

# NEWMAN'S IMMANENT CRITIQUE OF LIBERALISM: A PHILOSOPHICAL ARGUMENT AGAINST LIBERAL HUBRIS

Michael C. Hawley  
Duke University

## Abstract

John Henry Newman's theological arguments against the mixture of liberal philosophy and Christian religion have drawn a great deal of scholarly attention. Comparatively underappreciated is Newman's rebuttal of liberal ideas on the philosophical plane. In this line of argument, which runs parallel to his more purely theological critique, Newman uses some of liberalism's own foundational philosophical premises to undermine the conclusions put forth by the exponents of liberal religion. This immanent critique of liberal religion is important not merely because it shows Newman's capacity to engage his opponents on their own terms, but also because it provides an argument against liberal religion that merits consideration even for those who reject Newman's particular theological beliefs.

## Introduction

John Henry Newman's critique of liberalism has inspired much excellent scholarly interpretation and analysis. However, relatively less attention has been paid to the significant points of agreement between Newman and those liberal doctrines he so opposes.<sup>1</sup> These aspects of Newman's thought are especially important for understanding Newman's philosophical arguments against liberalism, because Newman himself believes that meaningful discussion can only proceed from shared premises. Therefore, it is only on the basis of significant agreement that Newman could address liberals at all. However, these same premises also necessarily complicate Newman's own lines of argument against liberalism. This paper sets out to illustrate this interesting

dynamic in Newman's thought, especially in those works such as *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, in which Newman explicitly seeks to engage liberals primarily on philosophical—in contradistinction to more purely theological—grounds. In this light, we find Newman occupying an almost unique position. While many critics of the liberal Enlightenment have opposed it for setting its moral and philosophical sights too low (for instance, the liberal prioritization of enlightened self-interest over self-abnegating virtue), Newman objects from a different perspective. According to Newman, the philosophical failing of Enlightenment liberalism is hubris.

By the nineteenth century, the British strand of liberalism alone included the philosophical systems of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, David Hume, and others; influential theological schools; and the moral assumptions of many ordinary people. Thus, Newman is aware (and he expects his readers to be aware) that to develop an argument against "liberalism" is to do battle with a hydra. Yet, in the *Grammar of Assent*, he attempts that Herculean task. Much is at stake in the struggle, as Newman posits that the religious expressions born from this liberal philosophy will pass through several stages before eventually arriving at "that 'God-denying Apostasy,' to use the ancient phrase, to which in the beginning of its career it professed to be especially opposed" (Newman 1838, 95). In other words, the mixture of liberal philosophy with Christianity threatens to poison fatally Christian faith from within.

In this essay, I set out to explore how Newman's points of agreement with liberalism affect his argument against it, and how this dynamic produces Newman's original angle of criticism. I rely primarily on textual evidence found in the *Grammar of Assent*, but appeal to other works of Newman and to the scholarly literature where helpful. Whereas other treatments of Newman's engagement with liberal religion have addressed the topic from the perspective of theology (Pattison 1991), or comparative religion (Yearley 1978), or even biography (Ker 1988), I attempt to do so from the perspective of philosophy. Such an approach deals with Newman's arguments as they can be understood by those who do not accept his particular theological premises. Such ideas may point beyond themselves to Newman's theological ideas, but only as conclusions—they do not assume prior agreement on doctrinal

matters. I begin by briefly outlining what Newman understands to be the essence of liberalism. From there, I give an account of the two most important areas of philosophical agreement between Newman and his liberal opponents. First, I argue that Newman's position, that the criteria for assent are—at bottom—personal and subjective, is a liberal one. There is no common judge between minds available to us. This somewhat relativistic stance combines with Newman's second major liberal premise: his normative understanding of "nature." For Newman and his liberal opponents alike, *the natural* is fundamentally tied to (and, is almost identical with) *the universal* or *the common*. On this point, Newman breaks with the classical tradition of Aristotle and Aquinas, for whom a being's "nature" constitutes its perfection or the fulfillment of its highest capacity.

