation; there is a judge before whom we stand guilty.

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. *These feelings in us are such as require for their exciting cause an intelligent being*; we are not affectionate towards a stone, nor do we feel shame before a horse or a dog . . . and on the other hand it sheds upon us a deep peace, a sense of security, a resignation, and a hope, which there is no sensible, no earthly object to elicit. "The wicked flees, when no one pursueth;" then why does he flee? Whence his terror? Who is it that he sees in solitude, in darkness, in the hidden chambers of his heart? If the cause of these emotions does not belong to this visible world, the Object to which his perception is directed must be Supernatural and Divine . . . a Supreme Governor, a Judge, holy, just, powerful, all-seeing, retributive.¹³

Our sense of obligation, Newman stresses, simply cannot be wholly of our own doing:

What I am insisting on here is this, that it [i.e., conscience] *commands*,—that it praises, it blames, it promises, 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 not 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? . . . As a knocking at our doors at night implies the presence of one outside in the dark who asks for admittance, so this Word within us . . . necessarily raises our minds to the idea of a Teacher, an unseen Teacher.¹⁴

It is by an instinct of our nature, then, that "without previous experiences or analogical reasoning," we are "able gradually to perceive the voice, or the echoes of the voice, of a Master, living, personal, and sovereign."¹⁵ For many

¹²Newman, *Grammar*, 101.

¹³Ibid. Emphasis added.

¹⁴Newman, *Sermons Preached on Various Occasions*, 6th ed. (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1891), 64–5 (Sermon 5). Interestingly, Paley too agrees that our obligations point beyond themselves and ultimately to God. *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, book II, chap. I-IV.

¹⁵Newman, *Grammar*, 102.

this connection to a divine being will remain tacit and non-inferential. Yet to clarify Newman's argument I have formalized it as follows:

- (1) Conscience is one of my basic mental faculties/operations.
- (2) Basic mental faculties/operations are generally reliable (i.e., truth-oriented).¹⁶
- (3) I have experiences of conscience in which, upon performing some action, it seems that I have transgressed a law and displeased someone.
- (4) If conscience is generally reliable *and* I have experiences of conscience in which, upon performing some action, it seems that I have transgressed a law and displeased someone, then there is a superior being with attributes we often ascribe to God.
- (5) Therefore, there is a superior being with attributes we often ascribe to God.

III. The Proof's Advantages

The argument is certainly valid. And throughout his life, Newman was quick to tout its advantages—especially over design arguments. He often pointed to four key advantages of the argument from conscience. *First*, knowing God through conscience requires no great learning. “It is a proof common to all, to high and low, from earliest infancy. It is carried about in a compact form in every soul. It is ever available—it requires no learning—it is possessed by pagans as well as Christians.”¹⁷ Perhaps when taken not as a formal argument but merely as evidence of God whispering to the individual one might be even more confident in it than in a formal philosophical argument.¹⁸

Second, the argument is practical rather than merely theoretical. Conscience is intimately part of our everyday decision-making and acting. As Newman writes, “it is intimately combined with practice. It is not some abstract truth wrought

¹⁶Newman is, at times, loath to speak of trusting our faculties, because he thinks “trust” implies that we have a choice to do otherwise; yet we cannot help but use our faculties and treat them as reliable. See Newman, *Grammar*, 272–3. Cf. M. Jamie Ferreira, *Scepticism and Reasonable Doubt* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 212–26. It is enough for our purposes that Newman treats conscience as a reliable or truth-oriented faculty. Challenges to the truth-oriented nature of conscience are clearly challenges to thinking conscience to be the voice of God.

¹⁷Newman, “Proof,” 121–2 (cf. 169, 174).

¹⁸Such an individual might have what Newman dubs “material certainty.” See Brandon Dahm, “The Certainty of Faith: A Problem for Christian Fallibilists?” *Journal of Analytic Theology* 3 (2015): 143–4.

out by the pure intellect, or wrought out theoretically, as that from design.”¹⁹ The argument leads to a real apprehension of God. In this way it might move us from mere notional assent to God's existence to real assent. This matters because real assent affects our conduct. “Many a man will live and die upon a dogma: no man will martyr himself for a conclusion. A conclusion is but an opinion. . . . No one, I say, will die for his own calculations: he dies for realities.”²⁰ Much like his contemporary Søren Kierkegaard, Newman thought that an argument mattered little if it remained at the theoretical level.