After discussing the commonality of Newman's views and liberalism, I turn to Newman's critique. By depending on shared premises, Newman's engagement takes on something of the character of an immanent critique. Newman attacks liberalism philosophically on two separate, but ultimately related, fronts. First, Newman seeks to rebut liberalism's epistemological claims. The Lockean-Humean empiricist vision of how people actually do come to assent to propositions is simply wrong. This error invalidates the normative claims such empiricists make about how people *ought* to assent to propositions. For Newman, people in fact universally (i.e., naturally) assent on the basis of far weaker evidence than Locke or Hume demand. Since Newman accepts that nature is a normative guide, this means that it is also morally proper for people to assent in this manner. Thus, Newman concludes that Lockean-Humean liberalism sets an unreasonably high standard for assent contrary to human nature; a person attempting to meet such a standard before acting would be trapped in a kind of skeptical paralysis (and would certainly be incapable of accessing the truth offered by divine revelation).

Newman's second—and perhaps more important—critique of liberalism is moral. Newman views liberalism's claims about society, human potential, and humanity's moral nature to be dangerous and fundamentally incompatible not only with Christianity, but with natural human religiosity. With its confidence in human reason and belief in the inexorable progress of human development, liberalism

teaches human beings to hope that they can achieve by their own efforts what in fact can only come from without—from God.

The common thread of Newman's two critiques, then, is a teaching of humility. For Newman, the modern liberal project is a philosophical Tower of Babel, an arrogant (and doomed) attempt to solve all of humanity's problems through the application of reason. The Enlightenment's hope that evil and ignorance can be banished with science belies a hubristic self-forgetting of man's own wounded nature. Liberalism mixed with Christianity obscures the visceral consciousness of sin and the concomitant longing for God's salvation that were present even in the most primitive of ancient peoples. In this light, liberalism is *de-naturing*; it is disease posing as cure. For Newman, "the great practical evil of method and form in matters of religion,—nay, in all moral matters,—is obviously this: their promising more than they can effect" (Newman 1970, 266). The true facts of human nature render liberalism's hopes chimerical, making liberal ideas guilty of that great evil of over-promising. Therefore, the analysis offered in this article not only helps to illustrate the deeper complexity of Newman's own relationship to liberalism, but also helps to draw out of Newman's texts a powerful argument against liberalism that merits consideration regardless of whether one shares Newman's own theological premises.

### **Newman's Understanding of Liberalism as Philosophy**

It is probably impossible to specify precisely what Newman means when he refers to "liberalism." It was in Newman's time—as it is now—a broad school of thought with many adherents and different philosophic sources. The concept of liberal religion is almost as vague. Lee H. Yearley claims that Newman never gives "a clear, unified description of Liberal religion" (Yearley 1978, 93). Yearley calls attention to Newman's own disclaimer on the subject in which he insists that perhaps no individual holds all of the views enumerated. Nevertheless, Yearley identifies six characteristic principles in Newman's understanding of liberal religion: "(1) human nature is good; (2) private judgment is obligatory; (3) deity is a principle discoverable through examination of evidence; (4) revelation is a manifestation not a mystery; (5) useful goods are primary; and (6) education is salvatory" (Yearley 1978, 94).

As for liberalism as a philosophy, Newman seems to have in mind the largely British tradition of thought that begins with Hobbes and includes individuals such as David Hume, Edward Gibbon, and Newman's own contemporary, John Stuart Mill.<sup>2</sup> But, the most well-known and influential member of this tradition (at least for the purposes of Newman's arguments) is certainly John Locke. Locke's works span both British liberalism's empiricist epistemological elements and its moral elements, the latter of which constitutes a powerful synthesizing of liberalism with Christianity. Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* captures his empiricist strain, while his "Letter Concerning Toleration" most concisely expresses his moral and religious thought. Newman engages liberalism on both fronts with Locke as his foremost target.

Despite his general vagueness on the matter, Newman identifies the central premises of liberal empiricism rather succinctly. It is worth quoting the passage in full:

The authors to whom I refer wish to maintain that there are degrees of assent, and that, as the reasons for a proposition are strong or weak, so is the assent. It follows from this that absolute assent has no legitimate exercise, except as ratifying acts of intuition or demonstration. What is thus brought home to us is indeed to be accepted unconditionally; but, as to reasonings in concrete matters, they are never more than probabilities, and the probability in each conclusion which we draw is the measure of our assent to that conclusion. (Newman 1901, 159)

In the subsequent pages, Newman names only one of those "authors"—John Locke. According to Newman, "Locke's remarks on this subject are an illustration of what I have been saying. This celebrated writer, after the manner of his school, speaks freely of degrees of assent" (Newman, 1901, 160). We glean several important points from these passages. First, Newman views liberal empiricism to be a "school" of thought, comprising many different thinkers, but joined in one project. Second, Newman considers Locke the best representative of this school. Third, the central relevant claims of the school postulate a direct relationship between mental assent and the grounds for that assent.

As for liberal morality and liberal religion, Newman gives the reader a list of related beliefs:

That moral evil is merely the offspring of physical, and that as we remove the latter so we inevitably remove the former; that there is a progress of the human race which tends to the annihilation of moral evil; that knowledge is virtue, and vice is ignorance; that sin is a bugbear, not a reality; that the Creator does not punish except in the sense of correcting; that vengeance in Him would of necessity be vindictiveness; that all that we know of Him, be it much or little, is through the laws of nature, that miracles are impossible . . . that the only intelligible worship of Him is to act well our part in the world, and the only sensible repentance to do better in the future. (Newman 1901, 416)

Newman's collection of positions here is a reasonably accurate (if unfriendly) description of the morality and aspirations of the Enlightenment. It diminishes the role of sin, emphasizes human material conditions, and trusts in human progress.<sup>3</sup> In the religious realm, this school of thought has deistic tendencies, seeking God more in the laws of nature than in revelation, and preferring to downplay doctrinal disputes.

### **Newman's Common Ground with Liberalism**

Having offered an overview of Newman's view of liberalism generally, it is now possible to turn to address his common ground with liberalism. Such a discussion is important for several reasons. First, Newman's areas of agreement with liberalism are relevant *per se* to any exploration of Newman's engagement with liberalism as a whole. Second, that even so vocal and comprehensive a critic of liberalism as Newman would share certain fundamental premises with liberalism is an indication of the ubiquity of liberal ideas. Finally, Newman's liberal premises influence the ways in which he critiques liberal conclusions. Among other things, they provide the basis for Newman's immanent critique of liberalism. Since this paper argues that Newman seeks to refute liberalism on two fronts, epistemology and morality, it is perhaps fitting that of his two significant points of agreement with liberalism, one is epistemological and the other is moral/philosophical.

Since Newman devotes a large portion of the *Grammar of Assent* to a refutation of liberal empiricism, it might be surprising to suggest that Newman holds at least one epistemological premise that finds its roots in the liberal tradition. But indeed he does. According to Newman,

“where there is no common measure of minds, there is no common measure of arguments” (Newman 1901, 413).<sup>4</sup> Newman describes the “illative sense,” the faculty by which we evaluate propositions, as a particular and personal quality. The illative sense works from already-given first premises and “appeals to no higher judgment beyond its own” (Newman 1901, 362). Thus, the mechanism by which we come to assent to propositions is private and personal, and not translatable to others who do not share the same premises.

Although this understanding of the process of assent as subjective is downplayed in the writings of Hume and Locke, it has its roots in many other liberal Enlightenment thinkers on both sides of the Channel. For instance, Hobbes admits that however strong his arguments may be, the only valid test of his principles is for his reader to look within his own heart and find there an affirmation of the truth of Hobbes’s claims (Hobbes 1991, preface). When Newman argues that “deductions have no power of persuasion . . . the heart is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through the imagination,” he echoes Rousseau’s principle of persuasion, which similarly eschews ratiocination in favor of appeal to the imagination and sentiment for the same reasons (Newman 1901, 92).<sup>5</sup>

This subjective understanding of epistemology has both enabling and limiting consequences for Newman’s argument. On the one hand, if Newman is right that common premises are essential for any meaningful dialogue to take place, his engagement with liberals is only possible *because of* certain shared assumptions. In this sense, Newman’s common ground with the liberal tradition enables his critique of it by making it comprehensible to those who do not already share his conclusions.