Third, and in a similar vein, the argument from conscience is personal. Recent literature has focused on Newman's personalism.²¹ And it is difficult to find a better example than in Newman's preference for the argument from conscience. The argument reaches to the heart; it gets at sin and the need for conversion in a way that impersonal arguments do not. Perhaps one could treat the issue of whether there is an Uncaused Cause, or the design of the mammalian eye, with equanimity. But the argument from conscience isn't like that. It matters to us personally whether there is a “searcher of hearts.” Not so, Paley's argument:

If I am asked to use Paley's argument for my own 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.²²

Fourth, and finally, because it is accessible to all, connected to practice, and intensely personal, the argument from conscience—unlike natural theology—is suited to lead men toward Christianity rather than deism. Its conclusion reaches a personal being and not just an abstract principle. Writes Newman:

Now I have no intention whatever of denying the beauty and cogency of the arguments which these books [of Natural Theology] contain; but I question much, whether in matter of fact they make or keep men Christians. I have no such doubt about the argument which I have been here recommending to you. Be sure, my Bretheren, that the best argument, better than all the books in the world, better than all that astronomy, and geology, and physiology, and all the other sciences can supply,—an argument intelligible to those who cannot read as well as to those who can,—an argument which is “within us,” an argument intellectually conclusive,

¹⁹Newman, “Proof,” 122.

²⁰Newman, *Grammar*, 89.

²¹See especially John F. Crosby, *The Personalism of John Henry Newman* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014).

²²Newman, *Grammar*, 330. N.b., this quotation regards Paley's argument in *Evidences of Christianity* but seems to apply equally well to his natural theology.

and practically persuasive, whether for proving the being of a God, or for laying the ground for Christianity,—is that which arises out of a careful attention to the teachings of our heart, and a comparison between the claims of conscience and the announcements of the Gospel.²³

Given the weight Newman places on it and his dismissal of other approaches, the argument had better hold up to scrutiny. It is to an assessment of the argument that we now turn.

IV. The Darwinian Challenge

There are various possible defeaters for Newman's argument. Freudian defeaters which see conscience as strongly internalized social standards immediately come to mind.²⁴ However, today the most pressing challenge comes from Darwinism. The problem is not simply in having a naturalistic account of conscience and its origin. God, after all, could guide and direct nature to particular ends. The problem, rather, is the non-teleological nature of these naturalistic accounts.

Newman's "Proof of Theism" was composed just as Darwin's *Origin of Species* was being released, many of his notes and revisions sometime thereafter. Newman's *Grammar*, with its path to real assent to God through conscience, appeared a decade after Darwin. Darwin's *Descent of Man*, which focuses on conscience and the moral sense as the chief difference between man and the lower animals, appeared in 1871—nearly twenty years before Newman's death.²⁵ Hence he had ample time to consider Darwinian defeaters of his argument.

Newman wisely guarded against pronouncing too prematurely on Darwin's theory. But Newman went so far as to indicate that Darwin's theory is no threat

²³Newman, *Sermons Preached on Various Occasions*, 74 (Sermon 5). Cf. Newman, "De Deo II," *Sermon Notes*.

²⁴Newman's argument appears particularly vulnerable to Freud at times. For instance, Newman (see above) invites us to consider the similarity between the claims of conscience and the claims of the Gospel. Freud's understanding of the superego as internalizing the standards of parents and society nicely explains the convergence. Similarly, Freud offers a non-theistic explanation of the resemblance (that Newman noted above) between the feelings we have in conscience and the feelings of having offended a father. As Freud puts it, because the child sees his father as authoritative, life-giving, protecting, caring, etc., "all of the magnificence in which he once appeared to the small child" is projected onto God. Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton & Co., 1965), 163–4 (Lecture 35). If correct, it would be easy to see why we might identify conscience as the voice of God when it is really the voice of parental authority. For replies to Freudian defeaters, see John F. Crosby, *Personalist Papers* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), chap. 4 and William J. Wainwright, *Religion and Morality* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 36–7.