But, on the other hand, this same subjective element limits Newman’s ability to persuade in another way, effectively setting up an unbridgeable gulf between him and those with whom he most disagrees. Harold Weatherby offers insightful analysis of this facet of Newman’s thought, which he calls Newman’s “Orthodox Subjectivism.” He notes the gulf between Newman and Aquinas on the relative scope of reason and its ability to establish or interrogate first principles. Weatherby posits that Newman does not acknowledge “the possibility that right reason is capable of reaching conclusions independent of faith, which

are nevertheless in perfect harmony with faith.” Weatherby perhaps understates somewhat the power of reason for Newman. Nevertheless, he is right to point out that in denying that reason can judge between first principles, Newman allows it “only the more limited job of drawing conclusions from the original ‘givens’ of faith” (Weatherby 1973, 173). In this, according to Weatherby, “Newman joins his contemporaries in abjuring the exercise of reason in the proof or disproof of God’s existence” (Weatherby 1973, 172). In doing so, he relinquishes some of his ability to convince certain people. As Newman himself puts it:

I will not argue with men who hold [premises completely incom-  
mensurable with my own] . . . I do so, not as claiming any right to  
be impatient or peremptory with any one, but because it is plainly  
absurd to attempt to prove a second proposition to those who do  
not admit the first. (Newman 1901, 416)

The second of Newman’s liberal premises lies on the moral or philosophical plane. In short, Newman accepts the principle that “what is universal is natural” (Newman 1901, 405). To modern readers, this assertion may seem entirely straightforward and unproblematic. But, in fact, the identification of the natural with the common or universal is an innovation of modernity, especially the liberal Enlightenment. While early modern thinkers such as Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau agreed that with this proposition,<sup>6</sup> they self-consciously viewed themselves as breaking with ancient thought. Classical philosophy had identified nature as the *telos*, the perfection or end of a particular being. Thus, Aristotle, whom Newman elsewhere describes as his “master” (Newman 1901, 430), describes the *polis* as natural not because it is universal—it certainly was and is not—but because the city was the teleological perfection of human association (Aristotle 1985, 37). Thus, Newman sides thoroughly with liberal modernity against the ancients on the question of nature’s meaning and purpose in philosophical and moral discussion.

Newman’s position on nature once again affords him common ground with which to engage liberal arguments. Although it closes off his ability to draw upon a great tradition of argument that stretches from Aristotle to Aquinas that might have offered ammunition with which to rebut liberal claims, it opens up new avenues of attack. In particular, Newman’s acceptance of nature as the universal allows him



to hold liberal claims up to a standard they themselves accept. In this way, Newman is able to attack Locke's empiricism as unnatural and contrary to the universal habit of human assent-giving. It also allows Newman to critique liberalism's moral claims as de-naturing in light of common or near-universal moral experiences.

### Newman against Empiricism

In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke posits that the human mind is naturally a blank slate. All knowledge comes to us from experience; we know nothing a priori. For Locke, the mind is "white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas. How comes it to be furnished . . . I answer in one word, EXPERIENCE" (Locke 1959, 121). It logically follows from this that, since we have no internal mechanism by which to know the truth, our assent to the truth must be based entirely on the external evidence we have concerning it. Not only does Locke claim that this is how we usually come to assent to propositions, but he also insists that this is also how we *ought* to do so.

Newman takes issue with both the factual and normative claims of Locke's empiricism. First, Newman finds it absurd for Locke to claim that human beings usually follow this method when assenting to the myriad propositions they must assent to as a part of their daily lives. Newman charges Locke with armchair philosophizing, instead of examining the reality of the matter (Newman 1901, 160).

Newman disputes Locke's vision of the human mind as a *tabula rasa*. In moral matters, Newman argues, we have some inchoate, but innate, mental guide: conscience. Newman understands conscience to be natural: "as we have naturally a sense of the beautiful and graceful . . . though tastes proverbially differ, so [too] we have a sense of duty and obligation" (Newman 1901, 107). Newman does not claim to know exactly how much of conscience is shaped by society, but the germ of it is given to us *a priori*:

Conscience is nearer to me than any other means of knowledge. And as it is given to me, so also is it given to others; and being carried about by every individual in his own breast, and requiring nothing besides itself, it is thus *adapted for the communication to each separately of that knowledge which is most momentous to him individually*. (Newman 1901, 390; emphasis added)

Thus, for Newman, we have at least one internal source of knowledge that does not simply come to us *a posteriori* through social intercourse nor depends on experience. Moreover, this innate faculty is the source of the most important knowledge for individuals.

Newman also argues that Locke is wrong about how we come to assent in non-moral matters. As he puts it, “we know from experience that assents may endure without the presence of the inferential acts upon which they were originally elicited” (Newman 1901, 166). Defining assent as “the absolute acceptance of a proposition without any condition,” Newman insists that we assent all the time to propositions for which we have not nearly the sort of proof that Locke requires (Newman 1901, 13). From knowing that Britain is an island, to numberless minute assumptions upon which we act every day, Newman illustrates that, as a matter of fact, we almost never meet Locke’s standards for assent.

Newman shows that Locke contradicts himself when he finds himself compelled to acknowledge this fact about the world. He quotes from Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*: “some [propositions] *border so near* upon certainty, that we *make no doubt at all* about them, but *assent* to them *as firmly*, and act according to that assent as resolutely, *as if they were infallibly demonstrated*.” Thus, Newman shows that Locke must ultimately acknowledge that “there are many truths in concrete matter, which no one can demonstrate, yet everyone unconditionally accepts” (Newman 1901, 162–63; emphasis in original).

But, the empiricist error is more than a simple error of fact; it forms the basis for unrealistic normative standards for people’s belief. Newman quotes Locke’s position concerning justified beliefs in which he proscribes “*entertaining any proposition with greater assurance than the proofs it is built on will warrant*.” Newman denounces Locke’s claim that “it is not only illogical, but immoral to ‘carry our *assent above the evidence*’” (Newman 1901, 162–63; emphasis in original). Here, we see the importance of Newman’s second liberal premise, that the universal is the natural. This premise has a corollary—that the natural is good: “it is a general law that whatever is . . . an attribute of any class of beings, or is natural to it, is in its substance suitable to it, and subserves its existence . . . cannot be rightly regarded as a fault

or enormity” (Newman 1901, 348). Since Newman has established that we naturally assent to propositions without incontrovertible evidence—and that we *have* to assent to these things in this way simply to get through the day—, our habit of doing so must be justified. Locke’s mistake is consider “his own ideal of how the mind ought to act, instead of interrogating human nature, as an existing thing, as it is found in the world” (Newman 1901, 164).

Locke’s unattainable ideal is a kind of hubris, it demands and promises more than it can ever get or deliver. According to Newman “it may rightly be said to prove too much; for it debars us from unconditional assent in cases in which the common voice of mankind, the advocates of [empiricism] included, would protest against the prohibition.” This unrealistic arrogance is, at base, impious. Newman says that Locke “instead of . . . being content with the mind as God has made it, he would form men as he thinks they ought to be formed, into something better and higher” (Newman 1901, 160–64). Not only does this mindset seek to improve upon God’s own work, the hubris it entails blinds empiricists to evidence that might lead to an appreciation of God’s reality. Newman sees this dynamic in David Hume’s unwillingness to consider evidence of miracles (Newman 1901, 81). So confident are they of the truth and normative validity of empiricism, these thinkers close themselves off from evidence that far simpler people (for instance, ordinary people who do believe in miracles) can see quite clearly.

Newman thus sees empiricism as incorrect as a descriptive theory and corrupting as a normative one. It fails to accurately capture how we do assent; it sets up an impossible standard by which to morally judge assents; and it hubristically discounts the natural human modes of assent. Ultimately, empiricism leads to skeptical paralysis; leaving us free to act on only a minute handful of propositions that we can prove. Far worse, empiricism leads to religious skepticism and an arrogant assumption that the world exists free from divine agency. Since Newman concedes that the truth of Christianity cannot be demonstrated like a mathematical proof, it follows that anyone who adheres to empiricism’s standards cannot give unconditional assent to the Christian faith. This is why Newman asserts that the process of

drawing out the implications of liberal empiricism is unbelief, “God-denying Apostasy” (Newman 1838, 95).

### **Newman Against Liberal Religion and Morality**

Still, Newman believes that liberal religion will pass through many stages before it draws its final conclusion against belief in God. But, liberal morality and its mixing with Christianity are dangerous for more reasons than simply the slippery slope to irreligion. Liberal religion *as religion* tends to remove guilt and fear of God from the human mind, considering both to be irrational. In doing so, it seeks to efface from human beings the natural awareness of their sin and their correspondingly natural fear of God’s justice. Liberal morality posits that human misery (like all other phenomena) is reducible to material factors; once man’s material state is alleviated, so too will be sin and its consequences. For Newman, the reality of human sinfulness reveals this to be a false promise, rooted in human pride, a boundless (and groundless) faith in humanity’s ability to solve all of its problems on its own.