²⁵See especially chapter four of *The Descent of Man*.

at all to his concerns.²⁶ I whole-heartedly agree with Noel Keith Roberts's conclusion that:

Newman shows no awareness, let alone understanding, of the central role of Natural Selection in Darwin's theory. He accepts that evolution is not at odds with Scripture, but he fails to make a distinction between the *fact* of evolution and Darwin's *theory* of evolution. . . . It would appear that he had little grasp of Darwinism apart from the general notion of the evolution of man.²⁷

This being so, it is easy to see why Newman saw little threat in Darwin's theory: he simply saw it as a matter of change over time or common ancestry rather than as a non-intelligent, non-teleological mechanism.²⁸ While I think Newman's caution was wise, I think his lack of attention to Darwin was a mistake and will attempt to show why in regards to conscience.

Darwinian defeaters attack premise (2). On Darwinian explanations of conscience, it is difficult to see how the faculty is truth-tracking (i.e., sensitive or responsive to the truth). To see how contemporary Darwinian explanations undermine Newman's second premise, we can extrapolate from the more-developed Darwinian explanations of morality and theistic belief. The first kind of theory (which parallels Wilson's and Bering's explanations of religion²⁹) holds that conscience was selected because it enhanced reproductive fitness. But the reason conscience enhances fitness is not because it delivers true beliefs. The selective advantage comes in aiding group cohesion through a unified code of behavior and through the group not having to expend energy monitoring free riders and cheaters once the code of right and wrong behavior is internalized.

One of Newman's aspects of conscience gives us the code of behavior, and the other acts as a deep sense of felt obligation impelling us to comply. Selection

²⁶See his letters to Pusey (June 5, 1870) and Mivart (December 9, 1871) in *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, Vol. XXV, ed. Charles Stephen Dessain and Thomas Gornall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973).

²⁷Roberts, "Newman on the Argument from Design," *New Blackfriars* 88, no. 1013 (2007): 63. For a more optimistic take see Jonathan W. Chappell, "A Grammar of Descent," *Science & Christian Belief* 27, no. 2 (2015): 180–206.

²⁸On Newman's lack of careful attention to Darwin see Stanley L. Jaki, "Newman and Evolution," *Downside Review* (Jan. 1991): 16–33 and Chappell, "A Grammar of Descent." Ernst Mayr (often known as "the dean of evolutionary biology"), having surveyed a great deal of primary literature on Darwinian theory from Dobzhansky to Lewontin to Wright, concludes, "One thing about which modern authors are unanimous is that adaptation is not teleological." Mayr, "How to Carry Out the Adaptationist Program?" *The American Naturalist* 121, no. 3 (March 1983): 324–34, at 324.

²⁹David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2002); Jesse M. Bering, *The God Instinct* (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2011).

would also favor a natural inference to God's existence as the truly authoritative and all-seeing monitor of one's behavior. The felt sense of obligation is indeed to something personal (one's group) but not to something divine. This is a natural hypothesis, given Darwinian theory, which serves to defeat premise (2). The key problem is that on this view conscience will not be a reliable indicator of God's existence because it is not a truth-tracking faculty. On Darwinian theory it is plausible that our particular moral judgments, our experience of moral obligation, and our natural belief in God from conscience would occur even in the absence of God and objective moral truths.³⁰

What Ruse and Wilson say of morality seems true of this first Darwinian explanation of conscience: "Morality, or more strictly our belief in morality, is merely an adaptation put in place to further our reproductive ends. . . . In an important sense, ethics as we understand it is an illusion fobbed off on us by our genes to get us to cooperate." Not only our moral beliefs but also our felt sense of moral obligation was cobbled together by natural selection. As they put it, "the way our biology enforces its ends is by making us think that there is an objective higher code, to which we are all subject." Morality and all its seeming obligatory power is, contrary to Newman, "a legacy of evolution rather than a reflection of eternal, divinely inspired verities."³¹

The other major kind of Darwinian explanation of conscience (which parallels the arguments of Boyer and Atran on the evolution of religious belief³²) holds that conscience was not selected for fitness but is a by-product of something that was selected for fitness. Here we find the same problem as before: the outputs of such a faculty would be unlikely to track the truth. Even if they turned out to be true in general, they would only be accidentally true and hence unjustified for us.

The same goes for the deep sense of moral obligation and the natural inference to God. On this Darwinian model, just as on the first, there is every reason to think them unreliable since they did not evolve to give us true beliefs but, rather, evolved to enforce reproductively advantageous behavior. What better sanction could one want for this behavior than that of the gods? No amount of deep phenomenological analysis of conscience can generate a good argument

³⁰It is possible, of course, that conscience is still truth-tracking. But there is no reason to think this is the case. It would be utterly mysterious that blind evolutionary forces just happened to produce mostly true moral beliefs in a sea of falsehoods. Such outputs of a blind process would seem accidentally true at best, and hence unjustified for us. Finally, what would be our evidence that conscience in fact yields truths? Merely that they seem true? That isn't a good reason, since *ex hypothesi* they were selected to seem true to us.

³¹Michael Ruse and E. O. Wilson, "The Evolution of Ethics," *New Scientist* 17 (October 1985): 50–2.

³²Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained* (New York: Basic Books, 2001); Scott Atran, *In Gods We Trust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

for God's existence once we grant that conscience is not a truth-tracking faculty, for the Darwinian explanation can always chalk the phenomenology up to the genius of natural selection.

What Sharon Street says of the Darwinian view of our moral beliefs applies equally well here to the two major Darwinian models of conscience: Because the outputs of such a faculty are not truth-tracking, they "are in all likelihood hopelessly off track . . . or else . . . [true only] as a matter of sheer luck."³³ At no time need the Darwinian appeal to moral facts, real moral obligation, let alone real moral obligation *to God*, to explain the experience of conscience. Darwinian theory, then, serves to undercut premise (2); it undercuts the evidential power of the experience in conscience by providing an alternative, non-truth-tracking explanation of conscience which claims to be rooted in empirical science.³⁴

V. Revisiting Newman's Concerns with Paley and Design

If we are to advance the argument from conscience, then, we need a reason to think that non-intelligent causes are not solely responsible for our faculties (e.g., a design argument) or that they are otherwise truth-oriented.³⁵ Given their rejection of Paley, design, and natural theology generally, Newman and many of his followers seem caught between a rock and a hard place. But a closer examination of Newman's reservations about design arguments reveals that they stem not so much from serious intellectual reservations about the arguments themselves as from three sources: (a) his personal disposition, (b) his reading of his own historical situation, and (c) his general wariness of rationalism.

In *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (1864), Newman gives us an insight into his general disposition toward nature, writing, "I look into this living busy world, and see no reflexion of its Creator."³⁶ Without conscience, he indicates, he might be an atheist. When in 1870 Fr. William Robert Brownlow wrote to see if Newman intended the "testimony of conscience" to supplement (rather than replace) a traditional argument for God's existence from the visible creation, Newman replied unequivocally: "for 40 years I have been unable to see the logical force

³³Sharon Street, "Reply to Copp: Naturalism, Normativity, and the Varieties of Realism Worth Worrying About," *Philosophical Issues* 18, no. 1 (2008): 207–28, at 208. Cf. Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value," *Philosophical Studies* 127, no. 1 (2006): 109–166.

³⁴Notice that the second kind of Darwinian explanation might also undermine premise (1) since conscience may not be a "basic" faculty if it is merely a by-product.

³⁵I am not claiming that one *necessarily* needs a defeater-defeater in order for their belief in God through conscience to be justified. However, the average intellectually aware adult in Western culture would be aware of the Darwinian challenge to Newman's argument and hence would require a defeater-defeater.

³⁶Newman, *Apologia*, 216.

of the [design] argument myself. I believe in design because I believe in God; not in God because I see design.”³⁷

Newman was critical of design arguments long before the advent of Darwin’s *Origin*. In an 1839 sermon at Oxford, Newman leaves it an open, “great question” as to “whether Atheism is not as philosophically consistent with the phenomena of the physical world, taken by themselves, as the doctrine of a creative and governing Power.”³⁸ The most he can see, as he says in the *Apologia*, are “tokens so faint and broken of a superintending design.”³⁹

This is a surprisingly strong and counter-intuitive stance. For as long as people have been making philosophical arguments they’ve been making design arguments. Western design arguments date back to at least Xenophon’s (c.430–354 B.C.) Socrates.⁴⁰ Philosophical argumentation aside, ordinary people quite naturally and easily see the visible world around them as suggestive of theism. In our own day, even Richard Dawkins defines biology as “the study of complicated things *that give the appearance of having been designed for a purpose*.”⁴¹ And yet Newman can’t see it.