Nor is Newman’s view a caricature. Though perhaps no one liberal thinker held all of the beliefs Newman ascribes to liberalism, each of the ideas he points to have had major philosophical exponents. Hobbes and others had argued for a thoroughgoing materialism, in which all human problems admit of a material solution. Rousseau had argued for man’s natural goodness and innocence and held that artificial human conventions were the source of guilt. Condorcet had taught that progress in science would continue inexorably towards utopia. Once again, John Locke stands at the fore as the thinker most responsible for intertwining liberal philosophical and moral ideas with Christianity.

Newman’s discussion of religion in the *Grammar* is divided into sections on natural and revealed religion. The former is natural because it existed among primitive peoples around the world. It is the universal starting point. The germ of natural religion is conscience, which gives human beings a sense of right and wrong and—because we do not always act rightly— gives us the first feelings of guilt. This sense of guilt, or an “awareness of the wound of human nature,” is the central aspect of natural religion. It imparts a fear of God’s justice and an awareness of purity and impurity. It stirs a longing for repentance,

redemption, and revelation. It prompts human beings to develop rites of atonement and to offer sacrifices. Newman says: “natural religion is based upon the sense of sin; it recognizes the disease, but it cannot find, it does but look out for the remedy” (Newman 1901, 487).

From this basis, the various religious traditions of ancient peoples emerged, trying desperately to offer such a remedy. Since its foundational conception of the divine was of a being “angry with us,” early religion had a frightful aspect, featuring awe-inspiring and mysterious rites and terrible sacrifices (Newman 1901, 393). However, with the development of civilization, the spread of philosophy and ‘enlightenment,’ the nature of religion changed. Newman disapprovingly terms this development “the religion of civilization.” This religion was more rational, less fearful, and more optimistic than its predecessor. It had “nothing of that gloom and sternness” that characterized primitive religion, and “its gods were for the most part cheerful and graceful, and its new gods certainly more genial and indulgent than the old ones.” This, for example, is what became of the religion of the ancient Greeks, a development aided by the influence of rationalist Greek philosophers. For this reason, Newman also refers to this corruption of religion as “the religion of philosophy” (Newman 1901, 395).

The problem with this development, according to Newman, is that it was not truly a development at all. Newman notes that to be a true development, the new phenomenon must “subserve the elements from which it proceeds” (Newman 1901, 395). But the religion of civilization and philosophy in the classical world rejected the foundations on which it was built. Newman’s comment on it is worth quoting in full:

Such religion does but contradict the religion of barbarism; and since this civilization itself is not a *development of man’s whole nature, but mainly of the intellect*, recognizing indeed the moral sense, but ignoring the conscience, no wonder that *the religion in which it issues has no sympathy either with the hopes and fears of the awakened soul, or with those frightful presentiments which are expressed in the worship and traditions of the heathen*. This artificial religion, then, has no place in the inquiry; first, because it comes of a one-sided progress of mind, and next, for the very reason that it contradicts informants which speak with greater authority than itself. (Newman 1901, 396; emphasis added)

Thus, for Newman, the religion of philosophy and civilization derives from advances in intellect at the expense of other (more important) human faculties. In this way it is unnatural and de-naturing. It seeks to reason away the inchoate human awareness of guilt that gives rise to religion in the first place. In its hubris, it attempts to deny the authoritative testimony of human conscience.

Perhaps the apex of this trend in among the ancients was Lucretius. A Roman follower of the atheist Greek philosopher Epicurus, Lucretius wrote *De Rerum Natura*, which taught materialist physics, hedonist morality, and contempt for all religion. Newman credits Lucretius with perceiving clearly the difference between “the heavy yoke of religion” and the contented cheerfulness of godless science and philosophy. Lucretius symbolizes this in his distinction between “*aeternas poenas in morte timendum*” and “*Alma Venus . . . quae rerum naturam sola gubernas.*”<sup>7</sup> Lucretius chooses the latter, preferring to contemplate the beauty of nature and his own intellectual creations to wallowing in the primordial sensations of guilt and terror that accompany religion. Newman mixes great respect for Lucretius with his opprobrium. He claims that Lucretius brings out this antagonism with “soul-piercing reality,” and that we can appeal to Lucretius to illustrate this fact while we ought to repudiate his evaluation of it. An heir of Greek philosophy and a citizen of the Roman civilization, Lucretius is the culmination of the religion of civilization and philosophy. This culmination manifests in the rejection of religion itself. Once the sensations of fear and guilt are replaced with the confident belief in material causality and the concept of sin is replaced with the idea of ignorance as the source of human misery, religion no longer has any use. Religion appears to the ‘enlightened’ as superstition, an obstacle to the work of solving humanity’s problems: “religion is a mere yoke, as Lucretius describes it; not a satisfaction or refuge, but a terror and a superstition” (Newman 1901, 400).