Newman’s anti-natural theology claims, I submit, tell us much more about his personal disposition than the value of natural theology *per se*. Newman seems to say as much:

Were it not for this voice, speaking to me so clearly in my conscience and my heart, I should be an atheist, or a pantheist, or a polytheist when I looked into the world. *I am speaking for myself only; and I am far from denying the real force of the arguments in proof of a God . . .* but these do not warm me or enlighten me; they do not take away the winter of my desolation, or make the buds unfold and the leaves grow within me, and my moral being rejoice.⁴²

And yet, at times, he does argue for design—at least at the level of the laws of nature. In fact, he can sound a lot like Paley:

As a cause implies a will, so order implies a purpose. Did we see flint celts, in their various receptacles all over Europe, scored always with

³⁷Dessain and Gornall, *Letters and Diaries*, 97.

³⁸Newman, *Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 138 (Sermon 10). N.b., in the 1871 reprint, Newman seeks to take the edge off of this provocative statement.

³⁹Newman, *Apologia*, 217.

⁴⁰See David Sedley, *Creationism and Its Critics in Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 78–86.

⁴¹Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1996), 4, emphasis added.

⁴²Newman, *Apologia*, 216–7, emphasis added.

certain special and characteristic marks, even though those marks had no assignable meaning or final cause whatever, we should take that very repetition, which indeed is the principle of order, to be a proof of intelligence. The agency then which has kept up and keeps up the general laws of nature, energizing at once in Sirius and on the earth, and on the earth in its primary period as well as in the nineteenth century, must be Mind, and nothing else, and Mind at least as wide and as enduring in its living action, as the immeasurable ages and spaces of the universe on which that agency has left its traces.⁴³

Looming large in Newman's thinking about natural theology is not just his personal disposition, however, but his pastoral assessment of Victorian England—where he concluded that design arguments were unhelpful at best. As he wrote to Brownlow, "I have not insisted [in the *Grammar*] 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."⁴⁴ So in the wake of Hume and Kant, starting with design seemed to him foolish.

Newman observed increasing secularization in his day, especially in the academy. For him this was epitomized in the British government's creation of explicitly secular "Queen's Colleges" in Catholic Ireland. Replacing Christianity's unitive influence in the university with a generic Creator struck Newman as a disastrous watering down of the gospel. Newman worried about the rise of "natural religion"—an attempt to build religion without divine revelation.⁴⁵ Through the lens of these trends, design arguments appeared as a weak attempt to found belief in God on rational and impersonal grounds. Conscience, unlike design, can confront us with our sinfulness and lead to a true religious sensibility.⁴⁶

Newman thinks natural religion offers us an "intelligent, wise, and beneficent Principle of nature" or "a pervading Soul of the Universe."⁴⁷ What it can't deliver is an intimate, personal God. This is why, after giving the design argument regarding the general laws of nature (above), he goes on in the next chapter to develop his argument from conscience. As Hughes writes:

Newman gives only grudging approval to what might be termed the traditional arguments for the existence of God. His lack of enthusiasm stems

⁴³Newman, *Grammar*, 75.

⁴⁴Dessain and Gornall, *Letters and Diaries*, 97.

⁴⁵See his "The Religion of the Day," in *Plain and Parochial Sermons* as well as "Knowledge Viewed in Relation to Religion," in *The Idea of a University*.

⁴⁶Cf. J.-H. Walgrave, *Newman the Theologian*, trans. A. V. Littledale (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1960), 206.