Newman’s analysis of the fate of ancient religion is not simply an exercise in historical inquiry. He perceives the same dynamic happening in the contemporary world. The religion of civilization once again threatens to undermine genuine religious belief, only now Christianity—not the barbarous pagan religion—is endangered. Newman explicitly likens his own age to that of late antiquity:

The belief in Styx and Tartarus was dying out of the world at the time that Christianity came in, as the parallel belief now seems to be dying out in all classes of our own society. The doctrine of eternal punishment does only anger the multitude of men in our large towns now and make them blaspheme; why should it have had any other effect on the heathen population. (Newman 1901, 460)

The same arrogance that characterized the religion of civilization among the ancients rears its head in the modern world under the guise of Enlightenment. In fact, Lucretius had considerable influence on many Enlightenment figures. Hobbes especially drew from Lucretius's materialist worldview and quite possibly from his atheism.

The features of the new religion of civilization strongly resemble its classical predecessor. Liberal religion deprecates the fear of eternal punishment.<sup>8</sup> It sees material want as the source of wickedness, and believes that curing the former will end the latter. The acceptance of this sort of religion results in individuals who "know nothing of the wounds of the soul" (Newman 1901, 423). Such people feel no need for repentance and penitence, and do not have genuine sympathy for their fellows. At the height of its hubris, this sort of mindset leads to a resolution to "act not as suppliants, but as judges [of revelation] . . . to forget that revelation is a boon, not a debt on the part of the Giver." Proponents of this idea dare to sit in judgment on God himself, resolving "to treat the Almighty with dispassionateness, a judicial temper," a completely inappropriate orientation toward the mysteriousness of the divine (Newman 1901, 425–26).

Newman argues that the modern religion of civilization (which, spawned by Enlightenment thinkers, is also the religion of philosophy) will ultimately terminate in the same conclusion as its predecessor. Although liberal religion professed in its origin to be deeply opposed to atheism (Locke was especially insistent on this point), in the end, it will develop into "God-denying apostasy" (Newman 1838, 95). In his *Idea of a University*, Newman puts this in the starkest terms, saying of the human intellect, when deprived of the humility given by conscience: "it considers itself from first to last independent and supreme; it requires no external authority; it makes a religion for itself" (Newman 1947, 161). The intellect sees fit to pass judgment on the pangs of conscience that teach us humility by showing us our own

brokenness: “conscience indeed inflicts an acute pang, but that pang, forsooth, is irrational, and to reverence it is an illiberal superstition,” so follows the logic of liberal premises (Newman, 1947, 178).

Newman argues that in elevating the intellect over the conscience, liberal religion begins to obliterate our highest faculty and sets our flawed intellect in its place: “if we will make light of what is deepest within us, nothing is left but to pay homage to what is more upon the surface” (Newman 1947, 178). Thus, Newman offers his view of what is most lacking in Liberal religion: humility:

This embellishment of the exterior is almost the beginning and the end of philosophical morality. This is why it aims at being modest rather than humble; this is how it can be proud at the very time that it is unassuming. To humility indeed it does not even aspire... it is hardly professed even by name in the code of ethics which we are reviewing. As has been often observed, ancient civilization had not the idea, and had no word to express it: or rather, it had the idea, and considered it a defect of mind, not a virtue, so that the word which denoted it conveyed a reproach. As to the modern world, you may gather its ignorance of it by its perversion. (Newman 1947, 181–82)

### Conclusion

As we take stock of Newman’s evaluation of the liberal Enlightenment project, we find him not at all in simplistic rejection of it. Newman recognizes the formidable appeal and penetrating insight of much of liberal thought. It *is* a development of the intellect, and Newman accepts certain very important conclusions it has drawn. But, it is in the one-sidedness of this development that Newman discovers the tragic flaw of the project. In raising its demands upon human intellect above its natural capacity, liberalism occludes other important human faculties, particularly the conscience. The liberal hubris lies in its faith in its own ability solve the ills of man’s estate by the application of reason. The Enlightenment project to conquer nature thus culminates in the attempt to conquer human nature. Yet, some of liberalism’s own philosophical premises, when logically followed to their conclusions, undermine the plausibility of its aspirations.