⁴⁷Newman, *Fifteen Sermons*, 28 (Sermon 2). Cf. "Christianity and Physical Science," in *The Idea of a University*.

not so much from doubts about their validity or force, but from the very limited conclusions about the nature of God to which they can lead.⁴⁸

Newman, then, appears to interpret Paley and the post-Paley advocates of natural theology as part of the rising natural religion-secular academic complex. Paley and his ilk are wrong to suppose that science and natural theology will lead to Christian conviction. Paley may create wonder, Newman says comically, but “wonder is not religion, or we should be worshipping our railroads.”⁴⁹ Grounded in the wonder of design rather than in the moral perception of our situation before God, Newman maintained, design arguments lead only to a notional apprehension of God. They are not the sorts of things to make and keep men Christians.⁵⁰ As Kevin Mongrain helpfully summarizes: “Newman’s mixed evaluation of arguments from design ought to be interpreted in light of his broader theological understanding of the challenges posed to the practice of Christian faith in his nineteenth-century context.”⁵¹ He’s worried about natural religion and theological Liberalism more generally.⁵² Importantly, none of this challenges design arguments in principle, but only their use.

Lastly, Newman’s reservations about design arguments stem in part from his reservations about formal argumentation generally. It’s not that Newman thought that formal argumentation could never be helpful; nor was he any kind of logical skeptic. But Newman thought his culture (including the Church of his day) in the grip of an unhelpful rationalism. Newman insisted that the answer to the abandonment of true religion in his day was not another clever, rationalistic argument for theism or Christianity. Few people are ever won to Christianity by such arguments.⁵³ And even if the argument won assent, it would at best be a notional assent. The answer to the decline in religious devotion, he maintained, is to recover a perceptive moral sense.

Newman insisted on a parity between arguments and the intuitive evidence possessed by morally sensitive individuals with an educated conscience.⁵⁴ The

⁴⁸Gerard J. Hughes, “Conscience,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Henry Newman*, ed. Ian Ker and Terrence Merrigan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 207.

⁴⁹This is not very charitable. Paley was, after all, the author of the well-known *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* (1817).

⁵⁰See *Sermons Preached on Various Occasions*, Sermon 5.

⁵¹Kevin Mongrain, “The Eyes of Faith: Newman’s Critique of Arguments from Design,” *Newman Studies Journal* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 68–86, at 68.

⁵²As James F. Kaiser comments, this preference for a more personal argument—the argument from conscience—“will . . . be understandable if one interprets it in terms of his concern over the influence of Liberalism in religion.” Kaiser, *The Concept of Conscience According to John Henry Newman* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1958), 71.

⁵³See Oxford University Sermon 4, “The Usurpations of Reason.”

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

theistic philosopher is not necessarily in any better epistemic position than the uneducated elderly person in the pew. Arguments are not the only way to God. In this regard, Newman's concern with natural theology is actually part of a larger concern with arguments in general. Newman thinks that intellectuals vastly *overestimate* the role of explicit argumentation and radically *underestimate* the value of our intuitive judgments. He held that "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."⁵⁵ There is no escaping prudence—and thus no escaping the character and personal formation of the individual—when it comes to our views on important matters like the existence of God or the truth of Christianity. Newman worried that logic is simply "brought in to arrange and inculcate what no science was employed in gaining."⁵⁶ Knock-down arguments are rare. And arguments do not typically ground our beliefs anyway. The true grounds of belief (experience and judgment) are often "attenuated or mutilated into a major and a minor premiss."⁵⁷ We typically form our beliefs based upon the totality of our experiences. Newman thinks that this evidence is no less valuable than formal argumentation.

The point is this: Newman's worry about rationalism isn't specific to natural theology. It is just an obvious instance of such rationalism. It isn't so much that the arguments are unsuccessful as that syllogisms aren't how we decide that our spouse loves us, that murder is wrong, or that God exists. In such matters we have no recourse but to rely on personal judgment about the totality of our experience. What we need, then, is not a better argument but better formation—an educated conscience.

Formal inferences can be helpful, however. As he makes clear in Oxford University Sermon 4, the Church and "right reason" often must correct the errors of corrupt secular thinking. The Church takes what it knows intuitively from many years of experience and then makes careful distinctions and metaphysical arguments. Notice, though, that these pronouncements of right reason are not the root of our belief in theism or Christianity but its fruit. These are defeater-defeaters to heretical theological arguments. In the same way, Newman would insist that design arguments do not typically ground theistic (let alone Christian) belief. At best, they are a formalization of our intuitive recognition of nature's

⁵⁵Newman, *Grammar*, 240.

⁵⁶Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 6th ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 190.

⁵⁷Newman, *Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 160 (Sermon 12).

design and its logical implications. This still leaves room, however, for design arguments to fend off challenges to our intuitive judgment about nature's design and the reliability of our basic faculties. Newman's concern here is not about logical argumentation or natural theological argumentation *per se* but the use to which such arguments are put.

Newman does, however, offer one in-principle objection to Paley's natural theology. Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* famously argued that arguments from analogy for a designer are weak because the analogies between natural and artificial things are weak. Newman claims that his argument from conscience is unlike Paley's in that it does not commit this "mistake" of arguing from analogy.⁵⁸ But much contemporary scholarship on Paley's natural theology (both philosophical and historical) denies that the argument is analogical. The argument is likely deductive, although some think it best formulated as an inference to the best explanation. Despite the standard textbook caricatures, few if any who have worked seriously on Paley see it as an argument from analogy.⁵⁹

Given the understanding of Newman's critique of natural theology expressed above, there seems no principled obstacle to Newman and his followers utilizing a design argument as a defeater-defeater in order to proceed with the argument from conscience. Notice too that, if the foregoing has been correct, it would be extremely unwise to use Newman as part of a polemic against contemporary design arguments.⁶⁰ Doing so would not only misunderstand the nature of Newman's chief reservations about design but also render Newman's own theistic argument ineffective by neutering an obvious defeater-defeater.

VI. Conclusion: On the Prior Probability of Theism

Newman's claim that design arguments were unhelpful for Victorians might be true. But an argument for an "intelligent, wise, and beneficent Principle of nature" can be helpful in other contexts. And, as I have suggested, Newman's argument from conscience is one such context.⁶¹ Those most faithful to Newman

⁵⁸Newman, "Proof," 117–8.

⁵⁹See Logan Paul Gage, "William Paley" in *Dictionary of Christianity and Science*, ed. Paul Copan et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 500.

⁶⁰For examples, see Mark A. Kalthoff, "A Different Voice from the Eve of *The Origin*: Reconsidering John Henry Newman on Christianity, Science, and Intelligent Design," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 53, no. 1 (2001): 14–23; and Edward Jeremy Miller, "Newman on the Tension Between Religion and Science: Creationism, Evolution and Intelligent Design," *Newman Studies Journal* 7, no. 1 (2010): 5–19.

⁶¹Are design arguments the only way to shore up Newman's argument? No, but a design argument would seem to provide the most natural and direct defeater-defeater. The very thing being questioned is the reliability/design of the faculties themselves; and so it would be more circuitous to use another theistic argument as a defeater-defeater. A Thomistic first-cause argument,

today, I maintain, are those who read the signs of our times rather than those who parrot Newman's critique of natural theology out of context. In our own day, the pressing need is not to fight off natural religion. Our great need is to raise the antecedent probability of theism so that when our contemporaries hear God's voice in conscience or receive Christian testimony, they do not reject it as an illusion of blindly evolved faculties. Ironically, notional assent is not our enemy but our friend—a stepping stone between unbelief and real assent.

More than any other nineteenth-century thinker, Newman understood how antecedent epistemic probabilities affect the assessment of arguments. Given Darwinian defeaters, the antecedent probability that it is truly God's voice speaking in conscience appears low. However, while I cannot assess such arguments here, if we first possessed a good design argument, the antecedent probability skyrockets. One might think that possession of a design argument renders the argument from conscience unnecessary. But while from design we may only infer a generic intelligence, in conscience we see a personal, moral being.

In our culture the issue of whether nature is designed is far from a distraction from true religion. For many the assessment of this issue will determine the plausibility of religious truth claims. Ignoring or denigrating design is, then, an unwise, pastorally insensitive strategy. Cardinal Newman and his followers, I suggest, are going to need natural theology after all.⁶²

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for example, might also work. But in addition to being more circuitous (the first-cause argument, then to God's goodness, then to God's providential design), a well-developed Thomistic natural theology might render Newman's argument from conscience unnecessary.

⁶²The author thanks Fred Aquino, Chris Brown, John Crosby, Brandon Dahm, audiences at the 2016 Newman Association of America Conference at Duquesne University and the 2016 Theology and Philosophy of Science Conference at Concordia University of Edmonton, and Fr. Ian Ker and participants of the 2014 Lumen Christi Summer Seminar on the thought of John Henry Newman at Merton College, Oxford for helpful discussion.