The aspirations of liberal religion are fundamentally in conflict with the Christian teaching that man’s unhappiness comes from sin,



which can only be alleviated by God's grace, not man's industry. Newman's argument suggests that once one has thought out the problems and contradictions inherent in liberalism's philosophical claims, it becomes necessary to look beyond liberalism to Christianity—properly understood. But, the empiricist insistence on unattainably high standards of evidence for belief threatens to close our minds off from even hearing God's revealed message. Through Locke and others, liberalism and Christianity have disastrously intermingled, giving rise to “a sort of night battle, where each fights for himself and friend and foe stand together” (Newman 1970, 201). As a result, the same tendency toward irreligion that occurred when philosophy and religion mixed in antiquity now looms in modern Christendom. The same hubris that doomed the religion of philosophy and civilization among the ancients has infected Christianity through its marriage with liberal philosophy. As the primordial and natural awareness of sin becomes weaker under the influence of liberal religion, religion itself seems less necessary, because it seems less rational.

But, for Newman, liberalism will disappoint the hopes it has raised. If sin is the true source of our unhappiness, then no advance in our intellectual state alone will redeem us. Liberal philosophy and religion are guilty of that “great practical evil . . . promising more than they can effect” (Newman 1970, 266). At bottom, the fatal flaw of the Enlightenment project is hubris; it will never deliver on its promise of relieving the true evil that afflicts us. Its confidence in the power of human intellect blinds it to the promptings of conscience, which indicate our true condition. What is needed, then, is a teaching in humility. In the *Grammar* and elsewhere, Newman seeks to humble liberal pride, by showing the baselessness of liberal confidence. Only in a more humble state of soul, quiescent enough to be guided by conscience, can our recalcitrant reason be brought to regard our true hope for salvation in the Christian faith, and give its assent.

### Notes

1. One notable exception is Lee H. Yearley (1978). However, Yearley's perspective is one of comparative religious studies, and he focuses on those aspects of Newman's thought amenable to that approach. In contrast, this paper offers analysis of Newman's engagement with liberalism primarily on the philosophical level of argument.

2. That Newman read and was aware of Mill is demonstrated by Ian Ker (Ker 1988, 730).
3. For each of these positions, we can find at least one Enlightenment figure who espoused and popularized it. For a diminution of the role of sin, see Rousseau's *Second Discourse* (Rousseau 1997) or *Emile* (Rousseau 1979). For materialism, see the entirety of Hobbes's work, especially *De Corpore* (Hobbes 1999). For faith in progress, see Condorcet's *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (Condorcet 2012).
4. The other relevant parts of the passage run as follows: "if any one starts from any other principles but ours, I have not the power to change his principles, or the conclusion which he draws from them, any more than I can make a crooked man straight . . . men differ from each other, not so much in the soundness of their reasonings as in the principles which govern its exercise . . . those principles are of a personal character . . . where there is no common measure of minds, there is no common measure of arguments."
5. Compare to Rousseau's understanding of persuasion in Book 1 of *Emile*. Although Rousseau himself is often viewed as a critic of the Enlightenment, on the questions relevant to Newman, he can reasonably be counted a member of it. The faith of the Savoyard Vicar in *Emile* is perfectly compatible with Newman's view of liberal religion.
6. For instance, see Hobbes's explanation for the naturalness of fear (1996). Also, see Rousseau's explanation that pity is natural because it is universal (1997).
7. As quoted by Newman (1901, 391). "the fear of eternal punishments in death," and "loving Venus, who alone governs the nature of things."
8. Hobbes, for instance, teaches that those condemned by God will be reborn to live another normal life on earth, after which they will simply die a natural death—hardly inspiring of terror.

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